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The EU and Russia in the Wider Middle East

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A regional crisis that affects both the EU and Russia

Permanent conflict in the Wider Middle East and implications for the region and beyond represent a key challenge in the relationship between the EU and Russia. If not intercepted by constructive action and cooperation between local as well as regional and international actors, these developments may degenerate into one of the major problem of the 21st century, due to the total lack of social and economic modernisation, rapid population growth, ecological problems caused by human action and climate change, lack of water, etc. Violent extremism and terrorism as well as mass migration should be seen as symptoms rather than root causes of the problems emanating from the region.

Both Russia and the EU are affected by and involved in the crises in the Wider Middle East. Yet they have been unable to develop meaningful cooperation because of diverging approaches towards the region, mutual mistrust and the overall negative climate in their bilateral relationship.

Russian participants repeatedly denounced as misconceptions Western perceptions of a Russian “master plan” in the Wider Middle East. They stressed that Russian policy was not aiming at creating a pro-Russian axis in the region and thereby strengthening Moscow’s geopolitical position vis-à-vis the West/the US but was rather about protecting Russia’s security interests by stabilising the region through military and political means. Some Russian participants pointed out that the EU did not have a significant role to play in these (military and political) stabilisation efforts. On the other hand, the EU could and should make a decisive contribution to the economic and socio-economic rehabilitation and stabilisation of the region. Some Russian speakers highlighted as a particularly grave concern the resonance of war and violent extremism in the Wider Middle East within Russia’s Muslim communities in the North Caucasus, Bashkortostan and Tatarstan. They suggested that the EU’s attitude and approach towards Muslim communities in its own territories was rather naïve and not based on much

experience. Russia, on the other hand, was looking back at several centuries of co-existence with Muslim communities within her borders and, therefore, better acquainted with the realities and challenges of this situation.

EU participants agreed that EU member states have less experience with the integration of Muslim communities in their societies. However, they felt that their Russian counterparts’ perspective was too focused on Muslim communities as a threat rather than a part of their own culture. They strongly criticised Russia’s military actions in Syria as inhumane, which made co-

operation with Russia, though necessary, a bitter pill to swallow. Otherwise many EU speakers stressed that the EU shared Russia’s interest in stability, however with a much stronger focus on democratisation and economic development. One participant pointed out that from an EU perspective it was crucial to create a regional security governance structure in

which Iran and Saudi Arabia could co-exist. Such a structure would need to be built at the domestic as well as regional and international levels. Currently, however, destructive dynamics were fuelling dangerous zero-sum games at all levels. Unlike in Europe after World War II, no external force is pushing the countries and societies of the Wider Middle East towards constructive cooperation or integration. EU participants strongly emphasised the importance of the internal dimension of regional politics, and the special significance of societies and their involvement in stabilisation efforts.

Uncertainty in the wake of the new US administration

The policy of the new US administration remained the biggest question mark throughout the discussions at the seminar. Russian participants voiced grave concerns, in particular about Washington’s approach towards Iran. They stressed that American efforts to marginalise Iran, whether in Syria or in the region as a whole, would narrow down any space for cooperation between Russia and the West, and exacerbate tensions

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in the region. EU participants, too, expressed doubts about the US approach and were concerned about Washington's new unpredictability. Both sides cited successful cases of cooperation, such as the JCPOA and the agreement on Syria's chemical weapons in 2012, which should serve as examples for the future. Russian participants called upon the EU to use its influence in Washington to mitigate the actions of the Trump administration. EU participants indicated that serious efforts had been made to rescue the JCPOA during the spring of 2017, but that, at the same time, the influence of Brussels and EU member states remained limited.

EU speakers noted that the role of the EU in Syria was about to change. While it had no military profile, it was already an important humanitarian actor and had begun to develop a political role, too. Greater unity among EU member states paved the way for the adoption of a Syria strategy on the margins of an EU donor conference “for the future of Syria”, hosted in Brussels in April 2017. These developments also demonstrated that in a situation where economic leverage will become more important than military action, the EU will have a significant role to play in the Syrian context.

EU participants rejected the notion that the EU's “only” interest in the region was stopping migration and terrorism inside the EU. They stressed the interconnectedness of internal de-stabilisation and external implications. From this point of view, the only way out of the crisis was a political solution to the conflict (under UN Security Council Resolution 2254) by way of a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political transition and reconciliation. EU participants supported in principle the Russian-led de-conflicting efforts in Astana. They were concerned, however, about what they perceived as a selective approach applied by both the Syrian and the Russian governments towards different parts of the country. They feared that a departure from the goal of a global ceasefire could lead to the emergence of pockets of instability, in which ISIS/Da'esh could thrive in the future. EU speakers stressed the importance of engagement with regional actors such as Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and others. While this regional level was previously neglected by international actors, the EU had become increasingly active in this regard since autumn 2016.

Russian participants stated that, through her intervention, Russia had become a key

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actor in any peace process in Syria. At the same time, neither Russia nor any other external actor was able to control such a process. Moscow's policy aims at the stabilisation of the situation in Syria and the fight against ISIS – but Russia's involvement was also seen to play a role in Russia's relations with the US/the West. One Russian speaker explained that Moscow would like the intervention in Syria to become a showcase of a “foreign intervention without regime change”. At the same time, Russian participants were critical of the fact that the Russian leadership decided to intervene without an exit strategy. There was no agreement among Russian participants as to whether the intervention was an appropriate means to address the terrorist threat within Russia or actually rather increased that threat. Due to the lack of strategy, Russian policy had now become dependent on factors beyond its control and with a rather long-term horizon, such as the complete defeat of ISIS, military stabilisation and the start of a real political transition in the country. In that regard it was emphasised that, even though any form of regime change policy was to be rejected, few in Moscow believed that the present Syrian regime can survive without changes. It was also pointed out that the relationship between Moscow and Damascus remained uneasy and that the Syrian leadership still harboured the illusion that there could be a military solution circumventing the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 2254. This, however, was clearly against Russian interests. Astana should, therefore, be seen as a starting point for a global ceasefire in the country and as supplementing and supporting the work of the ISSG in Geneva. One Russian participant stressed that de-conflicting had to start through confidence building at the local level. In this respect EU support for Russian de-conflicting efforts in Astana as well as EU support for post-conflict economic reconstruction were of crucial importance.

Afghanistan and Libya: common concerns and different profiles

Compared to Syria, Russia's impact in Afghanistan is more limited. However, this was not seen as a disadvantage by Russian participants. The fact that Russia is less deeply involved but maintains certain interests in Afghanistan could help its recent mediation efforts. Russian participants criticised Western interpretations of Moscow's policies in Af-

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ghghanistan as self-serving. Rather than merely striving to balance Western, and particularly US influence, Russia is very concerned about permanent instability in Afghanistan and its repercussions for its Central Asian allies.

Russia is also strongly affected by drug trafficking and migration originating from Afghanistan – a challenge, it was pointed out, that it shares with the EU.

Because of these concerns and challenges, Moscow in recent months used the time window created by the change of administrations in Washington to gradually engage with the “four big neighbours” Iran, China, India and Pakistan as well as local actors, including the Taliban. The latter were considered important as potential partners in the fight against ISIS, which could use Northern Afghanistan as a safe haven for fighters from Iraq and Syria. However, it was pointed out, involving the Taliban in the dialogue was a difficult endeavour and for now only moderately successful.

It became clear in the discussion that the EU’s and Russia’s profiles in Afghanistan are very different. EU participants emphasised strong overlap of interests with Russia regarding the urgent need to address international terrorism, drug trafficking, migration issues and to support dialogue between the parties to the conflict and relevant regional powers. In its engagement in Afghanistan, however, the EU puts a strong focus on societal and economic development, including on the empowerment of women, which is also reflected in its current debate on a new joint strategy for Afghanistan. From an EU perspective, any dialogue and peace process must be Afghan-led. If this was the case, EU participants claimed, there should be sufficient space for cooperation, including with Russia.

The discussion showed that both the EU and Russia are facing new challenges in light of the deterioration of the security situation in Libya. Russian participants made it clear that there are few specific Russian interests in Libya beyond stabilisation and preventing the overall regional security situation from degenerating further. Again Russian speakers disagreed with what they perceived as Western misconceptions of Russia’s policies. Russia, they claimed, just like any other external actor, was still in the process of sorting out the nuances of the domestic situation in Libya and of deciding which

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local actors to support. They called on colleagues from the EU to engage in an exchange of analysis and expertise on Libya, to close knowledge gaps on both sides and make cooperation possible.

EU participants highlighted the importance Libya has acquired recently in the larger context of migration and forced displacement to the EU. They expressed support for the UN-led peace process and warned the Russian side against the pitfalls of tactical alliances when choosing an approach to the power struggles between different actors and militias in Libya. Both sides agreed, however, that the Libyan oil sector had so far been untouched by the conflicts and remained a unifying factor across political and regional divides. Therefore, the EU, Russia, and other external actors should work together to preserve the oil infrastructure. Failure to do so could lead to the collapse of the Libyan state, economic crisis and humanitarian disaster.

The discussions exposed significant differences in perceptions of developments in the Wider Middle East and the EU’s and Russia’s role therein. Eventually participants agreed that of the three cases, Afghanistan seemed the least politicised and most promising arena for the EU and Russia to overcome their geopolitical conflicts and work on common interests. One participant stressed that Afghanistan had already once served as the theatre for renewed cooperation between Russia and the West after a major political crisis over the 1999 NATO war in Kosovo. Referring to the EU’s potential as an economic and development actor speakers stressed the importance of economic development in Afghanistan and the creation of alternative income options for opium farmers. Such efforts could partly also draw upon an action plan on counter-narcotics policies developed for the Russian G8 chairmanship, which was subsequently not implemented. In order to support such developments the EU and Russia should include Central Asia in their reflections. Water and energy security projects in Central Asian countries could have a positive effect also on Afghanistan. In this regard the signs of positive change in Uzbekistan were

considered encouraging. Russia and the EU should also engage more intensely in a dialogue on counter-terrorism and returnees, as well as on the policies of the new US administration and their impact on the geopolitical situation in the Wider Middle East.

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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 **Institut français des relations internationales (IFRI)**, Paris, 6-7 July 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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