

Russia and the EU in multilateral contexts

Sabine Fischer

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The EU-Russia Expert Network on Foreign Policy used its 11th meeting to explore relations between Russia and the EU in multilateral contexts. This was done on the assumption that the EU and Russia have both identified multilateralism as a key pillar of a stable and peaceful global order: Russia's Foreign Policy Concept (2016) stipulates that the Russian state shall “promote, within bilateral and multilateral frameworks, mutually beneficial and equal partnerships with foreign countries, [...] guided by the principles of independence and sovereignty, pragmatism, transparency, predictability, a multidirectional approach and the commitment to pursue national priorities on a non-confrontational basis [...]”.¹ The EU aims to “promote a rules-based global order with multilateralism as its key principle and the United Nations at its core”.²

The discussion quickly revealed that a definition gap existed between the Russian and EU participants that went beyond the basic quantitative notion of multilateralism as cooperation between three or more states.³ EU speakers described the EU as one of the most efficient multilateral organisations. They felt very strongly that multilateralism was at the core of the EU's history and functioning, and was “an essential part of the EU's DNA”. They also stressed the significance of the UN as the most important embodiment of multilateralism, and of international law as

the compulsory basis of all forms and formats of multilateralism. Multilateralism, they explained, needed to be firmly tied to the rules-based international order.

At the same time, some EU participants conceded that there are “other sets of rules” than the ones already identified by the EU, which bore relevance for other international actors. Therefore, “we must ask: do they constitute a basis for multilateralism?” Other EU speakers remarked critically that multilateralism was achieving too little, on both a global and local level, with inequality being a constant reminder of how state policy around the world, including in multilateral organisations, had failed ordinary people. One speaker from the EU asked, “Who are we making politics for? Not for you!” and demanded that discussions focus on “effective” rather than “contested” multilateralism.

Many Russian participants contested the EU's and, more generally, the Western reading of multilateralism. They pointed out that “some countries present their definition of rules as legitimate”, while not showing any restraint in violating international law and multilateral principles when it is in their interests. This, as one Russian speaker explained, referred mainly to the US. Because of US policy, “Russia now sees multilateralism as a place of deception.” Russia had previously tried to adjust to the Western-

¹ Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation (approved by President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin on November 30, 2016), // https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptICkB6BZ29/content/id/2542248.

² Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign And Security Policy, p. 8, // https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/eugs_review_web_0.pdf, (June 2016).

³ On the conceptual differences between Russia and the EU see also: Maxine David, “Whose Multilateralism? EU-Russia Relations in the Diminished World Order”, Carnegie.ru, // <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/80454>, (November 29, 2019).

dominated world order and, as a result, found itself in an outsider's position. Now that the world was becoming polycentric – as opposed to the unilateral global system of the 1990s and early 2000s – the main challenge was to replace the current, ideology-driven liberal world order with a truly rules-based order and the Western-dominated idea of multilateralism with a more democratic multilateralism, based on national security, sovereignty and equality.

Russian speakers deplored that multilateralism was currently being undermined by a stalemate between the different camps. The UN Security Council had become toothless because its members lacked common ground.

The European/Eurasian continent was divided by a kind of “selective multilateralism” between two opposing projects: the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the US, on the one hand, and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), on the other. One Russian speaker somewhat contradicted this notion by stating that Russia remained a rule-taker rather than a rule-maker to this day, and was unhappy with this status.

The discussion about specific policy areas reflected the conceptual gaps that existed between Russian and EU participants. The most promising area for cooperation identified by the participants was the multilateral efforts to address climate change and protect the environment. Both sides are positively inclined to engage in this. The EU considers climate and environmental protection to be a key element of its internal and external identity, and there is a growing awareness in Russian society of climate and environmental issues. As a result, action is being increasingly taken on a political level. Moreover, Russia risks being excluded from the EU market if it does not comply with global and EU environmental standards.

Obstacles remain when potential cooperation is discussed and these need to be addressed. One participant pointed out, for instance, that the structure of the Russian economy was not conducive to a more advanced climate and environmental policy, and numerous veto players remained who believed their interests would be jeopardized by such a policy. One Russian participant observed that mutual sanctions also have a detrimental impact, diminishing, among other things, the Russian interest in purchasing (and becoming dependent upon) green technologies from the EU. According to another Russian speaker, environmental issues have become increasingly politically

sensitive in Russia in recent years. More EU engagement needs to be communicated with great caution, so as to not politicise the issue further. Finally, some Russian and EU participants felt that the EU was “frequently talking down” to other players on climate and environmental issues, so dialogue between the two, including in multilateral contexts, needed to be structured in such a way that did not give the impression of inequality.

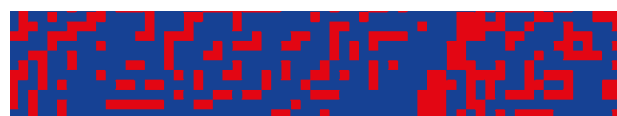
Regardless of these constraints, the participants discussed a broad range of ideas for mutual cooperation in a variety of multilateral fora, from the implementation of the Paris Agreement on Climate

Change to the Arctic Council and the Northern Dimension to the OSCE. They suggested that Russia and the EU could promote scientific cooperation on both a bilateral and multilateral level. This could include working together on restructuring traditional businesses and making them more adept at meeting the requirements of climate and environmentally aware policies. The EU could, within the Paris Agreement's implementation process, help Russia to reduce the economic risks of investing in renewable energy production. The EU and Russia could also, where feasible, conduct pre-policy consultations so as to keep each other informed about their approaches in the area. Last but not least, they could cooperate to strengthen the issue within the framework of the second dimension of the OSCE. Technical consultations between the EU and the EAEU could be expanded to issues pertaining to climate change and the environment ([see EUREN Briefs no. 9 by Georgios Kostakos](#), [no. 10 by Natalia Piskulova](#), [no. 11 by Oldag Caspar](#)).

There were considerably fewer spaces for cooperation identified in the area of economic multilateralism and of multilateral efforts to foster stability in the Middle East and Africa. The debate on economic multilateralism focused mainly on rescuing the WTO from recent attacks by other players. It was highlighted that the EU and Russia could jointly inform a reform debate that would help the organisation to adjust to the changing realities of international trade. They could also promote a more balanced G20 agenda. The participants also discussed the potential for cooperation between the EU and the EAEU but, as in previous meetings, their positions diverged on this issue ([see EUREN Chronicle no. 5](#), [EUREN Chronicle no. 6](#)).

The conversation about the Middle East/MENA region proved to be the most difficult one. The participants

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agreed that the EU is directly affected by instability in its Southern neighbourhood and has multifaceted political and economic relationships with MENA states, but it does not play a significant role in their security. Russia has become a much more prominent player in recent years, as its policy is about geopolitics and security in the region. Since the beginning of Russia's military intervention in Syria in 2015, Moscow has moved from an approach driven by threat (through the imminent fall of the Assad regime, ISIS, and the international isolation due to the Russian-Ukrainian conflict) to a policy driven by opportunities that emerged in the wake of American retrenchment in the region. The participants from both sides jointly identified various issues on which Russia and the EU should cooperate closely, including the preservation of the JCPOA; ending the war and economic reconstruction in Syria; ending armed hostilities in Libya; and the fight against terrorism (see [EUREN Briefs no. 12 by Maxim A. Suchkov](#), [no. 13 by Andrea Dessì](#)). They also highlighted important obstacles, with EU speakers voicing concern about the nature of Russia's military engagement in Syria and Moscow's support for Assad. Many Russian participants, as well as some EU participants, expressed strong doubts about the EU's capacity to act independently of the US. At the same time, speakers from both sides stated that the EU disposed of considerably more soft power in the region than Russia. Many speakers agreed that cooperation between the EU and Russia on the Middle East and MENA, including in multilateral fora, suffered from an entrenched lack of trust.

The discussion about Africa unfolded in a similar vein. Speakers from both sides underlined the huge potential that existed, as well as the many problems that the African continent faced. The EU maintains important political and trade relations with African states and African regional organisations. It is also the main destination for migrants from Africa (see [EUREN Brief no. 15 by Alex Vines](#)). Russia has become more active recently. The Russia-Africa summit in Sochi, under the auspices of the Russian President Vladimir Putin in October 2019, reconfirmed this renewed commitment (see [EUREN Brief no. 14 by Alexandra A. Arkhangel'skaya](#)). Moscow, according to some Russian speakers, was taking an interest-based approach to-

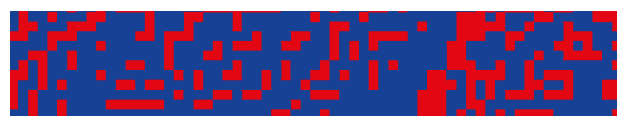
wards African states that was not charged with a colonial past. They dismissed the political conditionality applied by the EU vis-à-vis African partners as being a continuation of Europe's paternalistic and colonial legacy. EU participants criticised Russian covert security engagement in some African states, particularly the role of Russian private military companies, such as Evgeny Prigozhin's Wagner group. Despite these concerns, most participants agreed that the EU and Russia should explore opportunities for cooperation with each other and with African states in areas such as education or security (for instance, in the Sahel zone or

the Gulf of Aden), including food security, water and health security. The joint enforcement of UN sanctions against African states was also considered to be a potential area of cooperation. Even achieving more open dialogue – for instance, on arms transfers – would help the EU and Russia to understand each other better and contribute to improving the situation in Africa (see [EUREN Brief no. 15 by Alex Vines](#)).

The conceptual gap regarding multilateralism and the diverging understandings of and political approaches towards the three issue areas addressed at the 11th EUREN Meeting clearly impacted on the discussions between the experts. The scope of ideas and policy recommendations the participants were able to identify was rather limited in the two areas more affected by the current political and geopolitical standoff between Russia and the EU: the Middle East (and to a lesser extent Africa) and economic relations. The participants saw more space for cooperation, including in multilateral contexts, in the area of climate change and environmental protection. This is a global challenge that is considerably less politicised than other issues clearly requires prompt responses across political divides. It remains to be seen, however, whether or not it can become a “challenge that unites” (see [EUREN Brief no. 9 by Georgios Kostakos](#)).

This paper is a reflection on the discussions during the 11th EUREN meeting on "Russia and the EU in multilateral fora" on 31 October – 1 November 2019 in Moscow. Its content is the sole responsibility of the author and does not represent the position of individual EUREN members or EUREN as a group.

The most promising area for cooperation identified by the participants was the multilateral efforts to address climate change and protect the environment



EU-Russia Expert Network on Foreign Policy (EUREN)

Core group



Participants EU

Riccardo Alcaro
IAI > iai.it

Oksana Antonenko
LSE > lse.ac.uk

Steven Blockmans
CEPS > ceps.eu

David Cadier
Centre for International Studies >
sciencespo.fr

Maxine David
Leiden University >
universiteitleiden.nl

Laure Delcour
Université Sorbonne nouvelle >
univ-paris3.fr

Sabine Fischer
SWP > swp-berlin.org

Janis Kluge
SWP > swp-berlin.org

Rem Korteweg
Clingendael Institute >
clingendael.org

Petr Kratochvil
Institute of International
Relations > iir.cz

Sarunas Liekis
Vytautas Magnus University >
vdu.lt

Kadri Liik
ECFR > ecfr.eu

Gerhard Mangott
University of Innsbruck >
uibk.ac.at

Arkady Moshes
FIIA > fiia.fi

Julien Nocetti
IFRI > ifri.org

Nicolas de Pedro
CIDOB > cidob.org

Katarzyna Pelczynska-Nalecz
Batory Foundation > batory.org.pl

Jana Puglierin
DGAP > dgap.org

Stanislav Secieru
EUISS > iss.europa.eu

Hanna Smith
Hybrid CoE > hybridcoe.fi

Andris Spruds
LIIA > liia.lv

Tony van der Togt
Clingendael Institute >
clingendael.org

Carolina Vendil Pallin
FOI > foi.se

Ernest Wyciszkiwicz
CPRDiP > cprdipl.pl



Participants Russia

Alexander Aksenok
RIAC >
russiancouncil.ru

Timofei Bordachev
HSE > hse.ru

Olga Butorina
MGIMO >
mgimo.ru

Elena Chernenko
'Kommersant' daily newspaper >
kommersant.ru

Dmitry Danilov
Institute of Europe, RAS >
en.instituteofeurope.ru

Larisa Deriglazova
Tomsk State University >
tsu.ru

Mark Entin
MGIMO > mgimo.ru

Nikolay Kaveshnikov
MGIMO > mgimo.ru

Andrey Kortunov
RIAC >
russiancouncil.ru

Sergey Kulik
Institut of Contemporary
Development >
insor-russia.ru

Vladimir Likhachev
HSE > hse.ru

Nataliya Markushina
RAS > ras.ru

Valeri Mikhailenko
Ural Federal University >
urfu.ru

Tatiana Romanova
SPBU > spbu.ru

Ivan Timofeyev
RIAC >
russiancouncil.ru

Sergey Utkin
IMEMO >
imemo.ru

Natalia Viakhireva
RIAC >
russiancouncil.ru

Andrei Zagorski
IMEMO >
imemo.ru

Not all core group members were present at all meetings. The EUREN Chronicle no. 8 does not necessarily reflect the opinion of the core group.

About EU-Russia Expert Network

The **EU-Russia Expert 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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