

# A “CIVIL ASSOCIATION” BETWEEN THE EUROPEAN UNION AND RUSSIA

*Contradicting political worldviews of the EU and Russia contribute to their conflictual relations much more than the attention currently given to this facet of the relations. Each of their solidarist worldviews creates an ideological wall severing their communication that is essential for possible peaceful solutions. However, shifting toward a pluralist worldview inspired by conceptual tools of the English School and Michael Oakeshott’s theory of civil association could be an alternative to the current situation of conflict. Building on this theoretical framework, we also attempt to explain the significance of Türkiye’s mediation efforts along the way and present a constructive criticism of today’s norms-based international law.*

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**T**he political worldviews of actors are essential to understanding the international conflicts we experience today. These worldviews of states draw the foundations of the map of confrontation between them.<sup>1</sup> Political ideologies are not simply abstract ideas that stay in the back of the mind, but they are the foundational mindset that gives actors the perspective of perceiving friends and enemies, and of changing or influencing the world around them with specific goals and ambitions. These various mindsets adopted by different actors define how they act in the international sphere and make friends and enemies.

This was particularly visible throughout the 20th century, especially in the onset, process, and aftermath of World War II, stretching up until the end of the Cold War.<sup>2</sup> Today, such confrontations founded on contradictory worldviews are becoming more visible today, making us ask whether the Cold War years are coming back, with one reservation that now we have not only two poles but many of them. Turning to our case here, the European Union (EU) and Russia, each claiming to defend a particular political worldview that advocates them to act in a certain direction to change the international political landscape, obviously have such an ideological confrontation.

### *Solidarism*

This ideological struggle stems largely from divergent ideals and principles that each side has adopted to promote in international politics to achieve goals that are in line with their own self-interest. This conflictual setting between the EU and Russia could be understood well through the theoretical framework of solidarism.<sup>3</sup> The recent dramatic changes in the nature of international law, international institutional landscape, and roles of states have very quickly developed into types of solidarist worldviews adopted by some states.<sup>4</sup> By their nature, solidarist worldviews provide the states with the understanding that there are such global “humanitarian” norms and values beyond the sovereign authorities, which require their actions that go “beyond the sovereignty” of their fellow states, i.e. interventions. Although built upon beautifully theorized humanitarian concerns, the consequences of such worldviews have been disputable for either party, such as in the Kosovan and Georgian cases.

Arguably the most problematic consequences of solidarist worldviews have been self-claimed superiority of either party’s own values and exclusivity in their

<sup>1</sup> Mark L. Haas and Henry R. Nau, “Political Worldviews in International Relations: The Importance of Ideologies and Foreign Policy Traditions,” in P. J. Katzenstein (ed.), *Uncertainty and Its Discontents Worldviews in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022): p. 73–96.

<sup>2</sup> Haas and Nau (2022).

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Hurrell, *On Global Order: Power, Values, and the Constitution of International Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007): p. 57–94.

<sup>4</sup> Hurrell (2007): p. 57–94.

understanding and implementation. One can further argue that such humanitarian concerns may only be serving to fulfill the national interests of states in a hopefully less conflictual way. Obviously, the solidarist worldviews of both the EU and Russia could not produce less conflictual precedencies for a peaceful future of their relations as we continue to experience during the recent Russian-Ukrainian conflict.

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In EU-Russia relations, there is a need to go beyond the rhetorical construction of symbols of solidarism that is shaped by their conflicting political worldviews. The EU has its liberal solidarist worldview which makes it aim at expanding its normative influence throughout the *Common Neighbourhood* by promoting adoption of liberal democratic values in the countries that Russia has been historically viewing as its sphere of influence.<sup>5</sup> Especially the potential or actual solidification of these norms and values in those countries in the form of Colour Revolutions that replace those Russophile leaders with the EU-oriented ones, is viewed by Russia as absolute strategic losses.

In response to this, Russia has seen the lack of its normative power as a strategic deficiency and tried to build up its own normative worldview with its particular narrative and implications, no need to doubt, contradicting the Western one. It has tried to portray Western values and norms as dangerous for society and humanity, as opposed to what it wishes to represent as a spiritual and moral stance against Western hegemony and decadency.<sup>6</sup> Despite lacking serious grounds and principles, this portrayal may arguably be seen as somewhat adopted by some countries of the

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<sup>5</sup> European External Action Service (EEAS), *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe – A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign And Security Policy* (June 2016): p. 3–11.

<sup>6</sup> Jardar Østbø, “Securitizing ‘spiritual-moral values’ in Russia,” *Post-Soviet Affairs*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (November 2016), pp. 200–16; Elena A. Stepanova, “‘Everything good against everything bad’: traditional values in the search for new Russian national idea,” *Zeitschrift für Religion, Gesellschaft und Politik* [Journal for Religion, Society and Politics] (June 2022).

developing world pretty much as a consequence of hostility toward the Western domination of the past. Leaving alone that this confrontation can ever be a solution, only solidifies the conflict. These simplified dichotomous ideals, accompanying rhetorical representation, and legitimation efforts further cause “the dialogue of the deaf” to cumulate toward no foreseeable improvement.<sup>7</sup>

The rhetoric coming back and forth between the two sides doesn’t function as a political forum to present each other, come to know each other’s positions, and arrive at mutually beneficial solutions, but as a body of technics to portray one’s actions as legitimate as much as possible and the other’s as illegitimate; constant argumentation back and forth without any substantial understanding. They are making claims of their underlying worldviews as universally true and applicable, and that the opponent’s worldview is falsehood and even dangerous. Eventually, these purposive solidarist worldviews don’t seem to have a successful and peaceful end if continued so.

### ***Pluralism***

Given this rather pessimistic view of current affairs, some theoretical alternatives to it are often discussed in the literature. Continuing with the conceptualization in the English School, some types of pluralism are suggested to be a way out of this confrontation of worldviews, instead of solidarism.<sup>8</sup> Pluralism provides a framework where no single political worldview can legitimately provide globally applicable truths. This suggests that within the contingent plurality of nations and cultures, there’s no single set of norms and values to solve all our problems. Instead, we should recognize the importance of protecting this diversity of values by treating it as if it were fundamental to our own existence. This understanding tries to solve the problem of any given political worldview to claim global applicability and exclusivity to the truth. It also tries to lower the prejudice barrier of condemning the opponent based on self-imposed norms and hopefully provide a healthier basis for communication between the parties.

### ***Civil Associations***

Michael Oakeshott’s ideal type of “civil association” in political philosophy

<sup>7</sup> Judy Dempsey, “The dialogue of the deaf between the West and Russia”, *Carnegie Europe*, 7 February 2015, accessed on 9 February 2023, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/59003>

<sup>8</sup> Chris Brown, *International Society, Global Polity: An Introduction to International Political Theory* (California: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2015): p. 1–17; Ronnie Hjorth, “Civil association across borders: Law, morality and responsibility in the post-Brexit Era,” *Journal of International Political Theory*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (January 2018): p. 299-313; Sungmoon Kim, “Abating contingency: Michael Oakeshott’s political pluralism,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (March 2016): p. 267-88; John Williams, “Territorial Borders, Toleration and the English School,” *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 4 (October 2002), pp. 737-58.

provides us with a very useful tool to conceptualize a pluralist worldview.<sup>9</sup> The civil association is a political setting between individuals whose basic purpose is to uphold the civil condition among them, and which does not have any idealistic purpose to accomplish, other than sustaining itself.<sup>10</sup>

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Ronnie Hjorth argues that conceptually the idea of civil association is also applicable on the international level, which in turn would work for upholding the civil condition among nations.<sup>11</sup> That civil condition involves the conditions of practices among the nations to be just, peaceful, secure, and based on coexistence. So, it mainly concerns the conditions of relationships between the states, and not much more than that. It excludes purposive associations which postulate coming together to achieve certain goals and ambitions in the future, let alone them being salvific to humanity.<sup>12</sup> However, we should also note that the concept of civil association is used as an ideal type, a tool for analysis, and not as a real phenomenon to be achieved as a goal.<sup>13</sup> The main point is to be aware of such a possible understanding of international relations between states so that we are not stuck with disappointing purposive associations, which are called “enterprise associations” by Oakeshott.

Neither elimination of enterprise associations from the political landscape is something desirable. In this respect, Sungmoon Kim argues, for instance, that enterprise associations need to be voluntary, not imposed by a single, what we may call, “world government” or by other members of the international society,

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<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth C. Corey, *Michael Oakeshott: On Religion, Aesthetics and Politics* (Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2006): p. 175–88.

<sup>10</sup> Corey (2006): p. 175–88.

<sup>11</sup> Hjorth (2018).

<sup>12</sup> Corey (2006): p. 175–88.

<sup>13</sup> Corey (2006): p. 175–88.

notably the superpowers.<sup>14</sup> So, still, there's a lot of space for purposive associations in global politics based on state consent, and the civil association among the states is there to protect the civil condition among nations also by protecting the plurality of voluntary enterprise associations as in civil society.

Overall, the concept of civil association points out an understanding of international relations where there is no set of universally applicable salvific rules and norms which can help us achieve our universal goals. Civil association of nations is there to preserve the procedural needs for peaceful relations between the plurality of nations with various political norms and ambitions to promote. In this manner, the moral responsibility of the actors in international relations would be not more than to uphold the procedural rules pertaining to preserving the civil condition.<sup>15</sup>

### *Conceptualizing Toleration*

Following from accepting the plurality of nations, and their diverse ways of life as the reality of international relations and providing an alternative pluralist view to the current state of affairs, we also need to understand why this plurality is something crucial. As John Williams presents it,<sup>16</sup> embracing Hannah Arendt's philosophy to understand plurality and its virtue would be more than useful. He first demonstrates the downside of current understandings of plurality in which it is seen as something unfortunate, nevertheless, to be respected for practical purposes. He rather points out to the Arendtian understanding that the plurality of nations is something intrinsically valuable because it is the fundamental way in which we can understand our human condition.<sup>17</sup>

In this approach, the plurality of human beings, hence of the nations, is a result of diversifying nature of the human condition that is intrinsic and makes us human beings in the first place. Ignoring this plurality and imposing uniformity over human beings from the outside is non-human and detrimental to our nature. Therefore, to understand each other, and moreover ourselves, we need to understand this plurality; and understanding this plurality is possible through no other than coming together in a political forum, speaking to each other, and listening to each other. Given the understanding that plurality is actually intrinsically valuable and central to the health of international politics, what remains to be the best approach is to communicate with each other, rather than speaking to establish one's normative judgments over others and try to legitimize the unilateral actions which disturb the civil condition among each other.

<sup>14</sup> Kim (2016).

<sup>15</sup> Hjorth (2018).

<sup>16</sup> Williams (2002).

<sup>17</sup> Williams (2002).

### *Glory and Hostility*

As a matter of fact, our presentation of an alternative theoretical framework doesn't suggest a revolutionary change to solve the problems, as some analysts may think. The central topic that requires attention is, as we have already seen, the acknowledgment of the plurality of nations and the intrinsic value in it. Notwithstanding this, the hostile disagreements between the EU and Russia present a major challenge along the way. Here, we argue that this hostility is, in fact, not a consequence of scarce resources nor the anarchy of international politics as many would suggest. Still, it is nations' demand for esteem and honor.<sup>18</sup>

Arash Abizadeh argues that deriving from Thomas Hobbes, the main causes of conflict are not the scarce resources to be exploited nor the anarchical system of international relations, but an irrational passion, that is glory.<sup>19</sup> In this view, this passion involves the actor's demand for acceptance from others and also respect for her worldview. So, another actor's challenge to the validity of her worldview is deemed a serious blow to her glory and honor, which can easily turn into *casus belli*. As we have discussed, since the central problem in the disagreement between the EU and Russia concerns either party's exclusive claim to the universality of their worldviews, the source of conflict and disagreement between the two can also be explained in terms of their mutual disrespect for each other's worldviews by not acknowledging them. Without acknowledgment of the plurality of their worldviews, it is impossible to expect healthy communication between them.

Although a pluralist framework of relations between the EU and Russia is not impossible, it requires resetting actors' presumptions and mindset so that we may expect changes in the actions. As we have discussed, ideological worldviews are precursors to speech and action. Therefore, such a reset involves acknowledgment of the other party's worldview and the associated intrinsic value of diversity within it, which in turn demands them to renounce the exclusivity and universality of their worldviews. The basic moral responsibility of actors would be the commitment to preserve the civil condition between them for the sake of their peaceful coexistence and the preservation of their plurality for its intrinsic value. There would be no need for shared aims to attain to bring them together beyond these procedural commitments and acknowledgments, as in the civil associations of Oakeshott, as such purposeful acts would always require disputable explanations upon which they may not agree.

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<sup>18</sup> Arash Abizadeh, "Hobbes on the causes of war: A disagreement theory," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 105, No. 2 (May 2011): p. 298–315.

<sup>19</sup> Abizadeh (2011).

### *Mediation for Communication*

Our theoretical investigations until that point make us suggest two main practical implications regarding relations between the EU and Russia, and hopefully a peaceful future for them. These implications directly follow from the reality that relations between the EU and Russia are separated by an ideological wall that prevents understanding and communication that might be the only way to a peaceful solution. First of all, as we have pointed out, political forums and sincere communication channels, where each party listens to each other and speaks to each other in a two-way way, are required for this.

If the hostile disagreements between the parties prevent them from forming sincere communication channels, then third parties' delivery of these political forums would be very beneficial. Seemingly, Türkiye's mediation efforts are quite valuable in this respect, as a country that has well-rooted and indispensable relations both with the EU and Russia. For a disagreement as severe as this one, it is essential that the parties remain in constant contact with one another; if Türkiye is able to convey the perspectives and expectations of both sides to the other, there is hope that the chasm between their ideologies may be bridged.

Successful communication, in this case, requires that the differences in opinions and expectations of both parties are objectively heard, received with respect, and thought of well before responding. In this respect, Türkiye needs to be very careful in communicating these differences between conflicting and complex worldviews, which is not as simple and easy as it may seem. Before everything else, the mediator should understand both parties' ideological worldviews and political interests perfectly well enough so that the communication can be delivered objectively.

### *Normative vs. Procedural International Law*

Along with this rather "softer" implication of what we have discussed, the "harder" one points to some criticism of today's condition in international law and its application.<sup>20</sup> The solidarist assumption that the "international community" and liberal norms and values are measures of what is right and what is wrong in international law is simply not received well. There hardly exists such a thing as an "international community" as we experience in those complicated conflicts. Instead, there is a plurality of views, positions, and ambitions, all of which desire to be heard and respected.

It might be a saddening conclusion, nevertheless, the normative and actual validity

<sup>20</sup> Aidan Hehir, *Hollow Norms and the Responsibility to Protect* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019): p. 1–28, 213–23.



of liberal norms and values is not received with such enthusiasm in the developing world, especially among their people. Instead, they seem to empathize with authoritarian regimes, such as Russia and China, that wish to portray themselves as victims of the long-gone “Western domination” and saviors of other victims.

What we may suggest at this point is related to the common understanding of legality in international law. We must admit that international law is mostly based on normative expectations and purposive actions rather than clearly defined procedural rules and sanctions. However, what is understood by a civil association is not based on purposive norms and values, but on clearly defined procedural rules that are explicitly consented to by all parties, only to preserve the civil condition.

Ideological and vague views of international norms and the lack of procedural legislation cause serious struggles among states and international organizations on the way to enforce international law. Human rights and liberties, humanitarianism, self-determination, self-defense, etc., are all normative pillars of international law, but they will be exploited unless they are codified explicitly with actual implementation rules that are consented to by all the relevant governments and organizations.

As a side example, one of the purported aims of Russia’s war on Georgia was claimed to be “human rights”, as a mirror of what the Kosovan affair was like. Another example, on the other hand, the UN Charter could be seen as similar to a definite international legislation. Still, along with being too limited in coverage, it has already been violated by the United States and the United Kingdom who invaded Iraq in 2003. Such actions and violations, which are not properly sanctioned, present negative precedents for future violations, already encroaching on the credibility of current instruments of international law.

Overall, what is needed in the realm of international law is practical legislation as procedural rules and guidelines along with definite sanctions and precautions to be followed by relevant parties, that are consented to by states and organizations multilaterally, to preserve the civil condition among them, and not for any disputable normative purpose. In this regard, the consensus of the “international community” cannot be presumed, rather, individual state consent is to be sought through explicit treaties and conventions signed by them. Only with such a legislated and consented structure, the lawbreaker can be sanctioned effectively, and the free-rider problem can be alleviated.

We admit that our analytical discussions and suggestions here are much closer to theoretical than practical. Moreover, many valid criticisms can be applied to what we have suggested. However, a healthy comprehension of a problem comes before

its solution. Therefore, we hope our theoretical analyses and discussions can help improve our comprehension of the crises in front of us and lead us toward possible solutions.