



EUROPEAN LEADERSHIP NETWORK

Contact Group on Russia-West Relations

15-16 October 2020

Note from the 10th Meeting of the Group¹

On 15th and 16th October 2020 the European Leadership Network (ELN) convened the Contact Group on Russia-West relations via Zoom for its tenth 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 a new member: **Jana Kobzová**, Chief Foreign Policy Expert at the Office of the President of the Slovak Republic.

The virtual meeting took place amid what can be described as the most serious crisis in EU-Russia relations since 2014, owing to the poisoning of Alexey Navalny, the deep divide between Brussels and Moscow over post-election developments in Belarus, and the continuing lack of real progress in resolving the crisis over Ukraine. The discussion covered the way ahead for Russia-West relations against the backdrop of recent developments, a more effective EU approach on Russia, the implications of growing Chinese assertiveness on EU-Russia relations, and younger generation trends in Russia and the West, which might turn the tide in Russia-West relations in two decades from now. This note summarizes the main themes of the discussion.

¹ This note was prepared by the European Leadership Network team 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. Through 2021, a single biannual meeting will be replaced by a series of shorter (half day or less), more frequent meetings, three of which will be held tentatively in the first half of 2021 and three in the second half of the year. Before 2020 ends, the Group will convene for a short meeting/briefing to discuss the implications of the outcome of the US elections on Russia-West relations. When Covid-19 and resources permit, we will try to meet in person.
2. The Group remains interested in engaging with senior EU and NATO officials in Brussels on the case for a fresh approach to Russia. A number of virtual visits will be planned. To this end, the ELN permanent staff will circulate an updated version of the talking points and will engage the whole of the Group in refining them. This process is non-binding – the talking points will not constitute the position of the Group, only of those members who choose to join the Brussels meetings.
3. In growing the Group towards a network, we will seek gradually to expand the Group's membership to 30-50 members and open it up more to American participation, too. Current members are accordingly kindly requested to propose potential new members from parliaments, business or the media who are likely to become influential for Russia-West relations. In growing the Group, we will strive for it to remain a safe space for exchange, with members giving the time to listen carefully to other points of view and discussing areas of difference in a thorough and patient way.

Divided we stand: Is there a way forward for Russia-West relations?

During the previous Contact Group meeting, there was a general consensus among Group members that the pandemic is unlikely to bring about improvement in Russia-West relations. The unfolding crisis in Belarus and the Navalny poisoning are likely to produce additional animosities and further deepen political tensions in Russia-West relations. Mounting accusations and growing 'demonisation' of one another, which the 2019 [Contact Group statement](#) sought to address, do not bode well for a meaningful dialogue either.

In spite of the pandemic and recent setbacks, French President Macron continues to advocate renewed engagement with Russia. Even though France decided to postpone the ministerial meeting (in the 2+2 format), which was scheduled for 14th September 2020 and was meant to precede Macron's visit to Moscow, this decision did not impact the rest of the process, which continues. Working groups at officials' levels continue to meet, with a mutual agreement by both sides to go ahead as planned. Many find Macron's initiative disturbing. Macron continues to push back on criticism, arguing that the case for diplomacy and dialogue

remains valid and that dialogue should be widened especially when the times are difficult. Our guest speaker recalled the compromise underpinning the signing of the Helsinki Final Act in 1975, which constituted a significant step toward reducing East-West tensions during the latter part of the Cold War. If we were able to engage in dialogue in the aftermath of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, why are we refraining from doing so today? The climate does not seem to be all that much worse. A similar spirit and attitude are needed to restore a diplomatic process with Russia today.

Discussion also centred on the implications of the outcome of the US election on Russia-West relations. Participants agreed that, regardless of who is elected next US president, we will be unlikely to see any progress in US-Russia relations. Rather the contrary: both nominees are expected to adopt a firmer approach towards Russia. However, as one participant pointed out, their personalities are unpredictable and the element of surprise in US policy toward Russia should not be ruled out. Therefore, the Europeans should keep their eyes wide open. While some participants questioned the likelihood of progress in Russia-West relations without any US involvement, others stressed that the EU needs to have its own say and be able to chart its own course when it comes to dialogue with Russia.

Shared neighbourhood 'in flames': Peril or opportunity for EU-Russia dialogue?

From the mass protests in Belarus, through the ongoing Nagorno Karabakh conflict, to the political crisis in Kyrgyzstan and tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean, both the EU and Russia find themselves surrounded by mounting instability. Instead of elevating its engagement in the region, the EU has so far adopted a 'wait-and-see' approach, trying to buy time on all regional challenges. Russia, which continues to be regarded as a key external power broker in the post-Soviet space, is coming to realise that it cannot manage the crises in its neighbourhood on its own. As one participant pointed out, both sides are starting to see that their shared neighbourhood can no longer be approached as a zero-sum game. There was a general agreement among Group members that the crises in Belarus, Nagorno Karabakh and Kyrgyzstan present an opportunity for EU-Russia dialogue and collaboration. As regards Belarus, in particular, the space to talk appears to be greater than it was in Ukraine. As several participants pointed out, the two crises are not alike. In contrast to Ukraine, Belarusians call for a regime change but not for a geopolitical shift towards deeper integration with the EU. Recognising that the crises in the EU's neighbourhood erupt periodically, there was a general agreement that the EU needs to revisit its Eastern neighbourhood policy to be more agile in dealing with the region than in the past. It was set up 10 years ago and it is missing a real geopolitical vision. Not only the EU, but also NATO lacks a grand strategy towards Russia, which is particularly problematic in view of the fact that both Russia and NATO are nuclear powers. The prospect of nuclear conflict was one of the reasons behind Soviet-American détente during the Cold War.

Finding common ground in our disagreements

Group members tried to identify less controversial topics, discussion of which could reinvigorate exchange in the current geopolitical environment. In addition to jointly addressing the crises in the shared neighbourhood, which is detailed above, these topics could include cooperation to tackle climate change and other environmental issues, joint efforts to avoid a long-term economic decoupling between the EU and Russia, or the intensification of dialogue between the EU and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) with the ultimate objective of creating a shared economic space from Lisbon to Vladivostok. Cooperation in the Arctic and outer space were also mentioned as areas of mutual Russia-West concern. Although efforts in any of these areas are very unlikely to be transformative, Group members are in agreement that it is still worthwhile to explore potential Russia-West openings and new areas of selective engagement.

Impact of China on EU-Russia relations

The implementation of Western sanctions in 2014 was identified as a turning point in Sino-Russian relations, which drove Moscow closer to Beijing. In recent years, the relationship between Russia and China has grown in asymmetry, which might make it difficult for the two countries to maintain their partnership at the current level. Several Russian participants suggested that Moscow has accepted being viewed as a 'junior partner' to China, with the partnership reflected in the Sino-Russian ties in energy and raw materials, and Russian access to Chinese military and telecommunications technologies. According to our guest speaker, although contact between the two countries has widened, their economic interdependence remains relatively low. Chinese investment is not sufficient for Russian modernisation needs and Russia does not aid China's geo-political balancing against the US. China is economically more important to Russia than vice versa. With China aiming to become carbon neutral by 2060, it is unclear what the implications will be for Sino-Russian energy ties. Albeit asymmetric and problematic in many ways, the Sino-Russian relationship is being cemented further by an increasing isolation of China by the West. Several Group members stressed that, as NATO looks toward 2030, concerns about China's growing influence outweigh the Russia factor. Pushing China into a position of a strategic enemy would drive China closer to Russia, they fear.

Both Sino-American and Sino-European relations deteriorated dramatically after the Covid-19 outbreak. The EU has grown wary of its over-reliance on China for certain products, critical materials and value chains, and there are mounting concerns within the EU about China's assertive approach abroad. The EU and China do not see eye-to-eye on 5G either and the bloc regards China's 17+1 relationship and engagement with countries in Eastern Europe as disquieting too. The Group discussion concluded that growing Chinese assertiveness is unlikely to push Russia and Europe closer together.

Younger generation attitudes: Turning the tide in Russia-West relations?

Given the current state of Russia-West relations, coupled with the lack of Western strategy towards Russia, many look at young people on both sides as a hope for the future. The Russian younger generation's perception of Russia's relationship with the West is rather negative: as many as 41% of young women and men believe Russia-West relations will always be marked by mistrust. Russian youth identifies the US as the main actor interested in confrontation between Europe and Russia.

In contrast to younger generation attitudes in Western Europe, the polling evidence in Ukraine and Russia suggests a low level of political engagement among youth overall. The main reason is that young women and men do not feel their generation to be sufficiently represented in national politics. The majority of respondents are not engaged in *any* political activity, with low levels of political engagement having been recorded in volunteer activities and on social media. Their motivations appear to be organic and unstructured and their openness to political mobilisation is very low. In addition to a general disinterest in politics, young Russians often hold conservative political views (with regard to LGBT rights, for example). One of our guest speakers underlined the fact that younger people in Russia are more likely to continue living at home, grow up with their grandparents, and be influenced by some of the older generational views. This dynamic is currently understudied and deserves closer attention.

Young Russians do not necessarily identify as European and do not show a strong desire to emigrate either. Dissatisfaction with Russia's political system does not impact their patriotism. As one of our presenters concluded, Russian youth, overall, is a youth in transition that is divided on many issues. The value of dialogue and engagement should not be dismissed. Moving forward, educational and other exchanges were identified as the most effective strategy for bridging existing divides.

As one European participant pointed out, a lot of the general attitudes observed among young Russians can be observed among young Britons, too. From Euroscepticism through disinterest in politics to youth participation in volunteering, the figures are largely consistent. Similarities are apparent too in areas the Group identified as less controversial and of shared Russia-West concern. In both Russia and Western Europe, for example, young people show most concern about climate change and the environment. Climate change is viewed as an area where young people can make a difference. Several participants pointed out that Covid-19 is likely to have a lasting effect on youth attitudes toward government policies. On the one hand, the pandemic increases overall dependence on, and expectations of, public institutions. On the other hand, considering the restrictions placed on everyday life, the sudden U-turns in government policies and the major disruption in education systems, resentment against the state is likely to grow amongst young women and men. Several participants expressed hope that climate activism, coupled with the pandemic recession, might motivate young people to play a more active role in the political life of their societies.

Future of the Group

Group members participating in the meeting expressed a clear preference for shorter and more frequent meetings. The ELN permanent staff will seek to schedule approximately three meetings in the first half of 2021 and three in the second half of the year. Before 2020 ends, the Group will convene for a short meeting/briefing to discuss the implications of the outcome of the US elections on Russia-West relations.

Future meetings will:

- Address concrete issues, what is happening on the ground right now;
- Consider the outcome of Brussels meetings;
- Prepare for possible subsequent Moscow meetings;
- Involve American participants and external speakers;
- Consider one or more scenario-based exercises;
- Consider areas of common ground, including but not limited to climate, the case for avoiding economic decoupling, the arguments for EU-EEU progress to develop more of a shared economic space from Lisbon to Vladivostok, the so-called Eastern neighbourhood, and common issues relating to younger generation trends.

The Group remains interested in engaging with senior EU and NATO officials in Brussels on the case for a fresh approach to Russia. The ELN will seek to arrange a number of short virtual visits, with one-two meetings/briefings per visit. The ELN will circulate an updated version of the Brussels talking points and will seek to engage the whole of the Group in refining them. This process is non-binding: the agreed-upon talking points would not represent the position of the Group but rather that of participating members. Following each virtual visit, the ELN will report back to the full group.

Group members were encouraged to identify additional participants for the next meeting, particularly representatives of national parliaments, business people and journalists who are likely to exert influence on developments in Russia-West relations in their respective countries. There was a general interest in opening up the Group to greater American participation. It was agreed that the size of the group should grow only gradually, in order to preserve the ethos and working culture of the Group.

Group discussion also covered how the Group should operate, if it is to become more of a network. A network should be understood as not just a series of meetings but as a living collaboration of which meetings are just one element and impulse. In the words of one Group member: "Our duty is to strengthen our interaction." Therefore, as we move forward, the ELN permanent staff and Contact Group members are encouraged to:

- Share their writing, their media work, other media and commentary material and questions or issues of common interest;

- Work together outside meetings on, for example, the Brussels ‘visits’;
- Arrange professional and personal collaborations between individual members of the Group;
- Join or support the ELN’s Go Big initiative and other ELN initiatives now and in the future.

Reading suggestions made at the Group’s meeting:

1. Thomas de Waal, Nathalie Tocci, Dmitri Trenin and Paul Stronski, “A New Era for the Karabakh Conflict?” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 9, 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/10/09/new-era-for-karabakh-conflict-event-7445>.
2. Recent poll by the Foundation of Public Opinion (in Russian): “Оценки внешней политики: Об успехах и неудачах российской внешней политики,” October 13, 2020, <https://fom.ru/Politika/14473>.
3. *The Image of Poland in Russia through the Prism of Historical Disputes*, Center for Polish-Russian Dialogue and Understanding (CPRDIP), Warsaw, 2020, http://www.cprdip.pl/assets/media/Wydawnictwa/Raporty/report_The_image_of_Poland_in_Russia.pdf.
4. Marcin Przychodniak, “The Decline of the US: The Chinese Discourse on Post-Pandemic Relations with the United States,” The Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM), September 21, 2020, [https://pism.pl/publications/The Decline of the US The Chinese Discourse on Post pandemic Relations with the United States](https://pism.pl/publications/The_Decline_of_the_US_The_Chinese_Discourse_on_Post_pandemic_Relations_with_the_United_States).
5. Jill Dougherty, “Is there really a Putin generation?” Wilson Center, July 8, 2020, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/there-really-putin-generation>.
6. *YGLN Annual Trend Survey 2019*, European Leadership Network (ELN), April 8, 2020, <https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/report/ygln-annual-trend-survey-2019/>.
7. Kadri Liik, “The Last of the Offended: Russia’s First Post-Putin Diplomats,” European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), November 2019, https://ecfr.eu/archive/page/-/Kadri_Liik_russias_first_post_putin_diplomats.pdf.
8. Results of the FES Youth Study Russia 2020: “Generation Putin or Generation Protest? Between Adaptation and Rebellion,” Friedrich Ebert Foundation (FES), <https://www.fes.de/en/beitraege/youth-studies-russia>.
9. Work by vlogger Yuri Dud: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCMCgOm8GZkHp8zJ6I7_hluA.

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