

# **Selective Engagement between the EU and Russia**



Authors: Sabine Fischer and Ivan Timofeev

# Executive Summary

Four years after the fallout over Ukraine, rivalry and sanctions have become the ‘new normal’ between Russia and the EU. Both sides have become used to a state of affairs where relations are mired in inertia, and are currently both unable and unwilling to change the status quo.

This report is based on the results of discussions held by the EU-Russia Expert Network in 2017 and 2018.<sup>1</sup> It states that, while EU-Russia relations will likely be characterized by negative dynamics for a long time to come, both sides need to acknowledge the losses and risks emanating from this situation. The report argues that both the EU and Russia need to leave their comfort zones if they want to change the negative dynamics underpinning their relationship. It suggests that they do so by proactively substantiating the term “selective engagement”, presented by the EU in its “five guiding principles” in 2016. The report suggests focusing, for the time being, on nine issues in three areas:

In the common but contested neighbourhood, the EU and Russia should support efforts to achieve a sustainable ceasefire in the Donbas war. A lasting end to armed hostilities is not only an important step towards the implementation of the Minsk Agreements, but also the precondition for any other measure that would bring the conflict closer to a solution. Russia and the EU should, furthermore, initiate two types of informal high-level dialogue: (a) between the EU, the EEU, and AA/DCFTA countries with the aim to generate new ideas on how to avoid further conflict between European and Eurasian integration, and (b) between the EU,

the EEU, China and Central Asian countries about how to utilize the Belt and Road Initiative to foster connectivity and development across the region.

Russia and the EU should work towards safeguarding multilateralism wherever possible. In this area they should focus on rescuing the JCPOA, preserving its benefits for the remaining parties to the treaty and mitigating the crisis in US-Iranian relations. They must continue to explore finding a solution to the Syrian war, even though this issue will remain contested. They should explore less politicized areas of cooperation within the UN and the OSCE, such as climate change and the environment, global common goods, and economic connectivity, to create small but encouraging examples of successful cooperation.

In the area of EU-Russia bilateral relations, economic cooperation remains promising because economic interdependence and interests on both sides persist. Russia and the EU should, furthermore, create new spaces of societal interaction, and remove obstacles to mobility for each other’s citizens. Lastly, low-key expert dialogues on contentious issues should be (re)instated as a confidence-building measure.

At present, and probably for some time to come, selective engagement will be about managing the status quo and not allowing current conditions to deteriorate. By cautiously exploring the archipelago, the EU and Russia can, in the medium term, hope to discover and connect new islands of cooperation and, possibly, achieve more convergence in the long term.

<sup>1</sup> We would like to thank all members of the EU-Russia Expert Network for their active contributions to our discussions and for comments on earlier versions of this report. The content of the report is the sole responsibility of the authors.

# Selective Engagement between the EU and Russia

## What made you join the EU-Russia Expert Network?<sup>2</sup>

"I felt there was an insufficiency of professional, not ideologically-painted, analytical exchange between Russian and EU experts. It was motivating to have a chance to regularly meet a group of [...] experts who were committed to prevent further worsening of EU-Russia relations, to the extent they could, of course."

"Even if dialogue is rather inconclusive at the moment it is important to listen to [the other side] and follow the dynamic of their position

Four years after the fallout over Ukraine, rivalry has become the new norm in relations between Russia and the EU, and political and economic sanctions and countersanctions remain in place. The previously dense fabric of political, economic and societal dialogue between Russia and the EU has become porous. The Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA), in force since 1997, remains as the legal basis of the relationship and is unlikely to be replaced any time soon. Negotiations on visa liberalization and visa freedom, once launched to bring societies closer together, have been suspended. Despite geographic proximity and economic interdependence, EU-Russia relations today are marked by de-institutionalization and estrangement.

The EU and Russia have grown used to inertia. Brussels, overstretched after several years of financial and institutional woes, Brexit, the migration crisis, and right-wing populist challenges in member states

across the European Union, has pushed relations with Russia to one side. Consequently, 'Russia fatigue' has paralyzed intellectual efforts to search for ways out of the deadlock. Moscow's present attitude towards Brussels seems to be based on the assumption that the Union's internal troubles will, sooner or later, hollow out its positions on Ukraine, sanctions and other disputed issues. Decision-makers are sceptical about the possibility of a substantial change in relations with the EU and the West more generally. Moreover, there is a growing number of political and economic actors who benefit from the current state of affairs. Neither side is willing to change the status quo.

All of this is happening in the context of a rapidly changing global order. Spreading violent conflict in the Middle East and other world regions, transnational terrorism, environmental degradation and climate change, the increase of irregular migration and forced displacement, changing parameters in the world economy – both Russia and the EU are confronted with those challenges, but they cannot address them jointly due to an exceptional lack of mutual trust.

In this rather bleak atmosphere, the EU Russia Expert Network set out in 2016 to jointly reflect on issues of relevance for both the EU and Russia. The purpose of the network is to challenge the wisdom of both sides' approaches<sup>3</sup>. It is important to note that this is not a group of like-minded people who share identical views regarding the issues discussed during the process. On the contrary, the network's debates reflect many of the basic disagreements between Russia and the EU. Its members are united, however, in their conviction that in spite (or precisely because) of the fundamental change in EU-Russia relations, it is important to preserve and nurture spaces for dialogue as a long-term investment in the future<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> All quotations in the boxes are taken from questionnaires the members of the network filled in in spring 2018.

<sup>3</sup> The network was initiated by the EU Delegation to Russia in 2016 as a new form of interaction between EU and Russian foreign policy experts. In cooperation with the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC), the initiative brings together representatives of the main foreign policy think tanks in Russia and the EU. Between February 2017 and July 2018, the EU Russia Expert Network discussed six topics: "The relationship between the EU, Russia, and the US" (Moscow, February 2017); "The EU and Russia's common neighbourhood: shared or contested?" (Warsaw, April 2017); "The EU and Russia in the Wider Middle East" (Paris, July 2017); "Russia-EU-China: Perceptions of China's changing role" (Berlin, November 2017); "Looking beyond sanctions? Prospects for economic interaction between the EU and Russia" (Moscow, February 2018); and "Irregular migration and forced displacement: Challenges and opportunities for EU-Russia cooperation" (Rome, April 2018).

<sup>4</sup> We would like to thank all members of the EU-Russia Expert Network for their active contributions to our discussions and for comments on earlier versions of this report. The content of the report is the sole responsibility of the authors.

# Different views of the world

## What is the value of dialogue?

“To demonstrate that a) converging analysis is possible, and b) that analytical differences do not need to lead to conflicting policy choices and recommendations.”

“[To symbolically] demonstrate our willingness to listen and respect the position of the other side.”

The EU and Russia see the world differently. Their views have been drifting apart for almost two decades. The 2014 crisis revealed how deep the gap between them has become, fundamentally altering the setting of their relationship. It goes without saying that world views are not homogeneous in either the EU or Russia. Foreign policy debates on both sides reflect a broad spectrum of diverging positions. Our focus here is on mainstream thinking underpinning EU and Russian foreign policy-making.

## INTERNATIONAL ORDER

Russia approaches the existing liberal international order as a changing system under severe crisis. Officials and experts see the US-led Western camp as a declining power. Russians particularly focus on the idea of the irreversible collapse of the inequitable unipolar world order and suspect the “collective West” is attempting to preserve this order by all possible means. Russian official documents promote the idea of a multipolar and polycentric world of equal powers, led by the UN. The idea of equality among great powers is particularly important for Russia, which seems to be a rational strategy for a power with a permanent seat at the UN Security Council and relatively less resources and capabilities than other world leaders. From a Russian perspective, the EU does not count among the great powers in terms of security, but is rather following in the wake of US policy.

**The European Union** strongly promotes a liberal, “rules-based order with multilateralism as its key principle and the United Nations at its core”<sup>5</sup> which should ensure human rights, sustainable development and lasting access to the global commons. Officials and experts in the EU acknowledge that the existing global and European order is increasingly contested, including by an assertive Russia. However, the EU remains convinced that the liberal world order, as opposed to great power rivalry, is the most effective model of global governance. Euro-Atlantic solidarity is an important cornerstone of this order, but has started to wane since the election of Donald Trump. The notion of “strategic autonomy” has, therefore, gained more importance in the discourse about the EU’s foreign policy, although serious disagreements of what it implies persist among EU member states.

## APPROACHES TO SECURITY

**Russia** understands security as a central component of international politics. Power is still the main “currency” of international relations with a strong emphasis on defence capabilities. Sovereignty is a paramount international value. This concept implies the freedom of decision making, real independence from other powers and protection from external influence over internal affairs. Security and sovereignty strongly correlate with each other. Russia increasingly relies on military force in its foreign policy, although characterizing this trend as a forced reaction to the hostility of the international environment. Information wars, hybrid and ideological warfare, are also perceived to be among the top threats facing Russia.

The **EU Global Strategy** identifies a growing number of security challenges and spells out strategies for countering them. The key words here are **resilience** and **principled pragmatism**. The EU pledges to enhance defence efforts and tackle conventional as well as hybrid threats. A stronger emphasis on security and interests does not mean, however, that it is giving up on its core values either internally or in its external behaviour. Interests and values go hand in hand. Its enduring

<sup>5</sup> Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign and Security Policy, Brussels, June 2016, p. 8

power of attraction allows the EU to continue to foster transformation in its relations with third countries – which is in itself a contribution to peace and stability. The EU's notion of sovereignty is based on independence, territorial integrity and freedom of choice. It condemns the use of force as a means of resolving international disputes.

## ORIGINS OF THE CRISIS IN EUROPEAN SECURITY

**From a Russian** perspective, the crisis of 2014 and subsequent deterioration in relations are the result of a long-term accumulation of destructive factors in relations between Russia and the West. Among them are: the enlargement of NATO, the loss of relevance of the OSCE, the bombing of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, the issue of Kosovo, the West's apparent indifference to Russia's security concerns, the West's interference in the internal affairs of the post-Soviet states – including its support for the so-called “colour revolutions,” and its antagonism to Russia-led international institutions. Russia-US and Russia-EU relations in the post-Soviet space are zero-sum games, aggravated by state weakness and corrupt institutions in the newly independent states. An improvement in relations requires the restoration of the Euro-Atlantic security system based on the principle of the indivisibility of security (Helsinki 2).

The **European Union** considers Russian policy a root cause of the current crisis in European security. It rejects Russia's claim to a sphere of “privileged interests” in the post-Soviet space. From an EU point of view the concept of spheres of influence is outdated and counterproductive because it undermines the freedom of choice of sovereign states. Moscow's “annexation”<sup>6</sup> of Crimea and its support for the separatist forces in Donbas are considered gross violations of the European security order as laid down in the Helsinki Final Act and reiterated in the Charter of Paris. Many in the EU think that what Russia wants is not “Helsinki 2” but “Yalta 2” – which is not acceptable from an EU point of view. Russia is seen as the main culprit of the current crisis. Accordingly, the EU views change

in Russian policy as the key to improving the situation.

## VIEWS ON UKRAINE

Moscow regards the Ukrainian crisis as a result of corruption and weak institutions in Ukraine on the one hand, and as a result of a biased Western policy, on the other. As such Russia views the February 2014 revolutionary changes of power in Kiev as an unconstitutional coup supported by the West. Moscow assessed the coup as a direct threat to ethnic Russian and Russian-speaking communities in Ukraine which rendered the use of force legitimate in order to protect them from Ukrainian nationalists. Moscow also implicitly suspected the new political leadership in Ukraine to be proponents of NATO membership and closer security ties with the West, all at the expense of Russia's security interests. This assessment justified “reunification” with Crimea. Moscow approaches modern Ukraine rather like a failed state – dependent on the US and the EU, corrupt, and remarkably inefficient. The violent conflict in Donbas is regarded in Moscow as a civil war, with Kiev seen as a key obstacle to implementing the Minsk Agreements, and the EU as a dawdling player not strong enough to press the Ukrainian authorities to meet their end of the bargain.

In **the EU**, the Maidan revolution is seen as a popular protest against a corrupt and kleptocratic regime incapable of managing public discontent, or promoting necessary political changes, or responding adequately to the European aspirations of the majority of the Ukrainian population. The EU does not share the Russian view that what happened in Kiev in February 2014 was an unconstitutional coup. It sees Russian meddling at the core of the events that afterwards unfolded in Crimea and Donbas. Brussels regards Russia as a party in the Donbas conflict and Russian policy as a key obstacle to the implementation of the Minsk Agreements. Ukraine is facing severe problems, both internally and in its dealings with the war in the East – including its reluctance to implement the political provisions of the Minsk Agreements. According to many in the EU, however, these troubles are aggravated if not caused by Russia's aim to undermine Ukraine's trajectory towards the EU.

<sup>6</sup> Russia and the EU apply different categories to characterize the change of status of Crimea. In Russia it is called “reunification,” while in the West the term “annexation” is used. We put both terms in quotation marks when speaking about the Russian and the EU views.



## DEMOCRACY, POLITICAL REGIME AND INTERFERENCE

Russia and the EU are locked in mutual accusations of interference with the respective other's internal affairs.

Russia has long suspected the EU and other Western players of using talk of democracy and human rights to manipulate internal developments in post-Soviet countries. Western "regime change" policy is perceived as an existential threat. It undermines the efforts of the Russian political elite to cautiously promote reforms while at the same time preserving stability. The use of the term "regime" as a signifier for the Russian political system is perceived as offensive and humiliating. At the same time, Moscow fiercely rejects US and EU claims that Russia interferes with elections in Western countries and uses social networks, propaganda, cyber-attacks and its contacts with populists to undermine the political systems of others. From a Russian viewpoint, Western political elites exploit such accusations to distract their publics from their own incompetence at tackling fundamental changes afoot in their own societies. The Skripal affair is a case in point: it is seen as a provocation in Russia. Moscow claims it has no fundamental problem with EU political systems but instead stresses the difference between its own devotion to "traditional" and the EU's devotion to "post-modern" values.

**In the European Union** Russia is regarded as an authoritarian state where any previously existing balance of power has been replaced by a power vertical under President Putin. According to this view, Russian domestic politics and foreign policy are closely intertwined: whereas autocratic government fosters assertive external behaviour, successful great power politics on the international stage is being used internally as a source of legitimacy and stability for the political system. The **European Union** has become very concerned with Russian interference in its internal affairs: increased activities of Russian funded media; intensified contacts between Russia and Euro-sceptical political forces, including

during election and referendum campaigns; and cyber-attacks against Western European governments which are believed to originate in Russia. Incidents such as the Skripal affair further entrench the fear of hostile Russian action on EU soil. Most observers recognize that Moscow's policy is not the root cause of the internal problems the EU is facing today. However, it is believed that Russia exploits the EU's weaknesses in order to promote its interests in what some call a "hybrid war against the EU".

## Paradigm shift in EU-Russia relations

**The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation** stated in November 2016: "Systemic problems in the Euro-Atlantic region that have accumulated over the last quarter century are manifested in the geopolitical expansion pursued by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU) along with their refusal to begin implementation of political statements regarding the creation of a common European security and cooperation framework, have resulted in a serious crisis in the relations between Russia and the Western States".<sup>7</sup>

In March 2016, the EU External Action Service presented **five guiding principles** for the EU's policy towards Russia. They include the call for the full implementation of the Minsk Agreements; the strengthening of relations with the EU's Eastern partners and other neighbours; the strengthening of the EU's resilience against Russian threats, including hybrid threats; the need for selective engagement with Russia; and the Union's willingness to support Russian civil society and expand people-to-people contacts.<sup>8</sup> In the same year, the EU Global Strategy identified the relationship with Russia as a "key strategic challenge" because "Russia's violation of international law and the destabilization of Ukraine, on top of protracted conflicts in the wider Black Sea region, have challenged the European security order at its core."<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, December 2016, [www.mid.ru](http://www.mid.ru).

<sup>8</sup> Remarks by High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini at the press conference following the Foreign Affairs Council, Brussels, 4 March 2016, [www.eeas.europa.eu](http://www.eeas.europa.eu).

<sup>9</sup> EU Global Strategy 2016, p 33.

In other words: a functioning relationship, let alone partnership, has ceased to be a strategic goal for either Russia or the EU. Both perceive the respective other as a threat and an obstacle to the implementation of their preferred versions of the European security order. As one network member put it: The EU and Russia “act on the basis of fundamentally diverging understandings of the nature and prospects for the European order”. Both insist that they are merely reacting to the other’s actions; both see the responsibility for the crisis as lying exclusively on the other side. Neither is currently willing nor able to formulate a positive agenda for their relationship.

All this marks a **fundamental departure from the strategic partnership paradigm**, which informed EU-Russia relations, at least at the rhetorical level, before 2014. In fact, it is doubtful if “strategic partnership” was ever more than a buzzword for a relationship that went into crisis mode long before 2014. In 2018, strategic partnership as a goal has been replaced by “strategic distrust”, which now “permeates the full scope of bilateral relations”, as one network member put it. This seriously narrows down the spaces for (even selective) engagement.

The EU and Russia will be stuck with their differences for a long time to come. They need to be aware, however, that the current situation implies risks: economic disentanglement comes at a great cost, particularly for Russia. It creates path dependencies, which may at some – perhaps not so distant – point become irreversible. Furthermore, the present mixture of inertia and containment provides neither side with incentives to act – except in the case of renewed escalation (be it in Ukraine or elsewhere). Such a development would exponentially increase the costs for all sides involved and, therefore, needs to be avoided.

At the same time, the case of EU-Russia relations is not (yet) hopeless for three reasons:

- EU-Russia relations are indeed at a low, but they are in considerably better shape than Russia-US relations. Brussels takes a more cautious approach towards Russia than Washington. It maintains a clear linkage between restrictive measures and Russia’s policy towards Ukraine, and avoids sanctions spilling over into other areas. The EU

also has a more nuanced reading of the situation in Ukraine than the US. Russia, on the other hand, tends to regard the EU as a more adaptable and receptive international counterpart than the US. Russian foreign policy documents are more accommodating towards the EU than to any other Western actor.

- Despite shrinking interdependence, economic interaction between Russia and the EU remains dense. There is a demand in business communities on both sides to develop trade relations and economic cooperation in spite of mutual sanctions. Also, linkages between societies in the EU and Russia are still rather strong. In other words: there still is a lot of substance to preserve and build upon.

- Both Moscow and Brussels recognize that they have overlapping interests and face common threats in the international arena that require joint action. This includes the need to, in some areas, hedge against the risks emanating from a currently more erratic and disruptive US foreign policy.

## Selective engagement between the EU and Russia: Conclusions and recommendations

### What was achieved?

“Not that much in terms of generating new ideas. But certainly it serves the purpose of better understanding how we tick on both sides.”

“At the same time, a number of pressing issues will perhaps force Russia and the EU to cooperate and our discussions, mapping the different approaches to the topics at hand, could lay the base for arriving at fruitful discussions quicker.”

At present there is a lot at stake and very little scope for constructive engagement between the EU and Russia. Both sides will need to leave their

comfort zones behind if they intend to improve the relationship in the long run. For the EU that implies making Russia a priority again – not in the sense that Russia should have priority over other countries in Eastern Europe or elsewhere, but in the sense that Russia is too important an international player for the EU not to have a proactive and strategic policy. Moscow, on the other hand, needs to acknowledge that, regardless of intensifying relations with Asian countries and particularly China, the EU is an indispensable partner for any kind of sustainable development of the country.

The network suggests taking up the EU's term "selective engagement" and filling it with substance. In the view of network members, selective engagement could help to achieve "a certain degree of mutually beneficial interaction, prevent all-out confrontation and total zero-sum behaviour"<sup>10</sup> (pessimistic perspective). It could also help to create "a bank of tangible successes in relations" between the EU and Russia (optimistic perspective). At the same time, the term "selective" should not be read as an invitation to "cherry-pick those areas where engagement is convenient to the sides, and ignore others". Neither should it be used as an excuse for "almost no engagement at all". Rather, selective engagement should be understood as a process whereby Russia and the EU identify areas of possible cooperation in spite of the challenges they face. When embarking on such a path, the sides need to be clear about time horizons. At present, and likely for some time to come, selective engagement will be about managing the status quo and not allowing current conditions to deteriorate. By cautiously exploring the archipelago the EU and Russia can hope to discover and connect new islands of cooperation in the medium term. Sustainable improvement of the relationship and greater convergence currently seem to be a vague aspiration rather than a realistic long-term goal.

**Selective** engagement is, by definition, about prioritizing issues which promise tangible results, preferably in a foreseeable period of time. Therefore, we suggest focusing for now on nine

issues in three areas in which, from our perspective, progress is urgent and/or realistic.

### Obstacles to improving relations?

"This standoff is intimately connected to a conflict over values and therefore intimately tied to domestic politics and the respective systems that the EU, on the one hand, and Russia, on the other, is offering their respective citizens but also the countries in the shared neighbourhood."

### Areas of selective cooperation?

"I think two areas are most promising – (1) stimulating private sector-led technological innovation (including roadmaps for development of digital economy) and (2) future reconstruction of Syria."

"Economic relations is the most obvious sphere. But even here there is no "low-hanging" fruit anymore. With the exception of the energy sphere the risk of further degradation of the relations is imminent [...]"

## RUSSIA AND THE EU IN THE COMMON BUT CONTESTED NEIGHBOURHOOD

Network members almost unanimously identified the common, but contested neighbourhood as the area where engagement between the EU and Russia is most difficult to achieve. Both sides accuse each other of striving to expand their influence in the region to the detriment of the other. Both sides firmly reject the accusations levelled at them by the other. Both sides consider a fundamental change of the other side's policy the precondition for more stability in the region. At the same time, conflict and tensions in the neighbourhood inflict considerable harm on Russia, the EU and, most of all, their neighbours. In these difficult circumstances we suggest that the EU and Russia should:

<sup>10</sup> All quotations in this paragraph are taken from questionnaires the members of the network filled in in spring 2018.



1 Facilitate CBMs in Donbas: Views on Ukraine are irreconcilable. The status of Crimea will remain a divisive issue. The implementation of the Minsk Agreements on ending the war in Donbas is stuck in an impasse as are the international peace negotiations (the Trilateral Contact Group in Minsk, the Normandy Format and the Volker-Surkov Channel). The full implementation of the Minsk Agreements should remain the end goal of the process – if only for lack of viable alternatives. At the same time all actors involved need to be aware that it is currently not a realistic option. Russia and the EU should, therefore, focus on contributing to a stable and sustainable ceasefire – which is, in itself, anything but easy to achieve. Any other steps, including the deployment of a UN or UN-mandated mission in the conflict region, will be conditional upon a lasting end of armed hostilities. One way of working towards this goal is to identify confidence-building measures (CBMs) across the line of contact and cautiously encourage the parties to implement them. The EU is presently not directly involved in any of the negotiation processes, but coordinates closely with the OSCE and other important stakeholders and is a key donor of humanitarian aid to conflict-affected regions and communities in Eastern Ukraine. It also works closely with Ukraine on the implementation of the AA/DCFTA throughout the country. It could play an important role by facilitating and financing CBMs at the local level. Russia would need to use its influence in Donetsk and Luhansk to make such CBMs possible.

2 Initiate high-level dialogue between EU, EEU and AA/DCFTA countries: Both the EU and Russia need to draw lessons from the 2014 fallout. The EU has since concluded new agreements with Armenia and Kazakhstan, both members of the EEU, and no major crisis has occurred. This may, however, be proof of those two countries' ability to navigate a treacherous regional environment rather than greater wisdom in Moscow or Brussels. The Russian side, including in the EU-Russia Expert Network, advocates EU-EEU cooperation as a way to bridge the divide. EU representatives, including those from the EU-Russia Expert Network, are much more hesitant regarding this option because they perceive the EEU essentially as a Russian hegemonic project. The EU and Russia could jointly initiate an informal, high-level di-

ologue (preferably track 1.5) involving representatives from interested EU member states, EEU member states and countries with AAs/DCFTAs. This could help to transcend a potential “Yalta-effect” (much feared in the EU) and generate new ideas on the compatibility and interaction between the EU and the EEU (much desired in Russia).

3 Initiate high-level EU-EEU-China-Central Asia dialogue on BRI and connectivity: Russia and the EU should proactively use China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to increase connectivity in the Euro-Eurasian area. A dialogue format similar to the one suggested above could involve representatives of the EU, Russia/the EEU, China and Central Asian countries. It could be used to develop ideas on new transport infrastructures and trade links. Such a process could have positive implications for stability and development in Central Asia which remains highly vulnerable to internal and external threats. The EU could utilize such a dialogue for its new Central Asia Strategy. It would also fit nicely with ongoing Russian efforts to harmonize the BRI and Eurasian integration.

## THE EU AND RUSSIA IN MULTILATERAL FORA

Both Russia and the EU stress the importance of multilateral institutions, especially the United Nations, for international stability. However, their positions within the United Nations are very different. Russia is a permanent member of the UN Security Council. Through this, but also through other actions such as its military intervention in Syria, it is a key player in major international conflicts while the EU plays a secondary role in this field. It coordinates closely with the UN in many areas, but has a much less prominent role in key UN decision-making processes. In this asymmetric setting, EU-Russia cooperation should aim to safeguard multilateral cooperation wherever possible, for instance by:

4 Working to rescue the JCPOA: The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) on the Iran nuclear programme is one area where the EU and Russia not only both sit at the negotiating table but also share a strong interest in the preservation of the deal. Commitment and cooperation on

this issue is of the essence. It should aim less at bringing the United States back to the table but rather at salvaging the benefits of the agreement for the remaining parties. Moscow and Brussels should also try to jointly mitigate the crisis in US-Iranian relations.

**5** Continuing to talk about Syria: Syria will remain a contentious issue between the EU and Russia. They should nonetheless continue to search for possibilities to jointly promote the peace process. Once violent conflict has ended, cooperation on the post-war reconstruction of the country would be desirable – the EU could assume a strong role in this. However, this option seems to be out of reach as long as armed hostilities continue and the EU and Russia maintain diverging views on the political environment which needs to be created for economic reconstruction to begin.

**6** Exploring less politicized areas for multilateral cooperation including climate change and the environment, global common goods (within the UN) or economic connectivity (within the OSCE).

## RUSSIA-EU BILATERAL RELATIONS

The crisis between the EU and Russia did not start in the spring of 2014. Part of it goes back to the 1990s, but mostly it has evolved since the early 2000s, when mutual distrust flared up over the colour revolutions in Georgia (2003) and Ukraine (2004). What followed was a sequence of ups and downs (Putin's speech at the 2007 Munich Security Conference, the 2008 Russian-Georgian War, the EU-Russia modernization partnership), but the overall direction, clearly, was downhill. Today the sides find themselves entangled in a deep structural crisis which they will not overcome quickly. This includes sanctions as well as the near-complete breakdown of political dialogue and trust. However, as in the contested neighbourhood, there are niches for engagement, if Russia and the EU manage to:

**7** Explore areas of economic cooperation which do not violate sanctions on either side. Business communities in Russia and the EU maintain an interest in economic interaction. The EU

remains the most attractive partner if Russia decides to modernize and diversify its economy – which would be in both sides' interest and could have a stabilizing effect on the whole region in economic, political and security terms. One focus of economic engagement could be on supporting small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) in Russia. Both sides should remain committed to the norms of the WTO in relations with each other as well as with foreign partners. They should abstain from erecting additional barriers to trade and economic cooperation outside the sanctions regimes.

**8** Create spaces for more active and multifaceted societal interaction. This includes education and research, culture, cross-border mobility, (civil) society cooperation, inter-regional cooperation etc. Such initiatives need joint coordination, financial support and, above all, favourable visa regulations to ensure mobility. With negotiations on visa freedom/liberalization suspended, Russia and the EU should each consider unilateral steps to ease access to visas for each other's citizens.

**9** Initiate expert dialogues on contested issues: Russia and the EU maintained an exceptionally dense network of institutional dialogues before 2014, including a large number of ministerial meetings and two EU-Russia summits per year. Much of this was devoid of substance long before the institutional breakdown. Hence, it would be useless to simply reactivate the previously existing formats, even if political circumstances improved. It would make sense, however, to (re)instate low-key expert dialogues (involving political institutions as well as expert communities) to discuss contested issues in the bilateral relationship. This could open spaces for experts to leave their own echo chambers, get to know their counterparts on the other side and, with time, reduce mutual prejudice and threat perceptions. One of the first topics to be tackled should be the information war which currently poisons the atmosphere in Russia-EU relations.

None of this will be easy. Both sides need to be aware that any solution to their structural problems will take considerable effort and a very long time. However, working on them strategically through selective engagement is far better than inertia and the possible risk of collapse.

# EU-Russia Experts Network on Foreign Policy (EUREN)

## Core group



### Participants EU

**Riccardo Alcaro**  
IAI > [www.iai.it](http://www.iai.it)

**Oksana Antonenko**  
LSE > [www.lse.ac.uk](http://www.lse.ac.uk)

**Steven Blockmans**  
CEPS > [www.ceps.eu](http://www.ceps.eu)

**Nicolas de Pedro**  
CIDOB > [www.cidob.org](http://www.cidob.org)

**Sabine Fischer**  
SWP > [www.swp-berlin.org](http://www.swp-berlin.org)

**Tatiana Kaustoueva-Jean**  
IFRI > [www.ifri.org](http://www.ifri.org)

**Sarunas Liekis**  
Vytautas Magnus University  
> [www.vdu.lt](http://www.vdu.lt)

**Kadri Liik**  
ECFR > [www.ecfr.eu](http://www.ecfr.eu)

**Stefan Meister**  
DGAP > [dgap.org](http://dgap.org)

**Andrew Monaghan**  
University of Oxford  
> [www.ox.ac.uk](http://www.ox.ac.uk)

**Arkady Moshes**  
FIIA > [www.fiaa.fi](http://www.fiaa.fi)

**Katarzyna Pelczynska-Nalecz**  
Bartory Foundation  
> [www.batory.org.pl](http://www.batory.org.pl)

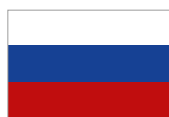
**Nicu Popescu**  
ECFR > [www.ecfr.eu/paris](http://www.ecfr.eu/paris)

**Tony van der Togt**  
Clingendael Institute  
> [www.clingendael.org](http://www.clingendael.org)

**Carolina Vendil-Pallin**  
FOI > [www.foi.se](http://www.foi.se)

**Ernest Wyciszekiewicz**  
CPRDIP > [cprdip.pl](http://cprdip.pl)

**Andris Spruds**  
LIIA > [liia.lv](http://liia.lv)



### Participants Russia

**Alexander Aksenok**  
RIAC > [russiancouncil.ru](http://russiancouncil.ru)

**Olga Butorina**  
MGIMO > [mgimo.ru](http://mgimo.ru)

**Yevgeny Buzhinsky**  
PIR-Center  
> [www.pircenter.org](http://www.pircenter.org)

**Dmitry Danilov**  
Institute of Europe, RAS  
> [en.instituteofeurope.ru](http://en.instituteofeurope.ru)

**Mark Entin**  
MGIMO > [mgimo.ru](http://mgimo.ru)

**Natalia Viakhireva (Evtikhevich)**  
RIAC > [russiancouncil.ru](http://russiancouncil.ru)

**Igor Ivanov**  
RIAC > [russiancouncil.ru](http://russiancouncil.ru)

**Nikolay Kaveshnikov**  
MGIMO > [mgimo.ru](http://mgimo.ru)

**Andrey Kortunov**  
RIAC > [russiancouncil.ru](http://russiancouncil.ru)

**Sergey Kulik**  
Institut of Contemporary  
Development  
> [www.insor-russia.ru](http://www.insor-russia.ru)

**Sergey Markedonov**  
RGGU > [rggu.com](http://rggu.com)

**Tatiana Romanova**  
SPBU > [spbu.ru](http://spbu.ru)

**Ivan Timofeyev**  
RIAC > [russiancouncil.ru](http://russiancouncil.ru)

**Sergey Utkin**  
IMEMO > [www.imemo.ru](http://www.imemo.ru)

**Andrey Zagorsky**  
IMEMO > [www.imemo.ru](http://www.imemo.ru)

Not all core group members were present at all meetings. The interim report do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the core group.

## About EU-Russia Experts Network

The **EU-Russia Experts Network on Foreign Policy (EUREN)** was initiated by the EU Delegation to Russia in 2016 as a new form of interaction between EU and Russian foreign policy experts and think tanks.

EUREN brings together foreign policy experts and think tanks from Russia and EU member states to discuss relevant foreign policy issues with the aim of exchanging views and formulating policy recommendations. The network meets on a quarterly basis in Russia and different EU capitals.



**Public Diplomacy EU and Russia** offers a platform for dialogue between Russian and EU selected audiences on a number of bilateral and global issues. Personal ties built over the years are an indispensable element of our relations with Russia, particularly with an eye to the future of the next generations.

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Mosty section on Colta.ru  
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European External Action Service (EEAS)  
in Russian  
[eeas.europa.eu/ru/index\\_ru.htm](http://eeas.europa.eu/ru/index_ru.htm)

RIAC – Russian International Affairs Council  
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