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The Perils of Ruxit: Russia’s Tension-Ridden Dissociation from the European Security Order

*Mikhail Polianskii**

Abstract: *»Die Gefahren von Ruxit: Russlands Spannungsreiche Dissoziation von der Europäischen Sicherheitsordnung«*. Why have relations between Russia and the West experienced such a dramatic downturn despite already hitting what seemed to be rock bottom in 2014? The dissociation model offers a novel approach to analyse the conflict between the two sides and its tragic development. According to this approach, Russia’s dissociation from the pan-European social order contributed to the outbreak of hostilities in 2014 and to Russia’s war of aggression in February 2022. Signs of Russia’s dissociation – intentional distancing from the core rules and norms of this order – were evident long before the annexation of Crimea in 2014, but the developments that followed marked a culmination of this process. The paper asserts that during the dissociation process, the foregrounding of ideational factors as opposed to material factors aggravated tensions and contributed to the radicalisation of relations between Russia and the West. Specifically, the study demonstrates how the fallout of institutional breakdown precluded management of the territorial security conflicts, resulted in the securitisation of the energy sector and overall polarisation of the relationship, and accelerated Russia’s authoritarian turn, preventing any attempt to repair bilateral and multilateral relations with the West after 2014.

Keywords: Dissociation, Ruxit, Russia, European security, Ukrainian crisis, NATO, EU.

> *“The biggest mistake on our part was […] that we put too much trust in the West. And your [Western] mistake was that you took that trust as a weakness and abused it.”*
> *(Vladimir Putin 2017)*

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1. Introduction

On 16 March 2022, Russia's flag was taken down from the flagpole in front of the Council of Europe (CoE) building in Strasbourg. This event symbolised the country's final departure from an institutionalised pan-European social order, a process that had started much earlier and culminated in the annexation of Crimea in 2014. The Russian withdrawal from the CoE, however, was hardly noticed and was indeed overshadowed by Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the horrors of the war that followed.

Events like these raise the question of whether dissociation from shared international institutions and the escalation of inter-state conflicts between those states leaving and those remaining are causally related. Putin's decision to launch a war of aggression in 2022 rested partly on faulty assumptions and was partly driven by a broader radicalisation of the president and his regime, the causes of which we still do not fully understand. However, this paper assumes that the conflict was also brought about by Russia's failed association with a pan-European order and its subsequent dissociation. In particular, the article asserts that during the dissociation process, the foregrounding of ideational as opposed to material factors (Dembinski and Peters 2022, this issue) aggravated tensions between Russia and the West and prevented the effective management of the post-2014 conflicts.

Dissociation involves countries that have left and those that remain and is by definition an interaction process. However, while not ignoring Western[1] actions and reactions in this process, the paper predominantly focuses on Russian foreign policy and its domestic dimension. It is based on an extensive literature review and more than 30 face-to-face interviews with experts and Russian officials carried out in Moscow during field research trips in the spring and summer of 2021.

Locating the causes of rising tensions between Russia and the West on the level of interactions, this study does not deny the relevance of explanatory variables that figure prominently in many reductionist studies focusing on developments within Russia, including its expanding state capacities (Giles et al. 2015; Laruelle and Radvanyi 2018), Putin's authoritarian turn (Lynch 2016; Stanovaya 2020), and the need to divert attention away from internal structural weaknesses (Shevtsova 2015; Romanova 2018). In this sense, the article focuses on dissociation as one factor among others that contributed to the escalation of the Russian-Western conflict.

[1] For the purposes of this paper, the term "West" is defined as a NATO (without Turkey) and the EU member states. Although this might be seen as too broad an interpretation, it corresponds both to the understanding of the term in the Russian discourse (Tsygankov 2007) and in the academic literature (Neumann 1999).

In the most general terms, and following the categorisation proposed in the introduction of this issue (Dembinski and Peters 2022, this issue), I conceptualise Russia's dissociation, referred to below as "Ruxit," as Russia's selective ignorance and/or non-compliance with the rules of the European international institutions before 2014. Even though episodes of Russia's dissociation could already be observed in the early 1990s and have continued well beyond 2014, for methodological purposes in this article I assert that dissociation starts in earnest around the mid-2000s and culminates in 2014, as during this period, dissociation comes to the surface in the most pronounced manner.

The remainder of the article is organised as follows: firstly, I briefly sketch out the norms and institutions of the European social order that emerged in the early 1990s, paying special attention to Russia's rationale for its initial association with the West. Second, I outline the process of Russia's dissociation from the pan-European social order, which was driven by its progressing disillusionment regarding the readiness of the West to offer what Moscow felt a fair place in the order. In the West, on the other hand, the dissociation was spurred by a progressing disillusionment with the state of democracy in Russia and its perceived implications for the Kremlin's foreign policy. I conceptualise the Ukrainian Maidan Revolution of 2014 as an unexpected crisis that both revealed the prior ideational roots of dissociation and marked a sudden escalation of tensions that was expressed, inter alia, in the erosion of institutionalised ties. Third, I demonstrate how the foregrounding of ideational factors in the aftermath of dissociation poisoned relations between Russia and the West relations preventing the development of alternative visions of conflict management and contributing to the outbreak of Putin's war of aggression in 2022. In particular, I show that in Western-Russian relations the mutually reinforcing perception, after 2014, of the other as normatively alien, a strategic rival, and later as the enemy (a) prevented the constructive management of the territorial conflict in Eastern Ukraine; (b) resulted in negative spill-over effects and a polarisation of the relationship; and (c) accelerated the authoritarian turn in Russia preventing any meaningful attempts to repair the bilateral and multilateral relations.

2. The Rationale Behind Russia's Association with the West After the End of the Cold War

Today, both Russia and the Western states frequently refer to previous mutual frustrations and unfulfilled promises made during the association period. But what were the promises and why did they come to play such a prominent role during the dissociation? I argue that heightened expectations formed during the association attempt and their subsequent non-fulfilment

significantly contributed to mounting tensions eventually leading to Russia's emotional decision to break off with the order. With this in mind, I sketch out the rationale behind Russia's involvement in the European social order, after which I then move on to discuss Moscow's dissociation from that order.

The collapse of the Soviet Union brought an end not only to a de facto highly centralised system of one-party rule but also to the political, military, and ideological antipode of the West and by extension also the bilateral order that had existed up till then. Most importantly however, the end of Soviet rule in Russia opened a window of opportunity for the country's return to Europe. Picking up the momentum created during Gorbachev's Perestroika and Novoe Myshlenie ("new thinking"), Russia embarked on a path described using catchwords like "Common European Home" and "Europe, whole and free." The principles and norms of this order were enshrined in the Paris Charter signed in November 1990 at the Conference for Security Cooperation in Europe (CSCE).

The organisational structure for the governance of this common space that developed in the coming years reflected the de facto accession of Russia to a pre-existing Western order. Apart from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), which in 1995 grew out of the CSCE, this order rested on what were previously Western multilateral institutions which either opened their doors to Russia or developed close relations with it. Among others, Russia joined the Council of Europe (CoE), became a member of the enlarged G-7/8, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and developed close relations with NATO, the European Union (EU), and even the OECD (Forsberg and Haukkala 2015). Yet, as I show in the following, Russia's place within this order remained largely liminal, as its status within the most important pan-European organisations, NATO and EU, was restricted to that of a quasi-associate member (for a more detailed account of the depth and nature of Russian institutional involvement in this order, see Polianskii 2021).

In essence, the normative order of the Paris Charter rested on two central pillars: common and indivisible security on the one hand, and the universality of liberal democratic values on the other (Dembinski and Spanger 2017). While human rights, democracy, and the rule of law were guiding principles of all the above-mentioned Western-dominated organisations for several decades and, thus, were clearly articulated, the novel principle of "common and indivisible pan-European security" was more ambiguous. Although it had subscribed to both sets of principles, Russia put a premium on the "indivisible security" principle, while the salience of liberal values in this order was fiercely debated domestically (ibid). For the West, however, the logic of cooperation with Russia was based precisely on the premise that "Russia remains on a trajectory of becoming a democratic European country" (House of Lords 2015, 23), which was reflected and implemented in the institutional cooperation with Russia at the time.

Contradictions between the two principles and thus, the two sides, manifested themselves early in the different positions on the future of NATO. In Russia's view, the principle of common security and the idea that the military security of each participating state is inextricably linked to that of all the others called for the transformation of the European order into a system of collective security and an end to military alliances on the continent. In such a system, as I show in the next section, NATO would either vanish and be replaced by the CSCE/OSCE, or Russia would gain a say over NATO's policies in general and NATO enlargement in particular (see Zagorskii 2017, 95). In Sergey Lavrov's (2016) words, Russia's goal has always been that "not a single cannon in Europe could be fired without our [Russia's] consent."

In the West's view, however, the fulfilment of the liberal values enshrined in the Paris Charter and subsequent documents would, by definition, lead to common and indivisible pan-European security. For example, the Charter for European Security (OSCE 1999) states that every participating country has "[...] the inherent right to be free to choose or change its security arrangements, including treaties of alliance, as they evolve [...]. Each participating State will respect the rights of all others in these regards." This applied to both NATO member countries, which eventually decided to preserve the alliance, and to the other states that decided to join it later. Somewhat undefined, however, was the relationship between the freedom of every state to choose its own security arrangements and another principle as enshrined in the Istanbul Convention (1999), which read that "no state would strengthen its security at the expense of the security of other States."

A second, less visible, yet equally consequential contradiction consisted in Russia's aspiration to be recognised as a leading power of this order, which grew out of the different understandings of how status is conferred within it (Tsygankov 2014). While Russia was convinced that status depended on great power attributes like military might or size of the territory, the West believed that status was primarily conferred by showing respect for the principle of equal sovereignty and according to how well member states lived up to the liberal principles (Troitskiy 2016). With Russia's inability (and at times unwillingness) to fulfil the high Western human rights standards in the turbulent transition phase of the 1990s and early 2000s, Moscow's wish for status recognition was repeatedly denied. The Kremlin was particularly puzzled by the fact that its smaller and far less powerful former satellites in Eastern Europe could occupy a similar or even more prominent place in the European security system than Russia itself. Although the West recognised the importance of accommodating Russia's status concerns for the same of the country's

domestic stability,[2] it did little to satisfy Russia's status aspirations, which some Western states believed Moscow did not (yet) deserve.

To summarise, Russia willingly joined the new order, hoping that this would enable a rapid move back to the centre of European affairs after the painful collapse of the Soviet Union. Yet, it quickly realised that it would be extremely hard to find what it perceived as a fair place in this order and was dissatisfied with the "side chair" it was offered.[3] At the same time, Russia did not reject the idea of the pan-European order from the very beginning, as Moscow expected that its own vision of the order would eventually prevail, as Istomin (2021) put it in a personal interview.

2.1 Russia's Disheartening Reform Attempts

In the 1990s and early 2000s, Russia undertook several attempts to adapt the emerging order to its own interests, hoping that its principles would eventually prevail over Western ideas of the primacy of liberal values. In what follows, I describe why these attempts failed and how this eventually contributed to Russia's decision to dissociate from the rules and norms of the common order. Even though the reform strategies were not officially formulated and even overlapped with each other in time, I will first present the OSCE case before returning to Russia's reform attempts within NATO. As none of these reform attempts produced the desired results, Moscow's dissociation picked up momentum in mid-2000s, arriving at its culmination point in 2014, to which I will come back in the next chapter.

2.1.1 Failure to Elevate the OSCE

The attempt to elevate the CSCE to a pan-European collective security organisation was by far one of the most important early attempts by Russia to occupy what it felt was a fair place in the newly formed order.[4] Despite the Clinton administration's decision to extend the existing NATO structures to the new territories in Eastern Europe in 1994 (Radchenko 2020), the Yeltsin-Kozyrev team still believed that Russia could have a similar position in the emerging European Security system to that of the United States. To achieve this, Russian leadership chose the C/OSCE for several obvious reasons.

Firstly, being a founding member of its predecessor, the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, Russia had de facto veto rights and fully fledged membership (unlike in NATO or the EU), which was supposed to

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[2] One of such examples was the NATO Partnership for Peace (PfP) program, which Clinton's advisor Strobe Talbott (2007) privately acknowledged to as being "a hedge against Russian intentions turning sour." Some even argue that PfP was intended to provide a "waiting room" for potential candidates and thus possibly drive out the desire to join (Zagorskii 1995).

[3] Interview with the anonymous Russian diplomat in Moscow, 10 April 2021.

[4] Interview with the anonymous Russian diplomat in Moscow, 12 April 2021.

ensure Russia's equal footing in the organisation. Second, Russia thought it had a number of allies from the post-Soviet space in the organisation with which it could bring common initiatives to the table (Kropatcheva 2012). Further, Russia saw the OSCE as the only genuinely inclusive pan-European organisation spanning "from Vancouver to Vladivostok." Finally, the OSCE with its "three baskets" structure allowed for a "compartmentalised dialogue" on various issues, preventing them from negatively influencing each other, especially in the human rights and disarmament domains, as it was during the Cold War (Zagorskii 2017).

Institutionalisation of OSCE, however, turned out to be only half of the problem. When it came to elevating the OSCE to a genuine pan-European security organisation, not just in word but also in deed, as recent historical accounts by Hill (2018) and Sarotte (2021) vividly demonstrate, the West and the United States in particular viewed the ambition with a great share of scepticism. Russia's hopes of making the OSCE the main security organisation in Europe were seen by most of the American establishment as a threat to the US political and military presence in Europe. The American leadership's fear of institutional competition with the OSCE made their commitment to the organisation largely rhetorical, while their practical engagement was reduced to a bare minimum. The US Secretary of State at the time, James Baker, voiced America's concerns by stating that the C/OSCE was "the real risk to NATO" (quoted in Shifrinson 2016, 31). Thus, despite receiving a new name and an institution-like structure, the OSCE remained on the margins of the European security architecture (Peters 2003).

Around 1999, weakened by economic and political crisis, Russia, in the words of Kortunov (2021), had to "bitterly accept the reality" and give up these self-defeating attempts to elevate the role of the OSCE. As a result, at the turn of the millennium, Russia decided to rethink what turned out to be an unrealistic approach of seeking institutional equality "with the West" (ibid.) and pursue another strategy. Creating a common European security architecture on equal footing gave way to Russian attempts to become a "member of the West" in order to get a say in existing institutions.

2.1.2 Russia in NATO?

As mentioned earlier, NATO's decision in 1994 to go beyond the "Partnership for Peace" program and open the alliance to new members was not originally perceived in Moscow as the ultimate breach of trust as some Russian observers assert today (Marten 2020). Since Russia believed that NATO was the central organisation in determining the future of the European security order, Moscow did not resist what it saw as a practically "inevitable process" (interview with Lukyanov 2021) and tried to "find a way to adjust to it" with minimal losses for national security instead. In 1997, Russia signed the Founding Act

with NATO and three years later, despite Moscow's strong condemnation of NATO's actions in the former Yugoslavia, supported the idea of establishing the NATO-Russia Council (NRC).[5] While the Founding Act stipulated, inter alia, that NATO would only expand its political but not its military infrastructure, the NRC gave Russia insight and a voice (but not a veto) in NATO decision-making (Forsberg and Herd 2015). Initially, Moscow saw the NRC as a cornerstone platform for cooperation and the provision of indivisible security in Europe. As one of the Russian diplomats I interviewed in Moscow admitted, at the time Russia saw it as a "holy grail" that would solve its problems with the West,[6] or might even be equalled to Russia's admission to the Alliance.[7] In the months that followed, Russia opened a Permanent Mission at NATO Headquarters in Brussels whose head took part in monthly consultations with his counterparts from NATO member countries. With this step, Russia, in Putin's words, helped "the outdated NATO to adapt to the new realities of European and global politics" (quoted in Zagorski 2002).

Russia's ambitions, however, have not been fulfilled. As Radchenko (2020, 782) puts it: "The Russians not just wanted to see Russia a part of the West – politically and institutionally – but had a conception of exactly where they wanted to be seated: right next to the US." NATO, on the other hand, perceived the above-mentioned concessions to Russia as a way of accommodating its status aspirations and softening its reaction to the eastward expansion. This stark mismatch of Russia's expectations and reality, as I show in the following, sharply intensified Moscow's frustrations that emerged in the earlier period of association.

Just as with OSCE, the Western states were quite sceptical towards Russia's institutional reform efforts (Globe 2000). Some saw it as Russia's attempt to get into NATO and paralyse it from within, whereas others argued that it was a bid to undermine the security guarantees NATO gave to its new East European members (interview with Danilov 2021). Others, however, argued, that the scepticism was more fundamental, brought about by developments within Russia, especially against the backdrop of its authoritarian "turn" under Putin (Lynch 2016).

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the rationale behind the West's engagement with Russia rested on the idea that this partnership would constitute a rules-based relationship based on democracy and the rule of law (House of Lords, 2015, 23). In the context of the newly elected President Putin's increasingly authoritarian rule, however, this expectation was proven

[5] On this platform, each state was supposed to represent their own country's interests in national capacity. The aim of this was to prevent the repeat of the situation when Russia was confronted with a pre-negotiated NATO position as it was in Partnership for Peace program.

[6] Moscow hoped at the time that its position in the NRC would give Russia the right to block any decisions it saw contradicting its security interests.

[7] Interview with the anonymous Russian diplomat in Moscow, 10 April 2021.

wrong. Propelled by high rents resulting from skyrocketing global prices for hydrocarbons, Russian state capacity had markedly risen, which was reflected both in its foreign and domestic policies. Among other things, Russian authorities are believed to have arrested politically active oligarchs (e.g., Khodorkovsky in 2003), murdered investigative journalists (e.g., Politkovskaya in 2007), and kick-started a general roll-back of the rule of law. Against this background, the Kremlin also relaunched, with heightened brutality, the military campaign against the separatists in Chechnya (also known as "the Second Chechen War"), which was heavily criticised by the West. These authoritarian tendencies have resulted in significant disillusionment among those in the West who thought that Russia was on track to democracy. In their eyes, the authoritarian turn tantamounted to a betrayal of common values (Forsberg 2014). This betrayal implied that Russia was moving away from this order, which necessitated the defence of once shared norms against an increasingly authoritarian and untrustworthy Russia.

For its part, Moscow also began to realise that Brussels and Washington were in no hurry to welcome Russia to the "club" (Kortunov 2016). Around the early 2000s, Russia eventually became disillusioned about the idea of being accepted in NATO and in the West at large. As a result, Moscow began to see the NRC (as it had the OSCE before it) as just another attempt by the West to pay lip service to the principle of "indivisible security," while implementing its original plans of expanding the Western institutions and keeping Moscow out.[8]

In summary, the norms of the Paris Charter-based order were ambivalent and were interpreted by Russia and the West in different and contradictory manners. Interacting within this order, both sides soon realised that they had "unjustifiably high hopes about the readiness of the other to see and understand their ambitions," as Tsygankov (2021) described it in a personal interview. As unfulfilled expectations and other unresolved conflicts slowly but surely consumed trust, Russia began to realise that the European security order was skewed against its interests. After two failed attempts to change this by elevating the OSCE and closely associating with NATO, Moscow finally came to believe that the trust it had invested in this order had been exploited and Western states deliberately used the norms of this order against it.

[8] Interview with the anonymous Russian diplomat in Moscow, 10 April 2021.

3. The Turning Point: From Reform Attempts to Leaving the European Security Order

3.1 The Shift

It is hard to pinpoint a date when the Russian leadership decided to abandon its attempts to reform the common European order. Yet, President Putin's speech at the Munich Security Conference in February 2007 has been widely regarded as an early expression of this shift (interviews with Parkhalina 2021; Trenin 2021). In this speech, Putin criticised the American supremacy and blamed the US for constantly ignoring Russia's interests: "The United States has overstepped its national borders in every way. This is visible in the economic, political, cultural and educational policies it imposes on other nations. Well, who likes this? Who is happy about this?" (Putin 2007). The harsh rhetoric was followed by equally radical actions, when shortly after this, Russia resumed flights of its strategic nuclear bombers after a 15-year break and suspended its participation in the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty (CFE), in effect lifting restrictions on the deployment of troops and equipment in the Western districts of Russia. Putin's assessment that the norms and institutions of this order were skewed against Russian interests was shared by many in his country. Aggravated by the wave of "colour revolutions" in the former Soviet republics,[9] as well as ongoing plans to further expand NATO eastward, observers in Russia started to believe that the West was actively "strengthen[ing] its security at the expense of the security of Russia."[10]

The increasingly influential state-centric and anti-democratic elements in Russia's political system (predominantly the so-called siloviki fraction),[11] also began to openly question the entire post-Cold War settlement. However, the critique was not confined to the more authoritarian circles of the political spectrum. In fact, one interviewee remarked that around 2007, even the most progressive voices in Moscow started voicing concerns about malicious Western ambitions in the common neighbourhood (interview with Tsygankov 2021).

Given this already very critical mood, NATO's Bucharest Summit in April 2008 fuelled Russia's suspicion of Western intentions even more. The summit ended with a compromise, according to which Ukraine and Georgia "will

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[9] The Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004 and the Revolution of Roses in Georgia in 2003 are the most frequently named examples.

[10] Interview with the anonymous Russian diplomat in Moscow, 12 April 2021.

[11] Russia's military and security establishments, which became a real political force in the mid-2000s, continued to regard NATO as an enemy and remained profoundly sceptical of the prospects for cooperation between Russia and the West (cf. Bremmer and Charap 2007).

become members of NATO […]" without, however, mentioning a date for the start of the accession process. Even though this was registered with some relief by the liberally minded pundits (Andreev 2008), the Russian leadership seemed deeply convinced that the West had again ignored Moscow's interests and visions of common security. In his speech in Bucharest, Putin warned that any attempt to expand NATO to Russia's borders would be regarded as a direct "threat to our [Russia's] national security" and thus constitute a red line for Moscow (Putin 2008).

However, for the time being, Putin did not embark on the path of outright confrontation. On 7 May 2008, he stepped down from the presidency and was replaced by his protégé Dimitry Medvedev. The following four-year interregnum saw a final and half-hearted attempt to adapt the European order to Russian views and interests. Medvedev's "European Security Treaty (EST)," albeit well-intentioned, turned out to be rather unspecific and was received with much suspicion in Western capitals, which politely buried the proposal in the so-called "Corfu Process" (Zagorskii and Entin 2008). Despite the fact that Medvedev never fleshed out his ideas in more detail in public, it is interesting to note that discussions among Russian experts at the time revolved around the vision of a regional bipolar security system together with the West (Sergunin 2016). This vision was focussed on European security and based on the idea of a new "Concert of Europe" for the 21st century (interview with Kortunov 2021). While members of the concert would be bound by common ground rules, Russia and Russian-dominated institutions (CIS, CSTO) would implement those rules and provide security in its own "zone" of responsibility.

The main obstacle to these unofficially proposed ideas was the resistance of those Eastern European states that Moscow considered to be located in its natural "zone of privileged interests." This vision also ran counter to central normative principles enshrined in the Paris Charter, such as equal sovereignty and the right of states to choose alliances and was therefore opposed by Brussels and other Western capitals.

The Russian debate about a zone of privileged interests of 2008–2010 irritated many in the West. Yet, it is difficult to determine exactly when Western capitals turned away from the vision of building a European social order with Russia. Most of the new EU and NATO member states had always been wary about building a close partnership with Russia. In the words of the former Lithuanian President Dalia Grybauskaitė (2014): "[Russia is] a totally untrustworthy and unpredictable partner." As the authoritarian turn in Russia became more pronounced, the reservations in Western capitals, or even opposition, to a common order with Russia also intensified. A watershed moment for the West is commonly considered Putin's decision to clamp down on the protests against the rigged Duma elections in December 2011, which in the

opinion of some Western observers became an omen for the end of Russia's "democratic experiment" more generally (Krastev 2019).

To sum up, the mutual disillusionment with the possibility of building a common order and the mutual feelings of disappointment and frustration did not develop overnight. Ideational conflicts were consistently intensified as Russia's attempts to reframe the Paris Charter-based order were rejected by Western states which, in turn, grew increasingly wary of the authoritarian turn and the possibility of a revanchist agenda in Russia. These perceptions of the other as normative alien determined to achieve unilateral gains at the expense of the other continuously interacted, eventually taking a heavy toll on mutual trust and understanding. The struggle between the Western insistence on the validity of liberal norms and Russia's insistence on common security and status was increasingly concentrated on the countries located between them. NATO and the EU insisted on their "freedom to choose alliances" while Russia emphasised its own right to define its security through a zone of privileged interests. Finally, when Medvedev stepped down and Putin returned to the Kremlin for his third presidential term in 2012, Moscow's policy officially shifted from attempting to change the system from within to abandoning it. As a result, Putin embarked on a path of creating a zone of special interest for Russia not in cooperation, but rather in competition with the West.

3.2 The "Big-Bang" of Ukraine 2014

In 2004, the EU Commission developed the European Neighbourhood Policy with a twofold aim: a) creating an alternative to further waves of enlargements and b) projecting stability into its Southern and Eastern neighbourhood by aligning this ring of states closely with the Common Market and incorporating them into the EU's system of regulatory governance. Three years later, the EU started negotiations with Ukraine on an Association Agreement (AA). In the post-Soviet space, Russia, with varying success and intensity, has been developing its own projects of economic and political integration, which, on returning to the Kremlin, Putin placed at the top of the agenda (Putin 2012). The institutionalisation of the then Customs Union into a fully-fledged Eurasian (Economic) Union (EEU) with membership of Ukraine was viewed as particularly important (Glazyev 2014). As Moscow presented the regulatory demands of the EU's Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) of the AA and the EEU as mutually incompatible, Ukraine's Moscow-leaning President Yanukovych eventually found himself in the position of having to choose sides. Due to Yanukovych's increasingly authoritarian style of governance and the EU's growing discontentment with him, Putin thought he would have the upper hand. The Kremlin believed that the wide-spread corruption in Ukraine, in particular, as well as the continued detention of

former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, would prevent Ukraine from fulfilling the requirements of the AA.

However, when Yanukovych made some symbolic concessions to meet the EU's demands to improve the human rights situation, opening the way for the AA to be signed at the Vilnius Summit in November 2013, "Russia suddenly woke up" (interview with Lukyanov 2021). Feeling betrayed by both the Ukrainian leadership and the West, Moscow decided to finally give up its covert efforts of stalling negotiations and instead started actively torpedoing the process (ibid). Employing a stick and carrot tactic, Putin threatened Ukraine with trade sanctions and at the same time offered vital economic incentives and assistance. As the EU did not come up with a counteroffer, Yanukovych switched sides at the last minute, declining to sign the AA. Had it not been for the Maidan protests that followed, this probably would have seen the story of Ukraine's Association Agreement with the EU come to an end, as was the case with Armenia shortly before that (Ghazaryan and Delcour 2017).

The unexpected success of the Maidan protests, Yanukovych's equally unexpected departure, and the fully fledged constitutional crisis that followed in Ukraine became a catalyst for Russia's dissociation from the European social order. In the following weeks and months, tensions between Russia and Ukraine, but also between Russia and the West, exploded, which profoundly transformed the nature of Russian-Western relationship (Casier 2021).

In late February and March 2014, Russian leadership proceeded to heavily support its own "anti-Maidan" demonstrations throughout Ukraine, particularly in the predominantly Russian-speaking south-eastern Ukraine. Pro-Russian separatists supported by Russian special forces without insignia ("polite green men") took control of the key buildings in the Crimean capital, Simferopol, and on 16 March, Crimea voted to secede in a disputed referendum (Golts 2014). Two days later, President Putin signed a bill to absorb the peninsula into the Russian Federation. Shortly after this, Russia ignited and orchestrated a guerrilla successionist war in Donbas, which eventually led to one of the bloodiest military conflicts in Europe since the end of the Cold War. For the Russian leadership, these steps constituted a de facto "referendum" on the question of belonging to the European post-Cold War social order.

During the crisis, Russian and Western decision-makers exchanged in a highly emotionalised fashion with barrages of accusations and counteraccusations, each side putting forward diametrically opposed versions of the same story to justify their policies. Yet, their exchange underlined one key point. The conflict, as I show in the following, was not so much about material interests and Ukraine's membership of one free trade zone or another. Instead, it revolved around the validity of competing norms, identities, and assignment of blame for the breakdown of the European order. In a one-to-one interview, Trenin (2021) posited: "The crisis in Ukraine was not about Ukraine per se. The tensions [between Russia and the West around 2014] were so high,

that they probably would have exploded somewhere else, maybe not as dramatically. But on the whole, everything was going in that direction."

Below, I tease out these dimensions of the conflict by interpreting the statements and narratives that both sides put forward to justify the dissociation. By pursuing this approach, I contend that even with regard to Russia, speech acts, although often camouflaging reality, may also reveal interests and motives (Waever 1993).

3.2.1 Russia's Framing: "The Compressed Spring That Snapped Back"

Vladimir Putin framed Yanukovych's departure as a "coup," which "created a new playing field and changed the rules of the game" (quoted in Allison 2014, 1257), and constituted, in his opinion, a clear breach of trust by the Western countries as foreign ministers from France, Germany, and Poland had mediated a compromise during the height of the Maidan protests according to which Yanukovych would stay in office until snap elections were held. The new authorities in Kyiv thus constituted a "junta," which in the words of the then Russian ambassador to the UK Yakovenko (quoted in House of Lords 2015, 56), was allegedly dominated by "neo-Nazis" and other extremist groupings (i.e., the "Right Sector" party and what was known as the "Azov" Battalion), which were particularly active in the "Euromaidan" protests. The alleged subsequent persecution of "pro-Russian" dissidents by these groupings across Ukraine[12] subsequently led, in Russia's narrative, to "civil war" in the country. Moreover, according to Yakovenko, Ukrainian "neo-Nazis" controlling the government were not acting on their own but were and still are being guided by Western "curators" who wanted to "destroy Ukraine's traditional ties with Russia" (ibid., 57) and take the country into the Western orbit and eventually NATO.

This twist in the narrative underlines two factors. Firstly, it shows that in Russia's view Ukraine had very little agency and its government was essentially a "puppet of the West" (Zhurzhenko 2014, 257). With the West becoming the main antagonist in the stand-off in and around Ukraine, the conflict acquired a strong geopolitical dimension. Although the competitive AA and EEU schemes dealt mainly with economic and regulatory issues, Ukraine's accession to NATO as a potential second step always loomed large in Russia's perception. The geopolitical dimension was further fuelled by Russia's concerns about the fate of its Black Sea fleet deployed in Crimea and possible NATO bases that might end up replacing it.

[12] In fact, only one incident made the headlines: on 2 May 2014, clashes between pro-Russian and pro-Ukraine demonstrators led to the Trade Unions House in Odessa going up in flames, resulting in dozens of pro-Russian demonstrators being killed (BBC News 2014).

Although security issues were relatively important, statements made by Russian decision-makers reveal the even greater significance they attributed to another factor: perceived injustices and betrayals over the decades of attempted Russian-Western collaboration. In his 45-minute "Crimean speech" on 18 March 2014, Vladimir Putin declared that the Ukrainian crisis "like a mirror reflects what is going on and what has been happening in the world over the past several decades" (Putin 2014). In his address, Putin recounted Russia's grievances and frustrations: "[the West] lied to us, made decisions behind our backs, placed us before an accomplished fact." Regarding NATO's expansion he lamented that: "[t]hey kept telling us the same thing: 'This does not concern you.' Well, that is easy to say [...]" (Putin 2014). In other public speeches and during his many hours of dialogue with Western leaders during the Crimean crisis, Putin and other Russian decision-makers repeatedly referred to incidents such as the "illegal" NATO bombardments of Serbia and subsequent recognition of Kosovan independence, NATO eastward expansion, the unilateral abrogation of the ABM Treaty and the deployment of missile defences in Europe, the illegal intervention in Iraq, and the abuse of the UN mandate in Libya. In Russia's narrative, these instances add up to a bigger picture of a shared past when the West used double standards in implementing common norms, exploited Russia's good will, and unilateral concessions, while ignoring legitimate Russian interests and demands.

In brief, material interests in a strict sense barely played a role for Russia in this conflict. In Moscow's eyes, Western states deliberately used the norms and rules of the Paris Charter order against it, denied the country its legitimate place and status within this order, and relegated the country to a liminal position. In his "Crimean" speech, Putin compared the accumulation of past grievances to a spring which was "compressed all the way to its limit [and] snap[ped] back hard" (Putin 2014).

3.2.2 Western Framing: "It's the Principles, Stupid!"

The Western narrative surrounding the 2014 crisis and its background could not be more different, however. In the view of EU officials, the Association Agreement has never been a red flag for Russia. Pierre Vimont (then Executive Secretary-General of the European External Action Service), for instance, claimed that the EU "never had any clear warning" from Russia that the Association Agreement with Ukraine "was unacceptable" (quoted in House of Lords 2015, 53). But even if this had been the case, the EU would not have accepted a Russian veto. The Paris Charter principle of equal sovereignty suggests, as a sovereign state, Ukraine and its people have the right to choose between different offers of association. In this view, a Russian counterproposal to the AA was legitimate, but bullying Ukraine with the threat of sanctions was not. European immediate economic and other material interests

were clearly not at stake in this conflict. The Association Agreements were primarily designed as a cost-saving alternative to further enlargements and many of its stipulations, such as visa-free travel, were highly unpopular in Western Europe (Schmidt 2016). In the competition between different association schemes, the EU was mostly defending a principle, not its economic interests.

When the events of Euromaidan brought about a new interim government in Kyiv, most of the EU member states and the US recognised it (partly for pragmatic reasons, partly because the new government seemed to represent the popular will). In fact, Russia's annexation of Crimea and its support for the separatists in Eastern Ukraine, however, was perceived in the West as a blatant violation not only of Paris Charter principles but also of basic principles of international law.

The Western response in the form of successive rounds of sanctions, military reassurance of NATO members along the Eastern "flank," the termination of Russia's participation in the G-7/8, and the suspension of cooperation within the NATO-Russia Council and the Council of Europe was driven by a deeply ingrained frustration and disappointment with Putin that had developed well before the Maidan crisis. In fact, the annexation of Crimea and the support for the insurgents in Donbas seemed to corroborate an already established view of Russia as a potential external threat (Chaban, Elgström, and Gulyaeva 2017). This view rests on the assumption of a close link between internal developments and external behaviour. According to this narrative, by repressing democracy, violating human rights, and restricting the rule of law, Russia has not only violated what were once shared norms and ideals, it has in fact left the common social order. Moreover, the dissociation and the betrayal of social norms had implications for foreign and security policy. In the eyes of the West, it turned Russia from a trusted partner into a revisionist actor and an existential threat to its neighbours (Lucas 2014).

In this view, Russia's authoritarian turn and the revisionist foreign policy which manifested itself during the Ukraine crisis were inextricably linked via two causal chains: Russia intervened to a) avert "democratic contagion" effects, and b) to divert attention away from internal weaknesses. According to the first argument, successful democratisation in Ukraine would constitute a shining example of the democratic transformation of a people that in Putin's view are virtually Russians too, and this would pose a major threat to Putin's autocratic rule and the system of oligarchic state capitalism (McFaul and Person 2022). According to the second argument, Russia's leadership was "[compensating] for its shortcomings by destructive, aggressive and bullying tactics against its neighbours" (Donald Tusk, quoted in Macdonald and Croft 2015). In August 2014 NATO issued a statement that read: "Russia attempted to divert attention away [at home]" and "made baseless attacks on the legitimacy of the Ukrainian authorities by using force to seize part of Ukraine's territory"

(NATO 2014). This "diversionary war" argument, in fact, continues to enjoy significant support among Western pundits and politicians to this day.[13]

With this change in Western perception, its stance on the central issue of the conflict became even more uncompromising. While Russia remained within this European order, Western states had taken at least some steps to alleviate existing tensions between the principles of equal sovereignty and common security, such as by agreeing not to extend the integrated military structure to the new territories in the NATO-Russia Founding Act. As Russia appeared to be withdrawing from this order, however, the West no longer recognised and even refused to discuss Russian security concerns as well as possible remedies proposed by Moscow. As already discussed, the Medvedev plan and early Russian debates on a "European Concert 2.0" with a special Russian zone of interest may have been more of a reflection of Moscow's security concerns and defensive motives than offensive imperial designs. Although some Western European scholars initially found it worthwhile to explore Russia's ideas (Van Herpen 2008), after 2014 this course of action stood no chance. For one thing, the agreed norm of equal sovereignty developed a pull of its own and precluded a debate on whether Russia's insistence on exerting influence in its Blizhnee Zarubezh'e ("near abroad") was only aimed at preventing another round of NATO expansion or also included a veto over the social, political, and economic developments in the neighbouring states. As the link between internal authorisation and external revisionism took hold in the West after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2014, any accommodation of Russian security concerns soon seemed like appeasement.

3.3 The Fallout

This and the preceding chapter argue that the disillusioning track record between Russia and the West within the common social order and the former's subsequent dissociation from this order influenced how the protagonists perceived each other and the nature of their conflict. Both sides emphasised in the narrative the ideational dimension of the conflict, with material issues playing a rather marginal role. The non-compliance with norms perceived as essential by the other side – liberal norms vs. common security – was regarded as an act of betrayal and provoked constant accusations and mutual recriminations. Russia's failure to find a place within this order, in particular, led to deep resentments and fuelled a historical sense of *obida*, a strange mixture of petulance and vengefulness (Shumatsky 2022). Russia argued that the West had never been ready to accept Russia as one of its own and had employed double standards to keep Russia on the margins of the new order.

[13] The "diversionary war" argument generally contends that authorities instrumentalise and exploit crises abroad to score political points at home and divert people's attention from domestic issues (see Gerstel 2015).

The change of perception of the Other from partner to traitor and Russia's subsequent dissociation in the wake of the Ukrainian revolution of 2014 had profound implications for how both sides perceived the conflict. Firstly, the end of the vision of a "shared neighbourhood" implied that the search for commonly agreed rules of engagement in the space between them gave way to a zero-sum situation with both sides competing to create mutually exclusive zones of interest. While Russia pursued such strategies deliberately, the EU recognised, at a rather late stage, that it, too, was engaged in geopolitics.

Secondly, both sides saw the conflict as having become securitised. By assuming a strong link between internal authoritarianism and external revanchism, the West finally came to perceive Russia as a security threat. Russia, which had perceived NATO and its enlargement as a potential security risk from the early 1990s on, had to come to terms with the fact that its dissociation from the common order had further reduced its already limited means of controlling the policies of the alliance. Thirdly, the change in perceptions and the securitisation of the conflict increased the tendency of polarisation, that is the likelihood of tensions on one policy field spilling over into other fields. Last, but not least, Russia's dissociation from the ideational foundations of the common order necessitates the search for alternative identities, as well as the suppression of those societal groups that had profited from cooperative relations with the West.

Building on these findings, in the following chapter, I show that the fallout from the dissociation prevented the creation of a new order of coexistence between Russia and the West and may have contributed to further radicalisation of the conflict in the form of Putin's decision to attack Ukraine in February 2022.

4. (Mis)Management of Conflicts in the Post-Dissociational Stage

As mentioned in the introductory chapter, dissociation entails the possibility that the actors involved, freed from the burden of their unsuitable institutional relationship, start anew and rebuild their relations on a new basis. Although the way Russia dissociated from the West left particularly deep scars and high tensions – for example in the form of a never-ending war in Eastern Ukraine[14] – such a constructive turn was not precluded per se.

[14] Data on the rate of fatalities provided by the Uppsala Conflict Data Program show that after a hike in the number of deaths in 2014, the number of fatalities decreased considerably in the following year and stabilised at 200–400 conflict-related deaths annually in the years since 2016 (see https://ucdp.uu.se/country/369).

Indeed, two Western responses to the events of 2014 created an opening for constructive management of the conflict and a relaunch of relations. Firstly, the Minsk I and II Accords, brokered by France and Germany after the Ukrainian forces had suffered severe setbacks on the battlefield and were on the verge of collapse, outlined a compromise for the future status of the self-declared breakaway "People's Republics" of Luhansk and Donetsk ("LPR" and "DPR"). Secondly, EU and American sanctions differentiated between punitive measures directed against the annexation of Crimea and those directed against the Russian support of the insurgence in Donbas (Fischer and Timofeev 2018, 6). While the former sanctions remained limited, the latter, which were triggered by the downing of Malaysia Airline plane MH17, were successively augmented and widened. Thus, the Western response to the events of 2014 entailed the possibility that both sides could (a) isolate the Crimean issue, (b) strike a compromise for the future status of the "LPR" and "DPR" that would also include lifting the majority of sanctions to (c) avoid a further polarisation of the overall conflict.

After the dust of the immediate confrontation in Ukraine had settled, decision-makers in Western Europe did indeed undertake a range of initiatives to that end (Dembinski and Polianskii 2021). At first, Russia, too, seemed willing to reach a new understanding with the West. Moscow supported UN Security Council Resolution 2202 of 17 February, which provided Minsk II with multilateral legitimacy[15] and, after some deliberation, recognised the new Ukrainian government. However, these endeavours, backfired spectacularly. As I show in the following, due to the badly managed dissociation, Russia and the West plunged into a new and unprecedented cycle of mutual accusations, sanctions, reprisals, and military provocations. In this contest, the West relied mainly on ever harsher restrictive measures,[16] which were increasingly perceived in Russia as an attempt to bring about "regime change" in the Kremlin (Neimark 2020). Russia, in its turn, intensified its covert activities in the West (Conley and Stefanov 2019), including interference in elections, cyberattacks, and disinformation campaigns, ostensibly aimed at undermining internal stability in Western states.

In the next chapter, I argue that dissociation did not lead to a stable relationship because, in contrast to e.g., Brexit, this process was rather unorganised, dominated at different stages by various actors with diverging interests whose position prevented the necessary compromises from being reached. Most importantly, however, the ideational confrontation that dominated "Ruxit" lingered on and shaped the perception of the Other as normatively

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15 UN Security Council Resolution 2202 (Security Council 2015).

16 Restrictive measures included sectoral economic sanctions, freezing the assets of individuals affiliated with Putin, and "blacklists" of officials banned from entering the EU and the US, as well as several other restrictions that are authorised and broadened on an annual basis (Timofeev 2018).

alien, which further fuelled the conflict. Focussing on three issue areas, the following paragraphs analyse how the ideational fallout of the dissociation contributed to the failure of attempts to rebuild relations after 2014. That said, the following chapter does not try to explain Vladimir Putin's decision to go to war. The reasons for this decision and the factors, prior to 24 February 2022, that led to it being made are not (yet) fully understood. The more modest aim of this coming chapter is to give an account on why political efforts to stabilise the post-2014 Russian-Western relationship failed. In so doing, I assert that relations were not predestined for eventual collapse but could have been stabilised had post-dissociational relations taken a different, less ideationally dominated course.

4.1 Failure to Settle Territorial Security Conflicts

As mentioned above, the Minsk Accords explicitly and implicitly represented a blueprint to solve the long-standing conflict between Russia and the West over security, status, and influence particularly in what some authors refer to as "countries in-between" (Charap, Demus, and Shapiro 2018). The Minsk agreements implied that Russia would retain its influence over the so-called LPR and DPR[17] and through them, would essentially gain influence over the defence policy of Ukraine and its future alliance status. Thus, Russia would retain authority, particularly in security affairs, and effectively have a veto over Ukraine's NATO aspirations. In so doing, it would reclaim its status as a centre of gravity in a newly defined European security order.

The Minsk accords, despite being quite beneficial to Russia, were never implemented, and numerous studies have analysed the reasons for their failure (Ashford 2016; Wittke 2019; Åtland 2020). Summarising the findings of these studies, it can be argued that the 13-point Minsk II agreement was too vague on several cornerstone measures and the sequence of their implementation. To mention just one example, the intended local elections in the self-proclaimed republics were almost impossible to conduct, as the Ukrainian government resisted them as long as it did not have complete control of the border to Russia. More importantly, Minsk II was perceived by the Ukrainian elite and public as a diktat imposed by Moscow, and its implementation beyond the political reach of any government in Kyiv. In 2019, ten thousand people demonstrated in Kyiv against Zelensky signing the so-called

[17] According to Article I of the Washington NATO Summit (1999), a country aspiring to participate in a Membership Action Plan (MAP) is, inter alia, expected "to settle ethnic disputes or external territorial disputes including irredentist claims or internal jurisdictional disputes by peaceful means." The active armed conflict in Donbas, thus, was and still is effectively blocking Ukraine's path into the Alliance.

"Steinmeier formula"[18] with former prime minister Timoshenko calling the implementation of Minsk II a "high treason" that Ukrainians "will never forgive and forget" (Timoshenko 2022). Complicating matters even further was the fact that instead of striving for security by stabilising Ukraine's status as an alliance-free country, Kyiv intensified its cooperation with NATO and, on a bilateral basis, with individual NATO states wherever possible, even enshrining the goal of NATO membership in Article 85 of its amended constitution.[19]

Moscow, too, oscillated between two approaches: gaining influence by pursuing a diplomatic settlement along the lines of Minsk II or exerting pressure on Kyiv by intensifying the militarised conflict in Donbas. At first, Russia, albeit half-heartedly, seemed to follow the former course, hoping that the implementation of accords would put an end to the conflict on its borders and normalise of relations with the West (Solovyev 2016). At the same time, Moscow insisted that Kyiv should take the first step and continued to support the breakaway entities, thus also blocking the implementation of Minsk II. Moscow also failed to put forward any alternative solutions (and blocked Ukrainian initiatives to include other countries in the negotiating process), instead restricting itself to heavily criticising the Western states for not putting enough pressure on Ukraine to implement the accords (Grushko 2020). With the de facto and de jure death of military confidence-building and early warning mechanisms such as the Open Skies Treaty and Vienna Document, the level of trust and predictability was reduced even further, leading to outbursts of fighting along the contact line as well as tensions across the region. As a result, eight years after signing the Minsk Protocol, for reasons that are yet to be revealed, Moscow lost hope that a diplomatic settlement would help it achieve its goals and embarked on an increasingly confrontational course.[20] On 21 February 2022, Putin signed a decree recognising the two breakaway republics putting an official end to Minsk II.

The biggest block in the entire process, however, has been the lingering ideational convictions and contradictions that resurfaced during the dissociation process. While France and Germany fought the increasingly impossible

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[18] In short, the "Steinmeier formula" postulated that the law on the special status of Donbas should enter into force on a provisional basis on the day of the elections in the disputed region. Once the OSCE recognises these elections as free and democratic, the law becomes permanent, which should open the road for further negotiations. The law stated that elections can only take place when the illegal military formations, military equipment, militias, and mercenaries (Art.10) leave the territory of Donbas, which was heavily contested by Moscow. See https://www.dw.com/ru/в-киеве-тысячи-людей-протестуют-против-формулы-штайнмайера/a-50715037 (Accessed 01 August 2022).

[19] Verkhovna Rada (2022), https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/44a280124.pdf (Accessed 15 July 2022).

[20] One rather far-fetched reason for this change of course might have been the paranoia of Russian decision-makers that Kyiv's resistance to Minsk II indicated its willingness to retake the two regions by force (Putin 2021).

fight and tried to eradicate the controversies along the path to Minsk, other actors in the West insisted that any accord would have to reflect commonly agreed and long-held normative principles. Pundits and politicians in the United States, but also in the UK and some Eastern European member states, strongly criticised any proposal that might contravene the liberal principle of equal sovereignty and the right to choose alliances (McFaul 2022). As a consequence of the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas, the stance of these countries became even more uncompromising. Given the entrenchment of these liberal norms within the Western debate, any attempt to openly question or qualify NATO's open-door policy became a political anathema. As a majority of observers and decision-makers in the West promised their Ukrainian counterparts that Ukraine had the right to join NATO and Russia had no right to block it, Ukraine's willingness to pursue the Minsk accords dwindled even more.

4.2. Spill-Overs into Fields of Parallel Interests

The initial Western response to the 2014 crisis provided an opportunity to isolate unresolved conflicts, such as the one over the status of Crimea, and prevent them from spilling over into those policy fields where both sides pursue material interests. Energy cooperation between Russian and Western European states has for decades been the most prominent of these fields. In fact, the bilateral and subsequently multilateral gas and pipeline deals between Russia, Germany, and other Western European states paved the way for détente and survived multiple severe crises in bilateral and multilateral relations.

At first, a similar pattern seemed to take hold after the Ukraine crisis. In 2015, just a year after the Crimea annexation, Western European and Russian companies started the now infamous Nord Stream II project (NS II), which would have taken cooperation in the energy sector to a new level. Although German decision-makers emphasised the private character of the NS II enterprise, they nevertheless supported the overall philosophy of trying to contain conflicts and prevent a polarisation of relations. German chancellor Angela Merkel, for example, was committed to "continue working towards good relations with Russia, despite having different opinions on many issues" (Merkel 2017).

In contrast to energy cooperation during the Cold War, however, NS II was heavily criticised not only by American administrations and both parties in Congress, but also by other European governments. Although, in order to repair the strained American-German relations, the Biden administration eventually acquiesced to the project, to a great extent, the criticism from the US delegitimised the overall philosophy in Europe that working with Russia in areas of parallel interests might have a civilising effect on the overall conflict.

So instead of stimulating cooperation, NS II split the West and exacerbated the conflict with Russia. This makes NS II a good case to illustrate that the fallout from Russia's dissociation and the lingering ideational conflicts increased to propensity for destructive spill-over effects and a polarisation of the relations.

The stinging critique was partly motivated by the fact that NS II would have circumvented Ukraine as a gas transit country and would thus have allowed Moscow to place Ukraine under even more pressure. What is more, the resistance to the project developed a specific dynamic and was very difficult to counter because it linked in with the perception of Russia as normatively alien, untrustworthy, and inherently aggressive. After all, in the Western view, Russia had not only left a rules-based order. The way Russia opted for confrontational retaliatory policies when leaving the order and its utter contempt for what were formerly considered common values gave rise to the expectation that in the future, Russia will not respect basic rules and will exploit the dependencies and weaknesses of others as it sees fit.

Nonetheless, certain proponents of energy cooperation with Russia continued to emphasise the mutual dependencies in this field and that "Russia was always a reliable energy partner for us – including in difficult times [...]" (Steinmeier 2016). However, given the increasing perception of Russia as inherently untrustworthy and aggressive, these arguments lost traction. Instead, pundits and decision-makers emphasised the risks, even of mutual dependencies and trading with the enemy (Krickovic 2015). Nord Stream II became the epitome of such risks. Increasingly, the project was described as "Moscow's hidden geostrategic weapon for 'dividing Europe'" (Gahler et al. 2018). Polish President Duda also argued that "the project has nothing to do with economics, it is an investment of political nature" (Duda 2016). Although the critics at the time had little evidence for their accusation that Russia used energy as a weapon to pressure its opponents,[21] energy cooperation was increasingly perceived as a risk and a liability in a struggle with the authoritarian Russia rather than an economic opportunity.

4.3 Authoritarian Turn and Failure to Repair the Institutional Relationship

Given the differences over core values such as human rights, democracies find it increasingly difficult to cooperate with non-democracies and pursue pragmatic cooperation with them, even in areas where they have parallel interests (Wolff and Spanger 2017). Russia's dissociation from the Paris Charter-

[21] As some studies demonstrate, stoppages in hydrocarbon supplies by Russia, especially in Belarus and Ukraine, primarily evolved around price manipulations and hard bargaining. Among others, Russia had successively cut the Soviet-era subsidies to these countries, developing market-like cooperation with them instead (Yafimava 2010).

based order and the importance that differences over normative issues played in this process made cooperation all the more difficult. Accordingly, any relaunch of relations, which is something some in the West hoped for, would have required a modus vivendi. This agreement would include an understanding of how issues of human rights are dealt with such that democracies can express their criticism, on the one hand, and differences and conflicts do not undermine the foundation of cooperation in other fields, on the other. Such a pragmatic approach would have required a combination of quiet diplomacy and a certain moderation of public diplomacy on the part of the West, as well as willingness to solve individual cases and respect some basic human rights on the part of Russia.

It is hard to say whether the Secretary General of the Council of Europe (CoE), Thorbjørn Jagland, and his allies in the Parliamentary Assembly of the CoE (PACE) were driven by this rationale. What we do know, however, is that when confronted with the decision to either suspend Russia from the organisation for good or allow Russian parliamentarians back into PACE, he successfully lobbied for an agreement that allowed Russia to return to Strasbourg in 2019, after a five-year break (Oxford Analytica 2019). Proponents cited two arguments in favour of Russia's readmission: as a full member of the CoE, Russia could be held accountable for human rights violations and would be committed to implementing the rulings of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR).

This initiative was well intentioned but ill conceived. Given the history of the ideological confrontation, it came as no surprise that instead of opting for moderation and pragmatism, many Western parliamentarians turned the assembly into a public forum to denounce Russian human rights violations. In fact, since Russia did not feel obliged to honour the Paris Charter commitments, normative differences have deepened, and the confrontation became more pronounced. In the aftermath of the Ukrainian crisis, many in the West questioned whether, culturally and politically, Russia belongs to the West at all. As one Bundestag MP was quoted as saying in a conversation with a former German ambassador to Moscow: "Russia does not belong to Europe at all! There are a few intellectuals in Moscow and St. Petersburg who want to make us believe that. That is a thin veneer. The rest is deepest Siberia. Asia" (von Fritsch 2020, 307).

Equally unsurprisingly, Russian parliamentarians reacted to accusations of human rights violations with cynical counteraccusations. As Russia had given up any pretence of trying to mimic liberal democratic governance and actively propagated a new, non-Western model (DeBardeleben 2021), Russian parliamentarians, too, stressed ideological differences and turned PACE into a battlefield with the West. In fact, the Russia that returned to PACE was not the same Russia that joined the club in the late 1990s. Increasingly authoritarian and positioning itself as anti-West, not only did Moscow perceive the

Western attempt to reform the CoE as a sign of the West's weakness, but also used this opportunity to prove that Western countries "finally realised that the entire crisis is their fault."[22]

Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, Ruxit increased the suppression of those societal groups within Russia that had profited from cooperative relations with the West. In as early as 2015, the Russian Constitutional Court had adopted a decision which allowed it to interpret and, if necessary, ignore ECHR decisions on a case-by-case basis. In practice, this move led to around 70 percent of all ECHR rulings being ignored in the Russian courts.[23] In an attempt to limit Western influence on Russian society, the Kremlin further stepped up the repression and marginalisation of NGOs, independent media, and civil society representatives that sympathised with the West by labelling them "foreign agents" or declaring them as "undesirable organisations." In 2020, the Russian parliament adopted amendments to the constitution that made Putin de facto president for life. Another amendment to the constitution adopted by the parliament put "national law above international commitments," which in effect meant the ECHR no longer had any authority in Russia (Polianskii 2020).

To summarise, the attempt to find a new and more pragmatic way of dealing with normative conflicts within a new institutional setting backfired badly. Given the confrontational mood that had dominated relations since Russia's dissociation from the Paris Charter-based order, this attempt could only end up being counterproductive and generating even more tension. Both sides used PACE as a battlefield not to engage in debate but to vent their mutual resentments. In fact, the same (argumentative) attitudes that could be observed in Russian domestic practices were also adopted by Russian parliamentarians in PACE, which rendered this institution completely dysfunctional.

5. Conclusion: "Ruxit" forever?

This study set out to prove that Russia's dissociation from the pan-European social order and the tensions that followed could be traced back to Russia's failed association with the institutions of the pan-European order as well as the disheartening experiences born out of the unfulfilled expectations after the end of the Cold War. Despite these common institutions potentially contributing to the outbreak of the crisis by generating unrealistic expectations, the study also shows that their stabilising role in the period before 2014,

[22] Interview with the anonymous Russian diplomat in Moscow, 12 April 2021.

[23] Department for the Execution of Judgments of the European Court of Human Rights: Country Factsheet of Russia. https://rm.coe.int/russian-factsheet/1680764748 (Accessed 20 September 2022).

which both sides so readily abandoned, has also been greatly underestimated. Institutional ties played an essential trust-building role that encouraged both sides to seek compromises, thus keep simmering tensions in check.

With dissociation culminating in 2014, relations between Russia and the West took a turn for the worse. Contrary to the expectations of some, reducing institutional engagement and thus, mutual expectations, did not reduce tensions, but instead led to more unpredictability and the loss of any residual trust. By taking three post-dissociational conflicts, the study demonstrated how the ideational conflicts born out of Ruxit aggravated tensions with the West in these specific domains, contributing to an already strenuous relationship.

All in all, after Russia's dissociation from the European social order in 2014, both sides failed to elaborate a common strategy for how to organise this process, despite the remaining mutual material interests. The subsequent post-dissociational stage was overshadowed by the ideational grievances and frustrations that surfaced with a vengeance in 2014. Arrangements that were elaborated to deal with processes ushered in by the fallout of dissociation proved to be rather ad hoc and extremely contradictory, requiring a level of trust for their implementation that was no longer there. This prevented either side from taking the prevailing problems at face value, as ideational grievances gained the upper hand and exacerbated the tensions. Eventually, Ruxit became a process for both Russia and the West to channel their frustrations about a deceitful and treacherous counterpart that they believed could no longer be trusted, not even in managing conflicts. In this set-up, even the good intentions of isolating political issues were overshadowed by ideational perceptions that undermined residual convergence of material interests. As a result, despite culminating almost a decade ago, Ruxit has left such deep scars in relations between Russia and the West that it continues to reverberate with ever-greater magnitude causing new outbursts of tensions.

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