

The G8 is Dead. Long Live the G7.

HUGO DOBSON

The University of Sheffield

Executive Summary

Under the presidency of Vladimir Putin, Russia has become increasingly isolated from the norms and mechanisms of international society. This policy brief explores this trend within the context of 'G' summitry and in particular recent summits since Russia's suspension from the G8 in 2014. It strongly recommends against a return to an expanded G8, and instead favours a clear break with this format and a renewed focus on the G7 and its underlying principles.

Russia's Pariah Status

Since consolidating his position as Russian president, Vladimir Putin has sought to restore Russia's position in the world as a contemporary great power. However, he has pursued this objective by engaging in an incremental and sustained campaign of ignoring and subverting the norms

of international society. The extent to which Russia has, as a result, become an international pariah ranges across a number of issue areas, beginning with Russia's annexation of Crimea in early 2014 and subsequent interventions in Eastern Ukraine. The world was outraged later the same year by the shooting down of Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 over Ukraine and held Russia responsible. At the same time, Russia's support for the Assad regime in Syria despite its use of chemical weapons has compounded both regimes' isolation from the West. Suspected Russian interference in the US presidential election and UK referendum on EU membership added to Russia's pariah status. More recently, the suspected poisoning of Sergei Skripal, a former Russian spy, and his daughter in the quiet English cathedral city of Salisbury led to an overwhelming outpouring of support from across the international community resulting in the [expulsion](#) of

Russian diplomats by twenty-one countries. As a result, Putin has become a [global villain](#) the world loves to hate.

Global summitry was [at the forefront](#) of the response to Russia's actions, especially in Crimea and Ukraine, with the cancellation of the G8 summit to be held in Sochi, Russia in June 2014, the subsequent suspension of Russia's membership and instead meeting as the original G7 in Brussels to decide on the imposition of sanctions. Yet, this specific development was part of a longer history of relations between Russia and 'G' summitry.

From G7 to G8 and Back to G7

The Soviet Union's position towards the G7 was overwhelmingly dismissive throughout the Cold War regarding the summit meetings as meaningless and irrelevant at best, unrepresentative and ideological anathema at worst. It was only with Mikhail Gorbachev's pursuit of *glasnost* and *perestroika*

that engagement with the West, and in particular, the G7 was pursued as a means of supporting his reform programme. Thus, from the 1989 Paris Summit, how to deal with the unravelling of the Cold War, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the securing of democratic and free market reforms became core themes of summit discussions.

This process began with French efforts to invite Gorbachev to Paris. Russia was then described as a 'guest' at the 1991 London Summit and a 'participant' at the 1994 Naples Summit. Eventually, Boris Yeltsin was invited to attend political discussions at the 1997 Denver Summit (which was not called the 'G8' because of Japanese objections to Russia's membership, but rather euphemistically the 'Summit of the Eight'). Membership of the G8 was being used as a means of engaging Russia with international society, supporting Yeltsin domestically and a *quid pro quo* for [Russia's acceptance of NATO expansion](#). To this end, at the

1998 Birmingham Summit, the term 'G8' was used for the first time and Yeltsin enthusiastically responded by seeking to replace (unsuccessfully) Japan as host of the 2000 summit. Russia's full membership of the G8 was confirmed at the 2002 Kananaskis Summit and it hosted its first summit in 2006 in St Petersburg.

Thereafter, a generous interpretation of Russia's behaviour would be to say that it was learning the ropes of summity. A more realistic view would be that it was motivated by the status that accompanies membership of this elite club and this motivation has largely waned. Its [levels of compliance](#) with G8 commitments have been low, it has not led on any notable initiatives, is not a significant aid donor, and Putin's engagement is also far from exemplary. G7 leaders have historically made considerable efforts to attend summits, even when fighting electoral campaigns at home. In 2012, the G8 was originally to be held immediately before the NATO summit in Chicago. As the latter's agenda

included security issues sensitive to Russia, the US hosts sought to assuage Russian sensibilities and changed the G8's venue at the last minute. However, by staying at home and sending Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev in his place, Putin became the only leader to ever snub the G8.

At the same time, and in response to Putin's rising authoritarianism, [calls were made](#) as exemplified by former Republican Senator John McCain for a reconsideration of Russia's membership of the G8, which is meant to be a grouping of like-minded countries committed to free-market economics and democracy. Although the G8 has no declared criteria for membership and no member of the G8 has ever been disbarred, this was an academic argument until 2014 when Russia's annexation of Crimea and intervention in Ukraine led to its suspension from the G8 and relocation of that year's summit from Sochi to Brussels.

The impromptu G7 [Brussels Summit](#) condemned Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea, its "unacceptable interference in Ukraine's sovereign affairs" and declared solidarity with the Ukrainian government but called on it to adopt a "measured approach". Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's reaction to the international community's actions and declarations was largely [dismissive](#), questioned the relevance of the G8, and stressed instead Russia's membership of other groups, such as the G20, [many members of which opposed](#) taking a similar line to the G8 of suspending Russia's membership.

At the 2015 [Schloss Elmau Summit](#), the G7 leaders reiterated this condemnation, non-recognition of the Crimean annexation and support for a diplomatic solution. They also stressed that sanctions against Russia would only be removed when the country realises its commitments and reserved the right to implement "further restrictive measures".

At the 2016 [Ise Shima Summit](#) and last year's [Taormina Summit](#), the G7 leaders continued to offer carrots and sticks. They re-emphasised that Russia was responsible for the conflict in Ukraine, stated that sanctions would be removed when Russia meets its commitments while reserving the right to introduce further measures. Both summits stressed respectively the possibility of dialogue and engagement with Russia. So, since Russia's suspension in 2014, the G7 have largely found themselves in a Groundhog Day of condemnation, encouragement and threats. However, in between these two summits, Russia announced its intention to ignore any overtures to reconvene a G8 and instead [permanently leave](#) the group.

The Charlevoix Summit and Beyond

On the first day of the Charlevoix Summit, US President and former reality TV star Donald Trump reignited the issue by declaring that '[t]hey [the G7] can let Russia come back in, because we should have Russia at the negotiating table'. Perhaps

surprisingly, the idea was not rejected out of hand by the other leaders, with Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte in [agreement](#). It also resulted in a rather awkward and confused response from President of the European Council Donald Tusk when questioned about G7 divisions on the issue at the EU press briefing that took place hours after Trump's comment – ['\[seven\] is a lucky number'](#) was the most substantial comment he could muster. Commentary in the US was similarly critical: McCain was again [one of the first to denounce](#) the idea.

The final [Charlevoix Declaration](#) contained the expected condemnation of Russia's destabilisation of democratic regimes, support for the Assad regime, intervention in Eastern Ukraine and the Salisbury poisoning. However, the issue of Russia's possible return to a G8 did not appear, despite some discussion on the first day of the summit. This is quite rightly so. Any putative return to a G8 is a non-issue and Trump's statement is little more than media-goading

chicanery, as demonstrated by the fact that Russia has not expressed any desire to return to the G8. So, any call to reconvene a G8 should be ignored and, in fact, Russia's permanent expulsion from the G8 should be confirmed. This does not mean that Russia should be isolated. Indeed, a number of alternative venues and mechanisms exist through which Russia can and should be engaged. The G20 most readily springs to mind.

Lavrov was only partially correct when, in response to Russia's suspension, he claimed that '[t]he G8 is an informal club, with no formal membership, so no one can be expelled from it'. Admittedly the G7/8 have no formal membership criteria, but in their absence the [Rambouillet Declaration](#) of the first summit of November 1975 stressed the leaders' belief in 'open, democratic society, dedicated to individual liberty and social advancement', thereby providing the ideological glue to bind like-minded leaders together. By ignoring these principles and embracing Russia



during the 1990s, the G7 sowed the seeds of its own existential crisis. It should not have allowed Russia into an expanded G8 in the first place and confirming Russia's expulsion now would allow the remaining countries to focus on revitalising the underpinning principles of the G7. This renewal of their marriage vows is even more necessary in an age of Trumpism in

which fears of the seven [fragmenting](#) into a G6+1 or a 'gang of six' are very real.

Hugo Dobson is Professor of Japan's International Relations in the School of East Asian Studies, University of Sheffield.