



**Vilnius
Institute**
for Policy Analysis

CHALLENGES TO THE EUROPEAN SECURITY ARCHITECTURE

Narratives of Control and Influence

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VILNIUS 2021

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In collaboration with



Challenges to the European Security Architecture: Narratives of Control and Influence. Policy paper
ISBN 978-609-8281-03-3

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INTRODUCTION

The European security order, based on commonly agreed principles, norms and common institutions, such as the EU, NATO, the OSCE and its *acquis* – the Helsinki Final Act, the Charter of Paris, arms control agreements and confidence and security building measures, is being increasingly challenged today. Russia has emerged as a major contender: having disregarded international law and regional agreements and having disrespected the sovereignty of neighbouring independent states, it attempts to drive wedges within the Euro-Atlantic community, exploits loopholes in arms control regimes and deploys large efforts to influence and destabilise European democracies through information warfare and election meddling. The United States, the strongest guarantor of security in Europe over the past seventy years, is reassessing the merits of its involvement in the continent, while European nations are questioning themselves about the future of the institutions that bind them together.

The stakeholders in the European security order, as constructed since the end of the Cold War, are in need for solutions to bridge the growing divides, the largest of which today is that between the West and Russia. Any common ground for mutual understanding and trust is slipping away. While Russia advances across Europe, tightening its grip on the neighbouring countries, nurturing conflictual grey zones, annexing foreign territories, brokering deals in what it claims to be its zone of influence, European powers have less and less leverage to deter Russia or to defend those nations which choose democracy and want to come closer to European institutions. Meaningful dialogue on a majority of critical security issues has stalled, room for compromise is shrinking, and trust-building is at its lowest.

Efforts to reinvigorate thinking about an inclusive European security order do not seem to deliver adequate results. Most of the discussions among

politicians and experts, open-mindedly welcoming “all sides concerned”, produce proposals that seem to be much closer to the Russian vision than to a European one. Western representatives, approaching these debates with their democratic habitus, are divided, questioning and compromise-prone, often self-critical, and are not necessarily well prepared (in terms of coordination and clarification of concrete interests). The Russians, on the contrary, both at the political and the expert level, seem to know very well what they are after. Their messages are well formulated and verified, underpinned by well-constructed narratives, their agenda is consistent.

Among these narratives, one will find a rationalisation for the illegal annexation of Crimea and war in Donbass, where it is claimed that Russia had been “provoked by the West”. Military and economic pressure against the sovereign neighbouring states, aspiring to join NATO or seek enhanced cooperative agreements with the European Union, is explained away with the claim for “privileged interests” in the “near abroad”. These rationalisations are reinforced by the argument that all states behave egoistically in the anarchical international order, that this is a matter of interests which must be respected, and that Russia is not to be blamed for aggressive behaviour any more than the West itself. Indeed, the assertion that both, the West and Russia, are equally responsible for shattering the European security order is very strong. Finally, in order to avoid the blame-game, and disguise those instances in which the Kremlin undermines European security, the order itself is criticised as outdated, exclusive, and out of sync with the “new realities”.

It is illustrative that many of the above-mentioned narratives appear in various “compromise-based” proposals for the future of European security. They agree to suggestions to reform the European security architecture, to activate European dialogue with

Russia and to bow to the politics of balance between power blocks, where the big states would guarantee security and economic welfare for small “states in between” in their respective zones of privileged interests.¹ The principles and values that have been so dear to Europe are dangerously put aside: the understanding that no security order can be sustainable without respect for human rights and freedoms, the acknowledgment of sovereign equality between states, the respect of agreements, the reckoning with truth and the rendering of justice, refraining from the use of force, and the restraint of power by law. Long years of experience within the Western security community have taught Europeans that no lasting cooperation is possible without basic *bona fides* and that communities do not last if they do not subscribe to the minimum of common principles. In a self-defeating manner, Europeans seem to accept not only the claim that reality has changed, but that the basic tenets, upon which the European security order had been constructed since the end of the Cold War, have lost their validity too.

It has become clear that a critical assessment is necessary not only of the current security challenges to the European security architecture, and the capacity of European states to respond to them, but also – the perception and the intellectual framing of these challenges and solutions proposed. This report argues that the discussions on the new European security order need to be underpinned by a clear reinstatement of the fundamental principles upon which this order has been built, and which are by no means outdated. A candid evaluation of the interests that

democratic European nations should defend is imperative.

This report is a joint effort by Polish and Lithuanian experts to examine how the European security architecture and international law are challenged by strategic narratives² promoted by Russian foreign policy elites who seek “great power” status for their country, pursue exclusive influence in Russia’s European neighbourhood, and are increasingly active in efforts to destabilise Western democracies. It also explores how these narratives are perceived among the allied partners and what consequences the shift of perceptions towards those desired by the Kremlin might have for European security.

We understand narratives as instruments to create a shared meaning of the international system, and narration as an effort to shape and drive the perceptions of strategic elites in order to solve strategic issues in security and foreign policy.³ Narratives help to organise seemingly separate events and their rationalisations into one coherent storyline, defining the concept of international security order, what positions different actors hold, and the priorities and obstacles for different states within this order. Although narratives of the international security order concern not only policy circles but also media and social networks, the main narrators analysed in this report are policy elites and policy experts.

We consider narratives to be part of strategic actions taken by a state. Narratives often go together with political, military and civil operations, both overt and covert, promoted by state and non-state actors. They supplement, explain, rationalise and help push through acceptance of the actions undertaken.

¹ Among others, see for example expert discussion proceedings that were supported by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, and prepared in partnership with Friedrich Ebert Stiftung - Samuel Charap et al., ‘A Consensus Proposal for a Revised Regional Order in Post-Soviet Europe and Eurasia’, 8 October 2019, https://www.rand.org/pubs/conf_proceedings/CF410.html Samuel Charap et al., ‘Getting Out

From’, 8 March 2018
https://www.rand.org/pubs/conf_proceedings/CF382.html

² Ben O’Loughlin, Alister Miskimmon and Laura Roselle, *Forging the World: Strategic Narratives and International Relations*, (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2017).

³ Ibid.

While these narratives often appear in disinformation campaigns and are promoted by malign non-state actors, it is equally possible to come across them in all domains of policy practitioner and expert circles, where Russian interests intersect with those of the West. The Russian narration of the European security order within diplomatic, civil, military and legal domains invites us to explore narratives in the context of hybrid, multi-domain or grey zone challenges. This is why our analysis will include not only the identification of the narratives themselves, but also the description of the context in which they are promoted, and the actions which they underpin. Competition of the visions for a European security architecture occurs simultaneously across multiple domains in local and global contexts. This is why the preparedness of the Euro-Atlantic allies to properly react to them is essential.

Do those to whom these narratives are tailored take them at face value? Our report is of course deemed to conclude negatively. The Russian strategic narratives collude with the strategic narratives of the West, with the complex interests of states and alliances, and within the conditions that shape their relations with Russia. Among the drivers of these relations are not only strategic security interests, but also the historical and cultural imagination of Europe and the West. The Western narratives rely not only on the vision of Europe as a cradle of continuously developing democracies, their norms and values, but also on the imagination of the role of the United States and the European states in the security architectures of the past, their relations to Russia both now and throughout history. These contexts influence the acceptance of Russian narratives, and the possibility to reconcile them with the European vision of security.

This study is focused upon the following elements: Russia's own narrative of international law, its role and its purposes, the narratives of Russia's role and interests in the international system, and the ways in which the West reacts to these narratives. The

analysis will illuminate the contrast which exists between the Russian way of thinking and the thinking that is fundamentally European, and optimistically was thought to be shared with Russia. Having established this difference, we conclude with recommendations, the thrust of which suggests that the right solution before diving into a dialogue with Russia is to assess which elements of our own thinking we are ready to sacrifice in a compromise with Russia, and which elements are fundamental to our own integrity.

This work is composed of three chapters.

In Chapter I, Ernest Wyciszkiewicz and Łukasz Adamski focus on the significance of international law in the shared European security environment and show how Russia exploits international law in its efforts to fulfil its political needs. There is a misalignment between words and deeds in Russian foreign policy, as is shown by repeatedly stressing the importance of sovereignty in their own foreign policy documents, while at the same time pursuing wars in Georgia and Ukraine. In this chapter the authors explain the psychological mechanisms at work used to reconcile words and deeds into coherent strategic narratives. Throughout their work, the authors delve into the vocabulary used by Russia in order to forge similar adversarial thinking about countries in Europe through an imperial lens.

In Chapter II, Viktorija Rusinaitė and Šarūnas Liekis focus on an analysis of specific Russian strategic narratives promoted as part of high level diplomatic and expert policy advisory efforts. The authors explore the narratives used to undermine the international security architecture and shift the blame for the militarisation of Europe from Russia to the West in general, and the US and NATO in particular. They analyse Russian narratives that promote claims about the crisis of the European security architecture, about the destabilisation of the region by the US and NATO, the legitimisation of the Russian spheres of influence, and discreditation of

the “Russophobic” Baltic States and Poland. In their analysis they look into how these narratives help to project Russia as a constructive and peaceful actor, and the international system as biased against Russia.

In Chapter III, Emilija Pundziūtė-Gallois analyses the ways in which the challenges that the European

security architecture is facing are understood in Europe, especially in France and Germany. The author also discusses how Russian strategic narratives are received in policy and expert circles in these countries and how they influence the future visions of European security that are being actively discussed today.

CHAPTER I. A LAW-BASED APPROACH TO REGIONAL ORDER

Why international law matters

The main Russian narrative today is that the contemporary international system is in decline. Apparently, the old rules are not valid anymore, so new ones must be quickly installed to avoid a world with no rules at all. Proponents of such thinking rarely, if ever, notice, that it was actually Russia that decided to undermine the normative foundations of international relations as defined in the UN Charter or the Helsinki Final Act, to name just a few key documents. Obviously, there were also other examples of norm-breaching in recent decades by other countries, though rather different in scale and content. None of them, however, can justify calls for a new normative architecture.

Recurring criticism of international law is that it fails to influence the behaviour of states due to the lack of central legislative or executive power. This kind of view relies upon a superficial comparison with domestic law, whereas both domains are distinct and deserve a different approach. International law carries significant normative and political weight. International law was, is and will be violated as any other system of norms, but at the same time, a system of norms has always been constitutive to any form of governance. Mutually accepted and internalised customary and treaty-based norms are an indispensable part of the stable international order. Obviously, they cannot eliminate international crimes and misdemeanours once for all, but they significantly increase the political and economic costs of such actions. Furthermore, they provide for all actors a protective shield against the appetites of those who

opt for vague concepts of “great power management”.

International law matters when it is reflected in the political practice of states and, most of the time, most international actors wilfully comply. Some of them do so out of fear of sanctions (or hope for profit), but a majority choose this path due to the need to behave according to mutually accepted rules to resolve conflicts in an orderly manner, to receive reciprocal treatment, or to avoid criticism. In many countries that are usually democratic and committed to the rule of law, proper international behaviour and an apt assessment of misbehaviour needs to be included into the political calculus of those in power. But even autocrats dress their unlawful actions in a quasi-legal costume to keep up the appearance of being law-abiding citizens.

Nonetheless, one can often hear that international law does not work because it is violated regularly. Interestingly, similar concerns are rarely voiced about the Highway Code, which is violated even more often. Due to selection bias, serious transgressions of norms, though quite rare, attract more public attention than day-to-day obedience. Blunt violations of fundamental norms do still occur, as in the case of the annexation of Crimea, yet the general track record of compliance looks quite positive.

Attempts to undermine the significance of international law are driven either by ignorance, naïve interpretation, misunderstanding or political agenda. But, flawed as they are, these attempts to frame international law as useless or dysfunctional do matter, as they might trigger a self-fulfilling prophecy and push international

order down a slippery slope. For actors that do not aspire to play their power games at the expense of others but are instead interested in rule-based cooperation and competition, such a scenario would be dangerous. The same applies to the world order in general. The balance of power between great powers – presented sometimes as the preferable model for global governance – does not mean bringing stability to the whole system, but rather transferring instability from some regions to others, and consequently leading to even greater local and global uncertainty and unpredictability.

“Russian international law”

Russia’s attitude towards international law is a derivative of a specific understanding of the relationship between law and power, with the former seen mostly as an instrument of the latter.

It is a by-product of a long tradition of an authoritarian system of governance. Past and current Russian leaders were not keen to accept any system of checks and balances that would not be dependent solely on their will and discretion. Nowadays in foreign policy, this purely instrumental approach is best illustrated by the lack of consistency between Russian statements and deeds. The Russian government strongly supports the UN Charter while blatantly violating its provisions (as in the case Crimea) without batting an eyelid. The rule of law has lost in this competition to rule by law. For example,

the Russian Constitutional Court approved the “accession” of Crimea to the Russian Federation without even thinking about the compatibility of this decision with the UN Charter, invoking historical rights and the supremacy of domestic law over international law, just to satisfy its political needs.⁴

In Soviet and Russian political parlance, the meaning assigned to legal notions follows political needs. So, legal concepts are re-invented whenever authorities find it useful. There is a great deal of purposeful mimicry to make things sound like their Western equivalents, but very often with the opposite meaning. Take these two brief examples. In the past, the Stalinist constitution of 1936⁵ strongly protected human and civil rights that were actually non-existent in the Soviet Union, as was vividly illustrated by the Great Terror. Today, the very title “Russian Federation” is confusing since Russia does not meet the basic criteria of a federation. The same quasi-postmodern game of shuffling with concepts also applies to international law, which for Russian political elites has never had universal but rather instrumental value. So, unsurprisingly, it was in Tsarist Russia that the concept of “Russian international law” was coined.⁶ Later on – to fight Western predominance – Moscow invented “progressive” (in the Soviet, not the contemporary meaning) international law in opposition to its “bourgeois” counterpart.⁷ Up to this day, Russian elites try to “nationalise” international law by twisting and

⁴ Lauri Mälksoo, *Russian Approaches to International Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 182.

⁵ Конституция (Основной закон) Союза Советских Социалистических Республик (утверждена постановлением Чрезвычайного VIII Съезда Советов Союза Советских Социалистических Республик от 5 декабря 1936 г.), http://constitution.garant.ru/history/ussr-rsfsr/1936/red_1936/3958676/

⁶ Lauri Mälksoo, *Russian Approaches to International Law*, p. 15.

⁷ For more see, Alina Cherviatsova, Oleksandr Yarmysh, ‘Soviet International Law: Between Slogans and Practice’, *Journal of the History of International Law* 19 (2017): 296–327.

turning well-known concepts for their own political benefit.⁸

As the legal continuator of the USSR, Russia inherited not only a permanent seat in the UN Security Council (UNSC), but also the characteristically Soviet reluctance to accept the universal applicability of international norms. It quickly absorbed the classic great power attitude (with the problematic record of the US in this field as a pretext) based on the presumption that international law should work up to the lines delimited by key actors, preferably the US, Russia, UK, France and China, with sectoral/regional input from a few others (i.e., India, Brazil, South Africa, Japan). Russia sees itself as a veto power, not only when it comes to specific UN codes of conduct, but also more broadly at any time when it feels the existing rules encroach its room for manoeuvre. Then it simply violates them and invites others to accept a redefinition of what it feels uncomfortable with. It is not about changing the rules as such, but seeking support for the claim that those rules are for the others, not the major powers who are predestined to be political and legal trend-setters and enforcers. Use of force, cyberattacks, interference in elections, and the use of chemical weapons are seen by Russian authorities merely as tools at the disposal of key actors. The remainder are supposed to accept this as a fact of nature.

Realists of all kinds typically argue in the same style, claiming that international law simply reflects the distribution of power, so great powers are to be followed voluntarily by others, either by necessity or by force. This comforting image

of international relations would work fine if peace and stability among a few could be equated with global peace and stability. Yet, this has not been the case even in the midst of the Cold War, let alone today with many other weaker actors enjoying a relatively high impact on world or regional affairs. Russian political elites (and to be fair, also many representatives of other real or self-proclaimed powers) have always had difficulty in accepting this change. There is a long tradition in Russia to perceive its own territorial conquests as normal, necessary, or even defensive. Great power instincts have not died out elsewhere, but at least they are kept at bay thanks to the internalisation of international law. For Russia it is still the balance of power that constitutes a level-playing field for key actors, whereas international law is a constructed level-playing field for the rest. In Russia's view, this kind of a normative order also hides behind such nicely framed concepts such as "Europe from Lisbon to Vladivostok" or "New Security Architecture": these seemingly inclusive concepts maintain the possibility of "privileged" zones, dependent on Russia as a great power.

Old Russian aspirations to have veto over NATO enlargement, and ongoing irritation over the increasing military capabilities of not-so-new members serve as a good illustration of the deep conviction that some states should give up control over their decisions to the more powerful. Such thinking can be found also in the so-called "realist" circles in the West. It makes Russian elites believe that everyone treats the law instrumentally, but some are just better at

⁸ Constitutional changes introduced in 2020 illustrate this attitude vividly. Apart from the most discussed issue regarding the nullification of presidential terms, a

provision was expanded about precedence of the Constitution over international law. The list of amendments: <http://duma.gov.ru/news/48045/>.

hiding it. Such cynicism refuses to take into account the essential understanding from which the possibility of all-encompassing civilised cooperation springs. It is not that mistakes and violations are made impossible by international law, it is that the very existence of international law allows them to be considered as violations, and not as the natural order of things. Western adherence to the rule-based order is real in general, nonetheless it needs to be supported by both words and deeds on a constant basis.

Russia has never accepted fully that international law could be the valid regulatory force in the post-Soviet area, as it would limit its room for political manoeuvre. Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova and others have never been treated as equal partners but rather as protectorates to be governed in a more or less subtle way. The term ‘near abroad’ that for many years was used in official Russian documents to describe post-Soviet neighbours (now excluding the Baltic States) clearly depicted its post-imperial phantom pains and conviction that there were other ‘laws’, apart from those rooted in the UN Charter, that should regulate state interactions in the area. This has always been the widespread and undisguised belief in natural spheres of influence, as any higher normative order with international law has been subjugated.

In a nutshell:

- Russia views international law as an instrument of power.

- When Russia thinks that existing rules reduce room for manoeuvre, it violates them and presents this as an opportunity to redefine international law.
- Russia has never accepted that international law could be a regulatory force in the post-Soviet area and views Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova and other states as protectorates, rather than sovereign states.

Between lawfare and lawtalk

If one were to take Russian foreign policy documents and statements at face value, Moscow would be considered the major guardian of international law. Yet, in this case practice has not followed preaching. Among Russian elites, international legal doctrine has usually been a derivative of foreign policy. Thus, compliance with or breaching norms were treated as tricks up one’s sleeve to be used when required.

For example, official praise for the sovereignty principle was accompanied by blatant acts of its violation in the case of Georgia and Ukraine. It showed that it was more about *Russia’s sovereign right* to decide upon others, in particular to limit the sovereignty of neighbours in the name of self-declared entitlement to regional dominance. Those who opposed were sometimes called irresponsible members of the international community that did not grasp the proper code of conduct set by the most powerful, or were too eager to follow the wrong ones.⁹ Russia undermined the principle of sovereign

⁹ Minister Lavrov produced plenty of comments about Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Poland in this respect: “EU policy should not be placed at the disposal of some marginal entities that are following instructions from overseas”. (Interview with the *Sputnik, Echo of Moscow* and *Moscow Speaks* radio stations, 22 April 2015); or

“the EU is so far unable to get the better of its Russophobic minority, which is taking advantage of the principle of consensus and solidarity to block the more or less constructive approaches to the development of relations with Russia” (Interview with *Sputnik, Komsomolskaya Pravda* and *Govorit Moskva*, Moscow, 14 October 14 2020).

equality that it publicly cherished. Yet, it was exactly this kind of peculiar game of contradictions and inconsistencies that was meant to leave the West confused and unable to react properly.

Russia firmly stood for the *pacta sunt servanda* principle, even when there was no treaty-based obligation (see the alleged promise from 1989 by the US to the USSR not to enlarge NATO),¹⁰ and at same time regularly violated ratified agreements (see Ukraine) and undermined key political documents (i.e., the Budapest Memorandum, NATO-Russia Founding Act).

For decades in the USSR and in Russia, the predominant view was that the use of military force is legal only in self-defence or when authorised by the UNSC. As Putin said in September 2013, “anything else is unacceptable and would constitute an act of aggression”.¹¹ And then, a U-turn in February 2014 happened, so that Russia could rhetorically ‘legalise’ and ‘legitimise’ the annexation of Crimea. So, there was no aggression, no annexation and no occupation of Ukraine, only the ‘protection of compatriots’ and ‘care for self-determination’. Along with these ‘legal’ rationalisations, different kinds of arguments came up as well, such as the ‘return of historical lands’ or ‘laws of geopolitics’.¹²

Russian propaganda juggled with various types of argumentation to target specific audiences. ‘Legal’ posturing was offered to the West so that we could start public hair-splitting of Russian views instead of a quick rejection of reasons born out of sheer cynicism. Russia has not stopped presenting itself as a constant warrior for international law. In October 2014, Putin said “...international relations must be based on international law, which itself should rest on moral principles such as justice, equality and truth”.¹³

In Russia in the field of international law “nothing seems to be true and everything seems to be possible”.¹⁴ In international law, as in politics, the instrumental framing of issues is understood as the process of creating reality.¹⁵ Russia’s official messaging about ‘international law’ has been more intense than any other UNSC members. It is sufficient to read Putin’s remarks delivered half a year after the Crimean annexation: “International law has been forced to retreat over and over by the onslaught of legal nihilism. Objectivity and justice have been sacrificed on the altar of political expediency. Arbitrary interpretations and biased assessments have replaced legal norms”.¹⁶ It suffices to juxtapose this wording with the practice of the Russian state to reach the conclusion that any

¹⁰ Mark Kramer, ‘The Myth of a No-NATO-Enlargement Pledge to Russia’, *Washington Quarterly*, 32/2 (April 2009): 39-61.

¹¹ Vladimir Putin, ‘A Plea for Caution From Russia’, *New York Times*, 11 September 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/12/opinion/putin-plea-for-caution-from-russia-on-syria.html?auth=login-google>.

¹² Address by President of the Russian Federation, 18 March 2014 (accessed 20 November 2019), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>.

¹³ President of Russia, ‘Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club’, 24 October 2014 (accessed 20 November 2019), <http://eng.kremlin.ru/news/23137>.

¹⁴ Peter Pomerantsev, *Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible: The Surreal Heart of the New Russia*, (PublicAffairs, 2014).

¹⁵ For a glimpse of how this reality is constructed, it is useful to read the column, published on 11 February 2019 by Vladislav Surkov, called ‘Putin’s Long State’, https://www.ng.ru/ideas/2019-02-11/5_7503_surkov.html?fbclid=IwAR0YyDI5ooq5Q5A7TGFzemFL91Fzt5RNsetsOHad9PySSxfrHx-cRT9ymtec.

¹⁶ Ibid.

serious conversation about international law as seen in the West becomes useless given such levels of cynicism.

For Russian elites, international law seems to be instrumental just to keep its status as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, seen as a club of global managers who set rules for the others. Any criticism of this de facto ‘oligarchic’ Yalta-driven system is framed as historical revisionism aimed at questioning the results of World War II. Recurring historical attacks against Poland, and also the Baltic States, have been closely related to this narrow and instrumental view of international law equated with the global power arrangement of 1945. International law is not about a code of conduct to sustain a stable environment, but to fight for status and to compensate for weakness in other domains. Legalistic Russian rhetoric is just part of lawfare, i.e., abuse of law for military and political ends. Peremptory norms, broadly accepted by the international community as mandatory, such as the ban on use of force or sovereign equality, are treated as flexible.

In a nutshell:

- Russia views the principles of international conduct as something declarative, but not necessary to follow.
- Official praise of the sovereignty principle goes hand in hand with limiting the sovereignty of neighbours.
- Its official position on the use of military force only in self-defence does not prevent it from annexing part of Ukraine.
- It then shapes the perception of these digressions from the norm by heavily relying on targeted propaganda.

Not only cynicism

The science of psychology has developed several notions that are useful to understand how the rhetoric of justifications and manipulation of meanings, attributed to the rules and their violations, help to create the sense that a certain kind of behaviour is normal. Since few people are morally ready to accept their own disrespect for social norms, they seek to exculpate deviant behaviour. To explain this phenomenon, one can refer to knowledge developed by social psychology. The so-called defence mechanism is at play here, which reduces the cognitive dissonance felt after dishonest behaviour, such as projection, rationalisation, denial or repression.

Projection is about attributing your own way of thinking onto others. The Russian elites’ world view is characterised by a dismissive attitude towards the law. They treat it not as a complex of binding directives, but merely as general suggestions. They think of it not as a specifically Russian phenomenon, but rather a universal one. Hence Russia’s breaches of international law are seen not as crimes but as misdemeanours that are committed from time to time by powerful states. The others (the West) are just better at hiding their real intentions or justifying their actions in the eyes of public opinion, but they are alike when it comes to a selective approach to international law.

Another mechanism is the post-rationalisation of decisions or actions. It is difficult to estimate, inasmuch the annexation of Crimea is currently assessed as a justified step in Russia. However, without any doubt, the act of sending and supporting armed bands of troops in Eastern Ukraine that resulted in international sanctions brought no visible benefits to Russia or to the

regime. Russian politicians seem however to believe that the decision taken in the spring of 2014 was fully justified and righteous and was preceded by a rational analysis of the situation.

The rationalisation of the past is supplemented and enhanced by two other defence mechanisms – denial and repression. They boil down to ignoring thoughts which could cause painful reactions or threaten the cohesion of the personality of an individual or of a group. In practical terms, it means the repression of possible evidence or arguments which could cast a critical shadow on decisions made, e.g., in 2014.

There is a danger that taking at face value the reasons for Russia-EU/NATO disagreements, presented by the Kremlin itself or many Russian commentators, can result in giving recommendations detrimental to international and regional security, in particular for Central and Eastern Europe and the Baltic States. This may happen, since the subjective perception of reality, shared by Putin and his inner circle, also under the influence of psychological defence mechanisms, is often interpreted by many circles in the EU/NATO countries as a description of objectively existing and unchangeable Russian national interests. This false diagnosis, prepared on the basis of logically fallacious argumentations, unconscious biases or deliberately politically motivated language, axiological relativism and judicial carelessness, does not contribute to stable order in the region. Quite on the contrary, those in Russia who wish to democratise the domestic situation in their own country can be demotivated, and those in Russia's neighbourhood who desire to strengthen democracy and the rule of law in their states to increase their ties with NATO and the EU may be discouraged. Moreover, the temptation

would arise to accept at least some of the Kremlin's expectations with regard to foreign affairs, which in turn would only increase incentives for Russian leaders to further dismantle international law-centred order, knowing they could count on de facto impunity for their actions. Let us analyse some of the most widespread beliefs with regard to Russia closer:

The EU, NATO and Russia bear joint responsibility for instability, conflict and wars in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus.

This view, often heard during conferences or encountered in policy papers and op-ed pieces, clearly contradicts the reality, given the constant efforts of the EU and NATO to provide stability and prevent conflict and wars in the region and, on the other side, the numerous actions of Russia to bring instability, conflicts and wars to the region, with the Georgian and Ukrainian wars as the most obvious cases. In searching for the reasons why this opinion is so widespread, one can assume that it is either an expression of genuine belief, based on an analysis with fallacious assumptions, or a political signal.

In the first case, proponents of this view commit a golden mean fallacy. Namely, they assume that truth "lies in the middle", so its identification requires making a compromise between two opposite positions. The expression of this view might be preceded by reasoning resting on the assumption that one has to adopt a politically motivated approach of a guilt-symmetry between Russia and the EU to help Russian elites save face, in the hope that they would change their policy in future. In the other case, this approach, irrespective of any backstage intentions, becomes a form of crime denial.

Avoiding terms supporting the claims of one party in the conflict is a form of abdication from the normative roles of language. It exacerbates the feeling of injustice and grievances of one party, while in parallel confirming for the other party – the Kremlin – the view that cynicism and a rejection of ethical and legal norms is the right strategy. Hence, stable order in the region cannot be built on euphemisms and axiological relativism when diagnosing, whence the problems result.

Russia was, is and will be a non-democratic country conducting policy based on an imperial approach (zone of influence, concentration of powers), hence the EU and NATO must come to terms with and accept the reality.

This view is a bright example of determinism, i.e., the belief that the future and present are permanently bound by a cause-and-effect relationship. Practically, it emphasises the weight of existing conditions for predicting the future and plays down the significance of random events or changes in circumstances on the future behaviour of states. Hence, the analytically unjustified, misleading diagnosis suggests that Russia is a non-democratic country with, overall, a non-democratic and imperial past, and has no chances for a democratic, non-imperial future.

To some extent, this approach also bears the hallmarks of one that could be called political racism, since it implies that certain societies or nations, due to their “inherent” features, are unable to establish democracy and implement rule of law. It is redundant to say that this kind of approach diminishes the chances to change the Russian political system from the inside. It deprives Russian civil society of belief in the sense of the struggle for freedom and democracy, inasmuch as it offers them the discour-

aging prognosis that their work cannot succeed, since Russia is bound to be imperial and non-democratic.

All states behave the same and Russia is no exception.

This view is also analytically erroneous, being a form of hasty generalisation. The politics of a state hinges on various conditions, including the political system and values which the respective society shares, and the latter’s vision of national interests. Thus, certain actions may indicate an ostensible similarity, but de facto they are motivated by various reasons. Moreover, the opinion that all states behave in the same way, if applied consistently, is also a hidden ‘whataboutism’ tactic, known also as a *tu quoque* fallacy. It aims at washing away one’s crimes, sins or misdeeds by pointing to the morally dubious actions of others (i.e., NATO in Kosovo) in the hope that it would change the legal and moral assessment of Russian actions. Politically speaking, this kind of slogan only discourages the Russian people to protest against the foreign policy of their state and diminishes support for the Western public opinion in favour of sanctions or other measures undertaken to condemn Russian breaches of international law that have been committed so far, as well as to prevent them in the future.

The security architecture in the region is determined by an objective rivalry between NATO and Russia, which feels endangered and encircled.

This view is a classical mind-projection fallacy, occurring when someone’s perception of reality is being confused with the reality itself.

Putin’s perception that NATO’s activity in the region constitutes a threat to Russian national

security starts to be taken for granted as an objectively existing state. The solution is however not a change in policy to satisfy the opponent's phobia-based expectations, but rather to assist in combating the phobia itself.

We cannot oppose the reality, so we have to accept the natural inequality of states when it comes to their status and capacities to act.

This view assumes that policy based on international law towards Russia is ineffective and the only alternative is to accept Russia 'as it is', along with its vision of foreign policy – the view that great powers have the natural right or predisposition to decide about the choices of less powerful middle and small countries. This kind of approach, resting on unproven premises and a false alternative fallacy, clearly contradicts both the spirit and letter of international law, which asserts that all states are equal. Furthermore, taking this view as a basis for strategy towards Russia would make stability and peace even more remote, because only a particular harmonisation of values and development models within the political culture of Russia, its European neighbours and Western countries could remove the obstacles in the way of reducing tensions and increasing mutual understanding. The possible implementation of practical actions derived from the above-mentioned views would lead to the limited sovereignty of minor states, if not formally, then factually. Thus, a new Brezhnev doctrine of limited sovereignty would emerge. Since this kind of status cannot count on popular acceptance in many states, first of all in Central and Eastern Europe, which is a *conditio sine qua non* to stabilise the situation, the strategy of 'accepting reality' will not resolve any of the existing problems.

In a nutshell:

- To explain its misdemeanours in international law, Russia uses ex-post rationalisations.
- It denies and represses any possible evidence or arguments which could cast a shadow on its past political decisions.
- Some of the main narrative strategies used to cover up infringements of international law are: golden mean fallacy, determinism, generalisations, mind projection, false alternative fallacies.

Breaches of the international law as a problem in Russia's relations with its neighbours

There are currently several cases of conflicts involving Russia as a violator of international law. The obvious case is Crimea which, according to Ukraine and almost all the UN countries, was annexed (illegally incorporated) to the Russian Federation and has been under Russian military occupation since then. According to Russia, it was incorporated based on the secession of the peninsula in March 2014 from Ukraine and as an exercise of the right to self-determination by the local population. Russia is undoubtedly also an aggressor under the London Convention for the definition of aggression (1933) in Eastern Ukraine (Donbass), since it is at least the state which "provided support to armed bands formed in its territory which have invaded the territory of another State, or refusal, notwithstanding the request of the invaded State, to take, in its own territory, all the measures in its power to deprive those bands of

all assistance or protection,”¹⁷ if not the state which carried out “Invasion by its armed forces, with or without a declaration of war, of the territory of another State”. Russia also occupies – after war against Georgia – parts of the latter’s internationally recognised territory in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. It is also a guarantor of de facto independence of the Moldavian breakaway territory, from where it has failed to withdraw its troops, despite international obligations going back to 1999.

When it comes to Russian-Belarusian relations, it is beyond any doubt that supporting a regime with no social legitimacy and violating basic human and civil rights constitutes a delict under international law, since it prevents the sovereign – the Belarusian nation – to exercise their right with regard to the composition of government, freedom of speech, assembly and many others. Russia has also legal problems arising from its history with Poland and the Baltic States – it has refused to recognise the occupation of these territories – in 1939–1941 and

1944–1945 (Poland), and in 1940–1941 and 1944–1991 (Baltic States), nor is it intent on returning the cultural objects and archives looted in this period.

Overall, all these remarks should incline the CEE states to:

- Give due attention to the political power of international law and a normative approach to the international relations.
- Combat analytically unsound descriptions of the situation in the region in the political discourse, in particular when discussing European security architecture.
- Use references to legal and moral obligations (international law and international decency) as leverage, which along with political correctness would contribute to stability in the region and contain states from actions that would endanger peace.

¹⁷ Soviet-Lithuanian registration of the treaty in the League of Nations Treaty Series

<https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/LON/Volume%20148/v148.pdf> (p. 81–85).

CHAPTER II. RUSSIAN NARRATIVES ON EUROPEAN SECURITY ARCHITECTURE

Russia¹⁸ has been among those players who actively pursue strategic narration of the global order. Political actors employ strategic narratives to foster a shared meaning of the past, present and future of international relations and their place within it. These narratives help to situate events and causalities into a seemingly coherent linear order, while at the same time influence the behaviour of other local and international actors, including strategic policy elites and international organisations. The broad goal of strategic narratives is usually to provide desired outcomes for the states fostering those narratives.¹⁹

Russia employs strategic narratives to shape perceptions and ensure the development of Russian political, economic and military interests.²⁰ In its strategic narrative, Russia projects the international system as being populated by “great powers working in concert, an elite group of states reinforcing a hierarchy to which Russia claims membership”.²¹ Russia occupies a central place in its foreign policy narrative and

narrative of the global order. The National Security Concept of the Russian Federation 2000 and Foreign Policy Concept of 2000 both reinforce ideas of Russia’s greatness, by claiming that it is a centuries-old country among the largest of the Eurasian powers.²²

The desire to be recognised as great is a powerful theme running through Russia’s foreign policy narrative. Its own narrative seeks to contain actors Russia sees as powerful, while simultaneously strengthening its own status and authority.²³

Russia projects itself as a key player within the international system and therefore as an integral part of the international framework of institutions, organisations and systems that are governed by international law and agreements. To project its centrality, it is essential for Russia to show itself as constructive, predictable, reliable, pragmatic, transparent and “oriented at resolving problems”.²⁴ But this is difficult to do, given Russia’s preference for enforcing its

¹⁸ Authors would like to thank Rokas Kriauciūnas, Elijah Liampert, Uladzislau Bass and their contributions to Grey Zones Project in Vilnius Institute, some of the data collected was used in this chapter.

¹⁹ Ben O’Loughlin, Alister Miskimmon and Laura Roselle, *Forging the World: Strategic Narratives and International Relations*, 2017.

²⁰ Alister Miskimmon and Ben O’Loughlin, ‘Russia’s Narratives of Global Order: Great Power Legacies in a Polycentric World’, *Politics and Governance* 5 (29 September 2017): 111, <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v5i3.1017>

²¹ Ibid, p. 115.

²² For more on Russia’s strategic narratives see Alister Miskimmon and Ben O’Loughlin, ‘Russia’s Narratives

of Global Order: Great Power Legacies in a Polycentric World’, *Politics and Governance* 5 (29 September 2017): 111, <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v5i3.1017>, Russian National Security Concept and Nuclear Policy, 21 July 2020, <https://www.armscontrol.ru/start/nsc.htm> and The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, Federation Of American Scientists, 28 June 2000, <https://fas.org/nuke/guide/russia/doctrine/econcept.htm>.

²³ Ben O’Loughlin, Alister Miskimmon and Laura Roselle, *Forging the World: Strategic Narratives and International Relations*, 2017.

²⁴ Ibid.

presence and influence through military means and hybrid meddling. There are discrepancies in how Russia projects itself as a constructive actor and its own illegal actions in Georgia and Ukraine. While inside the country the archetype of “Russia that cannot be grasped by the mind” might be enough to explain these discrepancies, it is not a sufficient working ground on which international relations can function. There is a strong need for narratives that would “soften” the perception of Russia’s breaches of international law in the eyes of policy players in Europe and the US.

Some prefer the explanation that Russia is “acting out” because it has not been included in major security decisions concerning Europe. Pushed forward by Russian state-funded think tank experts, this rationalisation ignores all the factual steps that Europe and the US took and continue to take, including the Russia-NATO Founding Act, inclusion of Russia into the Council of Europe, G8 Obama’s “Reset” policy, etc. The “acting out” rationalisation is an integral part of Russian strategic narration not only providing a “political cushion” to minimise the repercussions of international law infringements – after all, the West started first –

but it is also a pre-emptive tactic seeking to prevent any future exclusions.

To deal with these discrepancies between activities that do not correspond to the projection of constructive and reliable actor, after the occupation of Crimea, Russia resorted to the idea of ‘guilt symmetry’ or golden mean fallacy, as described in Chapter I. In multiple statements, the Russian policy establishment called the West as being responsible for war in Ukraine. For example, in his speech to the Youth Public Chamber, Lavrov claimed that “The Ukraine crisis <...> is a direct fallout of our Western colleagues’ attempts to maintain and move eastward the ‘dividing lines’ of the Euro-Atlantic space”,²⁵ while in his speech to the RIAC, Lavrov presented the situation in Ukraine as a chance for more improved relations, expressing the hope that “the current crisis will become a kind of ‘refreshing storm’”.²⁶

The guilt symmetry approach plays an important role in the Russian narration of the international system. The line of lack of recognition of legitimate Russian interests and the guilt of the West runs through later policy documents and political statements.²⁷ In their speeches, Russian officials often list instances of the

²⁵ ‘Opening remarks by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov at a meeting with the Youth Public Chamber of Russia, Moscow, 22 October 2014’, accessed 9 December 2020, https://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/asset_publisher/7OvQR5KJWVmR/content/id/716014.

²⁶ For more analysis on this, see Alister Miskimmon and Ben O’Loughlin, ‘Russia’s Narratives of Global Order: Great Power Legacies in a Polycentric World’, *Politics and Governance* 5 (29 September 2017): 111, <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v5i3.1017>, p. 115. See: ‘Sergey Lavrov Meets RIAC Members’, 9 June 2014, <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/news/sergey-lavrov-meets-riac-members/>.

²⁷ See, for example ‘Interview given by the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, to the “Russia Today”

TV Channel and “Vesti Nedeli” on “Rossiya” TV Channel, New York, 27 September 2014’, accessed 9 December 2020, https://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/asset_publisher/7OvQR5KJWVmR/content/id/668812, or ‘Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s Interview to Zvezda TV Channel, December 30, 2015’, accessed 9 December 2020, https://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/asset_publisher/7OvQR5KJWVmR/content/id/2004143, Washington Post Staff, ‘Read Putin’s U.N. General Assembly Speech’, *Washington Post*, accessed 9 December 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/09/28/read-putins-u-n-general-assembly-speech/>.

West's disregard for international law. With this Russia looks to "balance out" Russia's own digressions with statements that all big players exploit international law to ensure their own interests. While Russia's Foreign Policy Concept of 2016 is not only more assertive in identifying Russian interests than the earlier one,²⁸ it also includes a very peculiar definition of international law. Playing into the narrative of great power competition, the FPC 2016 defines international law as "intended to ensure peaceful and fruitful cooperation among States while seeking to balance their interests".²⁹ This emphasis on balancing the interests of states is unique to Russia's view on international law. For example, the UN defines international law by placing an emphasis on the responsibilities, and not the interests of states, as "legal responsibilities of States in their conduct with each other, and their treatment of individuals within State boundaries".³⁰

Some political elites in the West show willingness to accept a guilt symmetry idea between the West and Russia. According to this kind of position, it is not only the fault of Russia, who is strategically breaking the provisions of international law, but also of the West, who did not take the Russian position on spheres of influence into account. Proponents might think that by adopting such a position they are helping the Kremlin to "save face" and thus de-escalate the situation. The actual effects for Russia, which portrays itself increasingly as a victim of the

Russophobic conspiracy of the West, is the reinforced conviction that the West is to blame for it all.

The guilt symmetry approach implies sacrificing step by step the indivisibility of European security and normalising breaches of international law. If we accept the idea promoted by Russia that with the annexation of Crimea or the Russo-Georgian war, Russia was only "reacting" to Western ignorance, we effectively eliminate international law and the principle of the sovereignty of states from the picture. Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova are already some of the casualties of this kind of approach. Others may soon follow if buying into the narratives of competition between great powers is continued. Instead, we should strongly rely on international law and listen into the narratives from separate states in Europe, which are rarely heard. They deserve to be heard both in the West, and in Russia as well. These relatively local strategic narratives do not have global reach and a holistic Euro-Atlantic effort is needed instead of confronting individual Russian lines separately and partially. For this to happen, an understanding of Russian strategic narratives is crucial.

The notion of the "West not recognising legitimate Russian interests" is reiterated in the statements of political elites, experts and state-sponsored media. Behind the "legitimate interests" and "privileged zones of interest" lie a number of states, which the West perceives as

²⁸ Alister Miskimmon and Ben O'Loughlin, 'Russia's Narratives of Global Order: Great Power Legacies in a Polycentric World', *Politics and Governance* 5 (29 September 2017): 111,

<https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v5i3.1017>, p. 115.

²⁹ 'Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation (Approved by President of the Russian Federation

Vladimir Putin on 30 November 2016)', accessed 9 December 2020, https://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptICk6BZ29/content/id/2542248.

³⁰ 'Uphold International Law', 1 January 2014, <https://www.un.org/en/sections/what-we-do/uphold-international-law/>.

sovereign, and Russia – as engaged in some sort of patron-client relationship,³¹ deprived of independent decisions. Russian disregard for the position of the West lies not only on its own line, but on the overall perception and narration of the West. Stereotypical depictions of European countries, especially those on the western Russian border, as being hostile and weak prevail in the Russian foreign policy discourse. Russian government affiliated experts and newsmakers narrate Europe overall as weakening, biased, ineffective and arrogant,³² while the EU is often depicted as on the verge of chaos and self-destruction. Western efforts to remedy the situation with non-confrontational counter-narratives of cohesion and stability are counter-productive. The lack of a coherent EU strategic narrative that would correspond to the actual processes in the member states³³ and the EU's foreign policy aggravates the situation. Discursive emptiness in the strategic sphere creates fertile ground for the fragmentation of positions on key security issues. The Russian perception of the EU as weak and on the verge of collapse might encourage Russian leaders to adopt a confrontational approach. As is evident from the strategic narratives that will be further analysed, Russian national interests within these narratives receive much more space than any other issues, thus offering very little promise that Russia will genuinely seek to improve relations with the West.

Putin's rule and the return of great power ambitions

Over the years, Russian strategic narratives have undergone a transformation in the portrayal of main players, geography and policy ambition. In Kremlin-promoted strategic narratives, Russia is increasingly portrayed as a victim of Western conspiracy, while the West is described as an aggressor. There is a clear shift in the policy scope Russia wishes to influence too. Early Russian proposals were focused on curtailing NATO enlargement – namely, the possible new accession of Ukraine and Georgia into the alliance. More recent concerns are focused on regional security arrangements and the control of specific NATO deployments. It is not likely that Russia has been discouraged by the failure of the European security Treaty to pursue its containment policy against NATO, but that it found other, more effective channels to directly address its concerns. Fostering wars and instability are among them.

Right after the collapse of the former Soviet Union, Russia chose a foreign policy approach towards the former Soviet republics that was different to that of the US and the rest of Europe. Although after periods of bloodshed and struggle in some parts of the former Soviet Union Russia did recognise the independence of fourteen states, the Russian political establishment continued to treat these countries as not fully sovereign. Using vocabulary such as “the near abroad” (*blizhnije zarubezhje*), “pribalti-

³¹ Michael Leigh, ‘A view from the policy community: a new strategic narrative for Europe?’, *European security*, 28/3 (2019): 382–391, DOI: 10.1080/09662839.2019.1648257.

³² Chaban Natalia, Ole Elgstro and Olga Gulyaeva, ‘Russian Images of the European Union: Before and

after Maidan’, *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 13 (2017): 480–499.

³³ Michael Leigh, ‘A view from the policy community: a new strategic narrative for Europe?’, *European security*, 28/3 (2019): 382–391, DOI: 10.1080/09662839.2019.1648257.

ka” (Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia) and even going as far as President Dmitri Medvedev, who explicitly called Georgia part of Russia’s region of “privileged interests”,³⁴ Russia continued to portray these counties as failing to go down an independent political path. In the political sphere, this vocabulary was rightfully not welcomed by Russia’s neighbours. It was seen as an attempt to legitimise Russian imperial ambitions.

To preserve its influence in the region, Russia founded institutions such as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, mirroring the EU and NATO. These institutions were meant to attract the newly independent states, preserve Russia’s military influence and stop these countries from joining European and transatlantic alliances. The CIS was a platform for Russia to push for joint armed forces and border control. When this proved to be of limited success, Moscow relied on the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and bilateral agreements for military and security cooperation between Russia and Armenia, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan.³⁵ The CSTO allowed Russia to base its military in participating states and at the same time to avoid foreign bases, but organisationally continues to be weak.³⁶ The relationship between the US and Russia became increasingly stale

with the presidency of Vladimir Putin and his more assertive trajectory³⁷ of Russian geopolitical interests. During his first presidency, Putin witnessed Bulgaria, the three Baltic States, Slovakia and Slovenia joining NATO. During the same period, the US war on terrorism was engaging European partners; all of this went against the interests of the aims of Putin’s administration to sustain Moscow’s influence in the region.

Russia’s anti-western sentiment grew exponentially since Vladimir Putin assumed his presidency.³⁸ With his dissatisfaction with Russia’s place in the world in the past and even before his first term, Putin has expressed concerns that Russia is sliding from the “first echelon of states” and that the West will leave Russia behind.³⁹ Political elites and state-controlled media nurtured the development of this sentiment as it provided a purpose and justification for Russia to launch international conflicts. Anti-westernism is a source of dignity among ordinary Russians. It means considering oneself more canny than wealthy westerners, being able to circumvent obstacles, to bribe, and survive hardship in a country that provides an abundance of the latter. This kind of sentiment helps the public to focus on the outside culprit and foster national pride, instead of challenging the corrupt state and governance problems inside the country. It also assists the authorities to

³⁴ William H. Hill, ‘Kennan Cable No. 57: Rethinking U.S. Policy for Russia – and for Russia’s Neighborhood | Wilson Center’, accessed 8 December 2020, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/kennan-cable-no-57-rethinking-us-policy-russia-and-russias-neighborhood>.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Dmitry Gorenburg, ‘Russia and Collective Security: Why CSTO Is No Match for Warsaw Pact | Russia Matters’, *Russia Matters*, 2020,

<https://www.russiamatters.org/analysis/russia-and-collective-security-why-csto-no-match-warsaw-pact>.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ See for example the growth of number of mentions of the word “Russophobia” in Russian MID, RT and Sputnik @DFRLab, ‘#PutinAtWar: How Russia Weaponized “Russophobia”’, *Medium*, 15 February 2018, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/putinatwar-how-russia-weaponized-russophobia-40a3723d26d4>.

³⁹ <https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/legacy/files/electionbulletin1-00.doc>.

remain in power. In the end, they are the only ones who can act to address the Western conspiracy against Russia.

The European security Treaty was a Russian proposal promoted and distributed in 2008-2009 to create a new treaty that would encompass all existing security-related organisations in Europe including NATO and CSTO. The goal of this initiative was to:

- Undermine the role of NATO by creating a new security organisation of which NATO would part and only have a partial say in the security of its allied states.
- Contain NATO enlargement by guaranteeing what Russia calls “equal security” for all. Any NATO enlargement could be treated as threatening “the security of other parties to the Treaty”.
- Create the opportunity to hinder and retard any decisions of current Alliance partners and Russian adversaries by having to take into account the Russian position on any security developments in the region and not “ensuring one’s own security at the expense of others”.
- Decision-making in alliances is a slower process than within states. By engaging countries into additional organisation structures, in the case of conflict Russia would be able to slow down decision-making.

NATO and the US reacted to this treaty by stating that existing treaties and agreements are enough to address Russia’s concerns.

Figure 1. The European Security Treaty

Putin’s Munich Security Conference speech in 2007 is considered to be a milestone reflecting Moscow’s increasingly antagonistic approach towards the West. Putin invoked tropes that are still reiterated today by Russia’s high-level officials and experts, including those on the alleged broken promises of NATO not to include new members, shattering the foundations of European security architecture and arms control, and so on.

In Russia, anti-westernism has gone in parallel with the return of positive sentiment towards

the Soviet Union. After the first ten years of instability due to economic reforms and new political structures, ordinary Russians were searching for anchoring and stability, and President Putin was ready to offer this. In his 2005 address to the nation, Vladimir Putin said that the collapse of the Soviet Union “was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century” and that it had fostered separatist movements inside Russia (referring to Chechnya), while leaving other ‘countrymen’ outside the borders of the Russian Federation.⁴⁰ Positive sentiment towards the Soviet Union helped to reinforce the

⁴⁰ ‘Putin: Soviet Collapse a “Genuine Tragedy”’, *NBC News*, accessed 8 December 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna7632057>.

idea of spheres of influence and present this idea as a historic legacy of decades of Moscow's rule. Moreover, it gave the grounds for the narrative of 'defending the rights of compatriots' that was actively used in wars in Georgia and Ukraine to legitimise invasions. According to this narrative, those who were living in now independent states were not their citizens, but descendants of Soviet rule, and thus subjects of Russia.

Putin's strong ambition at Russia's great power status, and therefore his discontent with EU and NATO enlargement, led to new policy proposals. By the time Russia had put forward the idea of the European security Treaty aiming to limit NATO accessions (see Figure 1) in 2008, it was already clear that Russia was looking for legal and illegal channels to undermine popular pro-Western sentiment in Ukraine and Georgia and retain its political grip. In 2003, Georgia was swept up by the Rose Revolution and openly changed its course towards the West, pursuing Euro-Atlantic and European integration. Ukraine chose the same vector following the 2004 Orange Revolution. The aspirations of these countries to join NATO became a major problem for Russia. By 2008, Russia was at a crossroads with Georgia over the NATO Membership Action Plan, which Georgia was ready to actively pursue. As a response, Russia invaded Georgia under the pretext of defending South Ossetia and Abkhazia de facto controlled by Russia.

The EU launched its Eastern Partnership format while Russia was grappling with its collapsed policy efforts to persuade or force states not to

seek Western alliances. This did not play to the favour of President Barack Obama Administration's 'reset' of relations with Russia. Although the 'reset' produced outcomes, such as New START – a nuclear arms reduction treaty, joint actions against Iran and North Korea and US support for Russia to join the WTO, it did not resolve fundamental disagreements on the sovereignty of the states that Moscow considers its region of "privileged interests".⁴¹

Russia's efforts to control these states and their alliances quickly escalated from persuasion to coercion to war. In the decade after the Orange Revolution in 2004, Ukrainians proved that their pro-Western path was not some political vision cooked up in political chambers, but that it had genuine societal support. When in 2013 the President of Ukraine Viktor Yanukovich, without any prior notice, refused to sign the EU Association Agreement in Vilnius, crowds demanding his resignation poured into the streets. In the coming month, protests escalated into what is now known as Euromaidan. Once the Ukrainian Parliament voted to depose Yanukovich, masked men without insignia captured the Supreme Council of Crimea and main infrastructural points. An illegal referendum was held for Crimea to join Russia, and the rest as they say is history.

Contrary to the Russian strategic narrative, Russia did not resort to violence in reaction to what the West has been doing in Europe, but due to its own limited capabilities to match the goals of great power domination and a lack of resources to achieve these goals. This discrepancy led to Russia's overuse of coercion and

⁴¹ William H. Hill, 'Kennan Cable No. 57: Rethinking U.S. Policy for Russia – and for Russia's Neighborhood | Wilson Center', accessed 8 December 2020,

<https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/kennan-cable-no-57-rethinking-us-policy-russia-and-russias-neighborhood>.

kinetic power resulting in the further fostering of grey zones across Europe in Donetsk, Luhansk, Crimea and Transnistria.⁴² Without a recognised legal status and amidst Russian meddling, all of these continue to be a source of political turmoil for the states to which these regions formally belong. Locked in frozen conflict, these states cannot realistically pursue military or economic alliances.

Lessons learnt over the competition of influence on what Russia considers its zone of interest were enshrined into strategic documents of the Russian Federation. For example, the 2011 Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation considers events in other sovereign states as key developments for the Russian Federation. Regime change that is not in Russia's interests, NATO enlargement and any military reinforcements⁴³ that would challenge Russian aims for strategic dominance are all considered significant threats to Russia. Not only are these threats beyond the actual mandate of governance of the Russian Federation, acting on them with military force is against the UN Charter, which grants the right of self-determination.

Great power ambitions are deemed to leave Russia in discontent, if its offer for partnerships will continue to be limited to industries of war and natural resources. Besides arms sales, military assistance and cheap oil, Russia has little else to offer to its clients and partners. This has become all the more evident amid the backdrop of China's growing role, for example, in Africa, where it secured a strong foothold by providing

loans for much needed urbanisation. Forming partnerships based on collective security and good will has not been among Russia's strengths either, and its proposed unions did not attract sufficient interest among the states these initiatives were directed at. Moreover, Western sanctions curbed Russia's economic ambitions in Europe and its green course continues to challenge Kremlin's influence through natural fuels.

Political actors in Europe and the transatlantic space should be cautious when considering "Russian interests", because frozen conflicts are just one example of how strategic narratives transcend rationalisations and begin to constitute reality. The narratives that Russia is constructing are not based on historical legitimacy, nor are they the natural course of things, but rather, the decisions of the Russian political establishment. Decisions that were made, and have been echoed by the political apparatus for decades at the expense of international law, the sovereignty of other states and the image of the EU and NATO. In the following sections, we propose to take a closer look at four Russian strategic narratives on European security.

Tools for strategic narration

In the following sections we will identify narratives relevant to the Baltic States and Poland that Russia employs to explain its identity, portray the international system and problematise different aspects of international relations. As

⁴² 'Life in the Grey Zones', ECFR, accessed 9 November 2020, https://ecfr.eu/section/life_in_the_grey_zones/.

⁴³ See 8, 9, 12 in 'Военная Доктрина Российской Федерации На Период До 2020 г. : Министерство

Обороны Российской Федерации', accessed 9 November 2020, https://doc.mil.ru/documents/extended_search/more.htm?id=10363898@egNPA#txt.

we saw in the previous sections, Russia uses strategic narratives to explain its role in international events, explain the nature of these events and the nature of their adversary, all for the purpose of shaping the perceptions of policy elites. In this chapter, the topical structure of the Russian narratives relevant to the Baltic and Polish political landscape and defence will be

discussed. The thematic aspects of these narratives are central to this analysis, however the integral parts of how these narratives enter into the living space of politics are their vocabulary and internal structure, as well as where, when and by whom they are promoted.

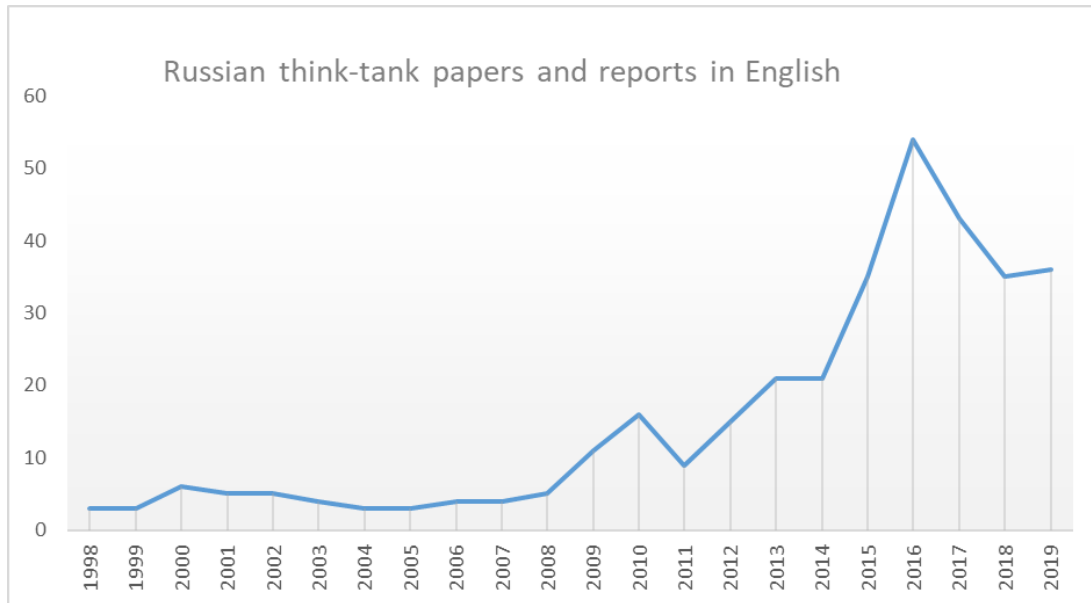


Figure 2. Number of English language papers and reports published by the main think tanks in 1998–2019

Russian policy elites use loaded vocabulary, which has an important role in shaping perceptions and putting political and military events into contexts that serve in Russia’s favour. For example, the Russian use of the term “NATO expansion” implies that NATO pursues expansionist policies in Europe. In the Russian political and historical discourse, expansion ‘экспансия’ often bears military and proactive connotations and thus helps to show NATO as an aggressor. To further victimise its own position, Russia uses terms such as “Russophobia”, which reinforces the idea of Russia as a victim of Western conspiracy. To foster the idea of itself as a great power, Russia reinforces on others ideas encoded in the “zones of privileged interest” and “contact zones”. Such terms are

meant to shape the perceptions towards the states in question as generic territorial units, stripped of identity, statehood and political subjectivity, and thus unworthy of sovereignty and participation. It reinforces Russia’s general ideas about world order dominated by great power competition

Outside Russia these ideas are promoted by the highest-level officials, their ‘twiplomacy’, as well as a plethora of think tanks and security and foreign policy experts. Since 2014, Russia has also invested immensely in the internationalisation of its think tanks and their networks. They are an important venue for Russia to shape perceptions about itself, its perceived adversaries, the world order as well as the main inter-

national events. In Figure 2, where the number of English language publications (reports and papers) in the Russian language are detailed, we can see that numbers increase firstly after the 2009 Russo-Georgian war and a dramatic rise can also be observed after the start of the 2014 Russo-Ukrainian war. The main leaders in the

number of English language publications are the RIAC (Russian International Affairs Council) and the Valdai Club, whose output concerns over two thirds of the overall English language production among the main think tanks in Russia.

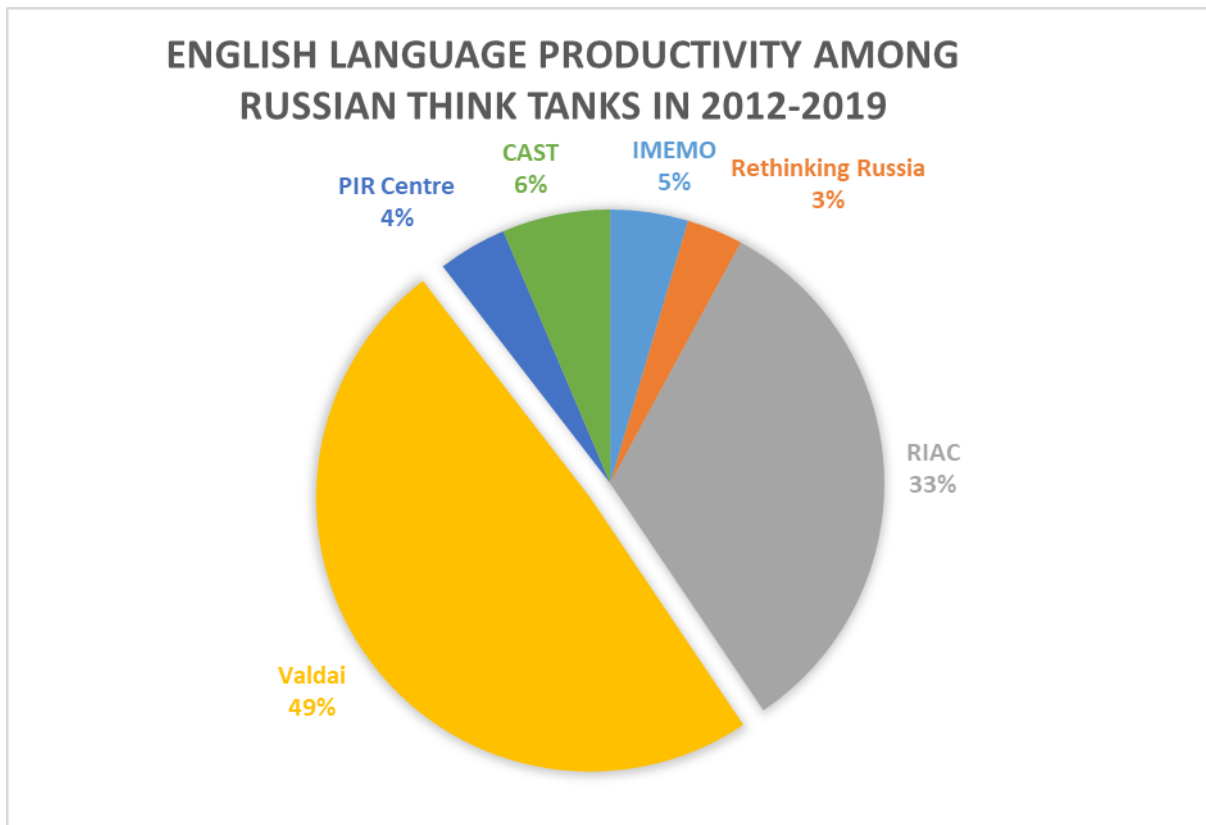


Figure 3. Proportion of English language reports and policy papers compared to other think tanks in Russia.

Repetition is an important tool in pushing forward strategic narratives, so experts and policy elites promote these ideas not only through their own channels, but also through multiple platforms and venues where representatives of the West and Russia meet under the guises of engaging in an open evidence-based expert discussion.

Central to these narratives is the portrayal of the international system as being in crisis and the aim to rehabilitate Russia as a constructive and peace-seeking actor, while at the same time

seeking to curtail the activities of other actors. The first narrative that we analyse deems Europe to be in a security crisis, the following narrative ascribes the blame for this crisis to NATO. The third narrative that we will analyse helps Russia argue its ‘zone of influence’ conception, while the fourth helps to portray small states as incapable and unworthy of self-determination.

Narrative 1. European security architecture is in crisis

In different iterations of this narrative, pro-Kremlin political elites and experts claim that arms control treaties, agreements and confidence building measures were essential in maintaining peace in Europe and the sphere of security predictable, but today they have either fallen apart or are in the process of disintegration, thus Europe needs new treaties and/or confidence building measures. If new arms control regimes cannot be introduced, the spectrum of political consequences in this narrative ranges from the inadvertent collision between NATO and Russia,⁴⁴ to failing to return to the golden age of predictable European security.

Since Russia has either repeatedly broken the agreements in question or withdrawn from them, to support the narrative it has put forward new proposals. Among them were the European security Treaty, various adaptations of existing arms control treaties and Yalta 2. The latter is an idea that has been reiterated multiple times by central Russian political figures in their statements since 2014 for the US and Russia to meet in a similar manner as they did after World War II and divide spheres of influence amongst themselves.

The main functions of the European security Crisis narrative is to project Russia as a great

power, project positive intentions, portray the West as in crisis, muddle the discourse about Russian infringements of international law, and diminish trust in NATO.⁴⁵

According to this narrative, the international system in Europe is infested with speedy militarisation, which jeopardises the entire political climate in Europe and increases unpredictability. When faced with this narrative on the international system, it is important to remember the sources of unpredictability in Europe. Namely, the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008 and the 2014 Crimean annexation and ongoing military support for armed formations in Donbass, as well as fostering grey zones such as Transnistria, Donbass and Crimea. Greater unpredictability is accumulating in Belarus, where in the autumn of 2020, Russia flew in propagandists from the state-funded broadcaster RT to help with information work and to rapidly increase the scope and duration of the military exercises amid the 2020 political crisis.

On the broader spectrum of political pledges and binding and non-binding commitments, Russia has repeatedly ignored principles of international conduct, such as the NATO-Russia Founding Act of 1997 and the Helsinki Document of 1992. Russian arguments about the need to return to these or other good-will international order principles⁴⁶ that it has already ignored seeks to establish Russia as a constructive

⁴⁴Recommendations from an Experts' Dialogue: De-Escalating NATO-Russia Military Risks', accessed 27 January 2021, <https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/group-statement/nato-russia-military-risk-reduction-in-europe/>.

⁴⁵ In this and further analysis of particular strategic narratives we employ the main elements of the analytical framework proposed by Ben O'Loughlin and Alister Miskimmon. We analyse these strategic narratives taking into account Russian narration of the self, the international system and its issues or problems. See Alister

Miskimmon and Ben O'Loughlin, 'Russia's Narratives of Global Order: Great Power Legacies in a Polycentric World', *Politics and Governance* 5 (29 September 2017): 111, <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v5i3.1017>.

⁴⁶ For example, this kind of narrative is reiterated in the introduction of this article: Rachel Ellehuus and Andrei Zagorski, 'Restoring the European security Order', *CSIS*, 2019 https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/190313_EllehuusandZagorski_RestoringEuropeanOrder.pdf

and peaceful force, diverting attention from its malign actions. It portrays Russia as the party seeking order, justice and dialogue amid an international system that is driven by unconscious fears and infested by anarchy and uncontrolled militarisation.

Concerns regarding European security architecture help Russian political elites to portray Russia as a great power. Withdrawing from international agreements in the long term could leave Russia without a stake in this architecture, thus it wants to be seen as pursuing new agreements. It is also eager to participate in New START, which helps it to be seen as a peer to the US,⁴⁷ but also arguably might provide ways for Russia to influence the political situation, especially if key agreements are to expire during the US election period, as was the case with New START in 2020.

Despite the high-level Russian claims for the need to reform and safeguard the European security architecture⁴⁸ and provide “equal security guarantees for all”⁴⁹ (see Figure 1. The European Security Treaty), Russia in fact limits its own transparency and refuses to discuss

modernising existing arms control arrangements, confidence and security-building measures.

It seems contradictory for Russia to violate arms control agreements and then complain about the lack of predictability in security architecture.⁵⁰ After all, Russia was suspected of infringing a majority of them. Among many examples is Russia’s undermining of the Vienna Document. The Vienna Document, as a set of confidence and security building measures, is the main document ensuring military transparency. Every year, 56 states exchange information about their armed forces, major weapon and equipment systems. Nevertheless, it is more complex than just an exchange of information. It provides for the inspection, notification and observation of major military activities, verification and risk reduction mechanisms. Russia has not updated its Vienna Document since 2011 and has effectively undermined its provisions in the past to conceal the real scope of deployments near the Ukrainian border in 2014.⁵¹ Russia continues to refuse to update the Vienna Document posing purely political conditions for the EU and NATO to

⁴⁷ Kristin Ven Bruusgaard, ‘Russia Killed Arms Control. Why Does It Want to Keep New START?’, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* (blog), 5 February 2020, <https://thebulletin.org/2020/02/russia-killed-arms-control-why-does-it-want-to-keep-new-start/>.

⁴⁸ For one of the early sources of this discourse, see Sergey Lavrov’s speech for the European Business Association in the Russian Federation: роль сотрудничества россия-ес и бизнес-сообществ сторон в условиях финансово-экономического кризиса и оценка потенциала взаимодействия на европейском континенте на среднесрочную перспективу <https://aeburus.ru/upload/iblock/222/2222825d72cbacf47e966f8927ee50ce.pdf>

⁴⁹ Ibid., and for similar wording, also see: Интервью Министра иностранных дел России С.В.Лаврова финской газете «Хельсингин Саномат», опубликованное 9 ноября 2008 года

https://www.mid.ru/web/guest/foreign_policy/news/_/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/317770 and Dmitry Medvedev’s Speech at the Meeting with German Political, Parliamentary and Civic Leaders http://web.archive.org/web/20080922031348/http://www.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2008/06/05/2203_type82912type82914type84779_202153.shtml

⁵⁰ Kristin Ven Bruusgaard, ‘Russia Killed Arms Control. Why Does It Want to Keep New START?’, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* (blog), 5 February 2020, <https://thebulletin.org/2020/02/russia-killed-arms-control-why-does-it-want-to-keep-new-start/>.

⁵¹ Ariana Rowberry, ‘The Vienna Document, the Open Skies Treaty and the Ukraine Crisis’, *Brookings* (blog), 30 November 1AD, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2014/04/10/the-vienna-document-the-open-skies-treaty-and-the-ukraine-crisis/>.

change their policy towards Russia adopted after 2014, namely political and economic sanctions and NATO's reinforcements in the Baltic States and Poland. As Russia calls it – the 'containment' policy. Russia has also withdrawn from the CFE in order to modernise its own army and breached the INF by developing and deploying missiles forbidden by the treaty.⁵² Putin's proposal on the moratorium for the deployment in Europe of intermediate and shorter range missiles regulated by the INF serves only to legitimise its already deployed weapon systems⁵³ and curb possible NATO deployments in the future.⁵⁴

To foster a sense of emergency that is encoded in the usage of the word "crisis" and increase perceived costs for the West for ignoring Russia, supporters of this narrative communicated the increased danger of further arms proliferation and the obstruction of means for the peaceful resolution of conflicts in Europe. However, despite the differences in political culture in Russia and the West, Euro-Atlantic countries and alliances should not succumb to these threats.

Given the recent history of Russia's violation of international agreements and exploiting loopholes in military transparency regimes, it is very likely that Russia is pursuing new arms control regimes in its hopes to contain the West. While the Euro-Atlantic block politically relies significantly on law and the political cost of breaches, Russia understands international law as an

instrument to serve its best interests. It is very likely that Russia is pushing for new arms control regimes and with lower thresholds than currently exist, in the hope that the European and American sides will honour them based on political culture and in anticipation of the political costs within the alliance and inside countries, while Russia will continue its *modus operandi* of breaching international law and coming up with explanations later (see Chapter I, "Russian International Law").

In summary, the European security architecture Crisis narrative is aimed to increase Russia's prestige, portray Russia as a constructive peace-seeking actor, expose the international system as being caught up in a militarisation crisis, and promote the need for Europe to become engaged in new arms control regimes with Russia.

In a nutshell:

- European security architecture is collapsing.
- Termination of the main arms control treaties is leading to rapid militarisation.
- This is a threat to the entire European political system and to peace in Europe.
- New Russian-proposed treaties must replace dysfunctional treaties.

Lobbying activities: proposal Yalta 2, European security Treaty, proposals for new CBMs, communication using think tanks and expert forums

Forms of pressure: military intervention in Crimea, military support for armed

⁵² 'U.S. Withdrawal from the INF Treaty on August 2, 2019', *United States Department of State* (blog), accessed 15 November 2020, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-withdrawal-from-the-inf-treaty-on-august-2-2019/>.

⁵³ 'Заявление Владимира Путина о дополнительных шагах по деэскалации обстановки в Европе в условиях прекращения действия Договора о ракетах средней и меньшей дальности (РСМД)', Президент

России, accessed 15 November 2020, <http://krem-lin.ru/events/president/news/64270>.

⁵⁴ Artur Kacprzyk, 'Russian Proposal to Limit (U.S.) Missiles in Europe', *PISM The Polish Institute of International Affairs* (blog), accessed 15 November 2020, <https://pism.pl/publications/Russian-Proposal-to-Limit-US-Missiles-in-Europe>.

formations in Donbass, non-compliance with the INF, selective implementation of the Vienna Document and Open Skies Treaty, etc.

Possible effects: weakening NATO, sowing disagreements between NATO allies, obscuring the aims of Russian claims, muddling sincere diplomatic efforts.

Narrative 2. The US / and NATO / are destabilising the region

This narrative claims that the United States and NATO are destabilising the international order and the European security system by acting aggressively towards Russia. The international system, and in particular the European Union, are portrayed here as vulnerable and unstable. Some popular tropes of this narrative include “NATO expansion”, statements that sanctions on Russia are detrimental for Europe, and the lack of dialogue with Russia. Using this narrative, Russia seeks to weaken sanction regimes and weaken Western alliances.

The “NATO expansion” trope is the most popular one behind the argument of destabilisation in Europe. The term ‘expansion’ deserves special attention: while in English it has a rather neutral meaning, in Russian ‘экспансия’ means

seizing foreign territories or markets and thus has a negative connotation. By using such terminology, Russia is trying to discredit the active and decisive role of national governments in seeking NATO membership, and in turn promotes the image of NATO actively seizing foreign territories. The proponents of this narrative claim that while NATO promised not to “expand” two decades ago, it did so nonetheless and at the expense of Russian interests.

Narrators claim that US withdrawal from the INF is allegedly is “leading to a new arms race”,⁵⁵ that US sanctions imposed after the annexation of Crimea divide the world into domestic (the West) and foreign (those under sanctions) parties, and that sanctions against Russia are detrimental to the West itself.⁵⁶ According to this narrative, the US is allegedly disrupting regional security by militarising the Baltic States and Poland, using NATO as its puppet and, in violation of the NATO-Russia Founding Act, is deploying troops in East Central Europe, and is generally fuelling anti-Russian sentiment in Europe.⁵⁷

This narrative communicates that Russia is the alleged victim of aggressive Western foreign policy and wrong impressions, while all it is truly seeking is to engage in a constructive dialogue.⁵⁸ After the wars it started in Europe, Russia faces the problem of its own image, which it

⁵⁵ Владимир Батюк, ‘Выход США Из Договора РСМД Приведёт к Новой Гонке Вооружений’, Клуб «Валдай», accessed 20 November 2020, <https://ru.valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/vykhod-ssha-iz-dogovora-rsmd/>.

⁵⁶ Primakov National Research Institute of World Economy and International Relations, Russian Academy of Sciences (IMEMO), 23 Profsoyuznaya St, Moscow, 117997, Russian Federation and A. Zagorskii, *Russia in the European Security Order* (Primakov National Research Institute of World Economy and International Relations, Russian Academy of Sciences (IMEMO), 23

Profsoyuznaya St, Moscow, 117997, Russian Federation, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.20542/978-5-9535-0524-6>.

⁵⁷ Софья Владимировна Астахова, ‘Страны Балтии в Противостоянии «российской Угрозе»’, *Россия и Новые Государства Евразии*, Имено. Хроника, события, комментарии, 2015, 91–97.

⁵⁸ Charap, Samuel, Alyssa Demus, Jeremy Shapiro, James Dobbins, Andrei Zagorski, Reinhard Krumm, et al. ‘Getting Out From’, 8 March 2018, https://www.rand.org/pubs/conf_proceedings/CF382.html

tries to solve by shifting the blame onto the United States and NATO for alleged militarisation of the Baltic Sea Region. Looking at the militarisation of Kaliningrad, it is clear that Russia is not trying to hold on to provisions from the NATO-Russia Founding Act, such as “refraining from the threat or use of force against each other as well as against any other state, its sovereignty, territorial integrity or political independence”.⁵⁹ By doing so, Russia aims to shift focus from its own digressive image and to stimulate divisions within NATO, the main security guarantor in Europe, whereas Russia is interested in diminishing trust in partnerships and sowing disagreements.

This narrative portrays the international system as “Russophobic” and undeservedly hostile towards Russia. According to this narrative, it is not Russia who is the aggressor and revisionist actor in Europe, but it is the West that is engaging in historical revisionism using the Eastern Partnership format.⁶⁰ Other iterations literally shift the blame for the annexation of Crimea and war in Ukraine to the West, claiming that if the West had been attentive to Russian needs, this never would have happened. According to this narrative, the international system is actually arranged by the needs and aspirations of great powers, as dictated by the narratives of Brussels or Washington.⁶¹

The political goals of this kind of narrative are multifaceted. In particular, it seeks to challenge the unity of Western alliances and form a negative opinion about the US and its motives in

Europe. Against the provisions of international law, its portrayal of the international system serves the imperial narrative, claiming that the world revolves around the needs and ambitions of great powers. Implicitly, this narrative seeks to portray new NATO member states as lacking autonomy and historically dependent on so-called big players. Some versions are directly aimed at discrediting NATO both inside and outside the alliance.

The proponents of this narrative reinforce the Russian promulgated trope that the West needs a dialogue with Russia. The main aim of this trope is to maintain all the benefits of the annexation and wars and to simultaneously weaken support for sanctions. In order to kick-off this “dialogue”, Russian politicians have been known to approach world leaders with lists of demands under which “dialogue” will be possible.⁶² The fact is that the West has been in dialogue with Russia since the 1990s. In these circumstances, sanctions are a response to Russia, and should be also considered as dialogue. Critical, painful, but a dialogue nevertheless, because it fulfils the major function of communicating the position of the West to Russia and invites Russia to respond.

In a nutshell:

- Shifting the blame for instability in Europe from Russia to the US and NATO.
- Claiming that the US is destabilising the international system by withdrawing from arms control treaties.

⁵⁹ NATO, ‘Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation Signed in Paris, France’, NATO, accessed 10 December 2020, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_25468.htm.

⁶⁰ Ibid. p. 9

⁶¹ Brussels and Washington dictate are recurring tropes in Russian state funded disinformation publications.

⁶² ‘D. Grybauskaitė: nuo pat pirmo susitikimo su V. Putinu gavau Rusijos reikalavimų sąrašą’, DELFI, accessed 16 November 2020, <https://www.delfi.lt/a/75646337>.

- Sanctions on Russia are undermining security in Europe.
- NATO 'expansion' is eroding European security architecture.

Lobbying activities: the European security Treaty, a moratorium on INF range missiles.

Forms of pressure: expulsion of Western diplomats from Russia, support for anti-European parties in the European Union, interference in US elections, etc.

Possible effects: undermines confidence in Europe in the US and NATO, sows disagreement among allies. Proposes to doubt US motives in Europe. Supports the Russian mantra – “The West and Russia need dialogue”.

Narrative 3. The Russian sphere of influence

The narrative of Russia's sphere of influence states that Ukraine, Georgia, Belarus, Moldova, Azerbaijan, Armenia, etc. are historically within Russia's sphere of influence. Nostalgia for the long-gone international role and power of the Soviet Union is an integral part of this narrative. Its implied meaning is that the alliance of countries from the former USSR as well as the former satellites in East Central Europe should compensate against the destructive role of the US and its allies.

For countries in the alleged Russian sphere of influence, Russia communicates that it has historically always been so – some were patrons, others were clients. When applied to Ukraine and Belarus, for example, this narrative is based on the idea of Trinitarian Russia, which states that the three countries (Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus) originate from a single ancient

“Russian substrate”. The narrative of its sphere of influence regarding the Baltic States is historically legitimised by conquests or trade-offs with the Russian Empire and occupation by the Soviet Union. The developmental argument is that the Baltic States became viable economically and politically and their identity was constructed as a result of the benevolence of imperial Russian policies. Finland's affiliation with the Russian Empire and the Finlandisation narrative function as a positive example of bilateral relations between Russia and other states, and serves as a precedence which has helped to stabilise the international situation.

This narrative primarily establishes Russia as a superpower, whose sovereignty transcends the sovereignty of other, smaller states and turns them into spheres of influence. This type of identity narrative helps to project Russia as a great power. With the end of the bipolar world order and the emergence of greater fluidity, and in the last decade the strong growth of Chinese influence and also the growing ambitions of Turkey, this kind of narrative projection helps Russia to maintain its position among the ranks of great powers. This projection is of immense importance for Russia under the current leadership. In terms of GDP, the Russian economy is smaller than the Italian economy and significantly smaller than the US economy. Unlike China or the United States, which can also make strong use of economic tools to exert influence, Russia, due to its limited economic power, is much more likely to use other methods such as propaganda, coercion, persuasion, blackmail and war. For Russia, one way to sustain the narrative of Russia as a great power is consistent disrespect of the sovereignty of smaller, neighbouring states. However,

conventional wars are expensive endeavours. Coercion and meddling are much more financially viable for Russia. This narrative implies that the former Soviet states are an area of Russian interest and therefore Russia is deemed to systematically seek to influence the ability of these countries to join alliances.⁶³

In explaining the international system, this narrative takes the form of imperial geopolitics or so-called *Realpolitik*, which claims that this is the way superpowers act: “values are values, law is law, but ability to exert power is more decisive”. According to this narrative, it is customary for great powers to decide the fate of other states. While some states succumb to this explanation, it directly undermines the international law-based system and that’s why it does not play into the hands of the transatlantic alliance, the US or the EU, not to mention the smaller states. In order for states to have confidence in the international legal system and transatlantic alliances, states should in general resign from this narrative. Until now, the narrative of Russia’s sphere of influence has also helped to maintain the illusion of a bipolar order, the US and Russia being on the opposite poles of this dichotomy. This is done to eliminate other influences from the power narrative, such as China. However, there are signs that this narrative will have to integrate Chinese influence in Europe in the future. Russia is

preparing for this transition by engaging in various cooperation formats with China.

The main function of this narrative is to justify breaches of international law by Russia. It functions according to the psychological mechanisms of projection, which help to project this thinking onto others and ex-post rationalisation, which helps to justify Russian actions in Ukraine, Georgia, Belarus and other countries. (see Chapter I, “Not only cynicism”).

In summary, because the narrative incorporates implicit agreements on the spheres of influence, it is easy to draw parallels between this narrative and the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, which leaves many countries in Europe with a bad after-taste. Dissemination of this kind of narrative is particularly harmful for all multilateral Western formats, especially NATO and the European Union, because it undermines the fundamental principles of international law and international relations – the sovereignty of all states. It is hard to see how one can reconcile support for full independence and sovereignty on the one hand, and a self-asserted “privileged interest” on the other. The Russian sphere of influence narrative also plays an important role in the Kremlin's legitimisation and sustainability, which is portrayed as being directed at restoring Russian greatness.

⁶³ See for example how the following report explains accession of the Baltic States to NATO due to the grace of Moscow – Alyssa Demus, Jeremy Shapiro, Samuel Charap, James Dobbins, Andrei Zagorski, Reinhard Krumm, et al. ‘Getting Out From in Between’, 8 March 2018. https://www.rand.org/pubs/conf_proceedings/CF382.html p. 7; or how the following article explains how Moscow should be consulted if other states wish to join alliances: Rachel Ellehuus & Andrei Zagorski, ‘Restoring the European security Order’, 2019 <https://russiancouncil.ru/papers/CSIS-RIAC-Ellehuus->

[Zagorski-RestoringEuropeanOrder.pdf p.3](#); or how the West and Moscow should supply other states with proposals on their defined aligned/non-aligned status: Charap, Samuel, Jeremy Shapiro, John J. Drennan, Oleksandr Chalyi, Reinhard Krumm, Yulia Nikitina, Gwendolyn Sasse, et al. ‘A Consensus Proposal for a Revised Regional Order in Post-Soviet Europe and Eurasia’, 8 October 2019. https://www.rand.org/pubs/conf_proceedings/CF410.html p. 16

In a nutshell:

- The Baltic States and other countries are regarded by the RF as sensitive regions, a “contact zone”, or even zones of privileged interest.
- All great powers have spheres of influence.
- Values are irrelevant in the face of *Realpolitik*.

Lobbying activities: European security Treaty, regional CBMs proposals, NATO has to reduce its military presence in “the contact zone”.

Forms of pressure: a Russia-Belarus Union State, annexation of Crimea, militarisation of Kaliningrad, maintaining troops in Georgia and Moldova.

Possible effects: undermines confidence in NATO, the European Union in Eastern Europe and the Baltic States, seeks to impose restrictions on the NATO presence in Poland and the Baltic States.

Narrative 4. The irrational Baltic States and Poland

This narrative implies that small states such as Poland or the Baltic States act irrationally and do not understand the logic of international relations. It is alleged that these countries are run by militants and seek to poison NATO-Russian relations. Some narrative iterations state that NATO exercises in the Baltic States and Poland

are not meant to deter Russia, but are intended to appease the militants in the Baltic States, and that Washington is in fact afraid of the initiative of small countries that can provoke war with Russia.⁶⁴ Or that the Baltic States pursue anti-Russian sentiments in order to cover their own poor internal governance.⁶⁵ Although it is used in international relations, this narrative is also well represented in the pro-Kremlin media in multiple tropes of “anti-Russian hysteria” and is spiced up with insinuations of the Nazism that is allegedly popular in the Baltic States and Poland.⁶⁶

Promoting the angle of small states stirring conflict between major players, this narrative reiterates on the main claims within the ‘European security architecture Crisis’ and ‘NATO is destabilising the region’ narratives, just with an additional twist. According to this narrative, surely enough, NATO is behind the European security architecture Crisis, but it is being pushed by non-constructive Poland and Baltic States, who demand militarisation and alleged Russophobia from their allies. This narrative arranges the hierarchy of inferiority in the international system, placing Poland and the Baltic States as inferior to Russia, and further promotes imperial thinking that fuels the ‘spheres of influence’ narrative. It states that small states are not only non-constructive but are even a debilitating force in foreign relations, and so implies that to ensure order is maintained, decis-

⁶⁴ Андрей Андреевич Сушенцов, ‘Союзники Бдят’, Официальный сайт МГИМО МИД России, 2015, accessed 16 November 2020, <https://mgimo.ru/about/news/experts/269910/>.

⁶⁵ See for example Софья Владимировна Астахова, ‘Страны Балтии в Противостоянии «российской Угрозе»’, *Россия и Новые Государства Евразии*, Имено. Хроника, события, комментарии, 2015, 91–97 https://www.imemo.ru/files/File/magazines/rossia_i_novay/2015_01/Strany_Balt_Astachova.pdf and

И. С Иванов et al., *Глобальный прогноз РСМД 2019-2024*, 2019 https://russiancouncil.ru/upload/iblock/992/riac_forecast_2019_2024.pdf.

⁶⁶ ‘Anti-Russian Hysteria Gave Birth to Daemons Such as Fascism and Banderism’, EU vs DISINFORMATION, accessed 16 November 2020, <https://euvdisinfo.eu/report/anti-russian-hysteria-has-born-such-daemons-as-fascism-in-the-baltic-states-and-banderism-in-ukraine/>.

ions could be passed on to more experienced actors and stable actors (such as Russia, of course).

This narrative communicates Russia as more worthy of pursuing sovereign foreign policy than other states. To reinforce this narrative, Russia uses different manipulations and distortions of history, such as, for example, President Putin blaming Poland for provoking the start of World War II, while in reality Poland was crushed by two dictator-led armies: Nazi Germany from the one side, and the Soviet Union from the other. This narrative follows up on all the other narratives mentioned above and exploits the European security architecture Crisis, zones of influence and US/NATO destabilising Europe narratives.

The aim of this narrative is to marginalise Poland and the Baltic States and to dismiss their post-Crimea security worries as exaggerated, driven by irrational fears and harmful ideologies. It seeks to shape EU, allied and US policy towards these states, in order to discard security issues and thus avoid the strategic arms and military presence of the US and NATO here, while continuing its own build-up of these measures in Kaliningrad.

In a nutshell:

- Only great powers interests are legitimate in the international system.
- Small states are unable to grasp the logics of an international system.
- They are incapable of leading independent foreign policy and are dominated by Brussels and Washington.
- Political elites in these countries are inept and short-sighted, in more radical versions - they are infested by Nazism and Russophobia.

Lobbying activities: Nord Stream II, the European security Treaty.

Forms of pressure: historical revisionism towards Poland, accusing the Baltic States and Poland of Nazism.

Possible effects: marginalising and excluding not only the Baltic States and Poland from security and political arrangements, but also other small players.

The way forward

All the above-mentioned narratives feed onto each other in order to help strategic elites to shape perceptions and foster imagery beneficial to Russian strategic elites. In its narration, Russia seeks to constrain the decision-making of whom it considers its main adversaries in Europe – NATO and the US, while also continuing to undermine the EU.

The desire to be recognised as a great power is a theme running throughout Russian strategic narration. It aims to gain regional dominance and prestige by establishing itself as a systemic competitor to the US, and thus communicating that its influence in Europe is at par to that of the US. Contrary to Russian statements, the main requirement is not more attention from the West in the form of engaging in new formats and agreements, but broadening its influence networks and factual control of sovereign states in what it considers its zone of influence.

In its strategic narratives Russia seeks to portray itself as a constructive, peaceful and concerned actor. It does so to manage its own image problem, constituted by numerous infringements of international law, be it wars, or the use of forbidden chemical weapons. Russian

political elites understand that the image of Russia as malign reinforces the support for sanctions in the West and the overall suspicious treatment of Russia. Using strategic communication tools, Russia seeks to shape its image abroad, in order to lessen the costs of its malign actions.

Strategic narratives are used by Russia to explain wars and thus to deter both Western alliances from enlargement and countries from wishing to join these by pursuing the path of accession. They are constituted in a way that encourages doubting that Russia is intentionally violating international law and the sovereignty principles of other states, but that rather this situation is a gross misunderstanding and misinterpretation of Russian activities and that it has been the situation created by Western partners which pushed Russia to act so.

The current focus of Russian strategic narratives is curbing US and NATO military deployments in Europe, which Russia sees detrimental for its military-strategic position. While more fluid narratives about the need to include Russia in equal dialogue might have been more successful in the past, so far, the narrative about the need for demilitarisation has been of limited success.

In Europe meanwhile, expressing “grave concern” should no longer be enough. Infringements of international law must bear consequences, otherwise international order risks the naturalisation of territorial advances and the use of chemical weapons, among other malign activities that hostile actors perpetrate. As a response to the Russian strategic narration of its malign activities, countries in Europe should abandon the idea of guilt symmetry or the so-called golden mean fallacy, which claims that all parties are equally responsible for the security situation in Europe. The Euro-Atlantic community should identify violators of international order and deter them by not only denying benefits, but imposing costs. Stratcom and think tank work in Europe is increasingly important. And thus, as a part of this work, the outcomes of Russian strategic narration in Europe should be acknowledged. The European strategic narrative should already push beyond cohesion and strategic autonomy, reiterating through words and deeds the importance of Euro-Atlantic bonds, the primacy of international law and European values.

CHAPTER III. EUROPEAN VULNERABILITY TO RUSSIAN NARRATIVES AND INFLUENCE ON EUROPEAN SECURITY ARCHITECTURE

The narratives that Russia promotes concerning the European security architecture are gaining traction within the Euro-Atlantic space at different levels. Some of the Russian ideas resonate with the existing thinking within the Western academic and political circles, others exploit the various geopolitical and societal vulnerabilities of the European states. The first vulnerability concerns the shift of American engagement within the European security order, which has sparked debates about the necessity to adjust the power balance in the continent, and rethink alliances and partnerships that Europe should strengthen in the Euro-Atlantic area, including with one of the largest adjacent powers – Russia. The second vulnerability concerns the openness and reception of Russian narratives within the European academic, political and diplomatic circles. France and Germany are identified here as the two most important places where ideas about the future security of Europe are being actively generated. While France is assuming a leading role in the European Union, especially since the election of President Emmanuel Macron and after Brexit, Germany is especially active in wider European security forums, such as the OSCE or expert discussions, also joining France on many initiatives within the EU. The future European security architecture will likely not be possible without taking into account the positions generated within

these two countries. Although the European public space is wider and goes beyond France and Germany, major ideas about the future of European security architecture can be found in the debates going on in these countries.

A possibly lighter American engagement

The rethinking of the European security order has primarily become relevant since the rise of Russian assertiveness in its neighbouring region, but also since the so-called American policy of “pivot to Asia” or, today, increasing disengagement from numerous theatres in which the United States had traditionally been present. Ever since President Obama came to office, the United States has shown decreasing willingness to engage in leadership in different security initiatives within the international community. American forces are gradually retreating from the Middle East and Afghanistan; similarly, the United States have been criticised for inaction or only reluctant action in Syria, Libya, Ukraine and most recently – Belarus. Some analysts suggest that this may be heralding a new era of American isolationism or even the revival of the Monroe doctrine.⁶⁷ The presidency of Donald Trump, marked by sharp criticism of European allies, public disavowal of alliances and unpredictability, was another acute reminder to

⁶⁷ Gérard Araud. *Passeport diplomatique. Quarante ans au Quai d'Orsay*, (Paris : Grasset, 2019), p. 359–363.

the European leaders that some kind of capacity for autonomous action was necessary. Discussions about European autonomy are not new, and have been raised since the

European Union articulated its political dimension with the Maastricht Treaty of 1992. However, previous European ideas of increasing responsibility for its own security and giving itself capabilities to act independently (e.g., the European security and Defence Initiative (ESDI), especially the French and British Saint Malo Agreement of 1998) were met with scepticism from the United States. Madeleine Albright, in her famous speech about the “three D’s” warned against de-linking of the ESDI from NATO, duplication of existing efforts, and discrimination of non-European allies.⁶⁸ Today, on the contrary, the general discourse on transatlantic relations is increasingly dotted with ideas that the United States should disengage from Europe, especially if the latter does not step-up its responsibility for its own security.

The idea of the United States not having to bear responsibility for protecting a rich Europe is gaining popularity within the circles of American opinion-makers. The argument is that American engagement in Europe was necessary after World War II, as the continent was being threatened by the domination of a single hostile power – the Soviet Union. Today, as the argument goes, Russia is not an existential threat to Europe, which is both richer and more militarily

capable to defend itself. Furthermore, pundits argue, attempts to redefine NATO’s role have failed too: they have not succeeded to strengthen a community of liberal and democratic values (Hungary, Poland and Bulgaria are drifting away from the rule of law, NATO’s partnerships have failed to substantially strengthen stability in Eastern Europe and in the Balkans), nor have the expeditionary missions of NATO been a success. The continuing American engagement in Europe is considered to be a negative incentive for the latter to make an effort for its own defence, while the expenditure that the United States dedicates to European security guarantees is said to be needed elsewhere, especially in Asia.⁶⁹

The official guideline, committing NATO allies to concrete burden-sharing, is the requirement for all to allocate at least 2% of GDP to defence spending. It was first formulated by the allied Ministers of Defence in 2006, and later politically confirmed by the Heads of State and Government at the Wales Summit in 2014,⁷⁰ but has had little effect on the budget planning of most NATO members. American dissatisfaction with the shrinking defence budgets of its European allies has been voiced rather consistently, but it was most acutely and clearly expressed by President Donald Trump. He went as far as to invoke the possibility of the United States to reconsider American engagement in NATO.⁷¹ Some Europeans read in these statements the

⁶⁸ Secretary Albright’s remarks to the North Atlantic Council ministerial meeting, Brussels, 8 December 1998 <https://1997-2001.state.gov/state-ments/1998/981208.html>.

⁶⁹ Barry Posen, *op. cit.* See also Stephen Walt in The Atlantic Council Debate “Should Europe go it’s own way?”, 17 September 2020. <https://www.atlantic-council.org/event/should-europe-go-its-own-way/>.

⁷⁰ Funding NATO.

https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_67655.htm, accessed 20 September 2020.

⁷¹ Barry Posen, ‘Trump aside, what’s the US role in NATO?’, *The New York Times*, 10 March 2019.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/10/opinion/trump-aside-whats-the-us-role-in-nato.html?partner=IFTTT>.

fading of American enthusiasm for protecting Europe.⁷²

The election of Joseph Biden to the office of the President of the United States is certainly going to reassure European allies, as the partnership will be more predictable and dialogue will be normalised. However, it is unlikely that the United States will go back to the interventionism of the Bush era, or that it will be easy on its European allies concerning their share of responsibility for security in Europe.

The rise of China has been another important factor in reconsidering the American role in Europe. First, China is becoming a serious factor in the arms race, pushing the American administration to reconsider the arms control agreements which limit American military potential. Second, attention and resources are necessary to counter the Chinese potential in the area of emerging threats to security, such as cyber, information and economic security. Europe is becoming less of a priority for the United States, and increasingly – a burden.

In parallel, Russia's place in the American security strategy has been shifting as well. In some areas, such as arms control, this shift is especially important to Europe, as it directly concerns its security. The dismantlement of the CFE treaty, the INF and the Open Skies treaties

is especially alarming, as it leaves Europe almost without a credibly functioning mechanism for arms control. For the Americans, continuous engagement in treaties such as INF or Open Skies have become obsolete either because of numerous violations by Russia,⁷³ and thus factual ineffectiveness of the arrangements, or by the rapid development of technologies elsewhere, as in the case of intermediate range missiles, which make a bilateral treaty between the United States and Russia irrelevant. The necessity to involve China in the new generation of arms control has been seriously evoked.⁷⁴ After some tergiversations on behalf of the American administration concerning the New START, it seems that there will be enough political will to try to safeguard this regime.⁷⁵ Nevertheless, the question of the future of strategic nuclear arms control will likely remain open.

Having said that, American engagement in Europe is not yet obsolete. Americans are actively working within NATO in looking for arms control solutions for the European theatre. The European Deterrence Initiative continues to be robustly funded,⁷⁶ NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence in the Eastern NATO allies is functioning well and is a clear sign that NATO (and the US) is ready to ensure its credibility as a defence alliance for its members. The American

⁷² 'Merkel: Europe can no longer rely on US to "protect" it', *Euractiv.com*, 11 May 2018,

<https://www.euractiv.com/section/future-eu/news/merkel-europe-can-no-longer-rely-on-us-to-protect-it/>

⁷³ <https://www.state.gov/u-s-withdrawal-from-the-inf-treaty-on-august-2-2019/>; Kingston Reif, Shannon Bugos, 'US to withdraw from open skies treaty', *Arms Control Association*, June 2020 <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2020-06/news/us-withdraw-open-skies-treaty>.

⁷⁴ R.Lipka, 'The Demise of the Arms Control Era: Washington and Moscow-Beijing axis on a Collision Course', *Pulaski Policy Paper*, 7 (2019), [https://pulaski.pl/en/pulaski-policy-paper-r-lipka-the-demise-of-](https://pulaski.pl/en/pulaski-policy-paper-r-lipka-the-demise-of-the-arms-control-era-washington-and-moscow-beijing-axis-on-a-collision-course-2/#_ednref31)

[the-arms-control-era-washington-and-moscow-beijing-axis-on-a-collision-course-2/#_ednref31](https://pulaski.pl/en/pulaski-policy-paper-r-lipka-the-demise-of-the-arms-control-era-washington-and-moscow-beijing-axis-on-a-collision-course-2/#_ednref31).

⁷⁵ Robbie Gramer, Jack Detsch, 'Trump Fixates on China as Nuclear Arms Pact Nears Expiration', *Foreign Policy*, 29 April 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/29/trump-china-new-start-nuclear-arms-pact-expiration/>.

⁷⁶ Gerda Jakštaitė, 'The effect of the United States of America on the dynamic of transatlantic relations', in Česnakas, Giedrius and Statkus Nortautas. Eds. *Lithuania in the Global Context: National Security and Defence Policy Dilemmas*, (Vilnius: General Jonas Žemaitis Military Academy of Lithuania, 2020).

deployments in Romania, Bulgaria and in Poland show that the United States is still serious about the threat that Russia potentially poses to Europe. An alternative opinion in the American expert community (compared to the one cited above) is that the transatlantic partnership is based on a long-term grand strategy which is about defending a rules-based international order that respects democracy.⁷⁷ Challenges to transatlantic security are multiple (economic, energy, cyber, and political-ideological, i.e., the rise of autocracies), and should instead trigger a new transatlantic bargain⁷⁸ with a potential re-division of labour⁷⁹ rather than a transatlantic divorce.

Considering the costs of the American disengagement from Europe, including symbolic ones, complete abandonment of Europe is not likely. However, some sort of rebalancing of responsibilities is going to be necessary, and the primary focus will be on big European powers, whose military contribution should be more significant. It is good to have the Baltic States within the “2% GDP” club, but it is not they who will bear the burden of European defence.

The leadership of the United States will also be necessary. Some analysts are of the opinion that the Continent, if left on its own by the United States, would not be able to organise a credible security and defence system, as the perceptions of threat and ambitions of different European countries provide for a “strategic cacophony” in defence matters, rather than a possibility for

harmonious strategic autonomy.⁸⁰ None of the European initiatives, conducted independently from the United States since the end of the Cold War, have produced substantial results (including the meagre outputs of the ESDP and the uncertain future of the PESCO). This hypothetical scenario supposes the risk of Europe becoming a zone of instability, which in the long run would become a threat to the United States.

All these elements, adding to the dynamics of the debate on transatlantic relations, will be important for the future decisions of European states in relation to their security. Europeans may either decide to use the opportunity and “drift away” from the United States, as suggested by France, or to renew their fidelity to the existing multilateral and transatlantic security institutions, as wished by Germany. Russia, as has been argued in previous chapters, enters the debate as an object for European discussion (whether it should be engaged or contained), but also as an active participant, promoting its own vision of European security. It is important to see clearly what each of the proposed visions entails, in order to make decisions which would best serve European interests.

In a nutshell:

- The United States is increasingly wary of being the single strongest pillar of European security, but remains an important ally, still active in the European theatre.
- European allies understand the need to take on a bigger burden for their

⁷⁷ Daniel Fried. The Atlantic Council Debate “Should Europe go it’s own way?”, 17 September 2020 <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/event/should-europe-go-its-own-way/>.

⁷⁸ Alexander Vershbow, in *ibid*.

⁷⁹ Martin Svárovský, ‘Changing Nature of US Global Leadership: Implications for Resilience in the NATO’s

Eastern Flank’, *Vilnius Institute for Policy Analysis*, webinar 11 September 2020.

⁸⁰ Meijer Hugo and Wyss Marco, ‘L’impossible renaissance de la défense européenne : généalogie d’une cacophonie stratégique’, *Le Grand Continent*, 9 May 2019.

security, although their capacity to do that in the near future remains unclear.

- American leadership in the transatlantic alliance is still indispensable.

France as a leader of the “European autonomy” initiative

The hypothetical prospects of American disengagement awakens the old discussion of the European autonomy within the continent. France is one of the main carriers of this idea, in part, as a continuation of its Gaullist tradition. The latter suggests that the independent actions of France should not be limited by other external powers, and supposes an inherent scepticism towards a lasting American engagement (or tutelage) in Europe. Nevertheless, one has to be clear, if France has historically been a challenger of the transatlantic relationship, and often a difficult one, it has always remained within the Western camp, and has been considered as such by outsiders, especially Russia.⁸¹ In other words, France seeks to be “allied” but not “aligned”⁸² with the United States.

Independence and sovereignty for France translates itself in different French proposals for independence and sovereignty for Europe. In an astute analysis, already back in 1990, Ole Waever argued that France sees Europe as an extension of its own power.⁸³ Many French

proposals within the EU confirm this idea. The early versions of European independent self-organisation go back to the “Confederation” of Europe⁸⁴ – an idea, formulated by François Mitterand in 1989, of Europe “from Brest to Vladivostok”, excluding the United States, and including the Soviet Union. Mikhail Gorbachev at that time had proposed a similar wide-ranging cooperation project, called a “New European Home”. None of these initiatives, rather vague and ill-defined, took root, while the security architecture of Europe started being built on the existing foundations already anchored in international law: the CSCE, the Council of Europe, the CEE and NATO.

The new proposals of President Macron for European security resume similar ideas: they refer to the “sovereignty of Europe”, i.e., the capacity of the European Union to be an autonomous international actor,⁸⁵ especially being able to act independently from the United States, and propose the “architecture of confidence and security”, involving Russia.⁸⁶ These ideas contain several concrete initiatives, but are still sufficiently vague to provide opportunity for further definition and concretisation, leaving a possibility for European partners to influence the development of the project. As David Cadier argues, it is Macron’s typical proposal for a “work of ideas”, which does not necessarily aim for immediate results, but nurtures debate.⁸⁷ Nevertheless, French diplomacy has been

⁸¹ See: Thomas Gomart, *Double détente. Les relations franco-soviétiques de 1958 à 1964*. (Paris : Publications de la Sorbonne, 2003).

⁸² “Amis, alliés, pas alignés” – a phrase attributed to Hubert Védrine, the French Minister of Foreign Affairs under J. Chirac and collaborator of President F. Mitterand.

⁸³ See his ‘Three Competing Europes: German, French, Russian’, *International Affairs*, 66/3 (1990): 477–493.

⁸⁴ Roland Dumas, ‘Un projet mort-né : la Confédération européenne’, *Politique étrangère*, 66/3 (Année 2001): 687–703.

⁸⁵ Macron’s speech in Sorbonne 2017: L’initiative pour l’Europe.

⁸⁶ Macron’s speech to the French ambassadors, 2019.

⁸⁷ David Cadier, ‘The Macron initiative, the Biden presidency and the future of EU-Russia relations’, *EUREN Brief no. 21*, December 2020.

mobilised to carry the idea of European autonomy forward and it is being raised in every-day European discussions in Brussels and other European capitals. The French-led European Intervention Initiative, for example, is one such case of the active pursuit of concrete instruments aimed at strengthening European autonomous action.

Within the shifting configuration of European security, Russia is seen by French decision-makers as an important factor. For the French political elite, Russia remains an element in the European security architecture which is impossible to side-line. Dialogue is necessary for two basic reasons: on the one hand, the French do not imagine a safe and secure Europe in which Russia is marginalised and hostile, and on the other – the view is still alive that Russia is culturally close to Europe. President Macron has mentioned in his public speeches that Russia has a European vocation. For both of these reasons, according to the French policymakers, it is not in Europe's advantage to alienate or isolate Russia.

The recently launched attempt to resume dialogue with Russia is seen as a necessity and an opportunity for an eventual rapprochement between Europe and Russia, but also – as a basic diplomatic process, which must remain in place if war is not an option. The French diplomatic tradition maintains that the process of dialogue and negotiation involves dynamics in which the interests of an opponent and therefore its intentions and actions may be altered, if parties manage to enter into an acceptable bargain or seize opportunities opened by changing international or domestic circumstances. This view is

different from the one often expressed by the Russian sceptics, that Russia has no intentions to change, and that dialogue is in vain as long as Putin is in power.

The gradual disengagement of the United States from Europe, and especially the disintegration of the arms control regimes, which involve Russia, and which directly concern European security (especially INF, but also the CFE, and New START) are cited by President Macron as additional evident and urgent reasons to engage Russia in talks.⁸⁸ The above-mentioned aversion of France to the processes in which issues that concern its own security are discussed without its participation (i.e., between Russia and the United States) drives the French leadership to be proactive. France as a regional power, and one with serious military capabilities (the most important in the EU, after Brexit), including expeditionary capacity, and a nuclear deterrent, also being a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, makes it feel capable of assuming leadership of this kind of mission in Europe. The traditional French reserve towards the American role in Europe only plays in favour of its current ambitions: France sees itself as a country which may “help” Europe to “distance itself from Washington,” in the words of the French ambassador Gerard Araud,⁸⁹ and strengthen European “strategic autonomy”. The latter, as discussed above, is a long-standing French idea, which is unlikely to change even with the arrival of Biden at the helm of the United States.

This means eventually lessening European dependence from America, but not necessarily breaking off the transatlantic link. The trans-

⁸⁸ Macron's speech in Ecole Militaire, 2019.

⁸⁹ Araud, op. cit.

atlantic alliance, in spite of everything, remains important to France, and many cooperative projects, where necessary, are in place, including the fight against terrorism, intelligence sharing, conducting common military operations, etc. In this sense, the security behaviour of the French is in no way naïve or irrational: on the professional level, it is supported by a realistic and robust assessment of the strategic environment and adequate planning. The French commitment to the efforts of transatlantic security are manifest in its return to the NATO military command structure in 2009, and in its military engagement in the Enhanced Forward Presence initiative among NATO's Eastern allies, as well as participation in the NATO Air Policing mission in the Baltic States.

This is also valid in relation to the French professional assessment of Russian resurgence. The annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbass have been considered by the French government as serious threats to the European security (although not necessarily seen as a priority). In addition, France is exposed to other actions of destabilisation, orchestrated by Russia, in Syria (and in the United Nations on Syrian issues), in the Central African Republic, in Libya, and, not least, in domestic politics.⁹⁰ French diplomacy prides itself on leadership in imposing European sanctions on Russia after the annexation of Crimea. Much of the French diplomatic and military establishment are

sceptical about Russia, and Emmanuel Macron has referred to them as “deep state,” urging them not to resist the presidential initiative to re-engage Russia.⁹¹ Public opinion has also been largely hostile to Russia and to Putin (especially because of Russian involvement in Syria, and human rights violations, including the sorry state of LGBT rights in the country).⁹²

The views within the French public sustain and often inspire French political positions. In general, the French public is receptive to the human rights and democratic values narrative, although, at the same time it is critical of American (neo)liberalism and nourishes empathy towards those who claim to have been “humiliated” by American hegemony. The tradition of critical thought, importance of the political left, including the historical eminence of the socialist and communist parties in France, philosophical openness of its elites towards Socialism (Soviet Union) as an alternative political system (cf. the famous debate between Jean-Paul Sartre and Raymond Aron on the Soviet Union), makes the French public receptive to Russian narratives. In this sense, French opinion is open to the Russian argument that some responsibility for the failure of the current European security architecture is imputable to the West (Europe, and importantly – the United States). The narratives supporting the alleged exclusion of Russia from decision-making about the continent's security, and thus its “humiliation”,

⁹⁰ One would mention here the communication hacks during the presidential campaign in 2017, the aggressiveness of the Russian-sponsored media, called by President Macron as “agents of influence”, and the defamation attack on Macron's candidate at the Paris municipal elections in 2020.

⁹¹ Macron's speech to the ambassadors 2019. Marc Endeweld. Emmanuel Macron et l'« État profond ». *Le Monde diplomatique*, September 2020.

⁹² In December 2018 only 27% of the French population had favorable opinion of Putin (only 20% in 2013); 81% of respondents thought that the human rights situation was unsatisfactory in Russia, and around 70% thought that Russia was responsible for distribution of “fake news” and perpetration of cyberattacks in France and elsewhere. Data : Institut d'études opinion et marketing en France et à l'international.

<https://www.ifop.com/publication/le-regard-des-francais-sur-la-russie/>.

deception about NATO enlargement, preference by the West of NATO as a military block instead of OSCE as a wider pan-European security organisation, and “side-lining” of Russian security interests, do find an audience.

The French political elite has a number of influential “Russophiles” and those who follow the Gaullist tradition, critical of American hegemony (the two positions are not always aligned but often complement one another: if American hegemony is to be rejected, Russia may appear as a possible partner for strategic balancing). Some of these intellectuals, for example, Hubert Védrine or Jean-Pierre Chevènement,⁹³ are considered to be close to Emmanuel Macron, and supposedly influence presidential policy on Russia.⁹⁴ Russia skilfully uses the French highly informed and free public space, with its inclinations for unorthodox thinking, and nourishes various positions potentially useful to Russia. One of these positions, for example, deplores “occidentalism” – a notion, promoted by Védrine, according to which the current world order is dominated by American ideology and does not take into account the views of those who come from weaker positions (i.e., Russia).⁹⁵ Another faction of the French elite is fascinated by the Russian self-proclaimed mission to defend Christianity, yet others are simply driven by *Realpolitik* and the interest to promote economic cooperation.⁹⁶

This being said, despite the loftiness of the French ideas, much of French foreign policy is

driven by a pragmatic assessment of real possibilities at different political and administrative levels of the State. The foreign policy of France is clearly underpinned by a degree of realism, which is increasingly back in fashion. Therefore, if France is undoubtedly sympathetic to the calls for democracy and freedom of nations to choose their security arrangements (e.g., Ukraine), it will not willingly sacrifice national interests (including economic interests, but also the possibility to manage partnership with Russia on other international theatres in which France is involved politically, economically and militarily) for the sake of an idealist vision of an expanded Europe. If, to continue with the example, the problem of Ukraine can be sufficiently contained with limited engagement, so as not to pose a direct threat to French national security and to the cohesion of the EU, further action will not be undertaken.

Nevertheless, France is a negotiating partner, demonstrating its openness to dialogue. It often acts alone, especially its current President Macron (as in the case of accepting dialogue, as a matter of principle, on the Russian proposal of the moratorium on intermediate-range missiles in Europe – a dubious suggestion by Putin, criticised by NATO allies, and later shunned by France itself),⁹⁷ and often appears to take French interests for the interests of Europe as a whole. However, these are flaws rather of style than of substance, and many elements show that France maintains its pragmatic fidelity to the

⁹³ J.P. Chevenement is identified by Cecile Vaissie as a pro-Russian influencer.

⁹⁴ Among others, Sarkozy and Pierre Vimont are cited.

⁹⁵ Galia Ackerman, Nicolas Tenzer, Françoise Thom et Cécile Vaissie, ‘Le discours de Hubert Védrine analysé par des spécialistes, www.political.fr, 18 October 2020.

⁹⁶ One such figure is Philippe de Villiers, a politician and a businessman. See: Cécile Vaissie, *Les Réseaux du Kremlin en France*. Paris : Les petits matins, 2016.

⁹⁷ Reuters. Macron prône le dialogue avec la Russie sur la maîtrise des armements. 28 11 2019. https://www.challenges.fr/top-news/macron-prone-le-dialogue-avec-la-russie-sur-la-maitrise-des-armements_687078

Western alliance, and is open for dialogue with its European allies if they are ready to propose ideas or at least credibly challenge the French ones.

French diplomacy is sometimes arrogant, but the French political elite may yield to persuasion and honest bargaining with its allies. The example of recent reactivation in French-Estonian relations is illustrative: Estonia is one of the rare European states contributing to the French anti-terrorist operation in Mali, Barkhane (to be distinguished from the EU mission EUTM). With this Estonia has gained special attention and important political dividends within the French political class.

Similar lessons may be drawn from the visit of Emmanuel Macron to Lithuania and Latvia in the autumn of 2020, where he demonstrated the openness of France to the security preoccupations of the Baltic States. Countries in the region should capitalise on ties of positive dialogue established with France, look for synergies, where they could work together, and promote the ideas which are important to them. The “declaration for protection of democracy”, signed on the occasion of Macron’s visit, is a case in point: not only does it propose concrete measures to more effectively address the external interference and destabilisation of democratic processes, but it also strengthens the narrative in which democracy is proclaimed as the very foundation of European security.

The French aspiration to assume the role of leadership in the European Union increases the relative importance, and potentially – leverage, of all EU members, and thus the Baltic States, and Poland. This is manifest through the growing attention that France pays to these countries, which (especially the Baltic States) have not

traditionally been in the sphere of France’s special interests. This opens additional opportunities to build cooperation with France and, employing skilful diplomacy, to make those interests, vital to our region, heard. The opportunity should be seized. Other European allies, especially Germany, can be usefully mobilised for success in this dialogue.

In a nutshell:

- France is demonstrating leadership in the efforts for stronger European autonomy, but is open for input from other EU member states.
- It harbours ambitions to distance Europe from the United States, although fundamentally it remains faithful to the principle of the transatlantic alliance.
- France sees Russia as an indispensable factor in the European security order, and prefers to have Russia as a friend, not as a foe. For this reason, dialogue is thought to be indispensable.
- The French domestic public is sensitive to Russian claims for an inclusive European security order, but is equally attached to the fundamental democratic liberal values, on which this order stands.

Germany as a leader of dialogue on European security architecture

Germany is attached to the current European security order and especially cherishes the transatlantic link. Recent developments in the US and statements made by German leaders that there is a necessity to start thinking about autonomous European action, do not (yet) mean a paradigm shift. Defence planning documents continue to reaffirm German reliance on the

transatlantic link, and on a parliamentary process for endorsement of German military engagement.⁹⁸ This means that Germany remains heavily reliant on American support for its security and is not ready to be a pro-active security agent in Europe, as its military engagement procedure is slow and military participation is conditioned on many caveats. In this sense, the German view is different from the French view: the former is much less keen on distancing Europe from the United States. Germany shows openness to the French proposal of European strategic autonomy, but does not seem to have a clear idea of its making.⁹⁹

In a similar sense, Germany is also attached to multilateralism and the existing elements of the European security architecture, especially OSCE. If France is ready to “think outside” the existing frameworks, for example, by envisaging separate and new political-diplomatic platforms for discussion about European security, Germany maintains preference for the existing international formats, and also, for effective multilateralism.

The current German leadership tends to maintain that it is Russia who has violated the rules of the European security order, and therefore is responsible for the failure of the European security architecture. The major challenge is to go back (bring Russia back) to rules-based security behaviour, although the German elite is still in discussion over how this should best be done: if the deep roots of the decay of the current order

lay in the lack of dialogue with Russia and lack of mutual understanding, then the response must be more dialogue. If the real reason is the Russian one-sided disregard of the established rules, then the response must be principled and strict.¹⁰⁰ The German public opinion, the expert community and the political elite is divided on the issue.¹⁰¹

German foreign policy thinking is seriously marked by the *Ostpolitik* tradition which maintains that peace and stability can be achieved through dialogue and interdependence, including advanced economic cooperation. Based on this, Germany has long been open towards dialogue with Russia, and has traditionally been a privileged political interlocutor to Russia, not least, because of strong business links between the countries. Among the political forces, the Social Democratic Party, which is at the origins of the *Ostpolitik*, is most strongly attached to it. The Christian Democratic Union on the right, and especially its long-standing leader Angela Merkel, has been more inclined to be critical of Russian politics, but has also been an important promoter (and participant) of diplomatic engagement with Russia.

The “golden age” of German-Russian relations seems to have reached a tipping-point around 2012, when Putin announced his return to the president’s office, which was perceived in Europe as a cynical and premeditated undemocratic plot to maintain power.¹⁰² The annexation of Crimea and the subsequent war in Donbass,

⁹⁸ Barbara Kunz, ‘Le débat allemand sur la sécurité: changement du discours, maintien du paradigme’, *Politique étrangère*, 4 (2015): 91–101.

⁹⁹ Barbara Kunz, ‘The three dimensions of Europe’s Defense Debate’, *GMF Policy Brief*, 2018, no. 024.

¹⁰⁰ Marco Sidi, (2020) ‘A Contested Hegemon? Germany’s Leadership in EU Relations with Russia’, *German Politics*, 29/1 (2020): 97–114.

¹⁰¹ Tuomas Frosberg, ‘From *Ostpolitik* to ‘frostpolitik’? Merkel, Putin, and German foreign policy towards Russia’, *International Affairs*, 92/1 (2016): 21–42.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

of course, was a critical blow to German positive attitudes towards Russia. Instances where Russian politicians and diplomats lied to their German counterparts (e.g., on the presence of Russian troops in Ukraine) additionally, and seriously, undermined the relationship of trust.

The consensual politics in Germany makes it so that political positions are not radical, but that they usually converge, even though divergent voices, as in any democracy, are always present. This way, after 2014, the leadership of Angela Merkel in the critical stance on Russia has been followed by her social-democratic colleagues. Society, especially the business community, with the public leadership of the Federation of German Industries (BDI), has lined up to support the official German policy of sanctions.¹⁰³ Different strands of German society have reasons to be sceptical towards Russia: the liberals and the greens criticise the decay of democracy and the human rights situation in Russia, while others are alarmed by the violation of international rules or the blatant cases of propaganda, such as the famous “Lisa story”. The recent case of poisoning of the Russian opposition figure Alexei Navalny and the critical reaction of the German leadership has clearly shown a shift in the German Russia policy towards stricter relations.

Nevertheless, the *Ostpolitik* tradition remains strong, and continues to be cultivated by different German politicians and experts. For example, the agreement of the grand coalition, signed between the CDU-CSU and SPD in 2013, included a paragraph on the “tradition of

cooperation between Germany and Russia”.¹⁰⁴ This makes Germany one of the more active promoters of dialogue with Russia on European security order, particularly, in search for solutions for arms control. Note, for example, the “Steinmeier initiative”, proposed by the socialist German minister of foreign affairs in 2016 and aimed at revitalising a structured dialogue on conventional arms control within the OSCE.

The premise on which this and similar initiatives are built, in line with the *Ostpolitik* tradition, is that cooperation brings forward more cooperation. This deep-seated conviction that “to talk” is always better than “not to talk” sometimes frustrates the German allies, who see few conditions for a fruitful conversation with Russia. Ironically, the letter, published in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, in which Frank-Walter Steinmeier proposes the above-mentioned re-launch of arms control dialogue ends with fatalist words: “It is time to try the impossible...”¹⁰⁵

There is much to frustrate Germany’s allies in Europe and across the Atlantic. Russia does not seem to be willing to cooperate because cooperation is simply not advantageous to it. Since the signing of many of the arms control agreements in Europe, Russia has advanced in various “gains” in its favour, for example, the continuous stationing of military troops in Transnistria, Moldova, the military bases in Abkhazia and South Ossetia regions of Georgia, additional deployments in Kaliningrad, production of new weapons, and, not least, the annexation of Crimea. Negotiating arms control would

¹⁰³ Kim B. Olsen, ‘Diplomats, Domestic Agency and the Implementation of Sanctions: The MFAs of France and Germany in the Age of Geoeconomic Diplomacy’, *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, 15 (2020): 126–154.

¹⁰⁴ Frosberg, op. cit., p. 28.

¹⁰⁵ Frank-Walter Steinmeier, ‘More security for everyone in Europe: a call for a re-launch of arms control’, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 26 August 2016.

mean opening these issues up for discussion, and the discussion would be difficult as Russia does not show signs of willingness to go back to the *status quo ante*.

Another serious obstacle which makes the negotiations “impossible” (or, in the words of another proponent of the re-animation of dialogue with Russia, the French diplomat Pierre Vimont – “the work of Sisyphus”)¹⁰⁶ is the leverage that the European powers would have in such discussions. If power politics is back in play, any negotiator needs to strengthen his own position, when engaging in talks with the adversary, or wait until political conditions are in place to reach a real compromise. Historically, major deals on arms control have been signed only when political tensions were decreasing between the adversaries, and it was almost impossible to reach a compromise when confrontation was high. Today, it seems, Europe is in the latter situation, and therefore, engaging in dialogue needs to be either based on robust positioning or should simply be postponed.

On many aspects of arms control, Russia has shown unwillingness to reach a compromise, or is refusing serious dialogue. Russia is shunning any substantial working-level talks on those arms control arrangements which can be workable for all sides, and are not very difficult to tailor to today’s needs, for example, the Vienna Document. At the same time, it dots its diplomacy on confidence and security building measures with public proposals, which lack detail and credibility. One example, cited above,

was the Russian proposal for a moratorium on the stationing of intermediate range missiles in Europe in 2019. It was proposed by the President of Russia, thus, by default, had very little concrete details, as is appropriate for high-level initiatives, and was not followed by further specifications. Without these, the proposal clearly seemed to lack credibility, and indicated rather the Russian willingness to consolidate the *status quo*, at present advantageous to Russia, than to genuinely involve Europe in negotiations. The response of the NATO allies, including the German government, was sceptical. Unwillingness to make genuine and concrete steps for dialogue from the Russian side, and its insistence on maintaining the *status quo* as an opening position for negotiations¹⁰⁷ shows to many European practitioners that cooperation is not what Russia currently seeks.

In addition to the promotion of dialogue with Russia on the diplomatic level, Germany is also active in sponsoring second-track diplomacy discussions about European security architecture. The belief in the strength of second track diplomacy dates back to the Cold War, when the academic and expert community, through building bridges, and “better understanding” of the parties, believed to have contributed to the thaw between the United States and the Soviet Union. The mechanism is widely supported in the current crisis of trust between Russia and the West in the hope that the civil society dialogue could eventually offer a breakthrough. These discussions typically involve “all parties

¹⁰⁶ Pierre Vimont, ‘20 ans après Poutine : une conversation entre Vimont, Tenzer, Ackerman’, *Mardi du Grand Continent*, 03 March 2020 : “...It seems to me that we should very modestly imagine a happy Sisyphus, and resume our work unperturbed to try to push things forward”.

¹⁰⁷ Andrei Kortounov, ‘Contrôle de l’armement. Quatre conseils à Emmanuel Macron’, *Le Courrier de Russie*, 16 December 2019, <https://www.lecourrierderussie.com/international/2019/12/contrôle-de-larmement-quatre-conseils-a-emmanuel-macron/>.

concerned”, and most importantly – Russia. The German government and the influential German funds, such as Konrad Adenauer or Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, support numerous initiatives, where the future of European security is discussed. These debates include a wide range of representatives from expert and academic communities, and, in some cases, acting or former government officials. The purpose of such discussions is primarily to listen to all sides, to understand the rationale and deep roots behind the arguments used in the current European confrontation. However, the assumption that polite talk between experts would escape the politics of conflict, has not been confirmed. Second track diplomacy largely takes over and reproduces the same narratives that are prevalent in first track diplomacy, and vice versa.

In a nutshell:

- Germany is attached to the existing multilateral institutions that underpin the European security order, and still seriously relies on American involvement in the Continent.
- In relation to Russia, Germany has a strong *Ostpolitik* tradition, which promotes dialogue and pragmatic cooperation as catalysts for peaceful relations. Therefore, Germany tends to choose dialogue even in the hardest of circumstances.
- This makes the country one of the most active promoters for multi-track engagement with Russia, especially through civil society and expert-community debates.

The receptiveness of Russian narratives on European security architecture in the West

The very openness to dialogue and the willingness to understand the deep roots of “Russian alienation” in Europe makes the Western public receptive to Russian narratives about European security, as has been largely discussed in previous chapters. As we have seen, Russia frames the discussed issues in a specific manner, and if additional reflection is not done to ascribe appropriate meanings to the Russian discourse, the debate can be very misleading. The structure of the dialogue itself tilts the balance against the Europeans: it is most often conducted at the initiative of the European side, the latter, represented by liberal democracies, has a much more developed tradition and acceptance of self-criticism, and its political processes are much more open to academic scrutiny than those in Russia.

Firstly, while there is agreement that the Western and Russian narratives on European security are different,¹⁰⁸ Western experts almost exclusively take the burden of reconciliation of these narratives upon themselves. For example, in December 2017, the OSCE network of Think Tanks and Academic Institutions prepared a study after the encouragement of the German 2016 OSCE chairmanship, and under the sponsorship of the Austrian, German, Swiss, Slovak, Irish and Serbian ministries of foreign affairs, called “The Road to the Charter of Paris. Historical Narratives and Lessons for the OSCE

¹⁰⁸ Wolfgang Zellner (ed.), *Security Narratives in Europe: A Wide Range of Views* (Baden-Baden: Nomos,

2017) ; “Back to Diplomacy”. Final Report and Recommendations of the Panel of Eminent Persons on European security as a Common Project. November 2015.

Today”,¹⁰⁹ with the aim of finding the historical reasons behind the fallout between Russia and the West. The hypothesis of the study was that the roots of the disintegration of the current European security order lay in the flaws at its historical foundations. Typically, the study essentially addresses the decisions made by the West, and not the Soviet Union or Russia (except for Gorbachev’s proposal of a “Common European home”). It also bases the historical analysis mostly on Western historical archives. The major conviction of the authors is that “indivisible security in Europe needs to be built on shared values and objectives together with Russia, not against Russia”.¹¹⁰ This implies that the European security architecture has been somehow evolving against Russia, and not vice versa, i.e., Russian politics evolving against the European security architecture and the spirit of Helsinki. The latter hypothesis lacks attention in such debates.

Therefore, and secondly, the responsibility of alienating Russia after the end of the Cold War is overwhelmingly put on the West. Europeans willingly accept to explore the historical parallel of the Treaty of Versailles, and the alienation of Germany in 1919, and the quote of George Bush Snr. saying “we prevailed, and they didn’t”¹¹¹ is commonly cited in documents,

arguing that the West has treated Russia as a loser of the Cold War, and, supposedly, ignored its security interests, especially through the “expansion of NATO”. Any responsibility of Russia since the 1990s is rarely considered.¹¹² On the contrary, the Russian narrative of its “humiliation” through the enlargement of NATO as an “illegitimate” vestige of the Cold War, is widespread.

The very nature of these compromise-based texts privilege neutral expressions that do not deny Russian responsibility for the current climate of confrontation, but assert that everyone has made mistakes,¹¹³ and therefore, everyone is equally responsible for the current situation. This brings us back to the “golden mean fallacy”, discussed in the first chapter, which is inevitably accepted by the actors involved. Following this logic, the problem of the disintegration of European security architecture lies not in the fact that Russia is breaking the existing rules, but in the generalised “missed opportunity after the fall of the Berlin wall to put in place <...> conditions for real stability in Europe”.¹¹⁴ This kind of proposition supposes, as widely discussed above, that the rules themselves, upon which the current European security architecture is built, are somehow flawed and should be re-considered.

¹⁰⁹ Christian Nünlist, Juhana Aunesluoma and Benno Zogg, *The Road to the Charter of Paris: Historical Narratives and Lessons for the OSCE* (Vienna: OSCE Network of Think Tanks, 2017).

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Mary-Elise Sarotte, *1989: The Struggle to Create Post-Cold War Europe*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); Svetlana Savranskaya and Tom Blanton, ‘NATO Expansion : What Gorbachev Heard’, December 2017. National Security Archive, Briefing Book no. 613. <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2017-12-12/nato-expansion-what-gorbachev-heard-western-leaders-early>.

¹¹² See Anne Marie Le Gloannec, ‘On Morality and Mistakes : Did the West Provoke Russia over Ukraine?’, *American Institute for Contemporary German Studies*, Johns Hopkins University. 14 April 2014, <http://www.aicgs.org/issue/on-morality-and-mistakes-did-the-west-provoke-russia-over-ukraine/>

¹¹³ For example: the Atlantic Council, European Leadership Network, Russian International Affairs Council ‘Managing Differences on European security in 2015. US, Russian and European Perspectives’, March 2015.

¹¹⁴ Pierre Vimont, Rapport pour le forum “Leaders pour la paix”, 2019, p. 34, https://normandiepourlapaix.fr/sites/default/files/2019-08/Leaders-paix_ra_interieur%20Version%20FR.pdf

Some narratives in compromise-based studies, produced by think tanks, are flawed with a big-power bias, in the sense that they do not take into account the agency of small states in Central and Eastern Europe, which have historically played an essential role in creating the current European security architecture. This view plays in favour of the Russian narrative that great powers normally have zones of influence and that the current European security architecture is a result of the unbalanced expansion of American influence in the continent. It is evocative that the states in the European and Russian neighbourhood in documents, elaborated in the spirit of compromise with the participation of both, Western and Russian experts, are often called “states in between”,¹¹⁵ thus referring to them as simple objects of international politics, conducted by great powers. This does not only evoke a realist vision, equally prevalent in the West, as in the East, but is also an erroneous analysis of international politics as it does not take into account the dynamics of the diplomatic process, in which small powers are very often able to exert influence and have relevance despite their size. Indeed, the sustained relevance of NATO, and the importance of the liberal democratic values at the foundations of the post-Cold War European security architecture were largely desired and actively promoted by the small states in Central and Eastern Europe.¹¹⁶

Similar great-power bias can be found in such proposals for future European arms control, which refer to “contact zones” between Russia and NATO.¹¹⁷ Security arrangements, based on this type of reasoning, and proposing arms limitations along the “contact zone” risk depriving entire countries, which find themselves within the said zone, of reasonable defence capabilities. If this kind of view might be acceptable from the point of view of major middle European powers, such as Germany and France, it runs completely counter the interests of small liminal states, such as the Baltic States and Poland. It would be untenable to build the future European security architecture on such reasoning.

It appears that in many of their initiatives for dialogue with Russia, European powers do not do much reflection on the process of dialogue itself, and on the implications that this process may have. Some proposals for dialogue, as in the case of German *Ostpolitik*, come as part of political habitus, conditioned by historical experience when this kind of policy was successful. In other cases, as in France, alternatives are seen as too unpredictable, and engagement, as a general principle, is preferred to isolation. Second track diplomacy, which is often seen as a panacea for trust-building between Russia and the West, does not escape the same flaws that plague first track diplomacy. The definition of the European position within the multi-track

¹¹⁵ ‘OSCE paper on narratives – or time for dialogue’, RAND corporation.

¹¹⁶ For a rare example of scholarly research that gives agency back to the Central European states in the process of NATO enlargement, see Amélie Zima, *D’ennemi à allié: L’adhésion de la Hongrie, de la Pologne et de la République tchèque à l’Alliance atlantique (1989–1999)*, (Bruxelles : Peter Lang, 2019).

¹¹⁷ OSW analysis. The German initiative for arms control: time for dialogue with Russia. 09 September 2016,

<https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2016-09-09/german-initiative-arms-control-time-dialogue-russia>; OSCE Network of Think Tanks and Academic Institutions. “Reducing the Risks of Conventional Deterrence in Europe. Arms Control in the NATO-Russia Contact Zones”, December 2018. https://osce-network.net/file-OSCE-Network/Publications/RISK_SP.pdf.

engagement with Russia should be more seriously undertaken through clarification of the conflicting positions, understanding of narratives, their origins and purposes, but also through a clearer definition of what Europe itself should defend in relation to Russia.

In a nutshell:

- The openness for dialogue and willingness to understand the root causes of Russian criticism of the European security architecture makes European political and civil societies vulnerable to Russian narratives.
- The representatives of Western democratic societies are generally open to the criticism of their governments and have better access to verifiable facts, which makes European and American mistakes of the past more apparent than Russia's mistakes.
- Lack of a common vision about the interest of the European nations to uphold the principles upon which the post-Cold War European security architecture was built makes the Europeans doubt the validity of the principles themselves.

Conclusion

European powers have been sensitive to the current challenges to the European security order and have been involved in considerations of its future. The process opens opportunities, but also exposes certain vulnerabilities. It is important to assess how these elements would affect security and stability in Europe, and which solutions are in the best interests of the Baltic States and Poland.

In relation to the transatlantic link, and the French proposals for European “strategic auto-

nomy”, the best scenario for European security, and that of the Baltic States and Poland, would be to increase the European share of burden while maintaining the strong transatlantic link with the United States. Negotiations should aim at tailoring initiatives for greater European autonomy so that they do not decouple Europe from the United States, and so that they can be useful not only for the French operational theatres, but would also ensure the security of the easternmost allies. From what has been said above, none of this should be contradictory, and can be achieved through pragmatic negotiation among European allies. Germany in this sense, is a good ally for the Baltic States and Poland, as it is equally attached to the transatlantic link, and to anchoring the United States in Europe.

Concerning Russia, it is important for the European states to reiterate the importance of the values on which the European security architecture was built: rule of law and the democratic organisation of government, freedom of peoples to choose their own destiny, including the security arrangements, solidarity and equality of all members. The pragmatic wish of France and the traditional inclination of Germany to maintain avenues for dialogue with Russia, including its grievances about its alleged “exclusion”, will be hard to avoid, but vigilance should be maintained that the European good will to hear “the Russian side” will not wash out the vision that is closest to Europe’s own interests. European powers should dare to actively defend their vision of European order, based on international law and liberal democratic values, as proclaimed in 1975 and in 1990. It is not so much about accusing Russia for breaching the agreed rules, but about protecting fundamental

European values that are challenged today by Russian narratives.

In this endeavour, there is room to capitalise on the French and German attachment to democratic, “Republican” values, and push European leaders for a clearer insistence on them in the European diplomatic process, and in the discussion of European security architecture.

Anti-Americanism and anti “occidentalism” should be de-constructed as well: while it is worthwhile to critically assess the actions of one’s own government and deplore the historical wrongs of the West, surely the fundamental values that underpin the European regional order, such as the rule of law, democracy and

fundamental rights and liberties, should not be thrown out with the “bathwater”. Similarly, the denunciation of power-structures, sustained by the West, should not occult the lingering power-structures in other parts of the world, especially those around post-imperial Russia.

Inclusive multilateral forums must be maintained, and proposals for special arrangements between great powers should be rejected. Germany again appears as a good ally for the Baltic States and Poland in this endeavour. France should be more actively engaged in discussions on the future of arms control to build up a strong and unified European position, which Russia could not forestall.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Reframe the *Realpolitik is back* debate. Concepts that legitimise power politics are not objective description of reality. International relations reach far beyond *Realpolitik* or great power politics. This version of *Realpolitik* is often boiled down to its most primitive vision of Darwinist struggle for power and survival, confusing the whole spectre of factors affecting the development of international order. Central to this spectrum is the primacy of international law.

Empires are gone. The last European one collapsed in 1991 and there is no need to facilitate their return. It is not in the interests of Europe or the transatlantic community to invoke concepts that legitimise practices undermining the principles of sovereignty of states, their rights to choose alliances and lead independent defence and foreign policies.

The West as a community based on democratic values should strongly stand by them using the language of norms and values and avoiding the language of political technologists and autocratic leaders. Working within the framework of international law and multilateral institutions that reflect the process of democratisation of international relations is the foundation of transatlantic peace and stability. While following the ideas of great powers working in concert will only bring new land grabs, political meddling and regional conflicts, and thus more insecurity for Europe. Russia’s efforts to return to bilateral or exclusive multilateral formats (such as the UNSC Permanent Members’ Summit) are aimed at weakening law-based methods of conflict resolution in favour of arbitrary mechanisms, contradicting democratic principles of international order established in the 20th century and thus should be treated as such.

1. **No new formats needed.** The Western community should reject the practice of invoking arbitrary workarounds of established institutions. Striving for stable relations between the great powers at the expense of others would mean simply transferring instability elsewhere and inviting trouble. There is a sufficiently developed institutional architecture to manage risks to regional security. There is no need to invent the wheel again. It is enough to adhere to the international institutions and agreements that already exist. It is not a lack of agreements or their deficiencies that constitute security risks, but the lack of genuine intention of some states to comply with commitments.
2. **Law-based order.** Members of the international community should lead law-based international relations, which are rooted in the sovereign equality of states. It also means continued support for the territorial integrity of Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova, the democratic transformation of Belarus and economic reforms in all of these countries. Respect for international law is about core security interests of cohesive West founded on democratic values. Alliances based on these values and on respect for international law protect against existential threats. Consistent support for international law has practical implications for security and well-being in the whole region.
3. **“Declaration of international decency”** (working title) to be adopted initially by the Central and East European states but open for other parties, interested in enhancing the political weight of international behaviour, based upon agreed and accepted principles and values. It may be a simple and straightforward code of conduct, defining not only what is legal or not under international law, but also whether certain actions are decent or not. This would allow creating additional leverage for states and politicians not to ignore the violations of international law and promote a value-based order among states.
4. **Calling spade a spade.** In order to oppose the flawed power-based *Realpolitik* frame, it should be de-constructed on a daily basis using public diplomacy tools. This can be done through amping-up STRATCOM work, initiating support tracks for think tanks, NGOs and academic initiatives, as well as continuous efforts to initiate public debate, conferences and workshops on similar and related themes.

Clear strategic messaging, free from falsely understood impartiality or what we called here guilt symmetry, is a must when it comes to proper description of Russian behaviour and the off-the-mark proposals framed in terms of “states in between”, “NATO expansion as the root cause of the conflict between the West and Russia”, “crisis in Ukraine” and “spheres of influence and legitimate interests”.

5. **Set up a consultative mechanism among the CEE and the Baltic States** open to those willing to participate in good faith about law-based order to identify threats and challenges, as well as to plan joint political initiatives. This mechanism might be also used to enhance cooperation in the field of memory politics to counter jointly current Russian historical propaganda and to mitigate conflicts existing among CEE and the Baltic States themselves. The mechanism could

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be useful in facilitating and coordinating projects addressed to politically and socially active parts of Belarusian and Russian civil societies, interested in fostering serious dialogue about the past, present and future.



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