

Strategic Insight Breakfast Briefing

The Future of Russia-West Relations

24 February 2016

Hosted by Salamanca Group

On Wednesday 24th February, the European Leadership Network (ELN) and Salamanca Group co-hosted a private breakfast meeting on "The Future of Russia-West Relations", attended by senior diplomats, politicians, members of the business community and leading journalists.

The meeting was chaired by Lord Browne of Ladyton, former British Defence Secretary and Chair of the European Leadership Network. Lord Browne opened the discussion by stating that "the opportunity to build closer ties with Russia during the 25 years following the end of the Cold War has been wasted." Lord Browne added that "with our experience of building a cooperative Europe in the aftermath of the Second World War and our experience of managing relations during the Cold War, we all should have known better".

The group discussed how the current state of relations between Russia and the West came about. From the Russian perspective it was argued that the failure to agree a mutually acceptable post-Cold War settlement and the decision to enlarge NATO were fundamental reasons why relations had deteriorated. It was contended however that the Russian perception of a zone of influence in its immediate neighbourhood and its desire to preserve influence over this zone also precipitated the deterioration of relations. It was argued that the NATO-Russia Founding Act, the NATO-Russia Council, and EU-Russia cooperation were elements of a post-Cold War settlement which involved Moscow and were later undermined by Russian actions and a Russian rewriting of history.

ELN Director Ian Kearns urged government representatives to learn lessons from how the Cold War confrontation was managed. Drawing on forthcoming ELN research into military-to-military relations, Dr Kearns highlighted that there is no agreement between NATO and Russia on managing close encounters and avoiding incidents in the air. He also stressed that any future incidents similar to the Russian aircraft shoot down by Turkey could potentially escalate into a more dangerous conflict. The implications of increased NATO

and Russia military activities and exercises analysed in several of ELN's reports, was of particular concern.

The impact of the Syrian conflict on the future of Russia-West relations was also discussed. It was argued that Russia's rationale in intervening in the conflict was clear from Moscow's perspective but that the West's actions appeared to lack a coherent strategy. One participant noted that after Russia secures its core interests in Syria there may be the opportunity for President Assad to step down, suiting all parties. Also discussed was the possibility of Turkey and Saudi Arabia's involvement in Syria and the pressures that a Turkish intervention would place on NATO. It was argued that NATO must not allow itself to be drawn into the conflict, but should be ready to invoke Article V (collective response to an attack on a member state) if Turkish territory is attacked.

On economic relations, it was noted that sanctions have hurt both sides and should certain Russian companies be forced to declare bankruptcy, around \$160bn in European investments would have to be written off. Significant Russian investments in Europe as well as European investments in Russia highlighted the economic interdependency and demonstrated the importance of relations between Russia and the West.

The long-term case for cooperation between Russia and the West, notably Europe, was articulated by Ian Kearns, who stated that Russia is simply "too important to ignore". There was consensus over the idea that it would be in neither side's interest to isolate Russia. At the same time, a number of participants highlighted that the relationship will remain transactional for the foreseeable future, focusing on areas where Western and Russian interests, rather than values, converge.

For more on the strategic rationale for cooperation, read ELN Research Fellow Joseph Dobbs' latest articles [Why the West, especially Europe, needs Russia](#) and [Why Russia Needs Europe](#).