



EUROPE - RUSSIA: PEOPLE TO PEOPLE DIALOGUE

RE-BUILDING SECURITY IN EUROPE:
SHORT- AND LONG-TERM APPROACHES

Prague June 8-9, 2017

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

European institutions should establish channels to talk with the pro-European part of Russian society in order to maintain dialogue with those who will be shaping the future of Russia.



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Europe - Russia: People to people dialogue - a roundtable Re-building security in Europe: short- and long-term approaches

Final report

“Europe-Russia: The people-to-people dialogue roundtable” took place in Prague on June 8-9, 2017 six months after the successful [Boris Nemtsov Forum](#) in Brussels. The meeting considered short- and long-term possibilities for stabilizing EU-Russia ties and developing linkages and patterns of cooperation to prepare a path for Russia’s reintegration with Europe.

The event organized by [Open Russia](#) and the [Institute of Modern Russia](#) gathered 32 participants, among them MEPs, politicians, journalists and high profile experts from Russia and the EU. [Karel Schwarzenberg](#), Chairman of the Committee of Foreign Affairs of the Chamber of Deputies in the Parliament of the Czech Republic was the guest speaker at a dinner organized during the event.

Conclusions and recommendations

- How Russia and Europe see each other
 - *The current Russian leadership does not consider Russia to be a European country.*

Prime Minister Dimitry Medvedev has publicly repeated the stereotype that having parliamentary democracy of the European type would be a disaster for Russia. An official report published by the Russian Ministry of Culture suggests that Russia is not part of Europe. The concept of the “Russian World” is very un-European and focuses on expanding Russia’s influence without accepting European values.

Western leaders sometimes harbour illusions about their Russian counterparts. This was for example the case with President Roosevelt, who despite evidence to the contrary believed Stalin would never harm American interests. It is important not to build policy based on illusions, but to make accurate diagnoses and propose adequate solutions.

- *The Kremlin uses international affairs as a tool to influence internal politics.*

The strong support for Putin in Russian society is support for an aggressive foreign policy. On internal policy there is a much more negative reaction to the authorities’ actions in society, even the actions of the President. People in the West tend not to see this nuance.

Europe’s instinct has been to try to seek compromises with the Russian authorities. That was the basis for the talks in Minsk, which successfully contained military aggression. After that there was no progress in the negotiations. The Kremlin is partly entangled in its own propaganda machine, which makes it unprepared for developments in Europe. It may also cause risky decisions, since the Kremlin believes its own propaganda that paints the West as weak and unable to respond.

International investors in Russia tend to set up offices in Moscow and, as a result, also tend to consider Russia a European country. At the same time, as some participants pointed out, even within the European Union there are still places (especially Central Europe) where there are arguments over what constitutes European values.

- **Democracy in Russia**

- *The West must not fall for the rhetoric about a unique Russia that cannot be genuinely democratic.*

It should be clear that Russia either is a democracy or not, and that there is no such thing as a special democracy. The return to good relations will only be possible when the Kremlin reverts to following European standards of behaviour, although some of the participants noted that getting back on a European track would be far from straightforward.

- **Official Russia and Russian civil society**

- *The liberal opposition, as opposed to Putin's regime, sees Russia as part of Europe.*

The EU must put more pressure on the Kremlin and stop treating the current authorities as representatives of the whole of Russian society. The Russian public is predominately in the hands of Kremlin since the state-controlled media has control of the narrative. At the same time, the EU fails to get its message across to Russian society.

In the light of historical experiences concerning change of power in Russia, it is also very important to focus on education and preparing people who will be able to take responsibility for the country in the future. In this context, it is important to strengthen academic cooperation between Russia and the EU, as well as exchange programmes and scholarships.

- *There is a need for an alternative vision of Russia's future based on European values.*

It is also important for Europe to create more effective and accessible tools to support civil society in Russia, as current forms of support are unreachable for many small civil society actors in Russia. Recent call for proposals for in the framework of the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights for example supports projects seeking large-scale funding. Many smaller civil society actors in Russia looking for smaller-scale financing have no means to apply for EU funds.

- *Hope for the future is building alternative ties and using alternative language in mutual relations between Russia and EU.*

Many Russian citizens share European values. The proportions between them and those who share archaic values are changing. Some of the participants noted that the attitude towards European values divides Russia geographically

into a more European and a more Asian part. There is also a big part of Russian society which ignores politics and elections completely. The division of European-oriented and Asia-oriented Russia can be seen not only in society, but also in the country's elites. Some of the elites are interested in integrating Russia further into the global economy.

- **Kremlin's aggression in Ukraine and its significance for EU-Russia relationship**
 - *The situation in Ukraine is an example of a deadlock in the EU-Russia relationship.*

The example of Ukraine shows that there is willingness on the part of the Russian authorities to engage in war. However, the situation in Ukraine is not the cause, but the consequence of previous mistakes in relations with the Kremlin.

At the moment Europe should try to mitigate the situation in areas where it is possible to do so, and work to avoid escalation of war in Ukraine and outside of Ukraine. Another potentially dangerous situation that will influence the EU-Russia relationship is the Kremlin's involvement in Syria, as well as hacking and attempts to influence electoral processes in Europe. One participant noted that the apparent hacker attack that led to the isolation of Qatar could be viewed as another conflict fuelled by the Kremlin.

One of the participants warned against the possibility of a war being started by Russian leadership in the near future. The authorities are preparing Russia's military and technological capability for confrontation, and in particular for a confrontation with the West. The current government does not understand that its policy will impact negatively on Russia's development. Not all participants shared this view. On the subject of Ukraine it was noted that in economic terms, the annexation of Eastern Ukraine would be very difficult for Russia, especially in terms of maintaining social standards in the new territory.

- *The pro-European part of Russian society would be significantly strengthened if it could point to the success of democratic reforms in one of the Eastern Partnership countries, especially Ukraine.*

That is also the Kremlin's biggest fear. It is therefore important for the West to support Ukraine and other Eastern Partnership countries throughout their transition. At the moment, EU strategic assistance is more focused on Europe's southern neighbours than its eastern ones. The traditional Russian sphere of influence has started to fracture as countries like Ukraine and Georgia demonstrate that they do not want to belong to that circle. Kremlin is not prepared to let them go.

It was also noted by some of the participants that if Europe fails to react strongly to aggressive actions by Russia, the situation may be comparable to the annexation of the Sudetenland by Nazi Germany. The lack of reaction from Europe increased Hitler's appetite for seizing more territory. This could also happen in the case of the current Russian leadership.

- **Guiding principles for EU-Russia relations**

Russia is an official member of institutions and bodies representing Europe and European values. Russia has been a member of the Council of Europe since 1996 and a signatory of the European Convention on Human Rights since 1998. Due to those commitments, Russia is obliged to follow basic European standards, such as the right to free elections. Russia is also a part of Europe in terms of trade, as many countries in Europe buy Russian products, especially oil and gas, and Russia is a significant importer of European manufactured goods. In the light of this it is impossible to argue that human rights are simply an internal issue for Russia, as Russia responds to international institutions and treaties it has signed.

It is important for Europe to always keep human rights and core European values in mind when conducting dialogue with Russia, especially on a bilateral level. EU policy towards Russia is currently based on sanctions and five guiding principles for EU-Russia relations. Those guidelines are:

- implementation of the Minsk agreement
- strengthened relations with the EU's Eastern Partners and other neighbours
- strengthening the resilience of the EU to Russian threats
- selective engagement with Russia
- the need to engage in people-to-people contact and support Russian civil society.

- *Europe should talk directly to Russian civil society*

Europe should conduct an official dialogue with Russian civil society using mechanisms that are not controlled by the Kremlin. If the Russian government is able to direct civil society dialogue, the talks will only legitimize state controlled civil society actors. Instead, the EU should seek to build alternative ties and use these to supplement its contacts with Russian officialdom. It is essential that EU countries hear directly from civil society what is happening at grass roots level across Russia.

As part of this process, European institutions should also establish channels to talk with the pro-European part of Russian society in order to maintain dialogue with those who will be shaping the future of Russia.

- *European authorities should always ask where the money for Russian investments in their respective countries comes from.*

The latter is especially important in light of the fact that Kremlin is actively supporting forces in Europe that want to undermine European and Euro-Atlantic stability. One important advantage Europe has over Russia is that it could track and block funds which are invested in Europe but have their origins in corruption in Russia. European countries should also make it easier to access their real estate registers, which could help Russian NGOs and journalists identify properties owned by the Russian elite in Europe.

- *Member states should not support its companies against the interests of common EU-Russia policy.*

EU member states are sending mixed signals to the Russian leadership: on the one hand, they have a sanctions policy, on the other hand, they are engaging in strategically important energy projects such as the Nord Stream 2 pipeline.

- **Mutual sanctions policy**

- *Participants noted that the effects of sectorial sanctions are felt by the whole of society, as the authorities make society pay for the consequences of the sanctions. They have little effect on the ruling elite.*
- *Personal sanctions, which the elite fears the most, are flawed and require adjustment*

Some people are on the European sanctions list are included for no apparent reason. Some, like Major Pavel Karpov, involved in the Sergey Magnitsky case feature on the US sanctions but do not appear on the EU list. Some of the participants from Europe stressed that the sanctions, although imperfect, were the only instrument available to the EU after the annexation of Crimea. It was also suggested that Europe could take into consideration technology sanctions, which would make the development of military equipment more difficult.

Disclaimer: The recommendations of this report do not represent any position on the part of the organizers or partners of the event. They are a summary of views expressed by different participants during the event.