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Evolution of the idea of the “Russian threat” to the security of the EU and NATO

Master’s Thesis

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1. I hereby declare that I have compiled this thesis using the listed literature and resources only.
2. I hereby declare that my thesis has not been used to gain any other academic title.
3. I fully agree to my work being used for study and scientific purposes.

In Prague on the 2nd of August, 2022 Anastasiia Peleshenko

References

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Abstract

Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014, the illegal annexation of Crimea, and the Russian proxy-war in the Donbas region of Ukraine, the idea of the Russian threat to the West has emerged in the academia and political discourse. While generally accepted as a serious concern among both Western democracies and international organizations, its conceptual complexity increased with time, to the point that the understanding of which Russian capabilities and foreign activities had to be considered threatening became multifaceted and convoluted. In order to understand how the idea of the Russian threat has evolved over the years, a discourse analysis of the texts from the EU and NATO was conducted, examining how the factors of context, identity, and goals have affected the articulation of the discourse. Research has shown that even though Russia gained a status of an ideological Other to the West, it was not always considered a threat. Additionally, while the awareness and understanding of the threats it posed to Western democracies grew over time, the organization(s) could not always articulate a clear discourse of the Russian threat. The changing contexts, the identities of the organizations and the values they are based on, as well as the EU and NATO's goals pertaining to Russia, have both facilitated and hampered the establishment of the idea of the Russian threat at different points in time.

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Introduction

The understanding of the Russian threat has not always been as clear as it is today, in 2022. Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, illegal annexation of Crimea, and the instigation of a proxy war in the Donbas region in 2014, the post-Cold War security regime was shaken by a sudden military aggression and occupation of the territory of another sovereign state, leading to the rise of the idea of the Russian threat to the West. Referring to various foreign activities of Russia as *aggressive* and *hostile* over the years has led to the establishment of the argument of the Russian threat to the Western democracies as a security issue that should be addressed and perceived with utmost seriousness. However, among various media discourses as well as official documents that constituted the Western political discourse on the topic, exists a wide spectrum of activities that constituted *the most* danger. Therefore, this thesis aimed to trace in time the development of the concept of the *Russian threat* as perceived and expressed by the official documents and statements from the EU and NATO and their representatives in the period from 2014 to 2021.

By implementing the approaches of the Critical Discourse Analysis and Political Discourse Analysis, the specific variations in the articulation of the discourse from both organizations were analyzed considering the effects of context, identity, and goals underlying the creation of texts in focus. The analysis of the contexts in which the discourses were produced, placed under consideration the Russian foreign policies aiming to destabilize and weaken the West and its possible responses to the Russian regime growing more authoritarian and revisionist since 2014, or going against the established norms of the post-Cold War security regime. Such policies included the Russian overall anti-hegemonic strategy against the West, as well as the use of hybrid warfare, cyber-attacks, disinformation, and chemical weapons, or infringement of the sovereignty of other states and the development of Russian conventional military and nuclear capabilities. This allowed to consider how such activities were perceived by the EU and NATO, and whether they were framed as a threat. Further, to understand why

certain contexts produced clearer threat discourses than other, the institutional context and larger socioeconomic and political contexts in which the organizations found themselves at different points in time were considered as possible limiting or supporting factors.

On the other hand, in order to understand the construction and the *meaning* behind the idea of the Russian threat, the influence of the identity of the actors were considered, as the discourses from different contexts have contributed to the ideological construction of Self-versus-Other discursive forms, where attribute Russia the role of a revisionist, but not always threatening actor opposing the Western democratic regimes. Finally, the analysis of the goals, which were determined by both the context of the discourse and the identity of the actors helped to understand why in certain cases the representation of Russia as a threat was avoided or excluded from the official communications.

This thesis aimed to present a complex approach and a comprehensive overview that considered the circumstances and drivers behind the discourse creation, that may help explain why the West was not able to deter the Russian aggression in 2022. To achieve that goal, the focus was placed on answering the following research questions:

- How were the discourses pointing to the growing (or existing) Russian threat articulated?

- How did the discourse characterizing the specific foreign activities of Russia as threatening develop over time and ultimately construct the idea of the Russian threat?

- What were the circumstances in which the discourse was produced and how did the factors of identity, context, and goals of the organizations affect the discourse articulation?

Therefore, this thesis follows the following structure: first a literature review presents the development of the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Political Discourse Analysis approached for the interpretation of the threat discourses; but also makes an overview of the Russia-West relations prior and after 2014 that have determined both the varying perceptions of the Russian threats and the articulation of the discourses in focus. Next, a research framework that outlines how the changing contexts, identities and goals of the organizations may have both facilitated and hindered the definition of the Russian policies as threats. As the research method is explained, the empirical part of the thesis presenting the discourse analysis is divided in two parts, focusing first on the articulation of the Russian threat to NATO and then to the EU. The finding and conclusions are summarized in the last chapter.

It is important to note that some changes to the original plan for this work as outlined in the thesis project were made, to ensure that the analysis can present most relevant conclusions. While conducting the analysis of the selected texts from both organizations, it became clear that most of the discourses were not focusing on the argumentation, as in most cases the deliberations on how to counter the growing Russian threats took place within the institutions, thus the focus on the constructions of the arguments in the discourse was removed, but the goal premise of the framework by Fairclough and Fairclough (2012) was preserved as it presented value for answering the research questions more clearly, while more emphasis was placed on the role of context and identity in the formulation of the Russian threat discourses.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Application of Critical Discourse Analysis to the Study of Threat Perceptions

2.1.1 Identity and meaning in Critical Discourse Analysis

The development of the research methods based on the analysis of the discourse and relations between politics and language may date back to the ancient Roman and Greek philosophers' works, however, the emergence of the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) occurred in the 1970s, with the growth of 'critical linguistics' studies (Dunmire 2012, p.746). van Dijk (2001) contends that CDA is primarily focused on the ways in which "social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context" (p.31).

However, over time, the CDA has become rather a "set of methods" and an "an orientation to the study of language in use […], language embedded within its social context, or language as a form of social practice" (Hodges and Nilep, 2007 p.4). It is in the social contexts that discourse produces meaning, in particular in the political settings, where the process of creation of what Müller (2011) calls the "truth regimes" and Bilgin (2007, as cited in Müller, 2011) refers to as "geopolitical truths," takes place. Chilton (2004) defines this process as the use of discourse through which political actors "imbue their utterances with evidence, authority, and truth" to achieve legitimacy (as cited in Dunmire, 2012, p.736). From a similar perspective, Edelman (1988) argues that the construction of meaning through discourse is what constitutes the political discourse aiming to create the understanding of, for instance, events, leaders, problems, and crises, turning "political language" into "political reality" (as cited in Dunmire, 2012, p.737).

Thus, discourse can be understood not just as general use of language and expression, but a "set of meanings" that convey an ideology or a specific agenda (Flowerdew & Richardson,

2017, p.22). Ideology then has been defined as a set of beliefs and values that frequently become the basis for the identity of a certain social group (ibid.). This ideology may be shared in pursuit of specific ends, one of which would be to set apart "Us" versus "Them" (van Dijk, 2007) in the process of construction of identity, conveying the self-perception in relation to others (Flowerdew & Richardson, 2017, p.23). Such "Us-Them" dichotomy frequently becomes the basis of threat narratives (Larina, Ozyumenko & Ponton, 2019).

When it comes to the political settings, van Dijk (2007) outlines the Us-verus-Them dichotomy as one both contributing to the construction of ideology and its indirect expression, as ideologies underlying the identities organize values and goals through the discourse. Ideology becomes the *basis* of discourse, and also a starting point for the group members (Us) to "explain, motivate or legitimate their (group-based) actions" (p.119). Additionally, van Dijk analyses the cognitive aspects of discourse formation which are determined by the *appropriateness* to the context, and "ideological bias of the mental model" which defines the meaning of the discourse, especially when it covers a specific event or action, coupled with previous knowledge and group beliefs (pp.119-123). It is through these processes that ideology (and group identity) may be expressed through the discourse or affect its interpretation. Finally, van Dijk identifies several means through which the ideology and identity may be coded in the discourse, including *context* (speaking as a member of the in-group or an event for the members of the group), *text* (positive presentation of "Us"; negative presentation of "Them"), *meaning* (in the topic, lexicon, and accepted (*local*) meanings), *form* (syntax, format, rhetorical structures), and *action* (Speech acts, communicative acts, and interactions) (pp.125-126).

Blommaert (2005, p.251, as cited in Flowerdew, 2017, p.165), defines context as "the totality of conditions under which discourse is being produced, circulated and interpreted;" while van Dijk (2005, p.237, as cited in Flowerdew, 2017, pp.184-185) refers to it as "the cognitive, social, political, cultural and historical environments of discourse," and finally, Fairclough points out that the analysis of the context of a discourse involves understanding the

relationship between "texts, processes, and social conditions, both the immediate conditions of the situational context and the more remote conditions of institutions and social structures" (Fairclough, 1989, p.26, as cited in Flowerdew, 2017, p.24). The context is dynamic and changes even as the discourse is produced, however, the discourse and context work together to create meaning through the process of contextualisation, and this process may be negotiated between the participants of the discourse (Flowerdew, 2017, p.185). At the same time, both the institutional and larger socio-political contexts may impose limitations for the discourse articulation (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012).

The interpretations of context, on the other hand, rely heavily on the ideology and identity of the producer of the discourse (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012), thus, an approach to discourse analysis that considers the interactions between the two factors, allows to deconstruct the meaning that the discourse intends to convey. The focus on the *Western* identities in the discourse analysis applied for the interpretation of the Russia-West relations was applied by several authors. Böller (2018) explores the shift in the identity of NATO following annexation of Crimea in 2014, through a comparative analysis of the discourses from two NATO Secretaries General, while Ališauskas (2015) employs a postructuralist approach to analyse the formulation of the Russian threat in the official discourse from the NATO Secretary General Anders F. Rasmussen. He proceeds from the understanding of the NATO-Russia relations to main themes, stages, and representations that emerged in the discourse that reflected their relations in the given period. Both authors find that the role of identity in the discourses from NATO reveals the most about the interpretation of the changing relations with Russia, or the threats that would be in the focus of the official communications.

On the other hand, Bauman (2020) applies a comparative discourse analysis to the exploration of the discourse on information warfare, propaganda, and disinformation in the Russia-West relations. He uses a poststructuralist framework focused on the construction of interpretations through the discourse. The author points out that no previous research on the 'information warfare' discourse and its effects on Russia-West relations existed by the time

of writing and argues that it can be best understood through the interpretation of 'Selves' within the discourses from Russia and Germany (as a cumulative *West*, 'representing the European discourse'). He finds that the key mechanism through which the discourses led to the current confrontation was the construction of the 'hostile Other' by both sides. While the research is limited to the Russian and German online newspaper publications, it brings to light some of the implications of the discourses on the current and future relations of Russia and *the West*, while introducing another methodological approach to the analysis of representation constructed through discourse.

The interpretation of the identity can also rely on the established *practices*, as is the case in the NATO-EU cooperation in the security field, where "communities of practice" may emerge, constituting the identity of the *collective security community* (Græger, 2016). The practices organizing the community develop in the everyday, often unnoticed and unofficial interactions that are based on "the (tacit) practical knowledge and shared "background" knowledge (education, training, and experience)" (in headquarters and offices of both NATO and the EU, but also in field missions) that ultimately *produce* the security regime (p.477). The existence of such knowledge plays an important role if we would consider the role that it plays in both discourse construction and interpretation (Flowerdew & Richardson, 2017, p.53). Adler (2008, p. 202) also notes that such *background knowledge* is "the context within which rational action takes place" (as cited in Græger, 2016, p.480). While such background knowledge in this context refers mainly to the practical, action-oriented expertise, as it stems from similar education and training, it also leads to shared beliefs and approaches to reasoning. In the context of the EU and NATO, however, the background knowledge would also reflect on the understanding of the core identity of the organizations, as it is organized around its fundamental norms, values, and commitments they were founded upon. Finally, it is also the historical knowledge or the *memory* that affects the identity and the construction of the discourse (Thaler, 2020).

2.1.2. Political Discourse Analysis and construction of a 'Threat"

Political Discourse Analysis (PDA) has emerged as another approach that "comprises inter- and multi-disciplinary research that focuses on the linguistic and discursive dimensions of political text and talk and on the political nature of discursive practice" (Dunmire, 2012, p.735), and its applications and interpretations have varied among the researchers. Van Dijk (1997) emphasizes its use for "understanding the nature and function of political discourse and with critiquing the role discourse plays in producing, maintaining, abusing, and resisting power in contemporary society" as the main focus of PDA (pp.11-12, as cited in Dunmire, 2012), while Shapiro (1981, 1984, 1988) contends that the analysis of the political discourse reveals "radical entanglement between textual and political practices" (as cited in Dunmire, 2012, p.737) which allows the researcher to properly interpret the political phenomena in focus of the research. Tichý (2019) also refers to Larsen's (1997, pp. 25–26) definition of political discourse as a "set of pronounced judgments, considerations, and opinions in political debates institutionalized by political figures, and its aim is not just attention, but mainly persuasion, with the condition that political direction is the cornerstone of argumentation" (p.605).

Fairclough and Fairclough (2012) adopt this perspective in the formulation of the political discourse analysis framework that aims to deconstruct the formulation of arguments of the political discourse intended for legitimization and justification of political decisions.

In a chapter on the evolution of the CDA approach, Norman Fairclough (2018 as cited in Flowerdew & Richardson, 2017) refers to this method as incorporation of "argumentation theory into CDA" and argues that it considers ideology through arguments and their features (the *premises* of arguments), where identity becomes one the premises of the action that the discourse pursues. Thus, this approach allows not only to demonstrate that the discourse may affect the policies in the *real* world, but actually allows to explain *how* this happens, as the discourse may present the reasons for and against a specific course of action. Applying this

framework to the global financial crisis, Fairclough and Fairclough (2012) explore how representation, identity, and narrative can be combined with argumentation analysis, allowing to explain how all of these aspects shape the discourse and its rhetoric. The authors emphasize that argumentation of the political discourse is based on the actor's identity (or of the identity of the group they represent) and the reasoning for a specific course of action.

The framework deconstructs the discourse considering context, goal of the agent, and the value that informs their goal. *The goal* in this framework is understood as a future, sought after state of affairs stipulating from the agents' concerns and *the value* that the completion of the goal would enable, which usually is tied to the actor's responsibilities and professional duties, but also the norms and rules they follow in their work (Fairclough & Fairclough 2012, p. 42). The final premise that may influence the discourse according is the presumed *means-goal* that can be leveraged instrumental for achieving the agent's goal (p. 44). The circumstances or the context in which the discourse is created may limit the number of means available for the agent, directly affecting the formulation of the discourse. Such circumstances include both the institutional settings and the larger context in which the event that prompted the discourse creation has taken place.

Through the analysis of the European identity in the EU discourses on Russia, Thaler (2020) finds that the EU relations with Russia is the most difficult subject in the EU foreign affairs discourse where it becomes the least coherent due to the *context* or numerous divisions between the actors on a whole range of policy areas, and the lack of coordination between actors and the EU policy objectives. By coherence the author understands "the presence of synergies between external policies and objectives of the EU and its Member States" (p.2). Consequently, the policies that are produced may reflect "the lowest common denominator" which usually lies significantly below the EU ambitions but is perceived as a compromise among the Member States, thus reflecting the effects of the *means* available to the actor in the institutional setting of the EU. Thaler (2020) also refers to Wolfers' (1962) definition of *goals* which the foreign policies may pursue that are defined as either *milieu* goals

("concerned with external environment") or *possession* goals (securing something which proves *value* domestically) (p.5). He finds that the EU milieu goals towards Russia were intended to promote the European norms and values, or improve and shape the external environment, while the possession goals towards Russia have not been as prominent in the EU foreign policy and were rather pursued bilaterally by the Member States leading to incoherence between the EU foreign policies and foreign affairs discourse. However, the author does not focus on the emergence of the concerns for the Russian threat in the EU discourses.

In the construction of a threat through political discourse, the goal practically becomes the creation of the understanding of a specific event or activity as a threat. Bauman (2020) refers to Campbell (1992) who defines the threat discourse as "the consequence of a calculation […] which objectifies events, disciplines relations, and sequesters an ideal of the identity of the people said to be at risk" (p.3). Additionally, Ališauskas (2015) refers to another work by Campbell (1998) for his definition of the "discourse of danger," which once again stresses the role of identity based on difference (going back to the idea of Us versus Them referred to by other scholars), but also "shared values, historical experiences, and ideas" that constitute the said identity of "Us" (Kitchen, 2009, p. 101, as cited in Böller, 2018, p.222). Campbell contends that the construction of "referent objects of threat" is important for the identity of a community, which serves even more truth in the case of NATO, since it essentially justifies its existence (p.37) and provides an impetus to engage in self-definition (constructing the meaning of *self*, with its scope, missions, and values) (Williams and Neumann 2000, p. 361, as cited in Böller, 2018, p.222).

Additionally, *discourse of danger* can be used to raise support for the security policies based on the identities of "Self" and the dangerous "Other" (or Us and Them) (as cited in Ališauskas, 2015, p.60). In fact, Ališauskas (2015) argues that in 2014, the NATO discourse of the Russian threat was used to a large extent with the goal to re-define the identity of the Alliance as "a security guarantee for allies that protects against the Russian threat" (p.60).

However, Bauman points to the dynamic nature of the threat discourse, where political struggles for reaffirming or challenging the existing discourse are taking place between different interpretations of the events that compete over dominance in the *new* discourse (Torfing, 1999, pp. 92–93, as cited in Bauman, 2020).

Dunmire (2012) also explores the connection between political discourse and war, with the analysis of the different approaches that the discourse analysis has taken in the aftermath of 9/11 terrorist attacks. In this body of work, the analysis of language used for justifications of the war, grammatical choices of the language, identity building through discourse, and the impacts of discourse on policies are in the centre of attention (pp.743-744). She also briefly outlines the approach that is most relevant to the current research, where Hodges and Nilep (2007) apply discourse analysis to evaluate how the political language in the aftermath of 9/11 has "shaped interpretations and understandings of the terrorist attacks and helped constitute sociopolitical reality in their aftermath." Their work focused on "the discursive production of identities, ideologies, and collective understandings in response to 9/11" (p.3), which led to the definition of both the identity of the enemy and the position of the democratic world (Us) versus terrorism (Them).

Thus, how the context of the discourse together with the identity and goals of the agents have helped or hindered the establishment of the construct of the Russian threat in the discourses from the EU and NATO.

2.2 Russia-West Relations

Russian role and status in the international politics has always been multifaceted, it could still be considered a great power primarily due to its large territory, energy resources, permanent seat at the United Nations Security Council, and military as well as nuclear capabilities (Fink

& Oliker, 2020; Parlar Dal & Erşen, 2020). At the same time, the Russian economy and social welfare are the factors placing it among the developing or rising powers, and part of the BRICS. Perhaps even more significantly, the role of a rising power is based on the values, power structures, and opposition to the Western influence in the international arena that Russia has been challenging for many years (Parlar Dal & Erşen, 2020, p.5).

Understanding the Russia-West relations has been approached from multiple theoretical perspectives of international relations, however, just as 2014 was the turning point for the relations with NATO and the EU, so it was for reassessing the Russian foreign policies in the academia, from realism-inspired studies aiming to explain the aggression as either sudden () or perfectly anticipated (Monaghan, 2015, Ališauskas, 2015), to constructivist perspectives that have especially explored the norms and narratives behind the Kremlin activities abroad or the Western interpretations of the relations with the state ().

The year 1991 marked the beginning of a new era – the era of prospects, "Europe whole, free, and at peace with itself and its neighbors," meant to be united by shared values and key principles of the international law that would pre-define at least to some extent the foreign and security policies based on respect for state independence, sovereignty, and peaceful settlement of disputes (Rumer, 2016; MacFarlane, 2016). This new order always intended to make Russia a part of it, moreover, the Soviet Union was one of the signatories of the Charter of Paris for a New Europe and Russia became a member of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) intended to implement its vision. While for some time Russia seemed to be committed to the new security regime, Rumer (2016) argues that ever since the fall of the Soviet Union, some of Kremlin's foreign policymakers have never entirely stopped thinking in the Cold War terms (p.5) and several authors have argued that Russia did not really endorse the norm-based vision for a Trans-Atlantic and European security community (???). Once Russia has re-established its position as an internationally significant economy by 2008, Kremlin has become much more vocal in their concerns.

Rumer (2016) argues that the first notable break from Kremlin's support for the post-Cold War security regime occurred as soon as in the 1990s, when NATO had confirmed the course for the future accession of both Central European and Baltic states. This development had immediately become an issue for Russia, since NATO's expansion to the former Soviet areas of influence would threaten both the state's security and its interests in the neighborhood, since Russia was keen on restoring the great power status as an *heir* to the whole Soviet Union (Busygina, 2018; Fink & Oliker, 2020; Rogers & Tyushka, 2017). Not only was the influence in the neighborhood needed for the great power status, but it was considered a *given*, since Russia *had* to ensure the safety of the ethnic Russians in the former Soviet republics (MacFarlane, 2016; Rumer, 2016).

From this perspective, the enlargement of membership of both NATO and the EU was perceived by Russia as a threat on both geopolitical and ideological grounds (Rumer, 2016; MacFarlane, 2016). Duke & Gebhard (2017) refer to Charap and Troitskiy's (2013, p. 50) definition of an "integration dilemma," which in case of the Russia-West relations gradually turned into a security dilemma. The expansions made Russia feel less secure not as much because of the fears of aggression with the *enemies'* lines moving closer to the Russian borders but for more European countries joining the organizations that Kremlin could not influence (D'Anieri, 2019). In addition to the new Eastern European members, the later evolution of the relationship of the former Soviet Republics including Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia with NATO and the EU has consolidated the Russian view of growing insecurity in the region (ibid).

It is especially the evolution of the EU relationship with its Eastern neighbors that has prepared the grounds for the Russian resort to aggression in 2014. As Kremlin started the work on the Eurasian Economic Union (EEA) project meant to provide a stronger position vis-à-vis the European Union, for Ukraine, Georgia or Armenia to join the EEA customs union would stand in contradiction to the Association Agreements under the European Union's Eastern Partnership (EaP) project (MacFarlane, 2016). While the objective of the

EaP project which became part of the European Neighborhood policy in 2009, was to "promote political, economic, and rule of law reforms in countries of Eastern Europe and encourage their closer political and commercial ties to the EU" (Rumer, 2016, p.12), for Kremlin the situation became a zero-sum game for who would *get* to draw the former Soviet Republics into their area of influence and gain the leverage over the Eastern Europe (Duke & Gebhard, 2017). In 2013, in simplified terms, Russia succeeded in convincing the governments of Armenia and Ukraine to leave the negotiations on the EaP Association Agreements, which resulted in the Revolution of Dignity in Ukraine in 2014 and the events following it.

D'Anieri (2019) argues that at the core of the Russia-West security dilemma was that both parties believed they were trying to preserve the security status quo while regarding the other as trying to overturn it to their favour. While NATO and the EU sought to stabilize the region and advance the postmodern project of the integration through promotion of the values of democracy and liberal economies, Russia tried to preserve the influence it had inherited from the Soviet Union, as well as prevent the US from becoming a hegemony in the new world order it was helping to drive. In this manner such institutions as NATO and OSCE in the Russian discourses were reduced to just some of the American tools used for destabilizing other countries as they questioned or even violated their sovereignty (Fink & Oliker, 2020; MacFarlane, 2016). Such views have shaped the Russian *anti-hegemonic* strategy (Rogers & Tyushka, 2017) discussed further in Chapter 4.

The narratives that grew from the Russia-West integration/security dilemma framed the Western bloc as the "rule breaker," "overly intrusive, aggressive, and self-righteous" international actor who has not only dismissed and humiliated Russia ever since the end of the Cold War, but would also use the pretexts of humanitarian considerations (such as the Responsibility to Protect) and democratization for establishing and maintaining the influence abroad (Kfir, 2016; Rogers & Tyushka 2017; Parlar Dal & Erşen, 2020; Böller, 2018). Such

narratives followed the interventions of the West in Yugoslavia in 1999, in Iraq in 2003, and in Libya in 2011 (Siddi, 2018).

Moscow argued that the West had also other means for gaining influence, for instance by pushing for democratization in exchange for economic benefits (in the process of integration) or creating instability by sponsoring "colour revolutions" (Rose Revolution in Georgia, Orange Revolution in Ukraine, or the Arab Spring) (Rumer, 2016). For Russia it was especially problematic if they considered the influence reaching the states in the Russian sphere of "special interests" or its "inner abroad" (Duke & Gebhard, 2017, p. 382; Busygina, 2018, p.107). In this way, as it was argued, the West threatened the stability in Russia and undermined the international law order (Rogers & Tyushka, 2017).

2.2.1 The dilemmas in Russia-EU Relations

Several concerns have always been evident in the relationship between the EU and Russia. Even though a military threat to Europe was considered practically impossible up until 2014 (Kfir, 2016), the geographical proximity to a nuclear state that seemed to be strengthening its conventional military capabilities rapidly since 2008 and had a history of occupation of the Eastern European Member States (Duke & Gebhard, 2017), had never fully allowed a security dilemma between the EU and Russia to disappear. The competition for the influence over the *Common Neighbourhood* (D'Anieri, 2019) with the EU projects for "integration without membership" (Kuzio, 2016, p.104) resulted in the *integration dilemma* (Duke & Gebhard, 2017) which for Kremlin had become a matter of concern and a focal point for the arguments about the EU expansionism threatening the Russian sovereignty, statehood (Fink & Oliker, 2020), and honour (Götz, 2016).

Certainly, this is not how the EU perceived its cooperation with the Eastern Neighbourhood, however, the integration dilemma perfectly reflects the conflicting views of the EU and Russia about the ideological and geopolitical grounds that both preferred the European

politics to be based on (Busygina, 2018). The ideological incompatibility, in particular, was not suspected during the establishment of the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) of 1994 (Duke & Gebhard, 2017) since the *special relationship* was to be built in accordance with the core European norms and values, however, over the years, it became increasingly clear that the EU-Russia relations were caught in the "conflict/cooperation dichotomy" as Russia never fully adopted the European ideology and the EU never managed to reach an understanding of the nature of the Russian ambitions for the region (Nitoiu, 2017).

In fact, Kremlin has repeatedly taken issue with the *imposition* of the Western values as a pre-condition for cooperation, since it appeared that the EU had acted from a position of superiority, refusing to accept Russia as an equal global power (Busygina, 2018; Kendall-Taylor & Edmonds, 2019; Lukin, 2020; Nitoiu, 2017). The disagreements on the idea of the security regime in Europe were never resolved, and gradually Russia also started to make less efforts to integrate the *European* values at home, leading to criticisms from the EU and a "latent conflict" that was never resolved (Nitoiu, 2017).

Nitoiu (2017) applies a neo-realist perspective to explain the persistence of the cooperation/conflict dichotomy both before and after 2014 and argues that "neither the EU nor Russian foreign policy has undergone major transformations (of both power, scope and organization) that would provide sufficient incentive or constraints for a complete overhaul of the [dichotomy]" (p.149), but also the post-Cold War world order has remained relatively stable and this type of relationship allowed both parties to preserve the benefits it provided without yielding any of their interests to improve it.

For the EU, the ideology was the core of its identity and the norms and values that were considered unnegotiable for any of its partnerships drove the criticism of the Russian both domestic and external policies, but the same ideology has driven the EU to continue the efforts to maintain the diplomatic relations and cooperation with Russia even while the "fundamental norms and values of the relationship" were continuously questioned by

"internal and external challenges" (Thaler, 2020, p.225) created by Kremlin since 2014. On the other hand, Russia continued to challenge the ideological standing of the Union and was not only uninterested in complying with the EU vision, since making Russia more democratic would undermine the regime of power built by its ruling elite (???), but has launched a strategy to weaken the EU and the Western bloc by undermining its ideology from within (???).

Following the annexation of Crimea and instigation of the war in the East of Ukraine, the EU had implemented limited sanctions which included the suspension of the summit processes, asset freezes and travel bans, followed by certain restrictions on the Russian access to the European capital markets, military trade, energy sector activities, cooperation with the European Investment Bank, selected bilateral economic programs, sanctions on Crimea, and individual sanctions (MacFarlane, 2016, p.3; European Council, n.d.). However, up until 2022, very few new sanctions had been introduced, and the cooperation with Russia persisted despite mutual sanctions regimes and the growing number of concerns over the Russian foreign policies targeting the EU or going against its core values of human rights, rule of law, and democracy.

The core area of cooperation confounding the EU-Russia relationship is the interdependence in both trade and energy sectors. Russia procuring approximately 40% of the EU energy supplies (Tichý, 2019) has created yet another security dilemma revolving around the *security of supply* for the EU and *security of demand* for Russia (Krickovic, 2015). Even though "liquified natural gas (LNG) supplies, US shale gas, and European energy policy regulation severely undercut Russia's use of energy supplies for political leverage" (Michlin-Shapir, 2021, p.246), the energy security has remained one of the key levers of influence for Kremlin and one of the most serious problems that the EU is facing in 2022 as Russia is using it practically as blackmail following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine (?).

For the same reason, the Nord Stream 2 pipeline was one of the most dividing issues for the EU, where competing viewpoints on the economic benefits and the geopolitical risks of the project have been at the core of the debate (Michlin-Shapir, 2021) and the energy security discourse (Tichý, 2019). Tichý (2019) explores the discourse on diversification of the energy supply from the EU as energy *security* discourse, which he finds "was dominated by a more negative understanding of Russia with only a limited influence of norms and values on the identity of the EU, which promotes its energy interests in relation to the RF in this context" (p.604). The author focuses on how the dependence on the Russian energy resources was securitized by the European Union. First and foremost, the energy security discourses would come to the spotlight in times of energy crises, which occurred in 2009 and 2014. The vulnerability of supplies travelling through Ukraine, turned the European energy dependency into *vulnerability* to disruptions (Šefčovič, 2015). In that respect, the Nord Stream 2 project was opposed by the EU institutions since it could increase the dependence on one supplier, and potentially reduce the security of supply due to a smaller number of "transportation corridors" since the implementation of the pipeline would lead to the abandonment of the route through Ukraine, also leading to Ukraine losing the leverage and revenues from the transit it hosts.

2.2.2 In between Cold Wars: Russia-NATO relations

Just as it was the case with the EU, NATO and Russia had to deal with an integration dilemma, but Duke & Gebhard (2017) found the security dilemma more pronounced in this case, since the precautionary measures implemented to increase deterrence before or after 2014, would be seen as either intended for influence-amassing or setting ground for aggression by either side.

Therefore, since 1990s NATO undertook measures to reduce the security dilemma, by creating the "NATO-Russia Council" and not establishing any new NATO bases on the territories of the new members in Central Europe (D'Anieri, 2019, p.259) and has always highlighted that any of its policies had remained "within the terms of the NATO-Russia Founding Act" (Sperling and Webber, 2017, p.45). Nevertheless, the accusations of a "broken promise" of non-expansion which was merely a verbal agreement made during the

signing of the Treaty on the Final Settlement with Respect to Germany (Sauvage, 2022 - https://www.france24.com/en/russia/20220130-did-nato-betray-russia-by-expanding-to-the-east), has remained one of Kremlin's key narratives up until today, even if it was based on the "the current and foreseeable security environment" and was not really documented as an official arrangement (Rumer, 2016).

For NATO, the year 2014 brought to the agenda a question of how the war at the border of the EU would affect the relationship between the two institutions (Duke & Gebhard, 2017, p.379). Essentially, it became a turning point for the re-definition of NATO's identity since the end of the Cold War, with regards to both the cooperation and relationship with the EU and Russia. Duke & Gebhard (2017, p.380) refer to several authors characterizing the EU-NATO relationship up to 2014 as "formal non-cooperation at the political level, with various informal forms of ad hoc cooperation in the field." Up to that point, the cooperation and the identity of the Euro-Atlantic security community focused primarily on regional and collective security (including crisis management and cooperative security "out-of-area"), and not as much on "collective defence," due to which even the "cornerstone of NATO," Article 5 on Collective Defense assuring support in self-defense in case of military aggression on one of the Allies has to some extent lost its relevance (Böller, 2018; Duke & Gebhard, 2017, p.381, link). Up to 2014, and according to some opinions even after (???), the two organizations have failed to establish "respective strategic specificity" (Duke and Vanhoonacker 2015, p. 153 as cited in Duke & Gebhard, 2017, p.381).

However, after 2014, Sperling & Webber (2016) argue that NATO has in practice "resecuritised" Russia as a threat to the alliance itself, in effect threatening its core identity based on the norms of the security regime established after the end of the Cold War. Even though it can be argued that Russia became an "external challenge" for NATO ever since the return of Vladimir Putin to presidency in 2012, since it is when a clear "juxtaposition of Russia vs. the West" emerged in the Russian discourse (Kendall-Taylor & Edmonds, 2019; p.12), and Matlary & Heier (2016) point to the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008; from 2014, NATO discourse has stressed the need for measures "countering and deterring Russian aggression" (Rumer, 2016). This change in understanding of the Russia-West relations has also heightened the need for closer cooperation between the EU and NATO due to the rising concerns of the Member States in Central Europe and the Baltics. Quite quickly after 2014, the relationship between the Russia and NATO worsened significantly, since the focus shifted from dialogue to "military signalling and […] taking military actions" (Sperling & Webber, 2016, p.43).

The first measures for deterring more Russian aggression in Europe were launched in 2014 and included the enhancement of defence in Europe, and suspension of "all practical civilian and military cooperation between NATO and Russia" (Duke & Gebhard, 2017, p.382). The latter was implemented also following the war in Georgia in 2008, however the aggression against Ukraine held more *symbolic* weight as it was the first act of annexation of another state's territory since the World War II (Sperling & Webber, 2016). The Alliance has also established greater cooperation with Sweden and Finland over the security of the Baltic Sea, as well as implemented the new Readiness Action Plan (RAP).

Annexation of Crimea became what Sperling & Webber (2016) call a "precipitating event," grave enough to disrupt the security status quo, where going forward, any following events could have reinforced the perception of the threat, while the threat discourse would run and change *in parallel* to the events it would refer to (p.30). However, just as in the case with the EU, NATO could not and did not intend to cut the relations with Russia entirely, as its

engagement was still required for the resolution of the ongoing conflicts in Afghanistan and Syria, as well as for managing the Iran's nuclear program, and fight against terrorism and the Islamic State of Iraq (ISIL) (Kfir, 2016, Böller, 2018).

As Russia continued to develop its foreign activities aiming to undermine the West, the range of Russian *threats* has been extended well beyond the possibility of military or hybrid aggression in Europe.

2.2.3 Perceptions of the Russian Threats

In particular since 2014, various explanations for the Russian turn to confrontation towards the West have emerged, stemming from both realist and constructivist perspectives and pointing out how the policies of both EU and NATO could have contributed to the *new* Russian course of politics. However, if one would be to delve deeper into the construction of the Russian national identity and the resulting outlook on the international relations, this course would barely be considered new.

Kfir (2016) outlines two competing schools of thought on the matter, where one agrees that Russia has primarily been acting in response to the growing influence of the West, while the other sees Russia under Putin as a neo-imperial, expansionist state. Götz (2016) refers to both perspectives which frame Russia either "a victim" or "a revisionist state," but adds a third outlook which considers Russia merely "a troublemaker," justifying the aggression in 2014 and foreign policies against the West henceforth by attempting to create external instability to divert attention of the domestic constituencies from the internal crises. From this view, as a victim of the ambitions of the West, Kremlin merely tried to defend its sovereign geopolitical interests and *honour* from "the Western encroachments;" but as a revisionist state, it pursued the ambitions of creating a new world order in place of the one established after the Cold War

that it never truly endorsed. Such ambitions would go as far as to the restoration of the influence of the Soviet Union (Götz, 2016; Kfir, 2016).

To consider in particular the perspectives victimizing Russia, Milne (2014, as cited in Götz, 2016) argued that the annexation of Crimea and instigation of the war in Donbas was a direct response to the NATO eastward expansion; Walt (2015, as cited in Götz, 2016) also stresses that it was primarily fear that forced Russia to such drastic measures to prevent Ukraine from moving under the Western sphere of influence; and Mearsheimer (2014, as cited in Duke & Gebhard, 2017, p.390), believed that the Russian actions were rather defensive than offensive and it was only the feeling of superiority and inability to take the Russian narratives seriously during the Western pursuit the "post-modernist agendas" that led the EU and the US to fail to anticipate the Russian aggression.

Other perspectives suggest that the West had mistakenly adhered to a possibility of being able to "wait Russia out," as its declining economy and social welfare would naturally incapacitate it in due time (Kendall-Taylor & Edmonds, 2019; Rumer, 2016), which is why they were unable to take note of the changing realities and views among the Russian people and elites (including the increasing nationalism), leading to the West "sleepwalking" into the conflict (House of Lords, 2015, p. 6, as cited in MacFarlane, 2016). Nevertheless, up to 2022, a *waiting* strategy still seemed passable, especially in Europe, since it seemed to be easier to resolve the conflict once Putin was no longer at power or when a more democratic regime would finally be established in Russia, since the EU did not hold too many levers of influence for Kremlin to change the course regarding Ukraine or the West overall (D'Anieri, 2019, p.269).

Duke & Gebhard (2017), on the other hand, argue that the EU and NATO could have been weighting in the various geopolitical stakes within different strategic goals, but even such consideration may have been overshadowed by their "naiveté" and lack of understanding of Russia (p.390). This lack of understanding may have led to the deepening of the security

dilemma by negligence (MacFarlane, 2016; D'Anieri, 2019), as long before 2014, in Russia the Western policies were framed and perceived as measures of alienation, helping Kremlin to construct the narratives of being a *better alternative* to "declinist and decadent" West (Rogers & Tyushka, 2017).

For the same reason, whenever the US was positioned as the power destabilizing the world order and undermining the sovereignty of other states, Russia stepped up to take on the role of a "righteous correcting power," intervening in conflicts from the Middle East to South America to protect the sovereignty of the states from the Western interests (Rogers & Tyushka, 2017). In particular, Russia joining the war in Syria had become a confounding factor for the deteriorating relationship with the West, creating both disagreements and quickly leading to criticism of more Russian neglect of the international and humanitarian law (MacFraland, 2016; Monaghan, 2015; Rogers & Tyushka, 2017). And while the annexation of Crimea had naturally drawn the Western attention to the Russian military capabilities, their actions in Syria have accentuated it as a Western security concern even more (Monaghan, 2015; Rumer, 2016).

3. Research Framework: Analyzing Discourse on Russia as a Threatening Other

It is clear that the rise of the Russian threat through the growing hostility of both the foreign policies and the narratives of Kremlin since 2014 have pushed both the EU and NATO to work on re-defining their relations with the state, however, the research on this shift has not been able to provide either a comprehensive overview of how this development has been reflected in the discourses from both EU and NATO, in particular after 2015, or did not manage to explain *why* certain Russian policies were perceived as more threatening compared to the others. Thus, an opportunity for research arises to fill in this gap.

In order to answer the research questions of this work, it is necessary to consider how the relations of EU and NATO with Russia change following 2014 and how these changes were reflected in the discourse which was articulated with considerations of the *context* of the discourse, *identity,* and *goals* of the actors. While the specific events or actions of Russia defining the context of the discourse may have prompted the specific statements from the organizations and their representatives, there were also numerous factors of the context that have prevented the Russian threat discourse from shaping or being more strongly articulated. In like manner, both the identity and the goals underlying the discourse articulation have affected both the definition of the threats or the construction of Russia as the threatening *Other*, but also have hindered this process. It will be argued that all three of these factors which are analyzed in this section and further considered through the analysis of the discourse from the EU and NATO in the timeframe between 2014 and 2021, can help explain why both institutions were not willing or capable of implementing more numerous or more robust measures to counter the growing Russian threat.

3.1 Considering Context, Identity, and Goals: Russian Threats and Western Limitations

3.1.1 Understanding Russian threats

The annexation of Crimea in 2014 was the biggest event shaking the Western confidence in the security regime they have built after the end of the Cold War until the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Following the Euromaidan Revolution or the Revolution of Dignity in Kyiv, in February 2014, public unrest grew on the Ukrainian peninsula and groups of the military with no identifying signs (later referred to as “green men”) have appeared on the territory and swiftly captured the key strategic sites by February 27, 2014, marking the beginning of the Russian invasion and undeclared aggression against Ukraine. Shortly after,

the new authorities appointed by Russia have fabricated a referendum, the validity of which remains unrecognized by both EU and NATO, proclaiming independence from Ukraine and later on, incorporation into Russia. The official date of annexation of Crimea is considered March 18, 2014 (Radio Freedom, 2021). In the second half of March, more separatist protests started in the East and East-South regions of Ukraine, with participation of the Russian citizens, and with the rebel groups supplied with weapons from Russia (Matlary & Heier, 2016). As Ukraine has initiated a military response referred to as Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO), unidentified military personnel assisted the rebels, and by May 11, the referenda also took place in the Ukrainian cities of Luhansk and Donetsk, establishing the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic (DPR or DNR) and Lugansk People's Republic (LPR or LNR) (Ukrainska Pravda, 2014).

In the following year, the military faced against the Russia-backed separatists and liberated several cities in the East of Ukraine, however, as the fighting continued the numbers of civilian casualties had increased, including the downing of the Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 (MH17) with the Russian Buk missile, fired from the territories under control of the separatists. The death of 283 passengers (211 of whom were nationals of the EU, mostly from Netherlands) and 15 crew members, made the Western attempts of "patient diplomacy" in response to the Russian aggression much more difficult (Duke & Gebhard, p.383), and this became one of the major events that both EU and NATO would refer to in the following years in their discourses on the Russia-West relations or addressing Russia (Kuzio, 2016, p.110). By 2015, the conflict became frozen with one third of the Luhansk and Donetsk regions (also referred to as Donbas) occupied by the Russia-backed self-proclaimed proxy statelets.

In June 2014, the preparations for negotiations over the conflict have been launched by the Trilateral Contact Group including Ukraine, Russia, and OSCE and the first agreement known as Minsk Protocol was signed in September 2014, which did not succeed to procure a ceasefire, and following the negotiations in the "Normandy Four" (Vladimir Putin, François

Hollande, Angela Merkel, and Petro Poroshenko) or Normandy-format, the Minsk II Agreement was signed on 12 February, 2015. While welcomed by the West as a possible end to the conflict destabilizing the region, the agreement was flawed, imposed several requirements on Ukraine aligned with the Russian interests (including a constitutional reform implementing the principle of decentralisation) (Jarábik, 2015), and was never implemented by either of the sides (Al Jazeera, 2022). While the fighting had decreased, the *proxy-war* with Russia continued until the escalation to the full-scale invasion on February 24, 2022.

Both the annexation of Crimea and the involvement in the Donbas region drew the attention of the West to the Russian use of the hybrid warfare, but also its conventional military capabilities, with a new-found concern for a possibility of the Russian aggression spreading further to the Central European or Baltic EU Member States and NATO Allies. In 2014, the EU has introduced economic and individual sanctions against Russia, while NATO has initiated strengthening the military capabilities for collective defense of the Allies in the region.

Siddi (2018) argues that the apparent unity in the West's condemnation of the Russian aggression and the sanctions regime was possible primarily due to the core values of the Euro-Atlantic security community identity that underlined the condemnation of the use of force for conflict resolution and respect for international law which stem from the devastating historical experience of the World War II. Thus, only the "mobilization of historical narratives" of the Russian "Other" (from the Northern War to the Cold War) that were already familiar to the European states and vested in the Western ideology (ibid., p.129), have supported the construction of Russia as a revisionist or *radical* and potentially threatening after 2014. Similarly, Russian violations of human rights in Syria through bombings of non-military targets, and further violations of the international law, including the use of chemical weapons for the poisoning of Poisoning of Sergei and Yulia Skripal in 2018 or poisoning of Alexei Navalny in 2020, and the explosion of ammunition depots in Vrbětice, Czech Republic that took place in 2014 but was traced to the Russian GRU agents in 2021; led to

"(discursive) interaction of identities between Russia and the West," where the danger or threat to the established Western ideology played the key role in differentiating the Self and the Other (Bauman, 2020, p.294).

Nonetheless, the diverging viewpoints about Russia as an international actor among the EU Member States and NATO Allies, as well as the perceived change of context after the Minsk Agreements led to changing narratives, weakening of the ideas of the Russian threat in the discourses, and lack of consensus on a *common* stance against Russia (Thaler, 2020).

Nevertheless, the normative *shock* of 2014 was enough to draw the attention of the West to the Russian hybrid and conventional military capabilities, which grew stronger in the following years, first as Russia joined the conflict in Syria in 2015 (Fink & Oliker, 2020), and as more hybrid tactics were deployed to directly target the West (Kendall-Taylor & Edmonds, 2019). While the tactics ranged from information warfare to cyber operations, the strategy was always to use hybrid warfare with the important *backing* by the conventional military (ibid.) as well as nuclear capabilities assuring deterrence from escalation or the Western military response.

The following passage on the non-nuclear deterrence forces serves as a good summary of the perceptions of the Russian military capabilities:

> *Today, Russia is able to bring its potent precision-strike, air/missile defence, electronic warfare, and cyber capabilities to bear against any would-be adversary. Conventional precision-strike weapons, especially the Kalibr family of cruise missiles extensively used in Russian military operations in Syria, have provided Russian military planners with previously unavailable–but long-desired–options. […] Additionally, Russia's air/missile defence, electronic warfare, and cyber systems are intended to disorganize and deny a would-be adversary superiority in the air and information domains, especially in the critical "initial period of war." Most of these capabilities have been battle-tested, demonstrated, and thus arguably made credible as a deterrent.*
>
> Fink & Oliker, 2020, p. 41

Moreover, the modernization of the forces since 2008 which included increased spending, modernization of weapons, heavy purchasing, and training for better deployment of the conventional military capabilities, especially with the display of force in Syria, have been noted as contributing to the growing Russian threat (MacFarlane, 2016 and Monaghan, 2015).

On the other hand, the nuclear capabilities have been of a particular importance to Russia and their standing in the world security order since the USSR had acquired them in 1949, and even more so since 1990s, as Kremlin has established the narratives of the Western threats and this deterrence capability was seen as a primary guarantee of Russian sovereignty (Rumer, 2016, p. 9). Apart from being an NPT signatory as a nuclear state, the Russian nuclear weapons have been regulated in a bilateral relationship with the US, that was practically suspended since the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, since in 2021, both sides have only begun the negotiations of a new START treaty or another agreement for the future regulations (CFR, n.d.).

Yet, since 2014, the Russian nuclear weapons became a bigger concern also for Europe, where even though Kremlin has declared that nuclear weapons may only be used "in response to the use of nuclear and other types of weapons of mass destruction" or an aggression with conventional weapons which would pose an existential threat to the state (Fink & Oliker, 2020, p. 42); the threats and *reminders* of Russia's nuclear weapons state status have been a frequent occurrence (Rogers & Tyushka, 2017). While this nuclear saber rattling has been an essential part of the Russian information warfare (ibid.), the possibility of tactical "limited nuclear strikes" being used to gain early advantage in a conflict became a part of the Russian military strategy, and Russian military capabilities became one of the security concerns for the West, especially as disagreements emerged on the US-Russia arms controls that became reflected in the discourses from NATO (Rumer, 2016).

The nuclear weapons have long been considered primarily a tool for deterrence from war between nuclear states and their allies by the principle of "nuclear umbrella" (Tow, 2014), in case of Russia, it has become a guarantee for other actors not being able to intervene into their "inner abroad" military actions. One could argue that for Russia the nuclear weapons have provided impunity and have likely been an important factor in the perception of the Russian threat that would restrict more confrontational discourses from the West, especially from the US or NATO.

Despite its developing conventional military and nuclear capabilities, Russia would still lack strategic resources for a successful military confrontation with the West, hence, it had to invest in cheaper, simpler, and at times even more impactful tactics of hybrid warfare, aiming to undermine the Western ideological unity and authority from the inside.

Hybrid warfare is not a new term or means of warfare (Rumer, 2016; Galeotti, 2019), however, Monaghan (2015) and Rumer (2016) argue that the understanding of the *Russian* hybrid warfare has emerged in 2014 in considerations of the means used for annexation of Crimea and proxy involvement in Donbas, and one of its first definitions came from an article by Chief of the Russian General Staff Valery Gerasimov from 2013, gaining the name of the Gerasimov Doctrine.) It can also be referred to as "modulated warfare" which combines conventional and nonconventional offensive tactics, as well as both overt and covert methods (Rogers & Tyushka, 2017, p.47), or simply understood as "a mix of special forces, civilians, information operations, cyberattacks, and, on some occasions, uniformed military personnel," most effective when used in a crisis environment (Rumer, 2016, p.24). By using hybrid tactics, the aggressor may avoid the necessity to resolve to large-scale military force.

Russia had leveraged disinformation and fake news, espionage, cyber-attacks, diplomatic and economic manipulations and blackmail, information warfare, and "activation of sleeper agents and friendly locals" (Rumer, 2016) as all the known hybrid tactics, but no longer on the grounds of preparation of a military operation, but to produce uncertainty and confusion

through destabilization of the credibility of the Western ideology (Rumer, 2016, p.24), as part of a large *anti-hegemonic* strategy to *spoil* "the very foundation of the liberal democratic order" (Rogers & Tyushka, 2017, p.21). A known approach pursuing this goal was in Russian cooperation with the Western radical and anti- establishment groups, including the extreme right parties, who are aligned with Kremlin's interests of challenging and weakening the existing *value* systems. By exploiting the existing uncertainties and frustrations in the Western societies, Russia can indirectly re-define the US, the West, and "the bureaucrats in Brussels," the so called *anti-liberal* regimes become an alternative to the existing regimes and intensifies the disagreements within the bloc (Meister and Puglierin, 2015, p.5, as cited in Busygina, 2018, p.100), limits its abilities to act due to the lack of consensus, and at times provides Kremlin with "unprecedented access to […] states' policymakers," as, for instance, was the case with Hungary (Hegedűs, 2016, p.7, as cited in Busygina, 2018, p.101). With the same aim, Russia had also undertaken numerous attempts for meddling in the elections and referenda in the US and Europe (Way & Casey, 2017). As explored in the next section of this chapter, the Russian anti-hegemonic approach had negatively impacted both the Western options for responses to the Russian threats, and the foreign affairs discourses from the EU and NATO.

It has been argued that disinformation was the key tool in the Russian hybrid warfare against the West. Rogers & Tyushka (2017) refer to it as "reflexive control," a method created in Soviet times which involves "modulating the flow and form of information, to deliberately engineer a political situation whereby an opponent can be enticed down a path they might not otherwise take, but in such a way that they opt to take it anyway, believing it even to be in their own interests" (p.45). Thus, one of the first and highly important Russian information *campaigns* focused on convincing the West of the fact that the undeclared war in Ukraine was justified as a defensive measure and "legitimate [response] to world events" through deception, lying, and "creation of an alternative reality" (Thomas, 2015, p.10). Based on the Russian own definition of "information war" it could be understood as "the ability to, among

other things, undermine political, economic, and social systems; carry out mass psychological campaigns against the population of a State in order to destabilize society and the government; and force a State to make decisions in the interests of their opponents" (Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation, 2011, as cited in Thomas, 2015, p.11).

However, another complex hybrid tactic manifested in the indirect negative effects of the Russian involvement in the conflict in Syria which aimed to increase "migrant flows, organised crime, and extremism [in Europe], […] forcing Western governments to concentrate on mitigating the symptoms [or effects] of those conflicts, instead of the causes" (Rogers & Tyushka, 2017, p.47). This logic had also guided the "migrant crisis at Belarus's border" in 2021, and while the EU had not publicly connected it to Russia, only criticizing Belarus and urging it to alleviate the situation, the allegations of it being a part of the Russian efforts for destabilizing the EU came from both experts and the Member States most affected by it, primarily Poland (Mirovalev, 2021; BBC, 2021).

The rapidly increasing number of tactics of the Russian anti-hegemonic strategy, once again drew the attention of the West to the need to develop capabilities for countering the *new* threats that aimed to undermine the core of their identity, clearly placing Russia, and later on also China and Iraq, as the *Other* opposing and corrupting the democratic values of the freedom of expression, rule of law, and democracy. Thus, a question arises on whether or not the EU and NATO discourses have considered the Russian hybrid warfare and anti-hegemonic tactics as a bigger threat compared to a possibility of a military aggression after 2014, and if this was the case, how were the discourses reflecting it articulated.

3.1.2 Limiting EU and NATO discourses

As mentioned previously, in response to the constructed Western threats Moscow has undertaken a variety of foreign policies to undermine from the inside "the West's hegemonic position" (Rogers & Tyushka, 2017, p.43) in "a legitimate gambit for justice and respect in international relations" (ibid., p.36). The policies came together in *anti-hegemonic* "spoiler politics" strategy with three offensive narrative tactics:

1. "Desynchronization" and "distortion" of perceptions of reality in the European Neighborhood and abroad (including the attention to and understanding of the Russian engagements).

2. "De-articulation" of the positive Western narratives, trying to discredit the ideas underlying the liberal democratic regimes, virtually distancing US and Canada from Europe.

3. "Saturating" the vacuum in place of the weakened Western narratives with false information and disinformation to create ambiguity and "manageable disorder."

Ibid., p.39

The first approach practically controls the narratives in the West and makes it more difficult for the international organizations to formulate their own understanding of the situation and ergo, a response to the threats created by Russia, instead pushing the states and institutions to react *post factum* with not always properly coordinated tactical measures and discourses. Narratives with this objective create time pressure and confusion that would weaken the discourses and the responses of the Western institutions (Rogers & Tyushka, 2017, p.48). The tactics for de-articulation would additionally overpower some of the Western discourses and leverage the "local spoilers on the ground," such as radical right and left parties, selected business and political elites, and experts (also referred to as "useful idiots"). By exploiting internal discontent and disagreements, the Russian domestic and foreign political discourse

gained more influence and made the Western discourse less relevant or prevalent and consequently, less effective (ibid., p.49; p.51).

These tactics were also supported by the Russian "trolls" on social media (Thomas, 2015). Once the Western positive narratives were displaced from the spotlight, the *vacuum* that appeared in their place was filled by the third *package* of tactics – disinformation and false narratives, in particular, the "narrative of faultiness" of the West that had been honed by Russia over many years (ibid., p.51). Nevertheless, the other hybrid tactics that Russia used against the West, including the cyber-attacks, nuclear saber rattling and frequent violations of the NATO airspace, have also created a heightened sense of insecurity and confidence in the collective defence guarantees, often leading to the discourses of unreliability of the NATO-EU cooperation, despite their efforts to make it more robust after 2014 (Rumer, 2016, p.42). For NATO in this case, Russia could be seen as a threat by posing a risk of undermining "the credibility of NATO's core functions of deterrence and reassurance" as well as the credibility as the "custodian" of the European security order (Sperling and Webber, 2017, p.21).

In such settings, the West adhering to the policy of open dialogue and even *selective* cooperation emerged from a perceived position of weakness rather than strength (Dempsey, 2016), and while the organizations continued to avoid antagonizing Russia or creating open confrontation, the effects of the Russian anti-hegemonic strategy would simply make the Russian threat discourses from the EU or NATO appear as an admission of weakness.

Thus, by *muting* and destabilizing the West and its responses, Russia has created an environment where it could proceed with relative impunity to its other military and non-military anti-hegemonic tactics. Apart from intensifying disagreements, these tactics also created a sense of ambiguity about the intentions and actions of Russia, and while both NATO and the EU have established new resources to try to strengthen their strategic communication capabilities, the debates on how the hybrid threats could be countered

persisted, gradually turning hybrid warfare into an abstract term in the discourse, rather than a specific strategic consideration in respect to Russia (Bauman, 2020).

At the same time, the appeal of the Russian critical narratives against the West to the populist and radical parties, or even citizens of the Western democracies pushed to question their self-perception and the capabilities of the Euro-Atlantic security community is how Russia has been *hacking* into the West to shake its ideological cohesion and possible opposition to Kremlin foreign (or for that matter also domestic) politics. Consequently, the discourses of the Russian threats from the EU and NATO would be weakened as they could only comment on a *fait accompli*, struggling to come up with their own narratives while having to maintain the calls for dialogue and cooperation, avoiding to even call the 2014 invasion of Ukraine and the Russia-sponsored war in the East a *war*, choosing to refer to it as a "crisis" instead.

This linguistic choice, however, can also be explained by starkly different perceptions of war from the European and Russian perspectives:

> *Although both deeply rooted in historical experiences, European and Russian perceptions of war and the use of force in foreign policy drastically differ, with Europe's tabooed approach to the issue and Russia's explicitly 'normal' treatment of war as a continuation of policy, much in the Clausewitzian sense. By contrast to Russia's domestic and international discourses that flourish with the theme, European discourses shyly hesitate using the term 'war' even in blatantly evident circumstances, like Russia's […] aggression in Ukraine.*
>
> Rogers & Tyushka, 2017, p.48

Another major difference in the Russian and European perspectives on the international relations norms is found in the reliance on different types of power, in particular, for the management of the relations with the Common Neighborhood (Busygina, 2018). As Russia relies on creating "managed instability" in the region of its *special interests* to maintain its *great power* influence, it relies on hard and soft power, as well as direct or *hidden* coercion (ibid., p.108, pp.118-119). The EU, on the other hand, resorts to normative or *civilian* power

and authority to further economic integration with the region, "project security and create prosperity" (pp.118-119), making the EU-Russia disagreements on the area more nuanced, because authority is not effective enough in countering coercion, practically or ideologically (p.109). Most starkly this contrast comes through in the discourses from both parties:

> *What we witness are two rival narratives: Europe's story of political, economic, and institutional transformation in line with its liberal democratic credo, on the one hand, and a counter narrative blending traditionalism, religious values, nostalgia for the Soviet past, and the historical myths of victimhood and resistance linking Russia to its neighbours, on the other.*
>
> Bechev, 2015, p.341 as cited in Busygina, 2018, pp. 119-120

This is very important to consider for understanding the impact of the EU's goals in the creation of its foreign policy discourse. Based on its ideology and identity as an institution, the EU's objectives in the Common Neighborhood, but also in respect to Russia, were strongly focused on *shaping* the political environment of its neighbors through the "promotion of its norms and values" (Thaler, 2020, p.5) in pursuit of closer cooperation and stability, which is practically opposite to the Russian interests for the region. As the EU builds its partnerships on the core values of its identity such as democracy, rule of law, equality, and respect for human rights, the shift of Russian domestic politics to a more authoritarian regime has prompted criticism from the Union, since Moscow did not show respect for the norms that the EU promotes on the continent and thus feels the *responsibility* to defend (ibid., p.225). Thus, the discourses produced with this goal, have contributed to the construction of Russia as the *Other*, opposing the Western ideology.

At the same time, by primarily trying to defend the rights of the people in Russia or other territories negatively affected by the Russian policies and thus protecting the norms at the core of the Western identity, the EU found itself at risk of not looking at a larger picture where the change of the regime at home, could allow Russia to facilitate its *unorthodox* behaviors abroad, as was the case with the gradually growing nationalism and xenophobia in

Russia that made the Kremlin's narratives of the Western threats more effective, preventing domestic opposition to the policies aiming to confront the said threats, even at a detriment to the wellbeing of the Russian people (Kuzio, 2016).

The misconceptions about the nature of the changing Russian regime and possible repercussion it could have for the European security were not the only factor that could possibly weaken the EU discourses of the Russian threat. The institutional fragmentation of the EU in external politics often suffered from "a lack of competences at the supranational level" due to several different actors representing the EU externally, the everlasting internal administrative overload and disagreements based on "turf wars," as well as "unresolved questions of final authority" (Thaler, 2020, p.224). Moreover, the EU's relatively young Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), which is considered to be established with the Treaty of Amsterdam (1999) even though it did not include the defence policy yet (EEAS, 2021), and lack of productive cooperation with NATO up to 2014 were additional factors obstructing the saliency of EU's adaptation to the new reality of the relationship with Russia since the annexation of Crimea (Duke & Gebhard, 2017, p.381).

However, the relations with Russia have always been the least coherent topic in the EU foreign policy discourse, especially in considerations of the energy and security issues, and *othering* Russia would frequently lead to more disagreements than consesus (Thaler, 2020; Siddi, 2018). This would bring to light another important issue the EU has been facing regardless of the Russian foreign policies, which is a weaker European identity as opposed to the national identities of the Member States (Caporaso & Kim, 2009) and a weaker identity of the EU as an influential international actor (Thaler, 2020; Siddi, 2020). As part of the efforts to gain more international *effectiveness* and authority, were created the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the position of the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HR) who would lead the Foreign Affairs Council configuration. Together they were intended to "oversee the Union's foreign policies, serve as an information

platform and mold different interests into more coherent external initiatives" (Thaler, 2020 p.223).

Despite this being an effort to produce more efficiency in the foreign policy creating, it resulted in an institutional environment where the decisions on the relations with Russia had to be discussed between "the High Commissioner, the Commissioner for Enlargement, European External Action Service, Director-General for Enlargement, European Council and Member States' diplomats, governments and parliaments" (Dragneva and Wolczuk, 2015, pp. 60, 109 as cited in Kuzio, 2016, p.104), and considering both internal and external challenges that the EU already had to face (financial and soon to come refugee crises) at different points in time, Russia did not always take a top priority in the EU foreign policy discourse (Duke & Gebhard, 2017, p.382).

For the same reason, it would be expected that the discourse of the Russian threat would be less significant after the February 2015 Minsk-II Accords ceasefire agreement, since it appeared that the conditions for "conflict conservation" have been created and other interests of higher priority could be pursued, especially if they could benefit from Russian participation, which practically forced the EU into accepting the Kremlin-set "new reality" (Socor, 2015 as cited in Kuzio, 2016, p.113), which was actively pursued with the anti-hegemonic strategies discussed above (Rogers & Tyushka, 2017).

Consequently, the discourse of the EU-Russia relations produced by the EU institutions after 2014, did not necessarily reflect the actual cooperation between the two, and even though official communication through the Strategic Partnership has been suspended, trade, natural gas imports, or even educational exchanges either quickly recovered to pre-2014 levels or even reached increased (as was the case with gas imports in 2016) (Casier, 2020). To some extent, this was the result of the construction of Russia as the *Other* revisionist state, has only taken place in the discourse of "high politics," and still, it was created as a rather "abstract, essentialised ideological mental [representation] of the other, [their] behavior, and

intentions," while cooperation persisted in the area of "low politics" of the relations between the two (ibid., p.529). Such discrepancy was quite natural, since even in the areas where the EU has attempted to take more distance from Russia (including the argumentation for diversifying the energy sources), most of the member states carried on the bilateral relations directly with Moscow. However, Kremlin has deliberately avoided creating too many official ties with the EU, encouraging instead the bilateral agreements with the Member States, thus leading to the EU struggling to reach to a *common stance* towards Russia in the context of developing energy and economic deals, resulting in further incoherence between the EU policies and discourses towards Russia (Nitoiu, 2017, p.154; Siddi, 2018).

As noted in the section on the dilemmas that persisted in the EU-Russia relations, the energy security has become one of the key issues of the conflict/cooperation dichotomy after 2014 and was also one of the factors weakening the EU discourse of the Russian threat. The Nord Stream 2 project, in particular, was a salient point of disagreements between the MS's and the EU institutions. As experts expressed warnings that the pipeline could lead to a higher dependence of Europe on the Russian gas imports, in addition to negative economic and environmental arguments, for the European Commission, the implementation of the pipeline would become a contradiction of its Energy Union initiative, "especially the objective of diversifying import partners" (Siddi, 2018). Thus, the pipeline became one of the dividing points and complicated issue for articulation within the EU foreign policy discourse, which led to some experts and politicians, in particular in Poland, to argue that the pipeline was yet another hybrid tool used for dividing Europe (Szymanski, 2016, as cited in Siddi, 2018, p.101). Going forward with the project has practically contradicted the criticism of the Russian aggression against Ukraine and the sanctions regime following it, but at same time, the EU could not prevent its development.

In this context, the EU had to practically carry on almost with "business as usual" approach to Russia, and both the High Representatives and the EEAS have practically taken a "back seat" on managing the relations with Russia, as even the negotiations between Russia and

Ukraine were *outsourced* to Germany, France, and OSCE (Casier, 2020). As the discourse analysis has revealed following the consideration of this issue, the EU had practically limited the discourse on the matter to the expressions of support for the diplomatic means for resolution of the conflict, or the implementation of the Minsk Agreements. The same rather passive approach was reflected also in the Five Guiding Principles on the EU-Russia relations that were established in 2016 and remained unchanged until 2022.

NATO also had to face the disagreements based on the Allies' preferences for cooperating with or standing up to Russia as its security discourses ultimately relied on a consensus between them (Sperling and Webber, 2017). It is worth noting that the threat perceptions among the members of the community (NATO Allies in this case) would depend on the historical experiences and geographical proximity to Russia, which led to very different understandings of the Russian threat among the member states and may have affected the NATO discourse accordingly. Limited security threat perception and advocacy for diplomatic means for managing the threats would lead to more support for cooperation, as opposed to high security threat which would dictate more confrontational measures in the context of the "vital aspects" or the "the fabric on which the existence of allies is built upon" (Ališauskas, 2015, p.55) being threatened. However, Böller (2018) contends that not all the security discourse from NATO is always coordinated, as Secretaries General may express ideas and opinions independently, even if such actions may cause disagreements and criticism from the Allies. While lacking formal powers, NATO GenSec can contribute to the construction of transatlantic discourses and "transatlantic collective identity" (Böller, 2018, p.218), as they serve as the main spokesperson for the Alliance, who can thus articulate their ideas on the international level, while some authors even consider them policymakers, since they can also suggest policy ideas, or "norm entrepreneurs," thanks to the influence of their organization (ibid., p.220). Thus, they may represent the perspectives of the allies and collective values or share ideas relatively independently (depending on the internal consensus) (Böller, 2018, p.221).

The perspectives on the Russian threat would also determine the policy responses the actors would advocate. Hence, if the West would agree on seeing Russia a revisionist state with neo-imperial ambitions, NATO and the EU would not only need to reinforce the military presence across the Eastern member states and the Baltics, but also advance different types of association with Kyiv, providing both military aid and support in their economic transition and military confrontation with Russia; all the while implementing harsher economic and diplomatic sanctions against Russia (Götz, 2016). However, if they would opt for a perspective that Russia was in fact a victim of the Western inconsiderate foreign policies of the past that have forced Kremlin to defend its interests more aggressively, then more accommodating policies and discourses would prevail. While the view of Russia as a victim may not has been articulated in the official discourse, the factor of the security regime being challenged called into question its management from 2014 and onwards, and with the Russian status as a nuclear weapons state, or even their permanent seat at the United Nations Security Council, would not allow NATO to entirely leave the state out of the negotiations of the matter. The discourse analysis has revealed, however, that there was never really an intention to re-define the post-Cold War security regime from Western institutions to accommodate Russia, but rather an intention to preserve it and protect it from international *challenges*, which sometimes required Russian cooperation, thus a middle ground was found for the discourse instead, with a combination of containment and engagement policies, sometimes aiming for short-term management of the situation, possibly due to a persistent hope that Russia would eventually reconsider its course.

Consequently, against the background of internal disagreements, several ongoing conflicts (Ukraine, Syria) and other security concerns that NATO had to deal with (ISIS, Afghanistan), it became more difficult to re-define the shared identity of the "security community" (Böller, 2018, p.218). While traditionally based on shared interests, economic interdependence, but also "shared ideas, values, and principles" (p.218), the identity of the Alliance was re-framed after 2014 to a closer to the Cold War times role as a provider of the *collective defence,* not

only on the regional (European) level, but also on the global one (p.218). But, Ališauskas (2015) notes that the "discourse of danger" has always reflected the understanding of the Russian role in Euro-Atlantic security environment, which has evolved from a partner (in the fight against common threat) to an *imminent* threat in 2014. Prior to 2014, the NATO-Russia relationship has evolved from the attempts to improve the relationship, find common ideological ground, and build a "strong and constructive partnership" for facing the world terrorism and other *common* external threats, and despite the economic sanctions, exclusion from summit processes such as the participation in G8, and suspension in the work of NATO-Russia Council, represented a sharp turn in the partnership-building efforts (Sperling and Webber 2017, p. 32), they could not exactly be cancelled overnight, and there were also strategic considerations at stake.

Nonetheless, to some extent, NATO was also better positioned to produce the security discourse on the Russian threats, since over the years of the Cold War, it has developed the strategic language, norms, and practices that provide it with *symbolic power* with "an authority to speak and act in the security field" (Sperling and Webber, p.27). The Washington Treaty of 1949 defines the Alliance as "founded on the principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law," acknowledging the United Nations Charter; with the mission of common defence guaranteed by Article 5 (Böller, 2018, p.222).

Additionally, the goals that NATO pursued in respect to Russia were close to the objectives of the EU on the level of promotion of peace and security, but different since following the Russian military aggression in Europe, the Alliance had to strengthen the defence and deterrence capabilities to ensure the security of the Allies, in particular the Central European and Baltic states. However, the discourse analysis has revealed that re-securitization of the Russian threat was not as strong as argued by Sperling and Webber (2017) and Ališauskas (2015), and the Alliance has certainly tried to avoid the return to the Cold War types of narratives. Moreover, in some cases the public opinion in the democratic Western states has prevented more robust policies against Russia (D'Anieri, 2019, p.261). In particular in

Europe, the security perceptions were based on shared norms, primacy of human rights in the international law, and public disinterest in "hard" military power, since, by norm, the disputes were meant to be resolved through peaceful means and military intervention would only be justified by humanitarian reasons. Thus, not all the states supported the idea of investments in more defense and deterrence capabilities, or even military intervention under Article 5 in case of an attack on one of the Allies (Kfir, 2016, pp.450-451).

Thus, both the possible discourses and the policy measures in response to the emerging Russian threats were dependent on the changes in the socio-political context, the institutional settings of both the EU and NATO, and the goals they pursued in relations with Russia that were determined by their identities and the interests of the member states. While 2014 was a shock for the Western security regime, from a constructivist perspective, an external shock does not immediately translate into policies, and as Sperling and Webber (2017) note, the actors need to first "make sense" of the event based on the *identity frames* in place (p.20). Therefore, to understand how the changing Russia-West relations and the Russian hostile foreign policies were perceived by the EU and NATO, the discourse analysis with considerations of contexts, goals, and identities was carried out to clarify how these factors have facilitated or prevented the construction of the idea of the Russian threat.

4. Methodology

In order to identify how the Russian threat was defined in the discourses of both institutions between 2014 and 2021, the discourse analysis will be carried out based on the documents, statements, and communications from the institutions of the EU and NATO and their representatives. For the EU, in focus was be the communication from the European Commission and the Presidents, European Council and their Presidents, European Parliament, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HR), and the European External Action Service (EEAS). For NATO will be considered the communications from the Secretaries General and the North Atlantic Council (NAC), including the documents produced by their summits.

Apart from the recurrent communications that were chosen for comparison and the analysis of the evolution of the discourse (State of the Union addresses of the EU Commission Presidents and the Declarations and Communiqués from the NAC Summits), the texts were selected based on the keyword search for Russia and then screened for the containment of any of the following keywords: "aggression," "threat," "hybrid," "cyber," "nuclear," "poison," "information," "nuclear," "energy." The analytics relevance of the documents was established based on the repeated reading and selection of passages that would refer to, explain, condemn, condone, or define the relations with Russia, the Russian foreign policies (and in some cases domestic policies), or the Russian threat.

Additionally, within the text were considered the linguistic choices coding the European or Euro-Atlantic identities and their juxtaposition to Russia and its activities, pointing to its characterization as an ideational *Other*.

5. Discourse Analysis

5.1 NATO discourse of the Russian threat

In his comparative analysis of the discourses from NATO Secretaries General Anders F. Rasmussen (in office 2009-2014) and Jens Stoltenberg (in office since 2014), Böller (2018) found stark differences in the references to Russia in the discourses from 2014 and 2015, despite the annexation of Crimea and the undeclared war to Ukraine in 2014 having a significant impact on the NATO identity. First mention of the Russian threat to "peace and security in Europe" came on March 2, 2014, from Secretary General Rasmussen:

I have convened the North Atlantic Council today because of Russia's military action in Ukraine. And because of President Putin's threats against this sovereign nation. What Russia is doing now in Ukraine violates the principles of the United Nations Charter. It threatens peace and security in Europe

Rasmussen, 2014a

GenSec Rasmussen also expressed concerns over the number of troops deployed in close proximity to NATO, and military aggression pointing directly to the new revisionist stance of Kremlin and an overturn of the relationship that the alliance was trying to build up to 2014:

We see what could be called 21st century revisionism. Attempts to turn back the clock. To draw new dividing lines on our maps. To monopolise markets. Subdue populations. Re-write, or simply rip up, the international rule book. And to use force to solve problems – rather than the international mechanisms that we have spent decades to build. We had thought that such behaviour had been confined to history. But it is back. And it is dangerous […]

We are driven by a desire to protect our values as much as our territory and our people. Freedom. Democracy. (…) These values and these norms are essential for our way of life. (…) But now, Russia is violating these very values

Rasmussen, 2014b

My very first speech as new Secretary General of NATO five years ago was about developing a stronger partnership between NATO and Russia. Regrettably, Russia has rejected our efforts to engage. Instead, Russia considers NATO, and the West more broadly, as an adversary. Russia has trampled all the rules and commitments that have kept peace in Europe and beyond since the end of the Cold War.

Rasmussen, 2014c

Russia pledged not to threaten or use force against Ukraine. By turning its back on that agreement, Russia has called into question its credibility and reliability as an international actor. (...) Because on its current course, Russia is choosing increased international isolation. There are no quick and easy ways to stand up to global bullies. Because our democracies debate, deliberate, and consider the options before taking decisions. Because we value transparency and seek legitimacy for our choices. And because we see force as the last, not the first, resort

Rasmussen, 2014e

Ališauskas (2015) offers a summary of Rasmussen's formulations of the Russian threat as "direct, unambiguous, and very straightforward" (p.55):

- *Russia's aggression against Ukraine is the gravest threat to European security in a generation;*
- *Russia's aggression against Ukraine challenges our vision of a Europe whole, free and at peace;*
- *It is a dangerous attempt to turn back time, using the methods and the rhetoric of the past we tried so hard to overcome*
- *'Today, Russia is speaking and behaving not as a partner, but as an adversary';*
- *'Russia's aggression against Ukraine shows we cannot take security in Europe for granted';*
- *'Russia has created uncertainty, instability and insecurity across our continent. And across the whole Euro-Atlantic area';*

- *'I think only imagination sets limits to what the Russians might use of tools when it comes to preventing countries in their near neighbourhood to seek Euro-Atlantic integration'*

His discourses clearly point out the ideational formulation of Russia as the *Other*, opposing the Euro-Atlantic security community, as well as the adaption of the goals of the Alliance to this new reality.

The collective defence (or collective self-defence) became anew as important as collective security for the identity of the transatlantic security community, directly impacting the goals they would pursue in relation to Russia. The goal was embedded in the defence of the Allies most vulnerable to a possible Russian aggression, but later on, in trying to get Russia to return to compliance with the post-Cold War security regimes norms and regulations.

This shift in the goals of the Alliance became clear from the statements from the next Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg, who came to office in October 2014, that now focused on how Russia threatened the stability of Ukraine (Stoltenberg, 2015a), becoming a *challenge* by preserving the *crisis* in Ukraine. While this not reverse the Russian status of the *Other* and a revisionist state, it was no longer framed as a threat to the Alliance itself, with the official discourse now simply urging Russia to "return to compliance with international law and with its international obligations" (Stoltenberg, 2015b). Such change in the discourse could follow the negotiations of the Minsk Agreements, as the Minsk Protocol (Minsk I) was concluded in September 2014, but as it did not lead to a ceasefire, the Alliance had to continue to express their concern for de-escalation of the conflict. Nonetheless, as the initial *shock* of the Russian aggression has passed, the need for cooperation with Russia returned to the agenda of the Alliance (Stoltenberg, 2015a).

Stoltenberg placed much more emphasis on the need and possibility of cooperation with Russia:

My experience is that it is possible to reach agreements with Russia. And as a Norwegian politician, both as prime minister but also as minister for Industry and for Energy, I have the experience back to the 1990s and also actually as a deputy minister for Environment before that, that it's possible to make agreement and to have a cooperative relationship with Russia.

But as I said, a precondition for that is that we have the confidence, we have the strength so Russia never challenged those on the principles, on our integrity of the… or they never challenged the sovereignty of Norway. And that's the problem now is that the trust which is a precondition for a cooperative relationship with Russia has so much diminished because of Russia violating international law and using force in Ukraine. But in Norway, the experience was that if you have the strength, if you are part of a strong collective alliance, it's possible to do business with the Russians.

Stoltenberg, 2015c

However, he also emphasized the need to maintain a position of strength in facing Russia, pointing to the strengthening of the military capabilities in eastern part of the alliance, and aimed to reassure the NATO capacity to defend its allies against Russia (Stoltenberg, 2015d).

Both Secretaries advocated the increase of the defence spending of the Allies, however, while Rasmussen would justify it by a clear Russian military threat, in discourses of Stoltenberg, the increase of defence spending of other states, especially Russia and China, was not posed as a threat, but rather as evidence that NATO has to stay in touch with the developments in the world, in order to be capable of fulfilling the main goals determined by its identity.

Despite the strong discourse of the Russian threat from the NATO Secretary General in 2014, in the following years the perspective of Russia of the *Other* to the Euro-Atlantic security community did not necessarily support the articulation of the discourse of danger, or cause a complete shift in the NATO identity, as global collective security still remained important to it, thus the exploration of the discourses of the Russian threat in the years that followed can provide crucial insights into its development.

One of the key events chosen for studying the NATO discourse were the North Atlantic Council biannual meetings: the Wales Summit (2014), the Warsaw Summit (2016), and two Brussels Summits (2018, 2021). By analyzing the Summit declarations and communiques, it becomes possible to understand how the security priorities of the organization changed over the years, as well as how the growing Russian threats were articulated through the discourse produced following the deliberations of the allies, based on the changing context and goals, determined by the identity of the community.

One of the aspects that all of the documents produced by the NATO Summits have in common is the introduction that always outlines the core values of the Alliance and reiterates the commitment to them, including democracy, individual liberty, human rights, and the rule of law; but also, the principal goals of the Alliance being collective defence, crisis management, and cooperative security. Naturally, every communication leverages the pronouns and formulations signifying the unity of the Alliance, namely *we*, *us*, *our*, "Allies," "Allied (joint force)," but also provides an emphasis on the identity of the community through such textual structures as "together as strong democracies" (Wales Summit Declaration, 2014), "solidarity, Alliance cohesion, and the indivisibility of our security" (Warsaw Summit Communiqué, 2016), or "Fair burden sharing underpins the Alliance's cohesion, solidarity, credibility, and ability to fulfil our Article 3 and Article 5 commitments" (Brussels Summit Declaration, 2018).

Every document has maintained the condemnation of occupation and destabilization of the territories in Ukraine (Crimea and Donbas region), Georgia (Abkhazia and South Ossetia), and Moldova (Transnistria), however, other references to Russia or Russian activities abroad have changed significantly over the years, clearly defining which activities were considered a threat or a *challenge* for the Alliance at different points in time. Furthermore, every communication highlights the importance of nuclear capabilities as a deterrence of the threats from *outside* the Euro-Atlantic area, hence, not targeting Russia, with the nuclear arms

control negotiations (such as the INF Treaty), especially between Russia and the US, occupy a specific category among the security concerns of the Alliance.

The Wales Summit took place on September 4, 2014, almost half a year after the annexation of Crimea was "finalized," and the act of Russian aggression took a central position among the Alliance's announced security concerns. The Wales Summit Declaration announced the implementation of the NATO Readiness Action Plan (RAP), meant to respond to "the challenges posed by Russia and their strategic implications," but also to the "risks and threats" originating in the Middle East and North Africa. It increased both the defence stance of the Alliance and military activity in the Central and Eastern European allies, but also "readiness and responsiveness […] to deal with security challenges […] from the east and south" (NATO's Readiness Action Plan Fact Sheet, 2016).

There is a notable contrast between how the Russian aggression is referred to as a challenge in comparison to the *threats* of the ongoing conflicts in the *south*, even though the "Assurance Measures" of the RAP were implemented "in response to Russia's aggressive actions." However, overall, the plan was intended to "address the security challenges it [the Alliance] *might* face" (emphasis added), thus, to strengthen the capabilities for defence and deterrence of further Russian aggression, which is arguably meant by the formulation of *strategic implications*. This also stipulated the need for improving the cooperation between NATO and the EU on the defence capabilities, but also a commitment to cooperation for facing the *security challenges* of "cyber defence, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, counter-terrorism, and energy security" and the work "in maritime security, defence and related security capacity building, and addressing hybrid threats." Thus, it expresses the main concerns for the whole Euro-Atlantic security community.

The declaration does not name the Allies whose defence was threatened the most, including those bordering with Ukraine and Russia, who have also voiced the most concerns about the Russian threat: Poland, Romania, Hungary, and Baltic states, but also the Scandinavian

states. Instead, the reference to the "periphery of the Alliance" is made, pointing to the perception of a threat to the *whole* Alliance, signalled in a specific region, where the Russian *challenge* is in fact, a burden of the whole security community.

Following the condemnation of the Russian aggression, violations of the international law and its international commitments (including those given to the EU), the declaration also expresses support for the sanction regimes. In fact, the Russian "pattern of disregard for international law" is considered a threat to the "rules-based international order," but still only a *challenge* to Euro-Atlantic Security, with, for instance, detrimental effects for stability in the Black Sea region. Thus, Russia breaking the *rules* at the core of the security community identity was the main root of condemnation in the discourse from the Alliance, but its military capabilities gaining a stronger position in the region became a strategic challenge. The declaration clearly stipulates that NATO "does not seek confrontation and poses no threat to Russia," in which case, the *threat* labelling would be problematic, as it would play into the already existing security dilemma between NATO and Russia. The declaration does, however, refer to the need "to effectively address the specific challenges posed by hybrid warfare threats" and "cyber threats and risks," with the need to enhance the Alliance's capabilities accordingly, but does not refer to Russia as the main sponsor of such threats. In fact, Russian military or non-military aggression is not directly labelled as a threat, as it was in the discourses from Rasmussen, not even in terms of a threat to the Ukrainian people, despite the formulations of a *grave* threat posed by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) threatening the Iraqi and Syrian people, "the wider region, and to our nations" and other. One note worth taking, is that the whole declaration only uses the word "aggression" once, in relation to the need for general deterrence of any aggression against the Alliance (not necessarily from Russia).

On the other hand, the hope for possible future partnership with Russia is expressed based on its *strategic value*, in particular when it concerns "NATO's and Russia's non-strategic nuclear force postures in Europe, based on our common security concerns and interests, in a Europe

where each country freely chooses its future." It is curious that the nuclear considerations are paired with an implied root of the Russian aggression, the Ukrainian course for the European integration. Practically, while NATO made sure to keep the political channels for communication open, it strived to make it clear that a partnership would only be possible when Russia would not violate the sovereign rights of any European states, including Ukraine.

Finally, the declaration features some of the energy *security* discourse, with the "stable and reliable energy supply, the diversification of routes, suppliers and energy resources, and the interconnectivity of energy networks" being of critical importance in the contexts of the Russia-Ukraine "crisis" but also instability in the Middle East and North Africa.

The Warsaw Summit, taking place on July 9, 2016, occurs in a new context, where the conflict in the Donbas region was not terminated, but was practically at a stalemate, but Russia has adopted a more confrontational behaviour towards the West and intervened in the war in Syria. In contrast to the Wales Summit Declaration, the official text refers to "Russia's aggressive actions" as one of the first security concerns, which included "provocative military activities in the periphery of NATO territory and its demonstrated willingness to attain political goals by the threat and use of force." Being a "a source of regional instability," the Russian actions "fundamentally challenge the Alliance, have damaged Euro-Atlantic security, and threaten our long-standing goal of a Europe whole, free, and at peace." The criticism of the breach of its international commitments is reiterated but now the Russian "destabilizing actions and policies" list has significantly increased:

> *[…] large-scale snap exercises contrary to the spirit of the Vienna Document, and provocative military activities near NATO borders, including in the Baltic and Black Sea regions and the Eastern Mediterranean; its irresponsible and aggressive nuclear rhetoric, military concept and underlying posture; and its repeated violations of NATO Allied airspace. In addition, Russia's military intervention, significant military presence and support for the regime in Syria, and its use of its military presence in the Black Sea to project power into the Eastern Mediterranean have posed further risks and challenges for the security of Allies and others*

Nevertheless, the document emphasizes the importance of keeping the communication channels open for deliberations with Russia, as well as the persistent strategic value of a possible partnership with Russia, even though the conditions for a relationship of the kind were still not fulfilled and a return to "business as usual" was not possible, especially as Russia was deemed responsible for "the serious deterioration of the human rights situation on the Crimean peninsula" or "ongoing and wide-ranging military build-up in Crimea, and […] efforts and stated plans for further military build-up in the Black Sea region."

The Allies emphasize the support for the Minsk Agreements importance of their implementation, especially in light of the Russian noncompliance, but also increased concern with the Russian continuous strengthening of its military capabilities. The Allies argue that the *instability* that these developments lead to, should be mitigated by "reciprocal transparency and risk reduction measures," as well as tailoring the response "to specific circumstances in each region" (which include the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea regions, the North Atlantic, and the Mediterranean) and working "to enhance our situational awareness and to develop common approaches to evolving challenges." Furthermore, the commitment to implementation of the Readiness Action Plan was still rooted in "collective solidarity and resolve to protect all Allies, […] assurance and deterrence." And yet, the Council stressed the importance of "meaningful dialogue and engagement with Russia" as a means to "prevent conflict and war" in support of "credible deterrence and defence." In light of such commitments, the Allies decided on an "enhanced forward presence in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland to unambiguously demonstrate, as part of our overall posture, Allies' solidarity, determination, and ability to act by triggering an immediate Allied response to any aggression," among other means, through a strengthened "the forward presence in the southeastern part of the Alliance territory." These and other efforts were intended to "deter and defend against potential adversaries, and the full spectrum of threats that could confront the Alliance from any direction."

The text reiterates several points made in the Wales Declaration, with the claim of the ballistic missile defence capabilities not directed at Russia and urging Moscow to maintain the commitment to the INF Treaty; concerns about the threats posed by cyber-attacks and hybrid warfare (still not associated with Russia), and importance of cooperation with the EU, especially in the context of the southern and eastern *security challenges* for "countering hybrid threats, enhancing resilience, defence capacity building, cyber defence, maritime security, and exercises," as well as energy security.

Practically, the Russian military capabilities became a bigger concern for the Alliance, as Russia engaged in the build-up of capabilities on the border of Ukraine since 2015, despite it being a violation of the Minsk II Agreement. However, while it remained important to deter any more Russian aggression, it was considered equally important to ensure this through a dialogue with Moscow. While the discursive confrontation with the Russian identity as the threatening *Other* has persisted, it brought to light the gaps in the NATO collective defence capabilities towards any external threats.

First Brussels Summit took place in July 2018, by which point Russia has extended significantly the use of hybrid tools against the West. It pointed to an even stronger sense of insecurity, but also repeatedly expressed reassurance on the effectiveness of NATO defence capabilities, such as with the following sentence added at the end of the introduction that emphasizes the normative core of the Alliance:

> *Any attack against one Ally will be regarded as an attack against us all, as set out in Article 5 of the Washington Treaty. We will continue to stand together and act together, on the basis of solidarity, shared purpose, and fair burden-sharing.*

Russia's aggressive actions with "[threats] and use of force to attain political goals" have remained at the top of the declaration, still *challenging* the Alliance and "undermining Euro-Atlantic security and the rules-based international order." In the list of the security challenges

of the Alliance, the cyber activities were now regarded as *malicious*, even though initially they were not attributed to any specific actor.

While most of the arguments criticizing the Russian international stance and breach of "the values, principles and commitments which underpin the NATO-Russia relationship" remained consistent in every declaration, the ways in which Russia-produced instability and unpredictability in the Euro-Atlantic security environment were added in 2018, making this particular discourse on Russia more comprehensive and specific:

> *Russia's illegal and illegitimate annexation of Crimea and ongoing destabilisation of eastern Ukraine, military posture and provocative military activities, including near NATO borders, such as the deployment of modern dual-capable missiles in Kaliningrad, repeated violation of NATO Allied airspace, and the continued military build-up in Crimea; its significant investments in the modernisation of its strategic forces; its irresponsible and aggressive nuclear rhetoric; its large-scale, no-notice snap exercises; and the growing number of its exercises with a nuclear dimension. This is compounded by Russia's continued violation, non-implementation, and circumvention of numerous obligations and commitments in the realm of arms control and confidence- and security-building measures. Russia is also challenging Euro-Atlantic security and stability through hybrid actions, including attempted interference in the election processes, and the sovereignty of our nations, as was the case in Montenegro, widespread disinformation campaigns, and malicious cyber activities. We condemn the attack using a military-grade nerve agent in Salisbury, United Kingdom and note the independent confirmation by the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) of the nerve agent used.*

Regarding the Russian conventional military capabilities, the document refers to Russian "aggressive military posture" and "ongoing selective implementation of the Vienna Document and Open Skies Treaty, and its long-standing non-implementation of the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe Treaty" as undermining the security of the Alliance and invite Russia to "engage constructively" on the matter. While signalling a stronger opposition to the Russian *pattern* of dangerous behaviours, the calls for Russia to maintain transparency and "periodic, focused, and meaningful dialogue" through the NATO-Russia Council, persisted, intended to avoid "misunderstanding, miscalculation, and unintended escalation, and to increase transparency and predictability."

However, a strong reaction and condemnation of the poisoning of Poisoning of Sergei and Yulia Skripal was also expressed by the Secretary General Stoltenberg, as it was "the first use of a nerve agent on NATO territory" and a "reckless breach of international norms" which was followed by a withdrawal of the accreditation of seven staff members at the Russian Mission to NATO and denial of accreditation of three individuals, as well as the official reduction of the Russian Mission to 20 people. However, he strongly emphasized that it would not change the "dual track approach" to the relations with Russia, based on "strong deterrence and defence and dialogue" (Stoltenberg, 2018a). To some extent this action became another *radical* violation of the core principles at the heart of the Euro-Atlantic security community, as it had breached the Chemical Weapons Convention, that the North Atlantic Council referred to as "one of the pillars of the global non-proliferation regime," and while they have also condemned the use of chemical weapons in Syria, this attack taking place on the territory of one of the ley NATO allies, the United Kingdom, warranted a more serious response (North Atlantic Council, 2018).

The Brussels Summit has also introduced the NATO Readiness Initiative intended to "enhance the Alliance's rapid response capability, either for reinforcement of Allies in support of deterrence or collective defence, including for high-intensity warfighting, or for rapid military crisis intervention, if required. It will also promote the importance of effective combined arms and joint operations," but also "Counter hybrid Support Teams aimed with assisting the Allies in "preparing and responding to hybrid activities" (Brussels Summit Declaration, 2018).

In 2018, the note of the Russian threats from the NATO perspective has increased significantly, with most of their hostile foreign activities now considered at the very least dangerous and warranting a response by strengthening the defences against both military and hybrid attacks, and as the key strength of this approach was considered the unity among the allies, through the support of economic sanctions regime, increased defence investments, or

diplomatic sanctions. However, this approach remained rather reactive and may not have necessarily been as harmful for Russia as the Alliance had hoped.

The final document in this analysis was produced at the second Brussels Summit that took place on June 14, 2021, which naturally was the time of great uncertainty following the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak in 2020. Once again highlighting the unity and the shared identity of the Alliance, NATO was referred to as "the strongest and most successful Alliance in history […] bound together by our common values, enshrined in the Washington Treaty, the bedrock of our unity, solidarity, and cohesion."

A big shift in the discourse comes in the Russia's aggressive actions being directly called "a threat to Euro-Atlantic security," which was not the case for the Summit Declarations before, but took place already in 2019, at the NATO Leaders meeting in London in December 2019. Based on "the deteriorating security environment," the leaders have pledged to continue to enhance the "deterrence and defence posture," even though the document reiterated that NATO did not seek confrontation with Russia and remained open for dialogue. However, a *partnership* was no longer mentioned, and only a possibility of a "constructive relationship" remained an aspiration for when Russia's "actions [would] make that possible."

The Russian military build-up, capabilities, and activities were now regarded as "increasingly [threatening]" to the security of the Euro-Atlantic area and contributing to "instability along NATO borders and beyond." At the same time, more concerns were outlined on both *intensified* hybrid actions against the Allies and partners, as well as the diversification of its nuclear arsenal. The concerns on the growing Russian nuclear capabilities which included dual-capable systems, non-strategic nuclear weapons, modernization, diversification, and expansion pointed to "a more aggressive posture of strategic intimidation," based on which the Alliance concluded that they would work "to address all the threats and challenges posed by Russia." Secretary General Stoltenberg had previously expressed concerns about the new Russian nuclear capabilities undermining first the INF treaty (which was still in place at the

time of the statement in 2018), but only as posing "a serious risk to the strategic stability of Europe" (Stoltenberg, 2018b), thus, a re-evaluation of the role of Russian nuclear weapons was reached by 2021 as well.

On the hybrid warfare, the use of proxies, "attempted interference in elections and democratic processes, political and economic pressure and intimidation" were added to disinformation campaigns, cyber activities, and "turning a blind eye to cyber criminals operating from its territory." Another action condemned by the document was the ammunition warehouses explosions in Vrbětice, Czech Republic in 2014, that the state has traced back to the actions of two GRU officers in April 2021. Interestingly enough, while expressing solidarity with the Czech Republic, the text does not explicitly outline the situation but rather condemns the Russian illegal and destructive activities by Russian Intelligence Services on Allied territory and express solidarity with *all* the Allies "that have been affected in this way."

Finally, to the threats was also added the "massive military build-up and destabilizing activities in and around Ukraine," restriction of navigation in the Black Sea, "impeding access to the Sea of Azov and Ukrainian ports." However, nothing more than contributing to the Ukrainian diplomatic efforts for de-escalation and "stepping up the support for Ukraine" was expressed as intended countermeasures, only a "commitment to respond in a measured, balanced, coordinated, and timely way to Russia's growing and evolving array of conventional and nuclear-capable missiles."

The strengthening of the NATO defense and deterrence capabilities was highlighted in this document as well, with "[acceleration of the] military adaptation with increased defence spending, modern capabilities, enhanced political and military responsiveness, and higher readiness of [NATO] forces." Finally, the military strategy was updated too with a focus on "defense and deterrence" and "warfighting" concepts, along with strengthening the NATO military command, resilience, and readiness capacities, while cyber threats were now

characterized as “complex, destructive, coercive, and becoming ever more frequent,” especially due to “the exploitation of the Covid-19 pandemic.”

Thus, much more direct formulations of the Russian threats were reached in 2021, even though, as mentioned in the North Atlantic Council’s statement on the military buildup on the Russian border with Ukraine, one of the key issues that exacerbated the perceptions of the Russian threats was the lack of reciprocity from Kremlin’s side (North Atlantic Council, 2021).

5.2 EU Discourse of the Russian threat

As explained by the theoretical framework in Chapter 4, the construction of the discourse on Russia-EU relations and the Russian threats within the discourse from the EU has been more complex and restricted by both the identity of the institution, its institutional structures, and the interests of its Member States. However, in an attempt to provide the analysis of how the changing contexts have interacted with the EU identity and goals towards the EU in the articulation of the discourses, the communications from 4 EU institutions (EEAS, European Council, European Commission, and European Parliament) and well as their official representatives (High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HR), President of the European Commission, President of the European Council) will be analyzed chronologically.

Period of 2014-2021 was under the mandate of first Jean-Claude Junker Commission (in office 2014-2019) and then Ursula von der Leyen (in office 2019-2024), thus it is possible to compare the State of the Union speeches by both Presidents to consider the evolution of the perceptions of Russian foreign policies in the EU discourses. While in 2014, the President of the Commission was José Manuel Barroso (in office 2004-2014), his last State of the Union address was delivered in 2013, thus we may first consider his statements on the undeclared war in Ukraine, clearly framing Russia as the ideological *Other* to the EU:

> *The 'Great Game' of geopolitics has made an unwelcome return (...). Unfortunately, the actions of some actors are based on a logic we cannot share. Because the European idea stems from a different perspective. For us the rule of law prevails over the rule of force. Sovereignty is shared and not limited. The logic of cooperation replaces the logic of confrontation.*
>
> Barroso, 2014

Regarding the State of the Union speeches, it is quite self-explanatory that the addresses were strongly saturated with the identity and community-centered language, with the use of

pronouns we, us, our, but also expressions such as “We Europeans,” “European solidarity,” “Union of Europeans,” European values, and focus on the *European* approaches to any area ranging from tacking climate change and the refugee crisis to protecting the European milk industry. The State of the Union addresses are a valuable overview of the evolving priorities of the EU, as well as the evolution of the understanding of the Russian threats.

The first address of President Juncker in 2015 is quite illustrative in this regard. The first and the biggest issue in focus was the management of the refugee crisis, however, the need for a stronger EU foreign policy was a close second. First emphasis was on Iran, Syria, Libya, and crises in Africa, as directly connected to the urgency for improvement of the refugee crisis, followed by the management of the euro crisis and the situation with Greece, as well as Brexit. However, considering the temporal proximity of the annexation of Crimea and the beginning of the war in Eastern Ukraine, the President has also emphasized the need for unity in facing Russia and the “tremendous foreign policy challenges” that Europe must address collectively.

First, it is “the security of our Eastern Member States, notably the Baltics,” for which the President emphasized that “the security and the borders of EU Member States are untouchable […] [this is] to be understood very clearly in Moscow,” which also underlined the need for unity on the sanctions’ regime, despite possible difficult repercussion for the Member States. This would be the policy in place until the implementation of the Minsk Agreements. However, “The EU must show Russia the cost of confrontation but it must also make clear it is prepared to engage.” (Juncker, 2015).

President Juncker has also presented “the 10 Commission priorities for 2015-19” with several areas at the very least related to Russia:

- “Energy union and climate (making energy more secure, affordable and sustainable)” While the priority points out the importance of improving energy security by diversifying the

energy supply, there is no mention of the risks the dependence on the Russian supplies may pose (European Commission, n.d. a)

- "A stronger global actor (strengthening the global role of Europe)" The need to strengthen the European foreign policy was connected to the need to "respond efficiently to global challenges, including the crises in its neighborhood; project its values; reject protectionism and keep EU trade standards; contribute to peace and prosperity in the world." However, once again, there is no mention of Russia among the challenges (European Commission, n.d. b), but this objective clearly aligns with the milieu goals that the EU was known to pursue in the relations with Russia (Thaler, 2020).

His 2016 address stressed the European values in respect to the measures taken against Russia rather than the *challenges* Russia may create for Europe, such as *solidarity* at the core of "jointly applying *European* sanctions when Russia violates international law" (emphasis added) and the need for implementation of the Minsk Agreements for improving the relations with Russia but continuing engagement on the issues with "clear interest" for Europe. The indication of possible concerns with the Russian malign policies in the speech, was the reference to the EU–NATO Joint Declaration for countering "hybrid threats and cyber attacks, [building] a stronger defence industry and [helping] our partners to prevent and respond to crises."

Energy security was also mentioned briefly, in particular in connection to the "energy union" proposal, but still with no reference to Russia. Interestingly enough, the beginning of the address discusses "at least in part […] an existential crisis" of the EU, with the lowest number of areas for agreement and cooperation between the Member States that the President had ever seen, and an overwhelming focus on the domestic priorities rather than European ones, with a lot of uncertainty in the international position of the EU. Several times a point of *40 ongoing conflicts* in the world is mentioned, without a particular emphasis on any of them,

but strengthening the European defense policy was framed as crucial "to take responsibility for protecting our interests and the European way of life" (Juncker, 2016).

From 2017 the addresses have shorter and more concise. The 2017 address does not mention Russia directly even once. Instead, the focus was on the growing European economy, plan for strengthening trade and industry, countering climate change, investment in development of Africa, European values and promotion of more equality, and couple of other issues concerned primarily with the internal issues.

Possibly only the objective of strengthening the resilience to cyber-attacks (with setting up of the European Cybersecurity Agency) and to propaganda can be considered somewhat a note that the EU attempted to counteract the Russian threats, but neither was formally associated with Kremlin in the text (Juncker, 2017). This comes as quite the irony, considering that just two months later, Federica Mogherini and *European leaders* were criticized by sixty-five security experts and parliamentarians from 21 states for not naming Russia the "main source of hostile disinformation" or the actual producer of the hybrid threats (Gotev, 2017). A year later, more criticism also pointed out the lack of resources of the EEAS East STRATCOM task force, whose main goal was to counter the Russian propaganda (Gotev, 2018).

The focus of the 2018 State of the Union address was on the European sovereignty. The last speech by President Juncker outlined some achievements of the Union in economic growth, stronger position as an international trade power able to "export stability", an *open* but not a *naïve* continent. And yet on the foreign policy the President referred only to Western Balkans, Syria, multilateralism, support for Africa's development, but not Russia.

One may guess some implication of the lacking trust to Kremlin in the words "In today's world, Europe can no longer be certain that words given yesterday can still be counted on today. That old alliances may not look the same tomorrow" but that would be rather speculative. Among the internal and external threats, the President mentions terrorism and

climate change that can be countered only by "strong and united Europe." Finally, protection of "free and fair elections" from "manipulation by third countries or private interests" is only mentioned in passing with no reference to Russia or the measures to be taken to achieve it, and perhaps ironically, in one of the last remarks, the President mentions that the EU must gain a more united voice on its foreign policy (Juncker, 2018).

The speeches of Ursula von der Leyen in 2020 and 2021 both had to take a major focus on the Covid-19 pandemic, and the address of 2020 has highlighted the *European* strength, rightfully praised the medical workers, the need for strengthening the European medical systems, and at length outlined the measures to be taken for overcoming the pandemic. Almost an equally strong focus on the agenda was the argumentation for countering climate change and the European Green Deal, as well as on developing the Union's the digital sector. However, even if in only one paragraph, president von der Leyen makes a rather strong statement on the EU's outlook for the relations with Russia which refers to several concerns at once:

> *To those that advocate closer ties with Russia, I say that the poisoning of Alexei Navalny with an advanced chemical agent is not a one off. We have seen the pattern in Georgia and Ukraine, Syria and Salisbury – and in election meddling around the world. This pattern is not changing – and no pipeline will change that.*

Thus, Russia is not necessarily referred to as a threat, but at the very least, the President makes it clear that the relationship is not likely to improve going forward (von der Leyen, 2020).

The 2021 address, however, does not mention Russia, despite the military build-up on the Ukrainian borders which was already long present. The President does refer to cyber and hybrid threats, and "a hybrid attack to destabilise Europe" for which Belarus "has instrumentalised human beings" while enabling the waves migrants to the EU leading to significant human suffering and destabilization of borders with Lithuania, Latvia, and Poland (Ioanes, 2021). It is not attributed to Russia, however, but the President refers to the EU

opponents leveraging the weakness of the European migration management policies. Finally, the need for protection of the rule of law and the European values is emphasized as well (von der Leyen, 2021). Later in the year, von der Leyen argued that the relationship with Russia is very complex and presents a "key strategic challenge" for the EU, explaining why it was necessary to continue to defend the European values and strengthening the "counter-hybrid toolbox" while keeping in mind the "considerable potential" for cooperation (Euronews, 2021).

Russia has certainly been downplayed in the State of the Union speeches when compared to the key priorities of the EU such as the climate change management, domestic welfare, or refugee crisis, therefore, it is necessary to examine the discourses from other European institutions.

Igumnova (2018) undertakes an analysis of the official communications of the EEAS on the EU-Russia relations and presents several valuable points. Even though the research comprises the communications from 2010 until the end of 2017, she finds that the majority of the analyzed documents referred to the Russia's violations of the rule of law and international laws, together with criticism of the Russian national legal processes and justice system, but also infringement of political opposition and restrictive legislation. Second largest theme across the EEAS communications concerning Russia is "Human rights and fundamental freedoms," which encompasses the concerns over "the freedoms of speech/expression, freedom of assembly, LGBTI rights," but also freedom of association, rights of national minorities, tightening control over social media and others (p.12).

She finds that the communications from the agency have mainly focused on expressing concerns and trying to call the attention of Russian authorities to the rule of law and human rights issues in the country (p.10-12). Security concerns occupied only the fourth position among the most frequently occurring themes in the EEAS communications according to Igumnova, where the negative assessments mainly covered the actions that were "detrimental

to the efforts to stabilize the situation in Georgia and Ukraine." Overall, the author finds that most of the contacts between the EU High Representative and Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs were concerned with the situations in Syria, the Middle East, Libya, and then the situation in the East of Ukraine, and have always pursued peaceful conflict resolution, along with the discussions of the questions under mutual interests or mutual concerns (p.16).

High representative Federica Mogherini had repeatedly expressed concern for the need of the EU to defend its core values, while trying to maintain cooperation with Russia. One such example comes from 2015: "We must finally take responsibility to live up to our values, to the values of our history, to the challenges of the most difficult times in our recent history, to our global role" (Morgherini, 2015) which could be placed in contrast to:

The European Union today is extremely realistic about the developments in Russia, but we'll never be trapped, or forced, or pushed, or pulled into a confrontative attitude. We still believe that…not only in our continent, but around our continent cooperation is far better than confrontation

Radio Freedom, 2015

A consistent point in the discourses form the High Representative and the EEAS was the implementation of the Minsk Agreements that became a pre-requisite for restoring the relationship with Russia, as pointed out by the EEAS Spokesperson on 10 December 2019, since it was considered "the key to reaching a sustainable and peaceful solution to the conflict in eastern Ukraine" (EEAS, 2019). In 2017, Federica Mogherini has also referred to the Minsk Agreements as being directly connected to sanctions on Russia (Morgherini, 2017). Moreover, even while urging Russia to de-escalate the growing conflict with the military build-up on the Ukrainian border and Crimea in April, 2021, the implementation of the agreements was highlighted as "the only way forward for a lasting political solution to the conflict" (EEAS, 2021 a).

However, in the next years, some of the Russian foreign activities were noted as points for concern, as in April 2020, Josep Borrell has argued that the "intentional and coordinated disinformation campaigns should be treated as a hybrid threat to European and global security," outlining further the measures taken to confront it, including the work of the Strategic Communication Division, Action Plan against Disinformation, regular Information Environment Assessments, sharing insights with the Member States through the Rapid Alert System, and Special Reports on disinformation related to the Covid-19 pandemic.

In the speech to the European Parliament, he has underlined the increased attention required to disinformation in the time of the pandemic, since extensive "disinformation efforts and aggressive push of narratives" "aim at harming the European Union," and are also produced by several international actors, including Russia, China, Syrian regime, and the Iranian government. "Disinformation can kill," remarked the High Representative, however, as the Member States "stand together" and the work of the EEAS continues, it will be possible to "[support] independent and free media and [promote] European Union values, democracy, human rights and our interests across the globe with the help of public diplomacy" (Borrell, 2020). While the attention to the hostile foreign activities of Russia has increased, they were not openly articulated as Russia threatening the EU, However, in 2021, the High Representative has more specifically argued that the EU should become "more robust and resilient against Russian attempts to undermine it."

In 2021, regarding the explosion of ammunition depots in Vrbětice, the High Representative has expressed both solidarity and condemnation of the Russian actions, urging it to "desist from activities that threaten security and stability in Europe and run counter to Russia's international obligations." Furthermore, he claimed that "disruptive actions of Russian intelligence services against the interests and security of the EU and its member states will continue to be met with the staunchest resolve," without, however, elaborating on any possible measures of response (Borrell, 2021c).

The EEAS Spokesperson has expressed *deep concern* about the situation but also criticism of Russia expulsing Czech diplomats in response to the Czech Republic explusion of the Russian representatives:

[We see] the repeating negative pattern of dangerous malign behaviour by Russia in Europe. Russia must stop with these activities, which violates well-established international principles and norms and threaten stability in Europe

EEAS, 2021e

The EU had also tried to establish a united approach to the relations with Russia, and one of the notable attempts in this regard were the five guiding principles for the EU's Russia policy which were agreed upon in March 2016 by the EU foreign ministers and High Representative Federica Mogherini:

- Implementation of the Minsk agreement as the key condition for any substantial change in the EU's stance towards Russia.

- Strengthened relations with the EU's Eastern Partners and other neighbours, in particular in Central Asia.

- Strengthening the resilience of the EU (for example energy security, hybrid threats, or strategic communication).

- Need for selective engagement with Russia on issues of interest to the EU.

- Need to engage in people-to-people contacts and support Russian civil society

European Council, 2016

A different formulation of the principles comes from the European Parliament briefing from February 2018 which clearly reflects slightly increased perception of Russia as a threat,

where the first principle was summarized as “Minsk agreements/sanctions”; the third principle was changed to “strengthening EU resilience to Russian threats” and the fourth principle gained an example of counterterrorism, but the language of *needs* was abandoned.

The briefing also refers to several difficulties in the implementation of the principles which included the stalling of implementation of the Minsk agreements; “the EU security [being] threatened by dependence on Russian energy imports and the destabilising effects of aggressive propaganda,” difficulty of supporting the Russian civil society among the increase in authoritarian legislations in Russia, and a decline in both cooperation and people-to-people contacts. Additionally, the continuation of the conflict in Ukraine, “Russia's involvement in the bombardment of Aleppo in late 2016 and alleged Russian interference in EU political life (e.g. the 2017 French presidential election)” have been considered other factors explaining the strain in the Russia-EU relations in 2018.

It is worth examining the description of the Russian threats to the EU presented by the briefing:

- Dependence on the Russian energy imports and its possible increase due to the construction of Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline is based on the previous disruptions of gas supplies in 2009 and 2014, that justify the measures taken on the EU level to create an energy union preparing the procedures for the case of an energy crisis which would require sharing of supplies, and confronting Gazprom on “abuse of its dominant position on EU energy markets”

- Russian military and non-military threats to EU stability. The military threats description emphasizes the Russian modernized armed forces and “largest-ever military drills” close to the EU borders, violations of the NATO airspace by Russian bombers and an estimation of possible overtaking of the Baltic States “in just a few days.” However, these are followed by a quote of Valery Gerasimov and a list of the

> Russian hybrid threats to the EU: "propaganda, funding for pro-Kremlin political parties and NGOs, as well as cyber-attacks," (p.6). Despite the label of propaganda, the text also refers to disinformation and misinformation, social media trolls, and connections to the European far-right parties.

The views of the European Parliament on the threats of the Russian propaganda are also visible in the 2016 resolution to counteract propaganda which specifically calls to *recognize* and *expose* "Russian disinformation and propaganda warfare" among hybrid threats to the EU (EUR-Lex, 2016a). In contrast, the EU Commission's "Joint Framework on countering hybrid threats" from 2016 had no mention of Russia (EUR-Lex, 2016b).

As means of countering these threats the document refers to some measures that Latvia, Lithuania, Sweden, and Hungary have taken to counter the Russian propaganda, as well as the establishment of EEAS's StratCom Task Force. In respect to the military and hybrid threats, the text refers only to the measures taken by or in cooperation with NATO, increasing military presence in Poland and Baltic states, and launch of a Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats (Think Tank, European Parliament, 2018, p.6).

Finally, the arguments for maintaining the cooperation with Russia on the areas under EU interest included the Russia's seat at the UN Security Council and being "an increasingly influential player in the Middle East" due to which "Russia has a key part to play in helping to tackle global challenges." The text points out the Russian support for the nuclear deal with Iran, alignment with the EU on a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and commitment to tackling climate change as signatories of the Paris Agreement as important points of agreement between Russia and the EU that enable their cooperation. The strategic value of cooperation with Russia on managing the Syria *crisis* was also more important in light of the continuing refugee crisis, where Russia was one of the key regional and international actors together with the US, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Iran (European Commission, 2015)

On the other hand, the European Parliament briefing mentions a disagreement with Russia on Syria where Moscow claimed to be fighting ISIL/Da'esh, but has targeted rebel groups, supported Assad's regime, and was co-involved in human rights violations under his regime (Think Tank, European Parliament, 2018).

The references to the "five principles" have returned to the public discourse in 2019, in particular in the discourses from the President of the European Council Charles Michel and the communication from the European Commission and the High Representative suggested that the EU "simultaneously *pushes back, constrains and engages* Russia, with the aim of moving towards a more constructive engagement and political commitment by the Russian leadership" (European Commission, High Representative, 2021). The principles did not change, but the third principle remained "Strengthened resilience of the EU" with no mention of the Russian threats.

In line with the EU's focus on the human rights violations, seven years after the annexation of Crimea, Josep Borrell has made an official statement highlighting numerous Russia's violations of the international humanitarian law (through oppression of Crimean Tatars, imposition of citizenship and conscription, etc.) and worsening human rights and environment in the peninsula since the annexation (Borrell, 2021 b). After all, the third pillar of the EU common foreign and security policy (CFSP) is to "promote international cooperation, democracy, the rule of law and the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms" (EUR-Lex, n.d.)

In 2015, the European Parliament resolution on the Annual Report on Human Rights and Democracy in the World 2013 and the European Union's policy on the matter have raised the question of the change of the relationship with Russia following the annexation of Crimea and the country's "slide into authoritarian rule." Among the arguments was the fact that violations of human rights should be considered "a threat to bilateral relations between the

EU and its strategic partners," and Russia has become a "strategic challenge" for the EU and can no longer comply "with strategic partnership criteria" (European Parliament, 2015)

However, the human rights concerns remained more prominent in the EU foreign discourses on Russia, where even the EU Defense Action Plan of 2016 included the challenges stipulating from lacking in the EU defense budgets, when compared to the continuously upgrading Russia, China, and Saudi Arabia, however, no other threats created by Russia were mentioned. The plan highlighted the importance of strengthening the cyber capabilities of the Union and the Member States, but not the resilience to hybrid threats or energy security (European Commission, 2016).

The European Council and the European Parliament have been more concrete in voicing their concerns on Russia than European Commission and the High Representatives or the EEAS. Starting from the implementation of sanctions in 2014 and their extension every six months, both institutions have emphasized the policy of non-recognition of Crimea as territory of Russia, but also have confirmed that the sanctions would be tied to the implementation of the Minsk Agreements, consistently over the years (European Council, 2014; European Council, 2015; European Council, 2018). Violations of international law, disrespect for the European values on which the cooperation with Russia was also meant to be built on were usually presented as the main reasons for upholding the sanctions and limited cooperation, however, the discourse of the Russian threats would come erratically, either from specific representatives (most notably European Council President Donald Tusk) or on specific issues.

Back in 2014, the European Parliament has referred to the annexation of Crimea as a "threat to the security of the EU" and had already emphasized the need for a more robust common energy security policy (European Parliament, 2014a). In another resolution, the Parliament stressed that the Russian military aggression was "threatening to undermine the post-war European order," and has called for measures in response to the Russian actions as well as the negotiations for improving the situation (European Parliament, 2014b).

In both 2017 and 2018, European Council President Donald Tusk has referred to Russia itself as "the main threat to EU unity," in particular under the rule of Vladimir Putin (Tusk, 2017; Kostaki, 2018). In 2019, Tusk also pointed out also the threat coming from "hostile" meddling in the European elections, but did not openly refer to Russia (Tusk, 2019). Other issues that at different times were considered a threat to the EU are disinformation, cyber-attacks, and hybrid warfare (Tusk, 2015; European Parliament, 2021).

As much as the European Union intended to build a unified voice on the foreign policy issues from the perspective of the European identity, the fact that Donald Tusk was one of the strongest voices on the Russian threats since he was the prime minister of Poland (Kanter & Higgins, 2015), supports the argument that national identities of the Member States still affect the discourses coming from the EU much stronger than a European one. Under the Presidency of Charles Michel, the discourse shifted back to the "five guiding principles," as mentioned earlier, while the President increased the frequency of conversations with Vladimir Putin in a series of attempts to de-escalate the tensions with Ukraine and create a more *proactive* rather than *reactive* approach of the European Union to resume cooperation on the situations in Libya and Syria (European Council, n.d. a; Michel, 2021 b). However, apart from the persistent references to the European values and the international law, the EU practically had no leverage while engaging in such negotiations with Russia.

Still, at Munich Security Conference in 2021, Charles Michel did mention Russia once, quite poetically emphasizing the value of the European identity and community:

> *When we are on the same page, we have greater influence to promote democracy and drive forward our economies. Together, we are stronger to defend the rules-based international order from the attacks of autocratic regimes, whether from Russia, China or Iran. And we are stronger to ensure peace and security*
>
> Michel, 2021a

Despite a clear understanding of the Russian threatening foreign policies, very few new sanctions on Russia were implemented over the years since 2015, either following the bombings of Aleppo in 2016 (DW, 2016), increasing disinformation and cyber-attacks, murder of Skrypals, or poisoning of Alexey Navalny. The extension of the application of sanctions since 2015 was based on the reviews of the implementation of the Minsk Agreements rather than the emerging threats coming from Russia. The few adjustments to the sanctions that were made only extended the lists of sanctioned individuals and entities in response to activities in either Ukraine or Russia, but no new economic sanctions were introduced until 2022. By the end of 2021, the sanctions were applied to 177 individuals and 48 entities (European Council, n.d. b).

Both the lack of new responses to the growing Russian threats and rather selective presence of the formulations of the Russian threats in the discourses from the EU institutions, points to the strong impacts of the limitations to the discourse outline in Chapter 3.

Conclusion

This thesis aimed to trace the development of the idea of the Russian threat from 2014 to 2021 within the discourses of the EU and NATO. In attempt to offer a comprehensive overview of the Russian strategies and tactics targeting the West or pursuing its interests by means that went against the established norms and values of the post-Cold War security regime, it became clear that all of the concerns that the previous studies have identified were in fact important for the definition of the Russian threat and were also represented in the discourses of both organizations.

Thus, the developing Russian anti-hegemonic strategy extensively deployed the means of disinformation, economic and political pressures, hybrid warfare, or gaining influence within the Western democracies to destabilize and create disagreements among the bloc it perceived as a threat. This made the issues in the relations of both the EU and NATO even more prominent, as both organizations had their strategic goals and interests vested in the relations with Russia, such as the resolution of the conflicts in the Middle East that Russia became a key player in. However, in addition to the interests that existed prior to the emergence of more Russian threats, it was also the Russian status as a nuclear weapons state and a major energy recourses supplier for the EU, the confrontation was not a reasonable option for both institutions, as it contradicted the ideological bases of their identity with the resolution of conflict by diplomatic means but would possibly lead to the escalation of the security dilemmas they found themselves in vis-à-vis Russia.

The discourse analysis has revealed that both institutions were careful in the definitions of the Russian threats, frequently using the label of a challenge instead, but as both the number and the nature of the activities has become more alarming, both organizations have engaged in more efforts to both counter and clearly signal their stance against the threats. Nevertheless, the articulation was frequently limited to either only criticism and condemnation, instead of specific responses, since the Russian actions primarily were opposed on the basis of the

norms and values that both organizations saw as the core of their identity, including the respect for international law, human rights, and democracy. The importance of these values that Russia was directly violating led to the construction of the discursive Self-versus-Other structures in the discourses of both organizations that clearly placed Russia in isolation from the West but did not necessarily frame it as a threat. As the value of cooperation and diplomatic resolution of conflicts lied at the center of the identity of Euro-Atlantic security community, the discourse of a threat would be either avoided or minimized using through the explanations of the specific threats, such as hybrid warfare or cyber-attacks, but not their attribution specifically to Russia.

Finally, while the NATO discourse has defined the Russian threats to the West directly and clearly by 2019, the EU discourses were much less coherent, as different institutions and actors would either focus on the importance of cooperation with Moscow, or the need to counter the threats it posed. It can be argued that all the limiting factors around the discourses for both the EU and NATO have led to the Russian threat remaining underestimated or addressed only to a limited extent, which was a mistake that hopefully will never take place again, as the price for it has already become too high.

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