

EU-Russia people-to-people contacts

With EU-Russia relations at a post-Cold War low, people-to-people contacts are an important means of overcoming mutual hostility. Individuals and organisations from the EU are continuing to cooperate with Russian counterparts, despite difficulties. On the other hand, there has been a significant downturn in personal travel, and public opinion mirrors frosty diplomatic relations.

EU support for people-to-people contacts continues

In response to Russian aggression in Ukraine, the EU [cut off](#) most of its Russia funding in July 2014. However, the EU is continuing to support non-governmental cooperation, through funding for Russian civil society, research, cross-border cooperation programmes and Erasmus+ higher education exchanges. Statements by EU High Representative [Federica Mogherini](#) and the [European Parliament](#) have emphasised the need to continue support for people-to-people contacts at a time of tense intergovernmental relations.

Russian civil society cut off from most Western support

Russia's [2012 Foreign Agents Law](#) has made it much harder for the country's NGOs to work with foreign donors, including the EU. Organisations receiving foreign funding for vaguely defined 'political activity' face an unpalatable choice: being labelled a 'foreign agent'; having to rely on scarce domestic sources instead of foreign funding; or closing down altogether. As of October 2016, [over 100 NGOs](#) are on the list of foreign agents. Many Western NGOs have pulled out of Russia [on their own initiative](#) while others have been banned by a 2015 law on [undesirable international organisations](#).

Despite these difficulties, Russian NGOs receive €3 million a year from the [European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights](#) (EIDHR), and €1 million from the [Civil Society Organisations and Local Authorities programme](#). Among other things, projects support human rights, reforms to state orphanages and combating domestic violence. Unfortunately, such funding is too limited to benefit more than a tiny number of organisations (for the EIDHR, [just four](#) in 2015). To encourage broader participation, the minimum EIDHR grant has been lowered from €300 000 to €100 000. The EU also helps finance an [EU-Russia Civil Society Forum](#) which holds regular meetings between Russian and EU civil society organisations.

By contrast, Russia welcomes EU funding for cross-border projects

EU [cross-border cooperation programmes](#) support joint projects between stakeholders such as universities and research institutes, as well as local and regional authorities from border regions in Poland, the Baltic States, Finland and Sweden and their counterparts in north-western Russia. Such [projects](#) include joint research on salmon fisheries; initiatives to encourage tourism in remote areas; trade fairs to help entrepreneurs market their products in neighbouring countries; and joint sports competitions and training. A [report](#) evaluating the EU's Arctic Circle cross-border cooperation programme (one of five in which Russia participated in the 2007-2013 period) concluded that, while there were few tangible economic results, projects attracted nearly 55 000 participants and thus succeeded in creating numerous EU-Russia personal contacts.

For [2014-2020](#), the EU and Russia have allocated €174 million and €87 million¹ to cross-border cooperation (with a possible additional €75 million of EU funding following a 2017 mid-term review). This represents a slight decrease on the €262 million of EU financing and €104 million of Russian co-financing for 2007-2013.

Close cooperation on research continues

Scientific research is another area of constructive cooperation. Under the EU's 2007-2013 seventh framework programme (FP7), Russian researchers were awarded €74 million¹ of grants – more than their counterparts in any other [non-associated/non-EU country](#). For the current Horizon 2020 research programme (2014-2020), the EU decided that Russian researchers would no longer be [automatically eligible](#) for grants; as a result, in 2014 and 2015 Russian institutes and universities received just [€1.5 million](#) – much less than the €17 million awarded during the first two years of FP7. That decision (which also applies to



China, India, Brazil and Mexico) was an economic rather than a political one, based on the argument that Russia, as a relatively wealthy country, needed the money less than other poorer ones. Nevertheless, EU-Russia research cooperation continues; although most of them no longer qualify for EU funding, Russian researchers still participate in Horizon 2020 projects, with administrative support and financing from the Russian authorities. There is also Europe- (but non-EU) Russia cooperation on mega-projects such as the [ITER nuclear fusion reactor](#) and the [Luna 27 mission](#) to prepare a base on the Moon.

Educational exchanges and foreign study — another important channel for personal contacts

Russia is one of the largest non-EU participants in Erasmus exchanges: in 2015, 1 900¹ Russian students and academics spent up to a year in EU countries, while 1 200 EU students travelled in the opposite direction.

EU universities remain very popular with Russian students, not only for exchanges, but also for full degree courses. Between 2014 and 2015, the number of Russians studying at German universities actually increased by 3 % to nearly [15 000](#). A further [8 165](#) came to the United Kingdom. Not least due to language issues, Russia was less attractive for EU students — in 2013, [6 400](#) chose to study there.

Personal travel between the EU and Russia in decline

Russia has never been a major destination for travellers from EU countries. In 2014, there were 6.4 million visits to Russia, just 1 % of foreign travel by EU nationals. By contrast, EU countries accounted for 40 % of all foreign travel by Russians ([18 million trips](#)), with Greece and Spain in the lead (1 million trips each).

Travel in both directions has been affected by current EU-Russia tensions. Between the first nine months of 2014 and the corresponding period in 2015, EU travel to Russia fell by 8 %, and Russian travel to the EU by 27 % (tourism: -36 %). The slump in Russian tourism can also be explained by the economic downturn and successive [travel bans](#); mostly introduced since 2014, these restrict debtors, police officers and various other security personnel and civil servants – altogether, around 5 % of the population – from leaving the country.

A longer-term obstacle to travel in both directions is an onerous visa regime. The [2007 EU-Russia visa-facilitation agreement](#) helped by reducing fees and making multi-entry visas more widely available, and in 2011 the two sides also agreed on a series of [common steps](#) towards visa-free travel. However, a 2013 [European Commission report](#) identified a number of concerns (such as the lack of a centralised Russian passport register, widespread corruption and inadequate border-crossing infrastructure), and in 2014 talks on the subject were suspended altogether following Russian attacks on Ukraine.

With visa-free travel a distant prospect, Member States' consulates have endeavoured to limit the negative impact of the visa regime on Russian travel by adopting a liberal approach to issuing visas. In 2015, [only 1 % of Russian applicants for a Schengen visa](#) were rejected, compared to a global average of 6 %, and Russians were more likely to be issued a multiple-entry visa (68 % of visas issued, compared to the average of 48 %).

The [EU regulation on local border traffic](#) also allows bilateral arrangements to facilitate short-distance cross-border trips. Until recently, the main example was 'Small Border Traffic', allowing Russians from Kaliningrad region and Poles from north-eastern Poland, including the city of Gdansk (a total population of [2.4 million](#)) to visit each other's regions without visas ([Latvia](#) has a similar, much smaller scheme along its border with Russia). In 2015, [1.3 million Russians entered Poland](#) under the agreement, spending around €70 million. Apart from shopping, the scheme facilitated school and youth exchanges as well as cultural and sporting events. In Poland, closer cross-border ties were reflected by a growing interest in Russian language courses.

Despite the [mutual benefits](#) of this scheme, in July 2016 the Polish government [announced](#) its temporary suspension due to security concerns during the NATO summit in Warsaw and the Pope's visit to Krakow. Since then, a similar scheme for Ukrainians has been reinstated, but visa-free local trips for Russians are off the cards for now, with the Polish authorities citing [Russia's aggressive stance](#) towards the country and the [loss of excise income](#) due to Poles buying cheap petrol and cigarettes from Kaliningrad. The immediate impact of ending small border traffic was severe, with crossings of the Russian-Polish border [dropping](#) by 58 % in July 2016, year-on-year, and only recovering slightly in August 2016 (-54 %).

Public opinion remains hostile on both sides

Fewer EU-Russia people-to-people contacts mean fewer opportunities to overcome mutual suspicion. Surveys show that public opinion on both sides mirrors frosty diplomatic relations: [53 % of Russians](#) view the EU unfavourably, and [over two thirds of EU respondents](#) are hostile towards Russia.

¹ According to unpublished data from the European Commission.