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RUSSIA AND THE WEST: CAUSES OF TENSIONS AND STRATEGIES FOR THEIR MITIGATION

***Abstract.** Six years after the Crimean crisis and the subsequent phase of confrontational dissociation, the first signs of a softening of the hardened fronts are becoming visible. There is a growing realization that the policies of recent years are producing high costs, but are not offering any solutions. Western states dared to take a first step to reduce the level of tensions in summer 2019 with the decision to keep Russia in the Council of Europe. Nevertheless, caution is advisable as phases of détente in Russian-Western relations have regularly been replaced by relapses into confrontation. Against this background, we are developing a new conflict model that sheds new light on the origins of the high tensions in Russian-Western Relations and points to a way to defuse them. In a nutshell, this model maintains that the high tensions resulted from a failed association project – the famous idea of a pan-European peace project whose contours were developed during the early 1990 – and the following dissociation of Russia from this order. However, this model also assumes that a conclusion of the dissociation process creates possibilities for a reduction of tensions. Building on this theoretical assumption, the article explores how the de-facto state of separation achieved in the last years could be transformed into a more codified and stable state of coexistence on the «thinner» basis of norms and institutions.*

Keywords: *Dissociation; Russia; West; NATO; EU; tensions; Paris Charter.*

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Дембински М., Полянский М.А. Россия и Запад: Причины противоречий и стратегии их разрешения

***Аннотация.** Спустя шесть лет после крымского кризиса и последовавшей за ним фазы конфронтационного размежевания мы становимся свидетелями первых признаков смягчения изначально непримиримых позиций конфликтующих сторон. Участники противостояния все более понимают, что в настоящее время выбранные подходы не приносят конкретных результатов. Страны Запада предприняли первый шаг на пути к купированию противоречий летом 2019 г., когда в ПАСЕ было принято решение восстановить в правах российскую парламентскую делегацию. Тем не менее, как показывает история, этапы сближения между Россией и ее западными партнерами нередко сменялись периодами конфронтации, что побуждает к особой осторожности в разработке дальнейших шагов по налаживанию отношений. Учитывая эту динамику, в данной статье мы развиваем концепцию диссоциации, которая позволяет взглянуть на кризис отношений между странами Запада и России с иной точки зрения, а также предлагаем другой путь его разрешения.*

По сути, предложенная модель описывает, каким образом неудачный эксперимент интеграции России в общеевропейскую систему безопасности, основы которой были заложены в начале 1990-х годов, привел к резкому росту напряженности в отношениях между двумя сторонами. В то же время модель предусматривает возможность снижения конфликтности в отношениях между странами в случае полного завершения диссоциации. Отталкиваясь от этого предположения, в работе анализируется, как достигнутое в последние годы де-факто состояние размежевания может быть использовано для поддержания устойчивости двух- и многосторонних отношений на менее плотном нормативном и институциональном фундаменте.

***Ключевые слова:** диссоциация; Россия; Запад; НАТО; ЕС; политическая напряженность; Парижская хартия.*

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1. Narratives of the Conflict

Six years after the explosion of tensions between Russia and the West during the Ukraine crisis, certain images of the other have been firmly established in Russia and the West.

The majority of academic and political observers in the West assign the main responsibility for this conflict to Russia (see for example: [McFaul 2018; Aslund 2019])¹. According to this view, Russia is an inherently aggressive actor, whose hostility towards the West is driven by a variety of factors, ranging from the interest in preserving a kleptocratic system to the persistence of the «Imperial mindset» and the consolidation of Russian statehood. Two arguments in this strand of literature have gained most prominence. The first maintains that Russia acts out of insecurity and weakness, which implies that the Kremlin needs a certain level of tensions with external enemies in order to divert attention from structural deficits of its system of authoritarian rule. According to this model, successful reforms in neighbouring countries would challenge Russia's authoritarian rule and might provoke democratic «spillover» [McFaul 2018]. The approach borrows heavily from the diversionary war studies, which argue that the need to stir up conflicts with external enemies is especially prevalent in periods when the economic performance lags behind [Gerstel 2016]. The second argument maintains that Russia's willingness to confront the West is driven by Russia's sense of «borrowed strength» that results from the autocratic coalition with China. In sum, Russian revisionism manifests itself in the Kremlin's support for anti-European forces, the meddling in elections, cyber-attacks, and other forms of hybrid warfare. Without the heavy investment in deterrence and defense in recent years, Russia would by now be on the march to forcefully re-integrate not only Ukraine but other former Soviet republics as well.

The predominant Russian image of the West mirrors the Western view of Russia. According to this view, the West is inherently expansionist on the one hand and suffering from civilizational decay on the other. Western policies are characterized by a sense of unilateral strength that, coupled with a self-image of liberal exceptionalism, fosters a behaviour marked by double standards. The United States has ignored legitimate Russian interests in its neighbourhood, while using values as a veil to mask its hardcore geopolitical interests. The West had exploited Russian past achievements such as acquiescence to the German unification and the failure to keep the given promises, primarily concerning NATO enlargement. Instead, it preached about «rule-based order», while violating international norms when they

1. *The Western debate on Russia is or course pluralistic. Different strands of academic research offer alternative explanation of the Russian – Western conflict that stress factors like institutional capture, an unilateralist misperception of the balance of power and a neglect of legitimate Russian interests [Mearsheimer 2014] or a downward spiral of insecurity and misperceptions (see for example: [Sakwa 2017]).*

were contrary to the interests of Western states [Tsygankov, Fominykh 2010]. Were it not for the strengthening of Russia's military forces, Western adventurism would have expressed itself in the admission of Georgia, Ukraine, and other Eastern European countries into NATO, and a further encirclement of Russia. At the same time, Russian observers note inherent contradictions and weaknesses not only within the liberal order but also within Western states. These internal contradictions both reinforce the perception of the «expansionistic West» and fuel expectations that Russia might be able to drive wedges into the liberal order.

To summarize, both mainstream views assign the responsibility for the conflict and the high level of enduring tensions that we observe since 2014 to the other side. At the first sight, this might come across as a Cold Warlike situation but we believe that the image of two rational actors whose antagonistic interests fuel the conflict dynamic is rather misleading.

We side with observers who notice a surprising level of emotional, irrational, and self-damaging behaviour and argue that the high level of tensions is not resulting from conflicting interests over vital issues [Forsberg 2014; Heller 2014]. In fact, the differences between Russia and the West concern relatively trivial or second-ranking matters and for the most problems, compromises or strategies to isolate contentious issues are easily conceivable. Instead, we argue that the high level of tensions and aggressive conflict behaviour are driven by feelings of frustration, anger, and lack of mutual respect that result from a failed attempt of association in an imagined institutionalized European security order and the subsequent departure of Russia from it.

In previous research, we have identified the mechanisms that explain (a) why states become entangled in institutions that overburden them and how these institutions generate tensions between their members, and (b) how tensions escalate in the process of dissociation and relationships become so polarized that antagonistic interests become dominant and completely overshadow common interests [Dembinski, Peters 2019]. Processes of dissociation can put a permanent strain on relationships. However, if dissociation is managed properly, there is (c) also the opportunity to acknowledge the separation and to stabilize a state of co-existence in such a way that, in addition to positional differences, common interests become visible again and guide action [Dembinski, Spanger 2017]. In what follows below we describe these mechanisms in more detail and show how they worked in the case of the Russian-Western relationship.

2. The Failure of Integration

Contrary to the assumptions of rationalist institutionalism, the norms and rules of institutions must not necessarily conform to the interests and needs of their member states. Institutions may develop further not according to changes in the

interests of member-states but according to the logic of path dependency and thus become estranged from their members. States may join an institution hoping to change it according to their interests like the UK tried to change the EU. Finally, states might join institutions because state elites perceive institutional norms and practices as superior and try to use membership as an «anchor» to modernize domestic norms and practices. If attempts to reform institutions or to use them as socializing agents fail, they can therefore become «inappropriate» in the sense that they overburden the participating states [Gruber 2000]. In the case of Russia's accession to Western institutions during the early 1990s, the latter two causal mechanisms played a significant part. Russia participated in the creation of a liberal order epitomized in the Charter of Paris for a New Europe because one part of the Russian elite saw Western institutions as an anchor of modernization, while another hoped to be able to influence the concrete design of this institution. This latter hope was not unrealistic as the Charter of Paris had two different dimensions. While one of them stressed liberal values like democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, the other enunciated principles of common security.

Institutionally, the pan-European order was consolidated, on the one hand, by the accession of Russia and the other Eastern European states to the Council of Europe and, on the other, through the transformation of the CSCE into the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). In this context, the OSCE established organizational units to enforce liberal norms such as the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), the High Commissioner on National Minorities, and the Representative on Freedom of the Media. With regard to the security dimension, however, the pan-European order remained pale. Aspects of military security were taken into account in the OSCE framework by the Vienna Document of 1994, but remained limited to confidence-building as a result of the failure to implement the Adapted Conventional Armed Forces in Europe Treaty (A-CFE). Russia sought to give institutional expression to the principle of common and indivisible security through the establishment of pan-European organizations in which it would be granted the status of a guarantor of that order. Unfortunately, these attempts failed when the West refused the Medvedev initiative of reforming the OSCE. Not only did the Western states decide to maintain the primacy of NATO and the EU in European security but also opened them to all former socialist countries in Eastern Europe ignoring Russian concerns.

An eventual estrangement of Russia from this order was finalized through two developments: by insisting on primacy of liberal values as a fundament of European security and by pursuing «everything but institutions» policy with Russia. The former was deemed to fail primarily to the disastrous social consequences of the liberal economic shock therapy in the 1990s which tarnished the reputation of liberal ideas and values in the country. This development has been further supported by President Putin's project of a «sovereign» democracy which restored strong

statehood in Russia at the expense of further erosion of liberal values and the rule of law in Russia. In the Paris Charter-based order, however, this run counter to the Russian aspirations of its status recognition, which in this system was awarded not according to size or military power but rather according to approximation to the civilizational standards (primarily in the domain of human rights). The second development was epitomized by the institutional marginalization of Russia when after the fall of the Iron Curtain the West decided to expand both NATO and the EU honestly believing that it would ensure the stability of a pan-European peace order. Russia's participation in this system was to be secured by maintaining «privileged» but non-inclusive cooperation (e.g. NATO-Russia Council, Russia-EU Summits), which was described by the former President of the European Commission Romano Prodi as «everything but institutions» [EU membership].

The states of Eastern Europe and the post-Soviet space located between EU/NATO and Russia have become the most affected side in this confrontation. Although Yeltsin and, initially, Putin, acknowledged the right to freely choose alliances provided by the principle of equal state sovereignty, they never concealed their opposition to the enlargement of NATO [Sarotte 2019]. Putin drew a red line at the 20th NATO Summit in Bucharest (2–4 April 2008), where he warned against the admission of Georgia and Ukraine into NATO, which, unlike in the 1990s, could lead to a real military backlash on the side of Russia. Even though the abovementioned NATO summit, which was considered a landmark event, ended with the compromise to admit these states without a fixed accession date, it nevertheless cemented Russian resistance to the EU's Eastern Partnership, which was introduced a year later [Lavenex 2017, p. 68]. During Putin's third presidential term he took his opposition to the Transatlantic integration initiatives one step further with the introduction of the prestige project of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU).

In sum, Russia found no rightful place in the Paris Charter-based order not because of its lack of military might or size, but rather due to its authoritarian turn [Hill 2018]. Moreover, the liberal norms of this order were perceived to be working against the Russian interpretation of the principle of common security, as they allowed for the expansion of NATO and the EU into the post-Soviet space without giving Russia a chance of becoming part of them [Арбатов 2010]. However, the Russian objections to Western enlargement policies were largely ignored [Krastev, Leonard 2014, p. 2] which eventually made compromises on its reparation unattainable.

3. Dissociation

When states withdraw from institutionalized social orders, according to the dissociation model, conflicts escalate, involved issues become «securitized», and the tensions which caused the failure of integration are released. The latter can be-

come visible both between the outgoing and the remaining states as well as impact internal politics of individual states. Like integration, dissociation also produces social winners and losers as during the polarization of relationships antagonistic interests often come to the fore and common interests are pushed into the background. Lending from the social psychology research, dissociation studies assert that states, like separating individuals, tend to ascribe only negative attributes to their former partners due to their ongoing emotional involvement in the relationship. When, on the other hand, both parties consider the relations to be over and do not feel emotionally bound by them, the level of tensions in the process of separation proves to be extremely low [Grau 2002].

We argue that despite common interests identified in Russian and Western position papers, the conflict between both sides spiraled out of control precisely because they are too emotionally involved in it and refuse to accept the status quo. It is hard to name the specific date when the dissociation has started but its first signs have been already evident during the Orange Revolution in Ukraine and Putin's reaction to it, followed by his speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007. With the crisis of 2014, however, the competition was transformed from influence-seeking into a military stand-off over territorial control. The operation in Crimea succeeded relatively quickly, but the conflict in Eastern Ukraine turned out to be extremely protracted and to date over 13,000 people have fallen victim to the war there.

Apart from «geographical» dissociation in Eastern Europe, relations between Russia and the West have polarized in other spheres too. Indicators of the tensions are the dramatic increase in dangerous military incidents [Kristensen, Korda 2020, p. 50; Kulesa, Frear, Raynova 2016], the arms race, and the various covert operations [Schnauffer 2017], which in the West are characterized as «hybrid warfare». In response to the Russian actions in Crimea and the support of the insurgents in the Donbass, the EU and the United States have introduced comprehensive restrictive measures which led to the downsizing of the trade level between the EU and Russia by almost half from 2013 to 2015. Russia reacted to Western sanctions with similar countermeasures by banning the import of numerous agricultural products and introducing travel restrictions directed against an officially undisclosed list of persons [Fischer 2017]. After the traumatic experience of 2014 both sides started to realize the meaningless of further integration attempts too. There are no serious political discussions of resuming G8 or Russia-EU Summit formats, Russia-NATO Council is paralyzed, and the Council of Europe and OSCE have become places for blame game.

Apart from the general Russia-EU dissociation we can also observe regional dimension of this phenomenon. Most prominently we can observe Ukraine's consequential «unbundling» from Russia which has included dissolution of economic interdependencies between the two countries and a reduction of the Ukrainian

dependence on Russian gas. Apart from that, the use of the Russian language is being further restricted in public spaces and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church has officially distanced itself from the Moscow Patriarchate. Finally, the infrastructural decoupling of the two countries has also significantly progressed in the last years epitomized by the opening of the Crimean Bridge connecting the peninsula and mainland Russia in 2018.

As mentioned earlier, apart from multi- and bilateral relations, dissociation has taken place in domestic politics too. Thus, we can observe how this phenomenon manifests itself in Russian internal political dynamics. By abandoning its plans to become part of the political West, Russia openly positioned itself as an opponent of this system. Moreover, the Russian leadership denounced the alleged decadence of the West and criticized it for betraying the «true» European values, while propagating alternative «traditional» values [Караганов 2016; Lipman 2016]. Finally, this policy has led to the marginalization of supporters of Russia's pro-Western orientation as they were equaled with the morally corrupt and decadent West.

In sum, Russia is no longer seen as part of the political West and Ukraine is no longer part of a Russian «orbit of influence». The camp of those who assume Russia's historical, cultural, and economic «attachment» to Europe and who want to save or restore as much as possible of its integration into the Paris Charter order has clearly lost influence since 2014 compared to the camp of those who assume substantial and lasting differences with the liberal European order: «The breaking news is that Russia's epic westward quest is finally over. Repeated and invariably abortive attempts to become part and parcel of the Western civilization, to get into the “good family” of European nations have ground to a final halt» [Сурков 2018]. Dmitry Suslov summed up the confrontation logic in the following manner: «Russia had burned all bridges with its actions in Crimea. Unlike in the aftermath of the Georgian crisis of 2008, both sides have now become entangled in a vicious circle of confrontation where the only way out is the capitulation of the other side» [Суслов 2014]. On the whole, most Russian observers believe that the assumption that Russia will modernise and Europeanise with closer ties to Western institutions is a thing of the past. Although Russia is still culturally European [Иванов 2018; Кортунов 2019], overall, it is neither Asian nor European, but simply Russian [Тренин 2019].

On the Western side it is not only pragmatic realists like Thomas Graham [Graham 2019] who accept that Russia should remain as it is, but also some more liberal thinkers [Kadri 2019, p. 6]. The establishment of the current regime in Russia, which has been epitomized by the campaign to amend the Russian Constitution, is now only commented on with mockery, but is no longer sanctioned with protest. At best, there is still discussion whether the hope of the 1990s that Russia was on the way to a liberal society was a fundamental misunderstanding or whether the transition was blocked by some unforeseen factors.

This might give hope that involved states finally start to realize that ever-growing tensions are not the only option. If dissociation is managed correctly by both sides, it can open up windows of opportunities to avoid further escalations. As the level of relationships is lowered, so are the mutual normative expectations that used to cause friction in the relations between the involved parties. If both sides officially recognize the current level of dissociation, the next logical step would be to politically secure the actual separation and to stabilize a state of coexistence, particularly in Eastern European.

The Post-Soviet space plays the most prominent role in securing mutually acceptable level of predictability. Realizing that to avoid competition in the region altogether is rather too optimistic in the current situation, we argue that instead of the Cold War-like geographical division, the competition could take more subtle and functional forms. The seemingly incompatible positions of Russia and the West, where the former insist on «zones of privileged interest» while the latter emphasizes the respect for sovereignty could eventually be bridged if the parties agree on the possibility of «dividing responsibilities» within individual countries. This too could heighten tensions, but to avoid economic problems slipping into military dimension these states should be offered an option of becoming military neutral which should enable them to simultaneously uphold close economic ties with both Russia (e.g. in EAEU) and EU (free-trade agreements) without risking that one side would try to secure their economic influence with «boots on the ground». If all the parties involved could agree on this type of formula it would create a sustainable foundation for Russian-Western peaceful co-existence.

**4. Proposals for a completion of the dissociation process:
No enlargement of NATO and no Russian interference
in the right of political and economic self-determination**

The process of dissociation, especially during its early phases, tends to increase tensions. However, as dissociation is completed or has reached a new equilibrium, opportunities arise for a recognition and stabilization of the new relationship of co-existence. If properly managed, this arrangement leads to a reduction of tensions, a re-evaluation of antagonistic and common interests, willingness to isolate antagonistic positions and cooperate on the basis of common interests.

Six years after the beginning of the Ukrainian crisis the first signs of Russia's progressive dissociation from the Paris Charter-based order are clearly discernable. The initial high level of tensions has been reduced and involved states begin to reassess the balance of antagonistic and common interests. However, given the deep mistrust, the chances are that there are actors on both sides who suspect the others of hoping to acquire concessions by increasing pressure on the other. Realizing this lingering uncertainty, we present proposals on how the achieved level of disso-

ciation could be instrumentalized to avoid dangerous escalations as well as ensure minimal level of cooperation on significant issues.

First of all, it is not expected that central differences will be resolved soon. An agreement on the status of Crimea and a lifting of the sanctions related to this part of the conflict would at best be possible in the course of a fundamental understanding between Russia and Ukraine. As long as such an understanding is missing, differences over regional conflicts and the interventions in these conflicts are also likely to remain. At the global level, relations between Russia and the West will remain strained but despite remaining differences, a less confrontational relationship might be possible if both sides could codify the achieved level of dissociation with regard to norms and guiding principles in the post-Soviet space. The demarcation of influence in the states between NATO/EU, on the one hand, and Russia, on the other hand, could prove to be extremely difficult for the Russian concept of full sovereignty for major powers, including the demand for influence in the post-Soviet space, is indeed ambiguous. Yet, we do not see a revisionist agenda in Russian actions. In the West, too, the political willingness to expand membership of NATO and the EU is de facto declining, as it is more focused on consolidating the institutional status quo. This should not prevent, however, the EU from living up to its geopolitical responsibilities, especially in Ukraine after the United States has abolished the position of Ukraine coordinator in State Department and essentially withdrew from the conflict. The task of Germany and France as leaders of the Western world would be to link the renunciation of NATO enlargement only in exchange for Russia's good will in settlement of remaining militarized conflicts in the region and Moscow's guarantees for observation of Eastern European states' political, social, and economic self-determination rights.

Secondly, by deciding to keep Russia in the Council of Europe, the West has secured institutional ties but created a potentially difficult situation for there is still no discernible common normative basis for a constructive dispute settlement over the key questions concerning democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. Left untouched, the current structure will lead to perpetuation of the blame game at best, and at worst could in turn fire up tensions in other issue areas. To mitigate this danger, the West should refrain from using the Council of Europe as an arena for «naming and shaming» Russia and instead focus on practical solutions and achievable improvements of human rights in ECHR where the latter still indicates some willingness to cooperate. Thus, instead of putting liberal norms in the center of stability on the continent, it is more advisable to elaborate albeit «thinner» but more sustainable normative basis that would reaffirm principles of inviolability of borders, define what constitutes non-interference in internal affairs and respect for state sovereignty. Taking the aforementioned into account it is OSCE (e.g. under the auspices of Structured Dialogue) and not Council of Europe, which should

become the platform to elaborate a new normative basis for the fragile relations between Russia and the West.

This, by no means, implies that the West should put aside its own political values and convictions. The attitude of tolerance associated with the state of coexistence is not unlimited and should not be confused with value relativism [Dembinski, Spanger 2017, p. 25]. The demand of authoritarian regimes that, in the interest of cooperation, they should refrain from criticizing the internal conditions in their countries is unacceptable. In order to showcase the advantages of their own model, Germany and the EU should keep their borders open for information and ideas as well as promote social exchange, for example by facilitating the granting of visas and extending study opportunities and temporary work permits both for Russia and countries of the Eastern Partnership.

Essentially, there are two scenarios how Russian-Western relations might develop in the foreseeable future. In an optimistic one both sides manage to codify the achieved level of dissociation and stabilize the state of co-existence by renouncing a further enlargement of NATO and the EU in exchange for Russia's acknowledgement that the post-Soviet republics are fully sovereign with regard to organizing their political and economic affairs under the condition of their military neutrality. The second possible option is continuation of the current conflict which would entail considerable costs and risks for all sides. Avoiding these costs and risks is in the interest of all parties and the continuation of current myopic crisis management is likely only to increase them.

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