



CONTACT GROUP ON RUSSIA-WEST RELATIONS

Keeping channels open and protecting space for diplomacy¹

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It has now been over two months since Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, and prospects for a negotiated settlement in the near future seem distant. Thursday's Contact Group meeting was dedicated to discussing aspects of the current conflict, as well as how to keep channels of communication open and protect space for diplomacy, even despite the current difficult circumstances.

Current situation: broad pessimism

Meeting participants were essentially unanimous in their pessimistic outlook on the current status of the conflict in Ukraine. Participants addressed a number of different aspects of the situation, including the facts of what is physically occurring on the ground, the positioning of the conflict in the international context, and sentiments about the conflict from both the Western and Russian sides.

One Ukrainian member provided a particularly detailed account of the situation on the ground in Ukraine, describing the dire circumstances present in eastern Ukrainian cities such as Dnipro, Kharkiv and Trostianets. Despite Russian forces moving away from Kyiv and concentrating most of their efforts on southern and eastern Ukraine, in this member's words, the situation in Kyiv is nonetheless "not the most comfortable" and that Ukrainians are "losing time, money and lives". The participant also emphasised that for those who wish to see what is occurring on the ground, Ukraine is open and welcomes foreigners.

A second vector of discussion on the current situation in Ukraine was based on analysis of how this conflict compares to other conflicts and how current hostilities fit into broader international politics. One participant noted how the current conflict in Ukraine is "unprecedented" in recent history. Yes, there have been massive and costly wars in other parts of the world, such as Afghanistan, but the current conflict is closer to Western Europe, "easier to understand", and fought in a country that,

¹ This was the Contact Group's 16th meeting. The Group met virtually to consider the current situation regarding the Russia/Ukraine conflict and the path forward for the group and for dialogue in general. This summary 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.

despite some issues, is “still a democracy that tried to follow the Western European example”. Thus, this member believed that it is fairly easy for the West to understand which side it is on. Meanwhile, on the Russian side, the state puts all of its resources into pushing the official narrative, which, while not accepted essentially anywhere outside Russia, has managed to placate Russian citizens to enough of a degree that large-scale protests are not observed. Another member expanded on these statements, arguing that the conflict was not simply about Russia and Ukraine, but about a broader set of differences between Russia and the West. In this participant’s words, the war is “not about Donetsk and Luhansk, and it’s not even about Ukraine”. Rather, this is a “war of civilisations”, and the conflict is fundamentally about the “new security architecture” and about “rearranging Europe”.

Finally, more personal aspects of the conflict were discussed, as part of the conversation revolved around the idea of Russia as feeling “humiliated” and attempting outcomes that would overcome this. Participants expressed various opinions on this matter: one member argued that Russians felt humiliated by the fall of the Soviet Union and that the current conflict was somewhat of a continuation of this humiliation. Another argued that this was not at all the case, and that the Putin regime is simply trying to use this narrative to rally Russians. Regardless, the argument was made that more or less any outcome in the present conflict will leave Russians feeling humiliated – and Europeans will have to live next door to that and deal with it. Hopefully, Europe will be able to deal with it better this time than last time.

Prospects for diplomacy and negotiations: similar pessimism

Another important topic that was discussed was the prospects for the future of negotiations and diplomacy. Contact Group members were unilaterally pessimistic about this topic as well. One member argued that the main issue is the atrocities that have taken place during the war and are continuing to take place. Unless this pattern stops, it will be difficult to find ground on which to negotiate, especially between officials. Furthermore, the Russia-Ukraine talks that have already occurred have not brought the two sides much closer together, and there was little progress in aligning Russian demands with Ukrainian red lines and vice versa.

Additionally, participants argued that neither side can afford to lose the war, and that both sides are in it until the end. Thus, returning to negotiations too early will certainly come at one party’s expense, and the conditions for “any kind of sensible dialogue” are currently being fought on the battleground. Such conditions may continue for quite some time: one Ukrainian member argued that Ukraine is certainly ready for compromise on certain issues, such as neutrality, Crimea and the Donbas. However, this member also was sceptical as to the ultimate efficacy of such positions, as Vladimir Putin can hardly afford to face the Russian people and say that over two months of war have only led to Ukrainian neutrality – which was already *de facto* the case before the war. In this participant’s mind, therefore, “weeks or months” could be spent simply keeping the conflict at its current point, and the most likely result will in fact be further escalation of the conflict. And, finally, for any Ukrainian neutrality to be reasonable in the first place, Kyiv would have to secure real security guarantees from the West – the “assurances” offered by the United States, in this Ukrainian member’s opinion, hearken back to the Budapest Memorandum, which has ultimately failed to be especially effective, given the current situation.

Thirdly, members discussed the long-term implications for negotiations and the global security architecture. One member argued that the West is now somewhat divided between those countries

who want to extend the war as long as possible so as to fundamentally weaken Russia and those who seek a ceasefire as quickly as possible. Also, in this member's mind, Russia is simply too large and influential for every country to cut it out, especially emerging powers such as India and Brazil, thus ensuring that Russia will likely not be fully internationally isolated. Regarding Russia itself, another member opined that even changing the Russian regime and finding a replacement for Vladimir Putin could easily not help the situation at all – Putin's successor could be even more committed to the war than Putin currently is. Regardless, participants generally agreed that war will likely continue for some time.

Future of dialogue: difficult through official channels, essential through channels like the Contact Group

Finally, Contact Group members discussed the future of dialogue: while most members were somewhat pessimistic on official dialogue, essentially everyone underscored the importance of maintaining ties through less formal formats – such as the Contact Group.

One member, a diplomat, stressed the difficulty of the current situation, arguing that “at the moment, it's very difficult to have a fruitful dialogue or diplomacy between Western leaders and President Putin”. The war has now entered its third month and all attempts at constructive dialogue between Russia and the West have failed. Nonetheless, this member stressed that as a diplomat, channels should remain open – it's better to talk than to not talk. One Russian member agreed, adding that official Russian narratives are not just seen as wrong but as completely unacceptable by many diplomatic circles.

Thus, this member argued, “personal ties” are what need to be relied on. Other participants echoed this sentiment; one stated that “keeping up connections on any level is important” while another said that they attended the Contact Group meeting to learn valuable perspectives and to “keep in touch with both sides.” Indeed, while members were pessimistic about most aspects of the conflict, they largely agreed that the Contact Group was a worthwhile endeavour. One member from Poland stated that “it's even more important now to understand what's happening inside our countries.” While the Contact Group, in this member's mind, has often tended to shy away from difficult issues in the past, it has a new responsibility as a forum for discussion not just about areas of obvious cooperation potential, but also about areas of clear conflict. The Contact Group has always recognised that its members do not agree on many issues; its role as a forum for dialogue should be especially encouraged given the current circumstances.

Finally, Contact Group members talked about what subjects should be discussed at future meetings. Members were uncertain as to what sort of real impact Contact Group discussions could have on policy, given that not all members are exceptionally well-connected or share their government's positions. Nonetheless, all agreed that dialogue should continue. In the current atmosphere of hostility and lack of dialogue, the Contact Group is an important vehicle for communication that should be utilised to its greatest possible extent.

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