

The EU, Russia, and the future of European Security

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The EU Russia Expert Network chose to devote its 10th meeting on 4 and 5 July 2019 to European Security. It did so based on the shared conviction that the European security order is in crisis. Its institutional structure has become fragile. Conflict and disagreements between Russia and the other European and Western states have undermined the capability of major European security organisations, such as the OSCE and the Council of Europe, to act. None of the sides has revoked the basic post-Cold War security treaties and arrangements, such as the Charter of Paris or the NATO-Russia Founding Act. However, their content and the principles they enshrine for a common European peace and security order **have become contentious**.

At the regional level, tensions have been building up since the early 2000s. Violent conflict returned to Europe in 2008, and most profoundly in 2014. Broader **military confrontation can no longer be ruled out entirely**. The transatlantic and international contexts of European security are in flux as well. Crumbling arms control regimes have further increased the risk of an arms build-up and

military confrontation in Europe. Information warfare, hybrid attacks and threats are contributing to both the internal and transnational polarisation of societies, thereby undermining the very foundation of a peaceful European order.

The 10th meeting of the EU Russia Expert Network on Foreign Policy focused on **three levels of European Security**: the institutional, regional and societal level. The discussion about the European security institutions demonstrated that NATO's future is and will remain a major bone of contention ([see EUREN Brief no. 8](#)). Russian Participants stated that Moscow did not feel its security concerns had sufficiently been taken into account in the post-Cold War security architecture. Russia's neighbours, it was underlined by speakers from the EU, consider their security to be threatened by Moscow. The arrangements made since the 1990s, be it cooperation in the framework of the Partnership for Peace, bilateral security cooperation or the NATO-Russia Founding Act and NATO-Russia Council, could not relieve the concerns on either side. Disagreements about NATO MAP membership for Ukraine

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and Georgia were seen as being symptoms of this structural deficiency. The sides remain divided by their contrary interpretations of the results of the NATO Bucharest Summit held in 2008. EU speakers stressed that there was no appetite in NATO to admit Georgia and Ukraine. The Bucharest Declaration put the discussion about MAP for Kyiv and Tbilisi on long-term hold while at the same time no one in the Western community would take back publicly the basic message of the declaration. Russian participants interpreted the declaration inversely as a promise that both Georgia and Ukraine would ultimately become NATO members, thus nourishing Russian uncertainties. They suggested a **reflection about concepts of neutrality**, including multilateral security guarantees, for the countries in the so-called “grey zone” between Russia and the EU, which would allow taking NATO enlargement off the table for good.

One participant called this discussion a **trap that Russia and Western actors, including the EU, had got stuck** in more than ten years ago – an effect which was reflected in the EUREN meeting as well. Russian participants insisted that Western actors confronted the post-Soviet countries with a binary choice between the EU and NATO, on the one hand, and Russia, on the other. EU participants stressed that all countries should be able to choose freely their domestic political system and foreign policy orientation. From this perspective, it was Moscow’s policy that drove them to binary choices. There was little to no common ground regarding a positive future of European security at the institutional level. Other organisations, such as the OSCE or the Council of Europe, while very important, were seen as unable to fundamentally alter the current situation. **EU participants expressed uncertainty about the future of the US role in European security** and whether Europe could compensate for shrinking American security guarantees ([see EUREN Brief no. 4](#)). Both Russian and EU speakers deplored the end of the INF Treaty and discussed possibilities to extract

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commitments from the US and Russia not to deploy medium-range ballistic missiles in Europe.

The network looked at the security situation in three different sub-regional theatres: the Arctic, the Baltic Sea region and the Black Sea region. There was agreement that these regions differed significantly in terms of political constellations, EU-Russian interaction and the level of tensions. The Arctic was seen as a low-tension area which offered opportunities for political and economic cooperation ([see EUREN Brief no. 5](#)). The participants stressed, however, that the potential spill-over effects from contradictions in other areas should not be underestimated. They pointed to **Russia’s veto against the EU gaining observer status in the Arctic Council** and constraints on economic cooperation because of EU sanctions as examples for such effects. The network agreed that Russia and the EU should try to cooperate and create synergies that were possible, for instance in the areas of science, rescue operations, the environment and economic relations.

The Baltic Sea was seen as comparatively stable, as it has well-established multilateral political mechanisms and is free of unresolved conflicts ([see EUREN Brief no. 6](#)). However, here too the dividing line between Russia and the other countries has become much deeper, particularly since 2014. While the participants agreed that there was no prospect of overcoming the divisions in the foreseeable future, all sides should work to keep tensions under control. This could be realised through intense dialogue within the existing frameworks, restraint and self-restraint in the military area, and cross-border cooperation.

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The most complicated European sub-region, the participants agreed, was the Black Sea ([see EUREN Brief no. 7](#)). Here, regional relations are characterised by unilateral action and marred by unresolved conflicts. The EU and Russia have different priorities in this region. Russia’s focus is on hard security and the



question of whether or not the conflict with Ukraine will lead to direct confrontation with NATO. The EU pursues a soft security agenda. Among other things, participants discussed various confidence-building measures, including military-to-military consultations, track two dialogue processes on the situation in Kerch, cooperation in the environmental sphere and increased efforts in the area of societal interaction (university cooperation, student exchanges etc.). Such interaction could take place within the framework of existing multilateral platforms, such as the OSCE and the BSEC; synergies between those platforms should be created.

The discussion about the societal level addresses the fundament of European security. In an age of hybrid attacks, fake news, information and cyberwar, **societies are subject to rapid polarisation**, both internally and transnationally. This affects national and international institutions. Societies across Europe increasingly exist in isolated information spaces and echo chambers. Perceptions are drifting apart and narratives have become irreconcilable, thereby undermining the very idea of a common European space, including in the area of security.

The participants stated that identity politics, both in Russia and EU countries, provided a basis for competing narratives to emerge. The effect was reinforced by dysfunctional media relations and social media. The politicisation of a broad range of sensitive issues, including historical experiences, gives rise to tensions and makes society-to-society contacts more and more difficult. EU speakers pointed to Russia's increasing engagement with far-

right populist parties in the European Union which damaged trust in EU member states. The participants agreed that the EU and Russia should invest in building trust between societies. Mobility, people-to-people contacts and cooperation in the area of higher education were identified as the instruments to achieve this. However, Russia and the EU remain divided in their approaches to these issues given the fundamental asymmetry between their political system ([Interview with Andrey Kortunov](#)).

The main conclusion from the 10th EUREN meeting is that **the space for immediate improvement at the macro-level of European security remains limited because of the existing divergencies and blockades**. It is important to continue the debate about European security between NATO, the EU and Russia, within the OSCE, the Normandy Four and other formats, and to closely refer it to the principles of the Charter of Paris. In the short term, however, more tangible results can be achieved at the micro- and meso-levels. Efforts need to be increased to support mutual trust and stability in various sub-regional theaters and to intensify people-to-people contacts. Approaching European security in this way, both top-down and bottom-up, could, in the long run, lead to a new form of cohabitation between the EU and Russia ([Interview with Markus Ederer](#)).

This paper is a reflection on the discussions during the 10th EUREN meeting on "The EU, Russia and the future of European security" on 4-5 July 2019 in The Hague. Its content is the sole responsibility of the author and does not represent the position of individual EUREN members or EUREN as a group.

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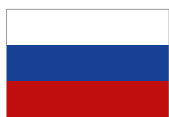
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Not all core group members were present at all meetings. The interim report do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the core group.

About EU-Russia 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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