



# EUROPEAN LEADERSHIP NETWORK

## CONTACT GROUP ON RUSSIA-WEST RELATIONS

### In-Person Meeting

### Russia-West Confrontation and the Future of the Contact Group

22-23 June 2023, Istanbul

#### SUMMARY

The Contact Group on Russia-West relations convened for a two-day in-person meeting in Istanbul in June, the first one since the 2020 Covid pandemic had moved the meetings to Zoom. The meeting took place against the backdrop of Russia's unprovoked and illegitimate invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, and the consequent rapid deterioration of Russia's relations with the West.

The purpose of the meeting was two-fold. First and foremost, to decide whether in the current context the Group can still fulfil its purposes – namely, to bust myths and avoid stereotyping, and serve as a platform for sharing diverse and frank opinions. Second, to exchange views on the state of and prospects for Russia-West relations and the global setting for this relationship, including Turkey's role in mediating the conflict and the country's trajectory following the May presidential election.

The Group concluded that sustaining dialogue and keeping communication channels open are now more important than ever. The Group therefore decided that in line with the ELN's mission, it should contribute to preserving and expanding the diplomatic space between Russia and the West, and seek the appropriate methods for reducing the current confrontation and minimising existential risks.

## DAY ONE DISCUSSIONS

Since its first meeting in January 2017, the Group has enabled ELN members with differing perceptions of the world to meet for respectful dialogue. That has helped all concerned to better understand other points of view, dispel myths and stereotypes about ‘the other’, and find value in doing so.

The Russia-West confrontation has deepened and widened further since 24 February 2022. Government-to-government relations have ruptured; threats, rhetoric and hostile actions have escalated; willingness to understand competing perspectives has evaporated; and a polarising and spreading de facto cold war between Russia and the West is underway.

In these circumstances, what can and should the Group do? Should it disband or expand? What should it talk about, and what should it work on?

Much of the discussion on Day 1 pivoted around the moral dimension of today’s geopolitical reality. The Group discussed ethical implications of the war, such as guilt, blame, and mutual accusations; honesty, truthfulness, and respect for facts; and justice, peace, and accountability for war crimes. Acknowledging diverging perspectives around the table, participants recognised that the Group may no longer be able to draw up joint recommendations, statements or calls for action.

The members, however, acknowledged their willingness to talk to each other despite apparent disagreements and appreciated the need to go beyond mutual accusations. Understanding your adversary’s point of view does not mean you agree with it. Relaying one’s position to the other side and keeping ‘back channels’ of communication open could be useful when circumstances change.

The Group acknowledged that the new geopolitical reality calls for both a broader national representation of its membership as well as a wider range of issues to tackle. Hearing the voice of Ukrainian experts as well as the view(s) of the EU’s ‘eastern neighbourhood’ is a must. Likewise, perspectives from the Global South, the Middle East, and China would also facilitate understanding the complex global context of the current conflict and could improve chances for its eventual resolution.

The Group proposed to explore a range of topics, including European security architecture; EU relations with Ukraine and Russia; scenarios for Russia’s future; global food and energy security; multilateral governance and the roles of BRICS and the Global South; and others.

## DAY TWO DISCUSSIONS

Day 2 discussions explored Turkey's foreign policy positioning and the state of the wider world as the setting within which the Russia-West confrontation is unfolding. This provided further context in which to consider future prospects for Russia-West relations, the Group, and the ELN.

The Group drew on a wide variety of different conclusions from comments delivered by Turkish experts. Some members were struck by the high degree of turbulence and change evidenced in Turkey and the region both currently and in recent decades. Others noted continuing Turkish popular support for EU membership, intense frustration with Turkey's treatment by the EU (still Turkey's biggest economic partner), and its wish for a more imaginative, flexible, and strategic EU approach. Noteworthy were also points made about Turkey's harshly realist foreign policy; how Turkish interests suffered whenever the West/US engaged in the region; Turkey's skill and pride in balancing the West and Russia; and Russia's diminishing influence in the Caucasus and Central Asia.

As far as Russia-West relations were concerned, Turkey is perhaps less a bridge, buffer or mediator and more simply an independent operator, with a variety of dependencies and levers on both Russia and the West. On Russia's war against Ukraine, the experts noted Turkey's provision of situational awareness in the Black Sea to Ukraine and Turkey's closure of the Bosphorus Strait to Russia's Black Sea fleet. Participants noted Ankara's likely opposition to Ukrainian membership of NATO and support for dialogue with Russia.

Discussion ranged widely on the global picture, with sparkling introductions from initial speakers, trying to position Russia-West confrontation in the complexity of the world's wider geopolitics, geoeconomics, and moral orders. Participants discussed the increasingly manifest multipolarity of the world, including the role of the private sector, particularly Big Tech. They agreed that the existential risks were high, rising, and neglected, but the world still had choices.

Before 24 February 2022, Russia had been gaining strategic momentum. Now, the West is strengthened, but at the same time, the Russia-China relationship has also intensified. However, Russia could now be seen as trapped in what is an increasingly geopolitical rather than broader relationship with China. Chinese business has little interest in Russia, and although strategic Chinese-US competition is growing, it might not lead to economic decoupling. Middle powers are rising in great diversity.

**Feedback? Questions? Please reach out to Jane Kinninmont – [janek@europeanleadershipnetwork.org](mailto:janek@europeanleadershipnetwork.org)**