



The EU's and Russia's common neighbourhood: **shared or contested?**

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The discussions during the meeting were shaped by important general perceptions and expectations on both sides.

Approach of the respective other to the neighbourhood

Russian participants saw the EU as expanding its influence in the post-Soviet space without considering the consequences of its policy. Judging from the statements of Russian participants, the EU is perceived as a geopolitical player who has been consistently securitising its policy – to Russia's detriment and with negative implications for the stability of the affected countries and the region as a whole. Moscow, on the other hand, was seen by experts from EU member states as deliberately deepening the dependence of neighbouring countries on Russia – including by applying military means where political and economic instruments fail – in order to halt their re-orientation towards the West/the EU.

Each side strongly rejected the intentions attributed to it by the respective other and stressed that such agendas were “stellar years” away from their own self-perception. EU participants underlined that the European Neighbourhood Policy/EaP aimed at gradual economic and political transformation of the associated countries and their integration into the European market, but was and is not targeted against Russia. Many speakers on the EU side also pointed to the manifold problems the EU faces, ranging from internal crises undermining foreign policy instruments to a lack of strategy vis-à-vis Russia and neighbour-

ing countries, and unfavourable conditions for EU policy in the region.

Russian participants rejected the notion of a systematic and aggressive Russian policy aimed at reintegrating the post-Soviet space. In their description, Moscow's approach was much less strategic, based on historical political, economic and societal ties between Russia and neighbouring countries, and in many ways defensive vis-à-vis the expansionist policies of the EU and other Western actors. A number of Russian participants also highlighted that the Russian political elite and foreign policy decision-making were much less

homogeneous and monolithic than usually perceived in the EU as well as in neighbouring countries.

Stability as a major preference for future developments

Strikingly, participants from the EU and Russia identified stability and stabilisation as the single most important goal for both sides' policies towards the common neighbourhood. A consensus may be assumed, therefore, on the value of stability as a basis

for future developments in the region. There were, however, significant discrepancies in how the experts (including from Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine) defined stability/stabilisation.

For instance, speakers from both sides regularly stressed that the “Ukraine scenario” must not be allowed to repeat itself in other countries in the future – but the discussion also showed clearly that the term “Ukraine scenario” was subject to varying interpretations. Russian participants mainly referred to the downfall of the Yanukovich regime, which happened

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despite an international agreement on the transition of power and, in their eyes, with strong Western support. Participants from EU Member States mainly spoke about the “Revolution of Dignity” on the Maidan, and the subsequent developments in Crimea and the Donbas, including Russia’s role in them.

Generally speaking, stability/stabilisation meant less interference by the EU and other Western actors in the internal affairs of neighbouring countries and the region as a whole where Russian speakers were concerned. Statements by speakers from EU member states pointed in the opposite direction. Interestingly there was a discussion among EU experts about the extent to which stability/stabilisation as opposed to democracy and human rights have come to determine the EU’s approach towards the neighbourhood in recent years. One speaker pointed out that, even though stability/stabilisation now feature much more prominently in EU policy, the goal cannot be authoritarian stabilisation but stable management of necessary political and economic change in the countries concerned.

The discussions revealed both overlaps in the assessment of political developments in some parts of the common neighbourhood and spaces for potential cooperation. However, cooperation is bound to be unsustainable or can even lead to new conflict and confrontation if the substantial differences in mutual perceptions and expectations on both sides are not taken into account and dealt with.

BELARUS

Participants from the EU and Russia assessed the situation in Belarus in very similar ways. EU speakers stressed the highly personalised system of rule in the country, which weakens political institutions and undermines good governance. It also makes external actors such as the EU (but also Russia) strongly dependent on President Lukashenka. Russian experts pointed to the thick fabric of the bilateral relationship between Russia and Belarus, which involves actors and institutions in the political, economic, societal and

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to dangerous socio-economic tensions and political destabilisation. One speaker cited recent protests across the country as an indication that such a risk is very real. This would in turn jeopardise Lukashenka’s rule, which, as it turned out during the debate, in the medium term would be in the interest of neither Russia nor the EU. Participants from all sides, including from Belarus, identified the gradual transformation of the Belarussian economy as a potential area of cooperation. They also saw a number of obstacles in the way of such cooperation: Belarus and the EU would need to reduce mutual mistrust. One speaker pointed out that EU-Belarussian relations still lack a legal basis (i.e. a partnership and cooperation or other agreement). Russia would need to abstain from bailing out Belarus for political reasons and to start applying real conditionality – preferably in coordination with the IMF – to urge the Belarussian government to reform. Experts from both sides agreed that any kind of economic change in Belarus will come with risks of political destabilisation. The challenge for both the EU and Russia would be to not let the situation degenerate.

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MOLDOVA

Similar to the case of Belarus, Russian and EU experts were very close in their assessment of the tumultuous political situation in Moldova. One speaker called the state of affairs an “oligarchic state capture financed by European tax payers”. Support for European integration has been declining recently due to growing disappointment with the domestic situation and the EU association process, while pro-Russian sentiment in the population and elite is on the rise. One Russian participant stressed, however, that Russia’s structural

military spheres. They, too, emphasized the crucial role of the Belarussian president, however with a different twist. Moscow, they said, deliberately leaves Lukashenka with a certain margin of manoeuvre to expand relations with the EU so as to demonstrate that Russia recognises him as a sovereign leader. This, in turn, allows him to “take a lot” from Russia. There was agreement among participants on Belarus facing huge economic problems – which could in future lead

(economic and political) power in Moldova has been on a downward slope over a much longer period of time. In the current situation it is local actors with particularistic interests, who – in a “simulation of geopolitics” – exploit the conflict between Russia and the EU for their domestic power struggle. Competition on the local and “geopolitical” level is bound to intensify in the run-up to the elections in 2018. As in Belarus, rising socio-economic tensions in Moldova proper, but also in Transnistria, heighten the risk of destabilisation. Were Russia and the EU to cooperate on Moldova, they should focus on this area.

UKRAINE

The discussion on Ukraine proved most difficult and controversial. There was no common ground whatsoever on the status of Crimea and the situation in the Donbas or on the origins of the current crisis.

Russian experts spoke about preconditions for the implementation of the Minsk agreements, but insisted that Crimea would stay with Russia. Speakers on the EU side stressed the complete breakdown of trust after Russia's violation of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. One speaker warned that narratives in the EU, Ukraine and Russia were drifting apart rapidly, thereby driving the elites and the societies further away from one another and blending into the general trend towards disengagement and isolation.

There was general agreement, including among Russian experts, that the crisis and the war had transformed Ukraine from a “swing state” between Russia and the EU into a country with an unequivocally pro-European orientation, and consolidated the identity of Ukrainian society against Russia. Ukraine is now clearly moving towards European integration. It is, however, confronted with an EU that risks losing its own sense of direction. This might undermine pro-European attitudes and – should this trend continue – might leave Ukrainian society in a vacuum because it has “lost” the Russian alternative/counterweight.

Participants discussed in depth the challenge of diverging time horizons emerging from Ukraine's association process. While this process is a success story from an EU perspective, it will take up to ten years before the population will be able to enjoy tangible positive effects. In the meantime power struggles among the elite and socio-economic hardship persist

and threaten to discredit the association process not only in Ukraine, but also in the EU.

The re-orientation of Ukraine towards the EU and the breakdown of relations and military confrontation between Ukraine and Russia make collaboration between the EU and Russia on Ukraine's domestic economic and political transformation extremely difficult. Participants tried but were unable to establish a common understanding of why the trilateral negotiations on the Association Agreement had failed. Regarding the situation in Donbas it was suggested that the implementation of the Minsk agreements be focused on the security provisions, along with a discussion on the deployment of UN peacekeeping forces.

The discussion on Ukraine made it clear that in this complex and unstable situation spaces for cooperation between the EU and Russia are limited. The same is true for the unresolved conflicts in the South Caucasus. Given the deeply entrenched conflicts between Georgia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia and the explosive situation in Nagorno-Karabakh, speakers cautioned against using the term “conflict resolution” when talking about EU and Russian activities. Rather, external actors should focus on conflict management and conflict prevention by applying context-sensitive measures of de-escalation, de-isolation and confidence building between the parties to the conflicts.

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Conclusions

Three general conclusions can be drawn from the discussions and the meeting:

1. The individual countries and conflicts are very different and require tailor-made policies from both the EU and Russia.
2. As a result, incremental policies based on ‘small steps’ seem more suitable than geopolitical approaches if Russia and the EU want to contribute to sustainable stability in their common neighbourhood.
3. The further neighbouring countries have progressed towards opening up and integrating with the EU, the more difficult cooperation between the EU and Russia becomes. Both sides should draw lessons from negative experiences in the past for the formulation of their own future policies. Belarus seems to be the most obvious case for such adapted approaches.

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Not all core group members were present.
The Chronicles 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 at the beginning of 2016 as a new form of interaction between EU and Russian foreign policy experts, analysts and think tanks.

EUREN brings together experts, analysts and foreign policy think tanks from Russia and EU member states to discuss topical foreign policy issues with the aim of coming up with concrete recommendations. The network meets on a quarterly basis inviting approximately 30 experts for one or two full days of discussions on a given topic. The meetings take place at the venues of the participating think tanks, both in Russia and different EU capitals.

About this edition

This edition of the **EUREN Chronicles** is the result of a two-day meeting discussion that took place on the premises of the **Batory Foundation**, Moscow, Warsaw, 20-21 April 2017.



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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