



# EUROPEAN LEADERSHIP NETWORK

## Contact Group on Russia-West Relations

11 June 2021

### Note from the 11th Meeting of the Group<sup>1</sup>

On 11 June 2021, the European Leadership Network (ELN) convened the Contact Group on Russia-West relations via Zoom, just ahead of the 14 June NATO Summit and 16 June US-Russia Summit. The Group was delighted to welcome a new member: **Igor Istomin**, Associate Professor at the Department of Applied International Political Analysis at MGIMO University.

The meeting's first session considered the new US Administration's implications for Russia-West relations; the second session reviewed the Group's virtual visits to NATO and the EU and the way forward for the Group. This note summarises the main themes.

#### Main Follow Up Points

- Sustain the Group in all its diversity as a safe space for myth-busting Russia – West dialogue.
- As soon as COVID permits, convene the entire Group in person.
- Meanwhile, conduct a virtual visit to meet Russian officials on the model of the Group's visits to NATO and the EU.
- Gradually enlarge the Group and increase its interaction with members of the ELN's other networks.
- Respond to the more detailed recommendations in the separate note on the Group's way forward.

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

## **First session**

Our guest speaker sparked and led a spirited exploration of the new US Administration's approach, whether it amounts to a strategy, and what it means for strategic stability and Ukraine.

### **'America Is Back': Biden's Narratives towards Europe**

The new US Administration has been consistent that 'America is back', with its allies and as a responsible global stakeholder. While this narrative is reassuring to many post-Trump, it is still unclear what America being 'back' really means to allies and adversaries. Many lingering concerns with the US's global role continue to feature. The Biden administration has re-joined the World Health Organisation and the Paris Climate Agreement, has extended New START and is trying to resuscitate the Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA), but has not returned the USA to the Open Skies Treaty, has maintained tariffs on Europe, has not resolved ambiguity around Nord Stream sanctions and the US role in European security continues to be problematic for some. In the United States, debate continues on whether the US can trust its allies and what the country's role in the world should be.

The Group considered whether, in Europe, there is a growing disillusionment with Biden's narrative: inadequate US consultation of allies; some allies feeling that Biden's approach to Russia is too quiet and too passive. So while Biden's presidency brought with it hope for the reinvigoration of multilateralism and has in some ways meant a return to more predictability, some members of the Group were unsure whether the impending summits would assure Europeans that Biden can alleviate long-standing concerns around the US-European relationship.

### **Muddling Through: A Biden Russia Strategy?**

It is still early days. So far the Biden Administration has highlighted its priorities towards Russia as being to increase stability and predictability and put security guardrails around the relationship. It seems more eager to focus on China. Could this emphasis, and US actions vis-a-vis Russia, be described as a Biden Russia strategy of 'muddling through'? Our guest speaker argued that the Administration is yet to be fully clear about its approach or its goals in dealing with Russia, which has made its approach towards Russia mostly reactive. This could send confusing signals for Russia, with the Administration variously saying American values are its interests, indicating that it understands the limits of sanctions, and engaging on New START. On whether 'muddling through' could be successful, there was concern in the Group that relations would not be improved by the imbalance between Moscow, for whom the issues in the Russia-US relationship are high priority, and Washington for whom China is the focus. A reactive Biden strategy could give Putin more power to determine the course of relations.

The Group noted that quiet, back-channel diplomacy will be in demand if the US and Russia want tangible results in the near term. The effectiveness of such diplomacy can be seen in the April Biden-Putin call, where, behind the scenes, they achieved a tacit understanding that each side should step back from rhetoric that enrages the other side. Both sides are politically constrained as a result of recent crises including the poisoning of Navalny and Russia's military build-up near Ukraine. Back channel diplomacy would allow for more manoeuvrability on both sides.

### **Biden-Putin Summit: No Reset, but Strategic Stability Dialogue**

Group members generally agreed that a US-Russia reset is unlikely and unattainable in present conditions. Neither side seems to want one. Members highlighted the need for realistic expectations, clarity and incremental steps at the Biden-Putin summit.

Is the Biden Administration's goal of a stable and predictable relationship shared by Russia? While some commentators argue that Russia wants instability, Group members contended that this would be an incorrect assessment of Russia's strategic priorities: Russia would prefer predictability so as to be a key player in certain issue areas. There was discussion of whether predictability could be beneficial for both powers in the near term but not the long term. In the bilateral relationship, it is clearer what Russia wants: seats at the table, spheres of influence, to be a part of key strategic conversations. It is less clear what the US wants, though it could be described as just wanting Russia to stop being a foreign policy problem. Our guest speaker also noted contrasting goals when it comes to international engagement: Russia seems to want low-level engagement, to signify its great power status, whereas the US would prefer to disengage.

Group members highlighted that in the current international environment, reciprocation or unilateral action is seen by American and Russian domestic audiences as giving concessions. The proposed strategic stability talks could shift the situation in a positive sense. Such talks could decrease tensions and serve as an umbrella for a wider range of issues, to include arms control dialogue. (In the event, Biden and Putin released a [Joint Statement on Strategic Stability](#), launching "an integrated bilateral Strategic Stability Dialogue" and looking towards future arms control. So the Group's ideas are apparently shared by the two presidents!) Our guest speaker advised that both countries should think how best to prioritise their goals and recognise their limits, not letting rhetoric overstep capacity. Guardrails and predictability are the likely way forward.

## **Ukraine: A Key Issue Area**

Ukraine is at the centre of many issues in the US-Russia relationship. Beyond the 2014 annexation of Crimea, the recent ceasefire violations in Donbass and Russian military build-up in Crimea and on Ukraine's borders had created grave concern in the West. The Group discussed the US-Ukraine relationship, including the priorities of both sides and what the immediate future might hold. Our guest speaker suggested that while Biden probably neither distrusts Zelensky nor considers him unreliable, the Administration does not find Ukraine's posturing helpful. Overall, the US wants to be supportive of Ukraine but does not see it as a priority issue. Like Russian-US relations, short of a Ukraine solution which furthers US interests, the US strategy is likely also to be 'muddle through'. This can be confusing for Ukrainian officials but does keep Ukraine on the US's agenda.

## **Second session**

### **The Group's NATO and EU visits**

Discussion of impressions and conclusions from the virtual visits that some Group members paid at the end of May to NATO headquarters and to EU officials in Brussels and Moscow was closely intertwined with views on how the Group should develop. But the two strands are separated here for clarity.

Views in the Group differed on what to take from the visits. Several members were disappointed that most of the officials whom participants met proved unable to go beyond their talking points and move into real dialogue. This illuminated the depth of current Russia-West polarisation. Apparently nettled by Borrell's treatment in Moscow and Russian sanctions against European Parliament President David Sassoli, some EU officials seemed even harsher than their NATO counterparts.

Other Group members considered that, given the dire state of Russia-West relations, talking points were all that could be expected from NATO and EU officials. Moreover, all the Group's interlocutors referenced at least some areas for Russia-West cooperation, including climate change, arms control, health, space and technology.

Some members considered Russia-West tensions grave but less dangerous and entrenched than they appeared. And if most of the meetings provided a pessimistic outlook, that in itself was informative. Moreover, there was a value in just continuing to talk with officials even if such talking was not immediately productive. Other members were more positive, seeing the emergence of a more cohesive Western position on Russia and looking forward to the Biden-Putin summit.

In the light of these meetings, members had a similarly wide range of views on useful future subject matter for the Group to focus on. Some members commented that the apparent impossibility of real dialogue with NATO and the EU pointed a narrow path forward that did not try for solutions, did not address military matters (well-covered in other formats) but considered a strictly limited number of modest areas for Russia-West cooperation and procedural steps that could improve relations. Some argued that meeting officials was useful, others that it was pointless. Some favoured scenario-based discussion. Most seemed to agree that group statements nowadays had too little impact to be worthwhile for the Group to pursue.

Conclusions at the time of the visits and in the Group's discussion included that:

- it would be worth conducting a **reciprocal 'virtual' visit to Moscow**, even though there might be no reason to expect a better dialogue with the Group than in Brussels;
- it might also be worth trying to **connect with the OSCE** and its new Secretary General Helga Schmid;
- we should work to help NATO and EU officials, including Members of the European Parliament, to identify and listen to a **wider range of Russian voices**.

### **Future of the Group**

With the ELN note on the Group's way forward as background, participants discussed what the Group should be and what it should do. Some made the point that low turnout by members for meetings of the Group argued for change.

Everyone values the Group's character: unconventional, not exactly Track 2, a safe space, bringing people together for dialogue even if we disagree, benefitting from diversity of expertise and the willingness to be positive and seeing a value simply in dialogue. These things should continue. As one participant put it, in a good sense we are a motley crew. We need to figure out how to make best use of this.

Participants were open, and some enthusiastic, about embedding the Group in the wider ELN Network, engaging and making maximum use of the ELN's other networks. We should be an amplifier of ideas. Participants were also open to enlarging the Group, provided it did not then break up into sub-groups.

We should continue to discuss key issues and to dig beneath the headlines. We should find policy niches on which we can agree. We should keep disseminating our views. But not through group

statements. We should diversify meeting formats: one hour meetings with 20 minutes from an expert and 40 minutes discussion. We should diversify subject matter too and keep it thought-provoking: scenario work; continued briefings and virtual tours; continued myth-busting; practical points combined with more general ones; go into more detail on interesting topics; pandemic lessons; the future of war; the future of trade and so forth.

For recommendations about the Group's next steps, see the revised ELN note about the way forward.

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