

# RUSSIA'S WAR AND THE FUTURE OF EUROPEAN ORDER

*Russia's war in Ukraine fundamentally challenges the post-Cold War international order. Yet the scenario of a renewed Cold War must be balanced by alternative visions of European order. This contribution reassesses the concepts of interdependence, socialization, normative power, and international society taken from international relations theory to develop some general lessons for European order and concrete pointers toward alternative policy paths. Such an order needs to build on a more honest engagement, serious great power management mirrored by societal linkages, and creative thinking about joint institutions and regional overlaps.*

Thomas Diez\*



TPQ

Spring 2022

\* Thomas Diez is Professor of Political Science and International Relations at the University of Tübingen, Germany.

**R**ussia's war in Ukraine fundamentally challenges the post-Cold War international order. The optimism of a peaceful liberal order has given way to fears of a new era dominated by geopolitical power projections and the ever-present threat of violence. Vladimir Putin's aggression suggests that the patterns of hostility between East and West have not disappeared and are coming back with a vengeance. Instead of blurring boundaries and peaceful relations, we seem to be witnessing a new Cold War, with NATO reinforcing its Eastern flank as a bulwark against Russia and its allies while the latter are seeking to bolster their influence in the former Soviet space.<sup>1</sup>

This has also undermined the European Union (EU) as a "normative power".<sup>2</sup> Instead of being able to "shape conceptions of [a new] normal" in which sovereignty would be redefined as responsibility, cooperation in multilateral institutions would prevail, and antagonism would be overcome by mutual exchange and regional integration, the EU seems to be forced to accept the prevalence of military might and geopolitical power. Putin's raid on Ukraine violates international law, which the EU has sought to strengthen and broaden rather than abandon. It is a murderous campaign in which Russian soldiers have killed thousands of civilians and displaced even more. Concepts such as human security are abused to justify violence against states and individuals. The war is also a return to revisionist imperialism that questions the sovereignty of states and imposes control over people against their will and resistance. After at least a decade of populism and increasing authoritarianism in many countries, it looks as if the final nail has been hammered into the coffin of any visions of a global liberal order.<sup>3</sup>

While such a scenario is undoubtedly likely, it would be wrong to simply give in to defeatism and turn current developments into a self-fulfilling prophecy. History is never deterministic, and we ought to at least contemplate possibilities for a different future that is not as bleak as the current situation may suggest. To develop alternative scenarios, it is helpful to reconsider some of the theoretical approaches that some analysts are presently consigning to the dustbin of history all too easily. In this short essay, I will briefly review some of these theories and outline how they may assist in imagining a peaceful European order, however distant this may seem now.

<sup>1</sup> This contribution is based on a lecture at the Turkish-German University, Istanbul, 22 April 2022. I am grateful to Anja Reil and Stefanie Krüger for research and editorial assistance, as well as to Senem Aydin Düzgüt and the TAU audience for their comments on an earlier version.

<sup>2</sup> Ian Manners, "Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?," *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (2002): p. 235–58.

<sup>3</sup> G. J. Ikenberry, "The End of Liberal International Order?," *International Affairs*, Vol. 94, No. 1 (2018): p. 7–23.

## *Reconsidering IR Theory*

Most commentators see current events as a vindication of (neo)realism.<sup>4</sup> Certainly, Russia's aggression illustrates the realist insistence on the security dilemma and the constant possibility of revisionist behavior. At the same time, some of the truths of a broadly liberal-constructivist stance seem to have proven false: trade interdependencies have not prevented the invasion; socialization through dialogue and institutional embedding has not worked in the case of Russia. Yet the neorealist ignorance of domestic factors and historical context offers a skewed analysis of the war: things did not have to turn out this way; they were shaped by and thus are the responsibility of specific actors (above all, Putin) acting in particular circumstances. Furthermore, it is not liberal constructivism that is necessarily wrong but our superficial readings of it, admittedly often shared by its proponents.

---

*“This leads to three consequences for a long-term peaceful European order: interdependence must be more diversified and symmetric; inclusive institutions must underpin it.”*

---

### *Interdependence*

That trade linkages as such are no guarantee of peace has long been established: the interwar period was characterized by exceptionally strong trade interlinkages, which nonetheless failed to prevent the rise of fascist, revisionist regimes bent on forcefully changing the international order.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Farrell and Newman<sup>6</sup> argue that interdependence may even be “weaponized” and turned into an instrument for deepening conflict. Yet there were at least three immediate problems with the “interdependence” between Russia and the EU. First, it was asymmetric. For Russia, EU sanctions are a nuisance and may lead to long-term constraints in obtaining technology and consumer goods. For the EU, the supply of Russian energy and other raw material is vital, at least in the medium run. Or, in the words of Keohane and Nye:<sup>7</sup> Russia is “sensitive” to trade obstructions, yet Europe is “vulnerable”. Putin

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Walt, “An International Relations Theory Guide to the War in Ukraine,” *Foreign Policy*, accessed 12 April 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/03/08/an-international-relations-theory-guide-to-ukraines-war/>; Scott J. Harr, “Realism’s Devastating Triumph in Ukraine: What It Means and Where to Go from Here,” accessed 12 April 2022, [https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2022/03/22/realisms\\_devastating\\_triumph\\_in\\_ukraine\\_what\\_it\\_means\\_and\\_where\\_to\\_go\\_from\\_here\\_823083.html](https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2022/03/22/realisms_devastating_triumph_in_ukraine_what_it_means_and_where_to_go_from_here_823083.html)

<sup>5</sup> Katherine Barbieri, “Economic Interdependence: A Path to Peace or a Source of Interstate Conflict?,” *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (1996): p. 29–49.

<sup>6</sup> Henry Farrell and Abraham L. Newman, “Weaponized Interdependence: How Global Economic Networks Shape State Coercion,” *International Security*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (2019): p. 42–79.

<sup>7</sup> Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, *Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1977).

knew this and perhaps even exaggerated the point, not expecting the EU to react as swiftly and determined as it has done. Yet, at the same time, the disputes over cutting down oil and gas imports have illustrated how dependent many EU member states are on them.

Second, one of the lessons of the interwar years was that interdependence needs to be bolstered by affiliated institutions. Yet the institutional integration of Russia in the post-Cold War liberal order was weak, partly because Russia and especially Putin regarded these institutions as dominated by the West and partially because Western states did not consider Russia, an equal partner. This has weakened whatever constraints there may have been through interdependence and has not facilitated proper communication.

Third, most interdependence theorists ground their arguments in objective rationalities. Yet one does not have to be a constructivist to argue that preferences are always contextual and subjective. Rational choices are rational in the eyes of individual decision-makers, not by virtue of a dictate by a given reality. Thus, interdependence only works if it is also seen as such, and if economic benefits do indeed top the wish lists of the actors involved. This clearly has not been the case for Putin and arguably for large chunks of Russian society, whose outlook has been conditioned by state-controlled media and parochial historical education.

This leads to three consequences for a long-term peaceful European order: interdependence must be more diversified and symmetric; inclusive institutions must underpin it. It will only work if actors do not prioritize nationalist and imperialist ambitions. This brings me to a second core theoretical concept, socialization.

### *Socialization*

Putin's war has been a particular challenge for Germany, whose policy towards Russia since the 1970s had been built on forging linkages, from Brandt's *Ostpolitik* during the Cold War to Merkel's *Wandel durch Handel* (change through trade) in the 2000s. The underpinning idea crudely followed a typical social-constructivist assumption: identities change through institutional involvement and mutual engagement. That this has not happened has led to harsh attacks on both pillars.<sup>8</sup> German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier, who had been a strong supporter of trade links with Russia during his time as German Minister of Foreign Affairs, was not welcome in Ukraine when he planned a visit with his Polish and Baltic counterparts in April 2022.

<sup>8</sup> Jan Behrends, "Egon Bahrs Ostpolitik: Kein Wandel Durch Handel" (Deutschlandfunk, 2022), <https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/wandel-durch-annaecherung-egon-bahrs-ostpolitik-kritisch-hinterfragt-dlf-kultur-11e651e3-100.html>; Sabine Kinkartz, "Russland Und Die SPD: Scherbenhaufen Der Ostpolitik," news release, 21 March 2022, accessed on 12 April 2022, <https://www.dw.com/de/russland-und-die-spd-scherbenhaufen-der-ostpolitik/a-61204291>

Yet, here again, the problem may be a rather simplistic understanding of socialization and insufficiently met conditions. On the one hand, socialization is not a one-way street with immediate effects. As the proverb goes, it always takes two to tango. So members will always bring their own identities to institutions and change them as much as they are changed – an experience that the EU also had to make in its 2004 Eastern enlargement, which many had wrongly expected to result in a mere imposition of values on the new members. The developments in Hungary and Poland and Cyprus<sup>9</sup> have shown that such “Europeanization” processes are a lot more complex. The expectation that after the breakdown of the Soviet Union, the successor states would be turned into Western liberal democracies by integrating them into a multilateral institutional framework was too simplistic. On the other hand, as I have already argued above, this integration has had several deficiencies, impeding socialization prospects.

---

*“Despite the importance of state-to-state interactions, domestic developments remain central. Links between civil societies should not be abandoned and instead, need to be strengthened.”*

---

Two things follow. Again, institutions need to be more inclusive and be able to integrate a broader range of possible members with different economic and political outlooks. Not every international institution designed to facilitate exchange and cooperation among liberal democratic states may be suitable for this. It may be necessary to create new institutions or re-vamp old ones. Socialization effects will be weaker if norms and rules are not firmly established. More generally, we should not treat socialization as an automatism but as an ongoing struggle requiring constant investment and involving us as much as our partners.

### *Normative Power*

What, then, about normative power? Contrary to the widely held view that the case of Ukraine is an illustration of the failure of normative power, it shows both the success conditions and limitations of it. Thus, the turn towards the EU in broad parts of Ukrainian civil society, symbolized by Euromaidan, may be seen as an effect of what Manners describes as “contagion”: the attractiveness of regional integration in economic and political terms. At the same time, both the Russian political elite and the broader public have not seen any attraction in the EU or its values – apart

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Diez and Nathalie Tocci, “The Cyprus Conflict and the Ambiguous Effects of Europeanization,” *The Cyprus Review*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (2010): p. 175–86.

from copying some institutional features into the design of the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, for the EU normative power to work, local actors must be predisposed to take up integration or specific EU values because of domestic identity struggles or economic interests. Such normative power is minimal: it works as a reinforcement of existing trends rather than a causal factor in generating change. Furthermore, much as socialization, the consequences of normative power are not mechanistic automatisms but conflictive and deeply political. In Ukraine, but also in cases such as Cyprus, normative power intersects with domestic conflicts, alters the local power configuration, and is instrumentalized by conflict actors.<sup>11</sup>

### *International Society*

The liberal world order epitomized a conceptualization of the international as a society rather than a system, with generally agreed norms and institutions as the foundation, and a move from a limited emphasis on sovereignty and non-intervention in a “pluralist” towards human rights and global responsibilities in a “solidarist” order.<sup>12</sup> Russia’s war has challenged this idea of a solidarizing international society. Yet as much as a normative power, solidarization is a contested process. In addition, many have pointed to the continuing predominance of pluralist structures in international society.<sup>13</sup>

In retrospect, the optimism about solidarization seems to have been misguided or at least premature. Yet this does not invalidate an international society approach. Indeed, one of the most influential authors of this approach, Hedley Bull,<sup>14</sup> was rather skeptical about the desirability and feasibility of a solidarist world order. We may be well-advised to revisit Bull’s five core institutions that, in his view, provide the skeleton of international society, and among which we find great power management and balance of power alongside international law and diplomacy. If it were not for the management aspect, these concepts would sound like realist categories. Yet Bull’s point is that they are not mechanical outcomes of a system, but patterns of practice among states to maintain order.

<sup>10</sup> Ekaterina Furman and Alexander Libman, “Europeanization and the Eurasian Economic Union,” in *Eurasian Integration: The View from Within*, ed. Piotr Dutkiewicz and Richard Sakwa, Routledge contemporary Russia and Eastern Europe series 60 (London: Routledge, 2015).

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Diez, “Transforming Identity in International Society: The Potential and Failure of European Integration,” *Comparative European Politics*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (2019): p. 512–29.

<sup>12</sup> Tonny B. Knudsen, “Solidarism, Pluralism and Fundamental Institutional Change,” *Cooperation and Conflict*, Vol. 51, No. 1 (2016): p. 102–9, [https://pure.au.dk/portal/files/120765771/solidarism\\_pluralism\\_and\\_fundamental\\_institutional\\_change\\_accepted\\_manuscript\\_2016.pdf](https://pure.au.dk/portal/files/120765771/solidarism_pluralism_and_fundamental_institutional_change_accepted_manuscript_2016.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> Barry Buzan, *An Introduction to the English School of International Relations: The Societal Approach* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014).

<sup>14</sup> Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1977).

Putin's Russia has clearly played the bully in this society, violating its core norms and ridiculing its institutions. A post-war order will have to find ways to punish the bully and acknowledge the continuing relevance of Bull's institutions. On the one hand, this implies that such an order cannot rely on deterrence alone but will have to be based on international law and diplomacy. On the other hand, the balance of power (as an institution) demands that China and Russia are not seen as mere objects of Western schemes. Great power management includes ordering devices such as mutually acknowledged spheres of influence, which thus may not necessarily be thought of as a thing of the past,<sup>15</sup> but as a valuable pillar of a peaceful European order. Of course, such an order should not rely on great power management alone – which is why diplomacy and international law are at least equally important. Likewise, great power management must be accompanied by civil society interactions. Yet treating the relevance of great powers as a thing of the past ignores an important ordering factor and glosses over the fact that the EU as a normative power has engaged in hegemonic policies in its neighborhood.<sup>16</sup>

Given the current climate of the public debate, I ought to underline that my emphasis on great power management is not an apology for Russia's invasion or condemnation of past NATO enlargement.<sup>17</sup> I also find pseudo-postcolonial arguments seeing Russia as an antidote to U.S. imperialism naïve at best and dangerous at worst. This is an imperial war, and there is no postcolonialism in it. The point is simply that a future global order will also have to rely on collaboration between great powers.

### *Consequences for a Future European Order*

#### *Premises*

Thinking about a future European order based on these theoretical considerations requires us to specify our assumptions about the likely development of core actors and processes. One of my core assumptions is that Russia will remain a problematic member of international society, independent of whether Putin will continue to hold the presidential seat. If Putin remains in place, it is difficult to see how trust between him and politicians worldwide could be rebuilt to even a bare minimum. I am not optimistic about the prospect of a stable and peaceful order in such circumstances. Meanwhile, a post-Putin Russia is unlikely to turn into a liberal, cosmopolitan actor swiftly. Instead, it seems likely that nationalism will continue to be a strong

---

<sup>15</sup> Oliver P. Richmond and Sandra Pogodda, "Rethinking the International Peace Architecture," European Consortium for Political Research, accessed on 14 April 2022. <https://theloop.ecpr.eu/rethinking-the-international-peace-architecture/>

<sup>16</sup> Thomas Diez, "Normative Power as Hegemony," *Cooperation and Conflict*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (2013): p. 194–210.

<sup>17</sup> *Foreign Affairs*, "Was NATO Enlargement a Mistake?," accessed on 20 April 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ask-the-experts/2022-04-19/was-nato-enlargement-mistake>

force, while it remains unclear who would succeed Putin and whether such a power transition would remain peaceful. At the same time, we should not overlook the sizeable minority of Russians who will continue to criticize the regime. However, many critical voices have already left their country and thus will have to voice their opposition from abroad.

A second assumption is that the current unity of the West glosses over some core internal challenges which question the currently prevailing black-and-white narratives. The support for Marine Le Pen in the 2022 French presidential elections, the re-election of Viktor Orbán in Hungary (not least because of his promise of stability in light of the war) and the not unlikely possibility that Donald Trump or another populist will be elected into the White House in 2024 show the continuing strength of nationalism and a considerable degree of political disquiet in the West, which may well lead to conflictive brinkmanship beyond China and Russia, on which much of Western discourse currently focuses. In Turkey, too, the outcome of the upcoming elections is uncertain and will decide on Turkey's future political orientation.

Third, despite the present unity, the EU will continue to square the circle of strengthening its foreign and security policy without requiring member states to relinquish their sovereignty. This dilemma has characterized the development of the external dimension of European integration ever since the failure of the European Defence Community in 1954. Thus, while there will be further amendments to EU security and defense, Russia's war ironically has strengthened NATO's dominance in this area and has made NATO membership an attractive option even for countries that have long been proud of their neutrality such as Finland and Sweden.

Finally, China will continue its balancing role of insisting on the pluralism of different cultural and political orders in international society and thus opposing Western hegemony, while at the same time pursuing further trade links with Western states and avoiding outright confrontation. Therefore, it will continue to support Russia and reiterate its call for a peaceful solution to the Ukrainian conflict and the building of bridges between East and West.<sup>18</sup>

### *Lessons*

This leads me to some general lessons for a future European order. The first one is that the path of European integration to weaken and redefine state sovereignty needs to be maintained. Sovereignty and the nationalist imagery it is based on, continue

<sup>18</sup> Stuart Lau, "China Insists It's 'Not a Party' to Russia's War with Ukraine," *Politico*, 14 March 2022, accessed on 14 April 2022. <https://www.politico.eu/article/china-is-not-party-russia-war-on-ukraine-foreign-minister/>

to be at the heart of international violence. However, this does not mean that sovereignty is a worthless principle. Even a solidarist global society cannot function without it. Violent infringements of sovereignty through military aggression and invasion cannot be tolerated. Thus, we need to guard ourselves against them, with a renewal of military forces and reinstatement of treaty guarantees, such as the Budapest Memorandum, backed up by credible military guarantees.

Yet, at the same time, we must not only focus on armament and deterrence but insist on the importance of diplomacy and international institutions. These have failed to prevent Russia's aggression does not mean that we ought to abandon our efforts to sustain them. In any society, rules may be violated, and institutions can be ignored. Yet societies know that they cannot exist without them, and thus most of their members will seek to reinforce them even because of their violation. In rebuilding European institutions, however, mutual recognition must be a guiding principle, implying respect for different views, the pursuit of institutions not primarily to further one's own economic or geopolitical interest, and honest dialogue, admitting one's shortcomings as much as not ignoring complex issues such as human rights violations even in the face of possible economic disadvantages.

Despite the importance of state-to-state interactions, domestic developments remain central. Links between civil societies should not be abandoned and instead, need to be strengthened. While they cannot be used as a mere instrument to enforce change, they need to be seen as part of an ongoing political struggle. By the same token, in a world of multiple, competing orders,<sup>19</sup> the EU needs to take the concept of principled pragmatism set out in its Global Strategy more seriously and neither focus only on geopolitics nor return to the missionary projection of presumed EU norms onto others. Particular focus must be given to the contact zones of these orders, for which creative solutions need to be found to allow them to interact with both sides. At the same time, we need to reinvest more energy in designing policies to overcome borders.

What does this mean in terms of concrete policies? Let me conclude with a few pointers:

- Renewing and strengthening the defensive forces in the NATO and the EU is right but needs to be accompanied by cooperative signaling and visions for institution-building in a post-Putin era.
- A renewal of OSCE may be one way forward but would require the NATO

<sup>19</sup> Trine Flockhart, *After the Invasion of Ukraine: The Old Order Is Dead - Long Live the New Order* (University of Southern Denmark, 2022). <https://www.sdu.dk/en/forskning/forskningsenheder/samf/cws/cws%20activities/the%20war%20in%20ukraine/the%20old%20order%20is%20dead>

- members as well as Russia to prioritize and not instrumentalize OSCE.<sup>20</sup>
- The EU and EU member states need to be more honest and consistent in their policy towards Russia and take Russia (and Ukraine!) more seriously, both as partners and rival. This is linked to sanctions (do not avoid them where they hurt) and societal cooperation (do not engage in symbolic politics that undermines potentially productive links).
  - EU member states and their citizens and industries need to reduce energy consumption and maximize renewables – not only to reduce dependence on Russia.
  - Informal meetings of China, the EU, Russia, and the U.S., together with regional representatives from the African Union and South America, are a good thing and ought not to be rejected because of antipathies towards great power politics.
  - Likewise, a neutral zone or zone of overlapping membership in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus should be pursued. EU membership is an option in conflict cases only if all parties agree. At the same time, the EU needs to deepen its continuous engagement with states such as Ukraine.
  - In the meantime, the EU should draw up a substantial post-war financial and economic aid package similar to the post-World War II U.S. Marshall Plan.
  - We need a renewed emphasis on creative border arrangements (“debordering”) in the form of Euroregions or similar structures.

The rise of a single liberal order and “the end of history” were misguided assumptions after the end of the Cold War. Instead, we have witnessed the continuous struggle between alternative political projects and a world of multiple orders. This has reinforced realist precautionary inclinations but has not invalidated the need for institutionalist engagement. A peaceful European order needs to build on (a) more honesty, (b) serious great power management mirrored by societal linkages, and (c) creative thinking about joint institutions and regional overlaps. None of this is easy, straightforward, or will yield immediate results. But the technocratic renderings of institutions and normative power have been profoundly rebutted, while our future is too precious to return to the Cold War madness of mutually assured destruction.

<sup>20</sup> On Russia and OSCE, see Viatcheslav Morozov, “Russia’s Changing Attitude Toward the OSCE: Contradictions and Continuity,” *Sicherheit & Frieden*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (2005): p. 69–73.