MASTER THESIS

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"Trusting the other:
Conflict Transformation in Eastern Ukraine."

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Pledge of honesty

On my honour as a student of the Diplomatische Akademie Wien, I submit this work in good faith and pledge that I have neither given nor received unauthorised assistance on it.

Vienna, 12 June 2020   *Olga Loidolt-Shen*

Abstract (en)

From stagnating conflict management to the transformation of conflicts: bringing in trust as a transformative tool.

The conflict in Eastern Ukraine has been extensively analysed by various scholars. These analyses, however, have mostly been executed through the realist lens, focusing on states, their interests and the security issues thus arising. As a result, this omits socially constructed elements of the conflict and the way they have influenced its evolution as well as how they still impact resolution attempts. In my thesis, I aim at filling this gap with an analysis of the agency involved as well as the culturally and socially constructed nature of the conflict. This is done by bringing in the component of trust as a key emotion to the evolution and resolution of the conflict, so as to understand and explain how the relationships of trust have changed at different points in time and how the leading actors' actions and reactions have developed in a dynamic relationship of challenge and change.

Keywords: trust, conflict resolution, conflict transformation, Eastern Ukraine, Russia, post-soviet space, negotiations.

Abstract (de)

Der Konflikt im Osten der Ukraine wurde äußerst umfangreich analysiert. Diese Untersuchungen beruhen allerdings zumeist auf der Perspektive des Realismus, mit einem starken Fokus auf Staaten, deren Interessen sowie die daraus entstehenden sicherheitspolitischen Konsequenzen; hierbei kommen jedoch die sozial konstruierten Aspekte von Konflikten bzw. Konfliktlösungsansätzen meist zu kurz. Mit einer Analyse, welche auf dem Agency Ansatz basiert, versuche ich in der vorliegenden Masterarbeit diese Lücke zu schließen. Dadurch wird zu einem ganzheitlichen Verständnis des Konflikts beigetragen. Im Besonderen wird auf die dynamische Entwicklung des Vertrauens in Konfliktbeziehungen innerhalb der Konflikttransformation eingegangen. Ausschlaggebend hierfür ist die dynamische und wandelbare Natur der Entscheidungen und Reaktionen führender Akteure innerhalb der Konfliktverhandlungsprozesse.

Schlagwörter: Vertrauen, Konfliktlösung, Konflikttransformation, Verhandlungen, Ostukraine, Russland, sowjetisches Erbe.

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1 Introduction

Frozen conflicts seem to have become the rule rather than the exception to interstate relations in the post-Soviet space, and the relationship status of "brother-nations" has thus been repeatedly changed to that of "foes." Nonetheless, these same post-Soviet relations and especially the interdependencies thus resulting make the states seek for a normalisation of relations. This results in unresolved conflicts being put aside, thus creating frozen conflict areas.

The conflict in eastern Ukraine is still being fought, with ceasefires being broken on a regular basis. Moreover, the scenario of a frozen Donbas does not seem to be an acceptable one for either side. Perhaps the only point everyone agrees upon in this conflict is that it cannot be resolved by military means, but only through a political and diplomatic solution.[1] Nonetheless, despite the recent positive developments, the resolution of the conflict is perceived to be stuck in a somewhat frozen peace process established by the Minsk Agreements.

The research interest of this thesis is embedded within the field of conflict resolution, the main focus being on the question of why conflict management stagnates. While freezing a conflict may introduce a positive effect of bringing violence to a halt or at least reducing it significantly, frozen conflicts still keep the situation tense, with the danger of an ever-stronger re-escalation omnipresent. Transforming such conflicts, therefore, is a balancing act, requiring a lot of attention to detail.

One such important element, as I will argue, decisive but neglected, is trust. Insights from psychological research suggest that with interdependence the relation between cooperation and trust becomes most important in situations of large conflicts of interests (Balliet & Van Lange 2012). The interests at stake, which led to the

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[1] Self-deterrence, the reluctance of actors to assume the risks of war independently of efforts by others to deter them, explains why the diplomatic path has been chosen as the only possible way out of the conflict. It arguably kept the Western powers from taking a harder line against Russia in the Ukraine crisis (Lebow 2018).

escalation of the conflict between Ukraine and Russia were and still are perceived as mutually exclusive, embedded within highly interdependent relations. In my thesis, I assume that trust, defined as an influential force within communication processes, impacts heavily the outcome of conflict resolution attempts. The varying levels of trust in ongoing conflicts are expected to have an important effect on the success of the attempts to solve the conflict or transform it towards new forms of relations. The aim of this thesis is to identify the limitations of the current understanding of trust in international relations as well as its neglected role within conflict resolution.

The literature on trust in international relations has been growing progressively in recent years (Haukkala, van de Wetering, Vuorelma 2018). And while the research stream on conflict management clearly recognises the trust factor as crucial for the negotiation process (Webel and Galtung 2007), little research has been done on its influence within the process of conflict mediation at the diplomatic level (Lebow 2018) and thus this presents a gap in conflict research (Wallensteen and Svensson 2014). Consequently, in my thesis I would like to investigate this issue and explore the different levels of trust and the actors' perception of it in relation to conflict transformation.

The structure of the thesis is set up in three major parts: theory, methodology and three empirical chapters. The theoretical part provides an overview of the current literature on conflict resolution and transformation, embedded within the constructivist understanding of conflict relationships; followed by the theoretical framework for trust in protracted conflicts. The methodology section elaborates on the methods used for the analysis, such as semi-structured interviews and primary sources analysis. In the empirical part, trust patterns inherent to the frozen peace process in the East of Ukraine, embedded within the conflict settlement process under the OSCE's lead are analysed. The conclusion reflects the results of the case study analysis against the main theoretical assumptions.

2 Theory

2.1 Literature review

2.1.1 Constructivism, Cultural Theory and Conflict

The problematic aspects of the existing leading international relations paradigms in assessing conflict as well as the consequences arising therefrom have already been mentioned in the introduction and will be further elaborated upon in the following sections. At this stage, the critical points in the theoretical assumptions of realism and liberalism are the following: Realism dismisses any existence of society at the international level, treating relations as universal, timeless and unchanging; Liberalism postulates a strong connection between the domestic and international levels, moreover, it emphasises the need of a hegemon or at least a leading power. From the constructivist standpoint, both realism and liberalism introduce essential challenges to conflict resolution in international relations. The concepts of sovereignty and national interest as leading forces in international relations have thus become the typical constructs for assessing a country's foreign policy options. In a sense, this determinist idea of structuring international relations in such a way became a self-fulfilling prophecy (Lebow 2008: 12). The proliferation of neo/realist conceptions and strategies of and for the world order arguably polarises the international scene or at least stipulates the one-way (realist) road for states on the international stage.

Constructivism, on the other hand, emphasises the decisive role of society in constituting actors and their identities, following Durkheim's thoughts on socialisation and collective consciousness. The socially and historically constructed nature of international relations is determinative as it rejects the idea of a structurally given \, and therefore static nature, of interstate relations (Onuf 1989, Wendt 1999).

Instead, constructivist approaches emphasise agency, context and psychological dynamics, as well as the need to differentiate influence from power and power from material resources. Material resources are understood to be only one component of power, and the extent to which they contribute to power depends upon investment in

the right kinds of capabilities. Power is thus, only one source of influence.[2] Within the constructivist assumptions about the socially constructed nature of interstate relations, influence, therefore, depends on persuasion, and that relies at least as much on knowledge, skill, and friendships, as it does on power. Such an understanding of the power-influence relationship provides a useful explanatory pattern for great powers' recurring incapability to translate their power into influence (Lebow 2018: 14f). These non-determinist assumptions about the nature of international relations as well as the non-materialistic constitution of power allow for new, transformative approaches to conflict and its resolution.

Conflict situations are more often than arise from previous historical disputes over similar issues or between the same actors. This way historically-based conclusions are drawn which may determine the development of conflict in the future as well as the success of resolution attempts. In this sense, historical lessons are a double-edged sword: they might be helpful in estimating the consequences of certain policies, but at the same time, they harbour the danger of false confidence in such policies. Lebow (2018) suggests that contexts are determining, neglecting them or overvaluing histor-ical conclusions over the specific circumstances of the current situation might turn out misleading. The reasons for this are again twofold, they can either be simple cognitive bias or motivated decisions in pursuit of specific political goals, which are then backed by such presumed historical comparability of events.[3] And while reading of historical lessons is clearly better than ignoring them, they nevertheless should always be up-dated on the basis of new experience and evidence (ibid: 24).

Another important constructivist assumption, decisive in terms of conflict rela-tions, is its emphasis on reassurance with a focus on the adversary's needs and weak-nesses. This is an alternative to deterrence, which starts from the assumption of

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[2] As such, military power applied in the wrong situation, for instance, can lead to loss of influence as arguably is the case with Russia's military interventions in Ukraine.

[3] The advent of the comparison between the Great Patriotic War against fascism won by the Soviet Union and today's need to defend a presumed rise of fascist forces in Ukraine as the leading narrative legitimizing Russian aggression, being an example.

genuine hostility and opportunity-seeking from the adversary's side (Stein 1991:4; Bercovitch 2009: 353). Reassurance thus seeks to reduce the expected gains of challenges and increase those of cooperation by reducing fear, misunderstanding and insecurity. Even in conflicts that are perceived as impossible to resolve, reassurance practised by leaders may help to avoid accidental or miscalculated escalation and eventually even eliminate the underlying causes of conflict in the long run (Lebow 2018: 198).

In this context, the approach to quid pro quos as means for addressing substantive or symbolic issues reveals the potential of actually building trust. Especially if such quid pro quos are public, irrevocable and costly, they can gain in credibility and thus support conflict resolution substantially (ibid: 207). With a strong emphasis on agency, the concept of accommodation in situations of conflict gains more importance. Leadership is assumed to be a crucial determinant in assessing the causes of conflict and the potential ways of accommodation. As such, research shows that accommodations are most likely to be sought when new leaders come to power and when strong domestic or external incentives for stabilising or resolving an existing conflict are pressing (ibid: 214)[4].

In his *Cultural Theory of International Relations*, Lebow (2008) understands identity as revolving around the notion of *thumos* – the human quest for self-esteem within a group or society in the context of international relations. He argues that in today's societies, people identify as citizens with their nation-states. This evolution brought about the transformation of the quest for self-esteem as interconnected with the standing of the state, its recognition and status. Such transcendence of citizens with the state can at times be mobilised by political leaders.[5]

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[4] As I will argue in the following chapters, there are grounds for arguing that the conflict negotiations within and beyond the Minsk framework have largely been brought into motion by the new leadership with new mindsets and different approaches to the conflict. Moreover, the domestic and external pressures contributed much to the pace with which accommodation came about.

[5] The notion of "raising Russia from its knees" has been present throughout Putin's presidency. It became especially mobilized during Russia's proactive involvement within the conflict in Eastern Ukraine as well as in the context of legitimizing the annexation of Crimea.

The holistic approach to understanding certain constellations in the international arena, such as conflict relations, requires an understanding of the underlying patterns to behaviour. Lebow suggests addressing this through the trilogy of society, order and compliance. Society achieves order through voluntary compliance. The notions of fear, interest, honour and habit are generally assumed to be the leading forces behind the willingness to comply. They, in turn, rely on universal drives (for appetite and spirit), a powerful emotion (fear) and routine practices (habit). It is their relative importance, varying in space and time, that determines a society's behavioural pattern. Deriving from such an assumption about socially constituted behaviour, fear, interest and honour, understood as motives for actors' actions, generate new approaches to cooperation, conflict and risk-taking (Lebow 2008: 5).

Derived from Plato's and Aristoteles' thoughts on psyche as being driven by appetite, spirit and reason, where the latter has the potential to constrain and educate the former two, Lebow stipulates that his theory of politics is based on the spirit. It is assumed to be the leading motive in all humans striving for self-esteem regardless of the ways its manifestations may vary across societies. While at first glance the elements of honour and standing appear to be the most strongly associated with the previous centuries' politics, the advent of the modern nationalism allows for an assumption that democratic, industrial and post-industrial states continue this trend. Moreover, it is argued that by identifying themselves with their nation-state people strive for increased levels of self-worth, achieved through group membership (ibid: 15f).

One of the key insights the spirit approach provides is that actors who act on its behalf and seek self-esteem though honour, standing or autonomy, are generally more prepared to take risks and even sacrifices for the sake of such lofty goals. Historically, Homer introduced the notion of the spirit and its behavioural consequences in *The Iliad*. At a later stage, Weber stressed the desire of states to get their superior value recognised as a major drive behind their behaviour at the international stage, which he labelled the *Machtprestige* (competition for standing among states) which infuses an irrational element into international relations. Morgenthau, however, reversed the

relationship between power and prestige, arguing that the former was subordinate to prestige, thus assuming power to be an end in and of itself. Lebow's cultural theory and case studies, however, suggest that the pursuit of power by states is a means to diverse ends such as security, wealth and, last but not least, status. Lebow argues for status is one of the strongest of such security-seeking ends (Lebow 2008: 20).

Another crucial assumption about the behaviour of societies is provided by the concept of ontological security. This constructivist concept gives an explanation for the way in which societies become stable through the mechanisms of routine. The latter is argued to allow people to reduce anxiety, structure their identities and enhance their capacity for agency. This concept is arguably applicable to states, which additionally rely on stable concepts of self. It is achieved and maintained through consistent foreign policy routines, provided by narratives of the state's identity, which in turn influences and justifies its international behaviour. Lebow's argument provides that self-esteem is a major element of identity, sustained through the quest for honour and standing (ibid: 25f).

Here, the emphasis on change and agency comes into play. It suggests that leadership, elite behaviour and also chance have the power of shaping goals and behaviour. This increases even more when combined with self-reflection (Lebow 2008: 506). Moreover, it suggests that changes in the identities and interests of the leading actors have the potential to change the character of their society. Here the notion of spirit and the universal drive for self-esteem come into play. While institutions and states possess neither psyche nor emotions, the people who represent them do. Acknowledging emotion as inherent to human rational behaviour, the Cultural Theory suggests that human reason ideally works together with positive affect, enabling empathy and dialogue which in turn allow for cooperation through self-imposed limitations on appetite and spirit. When separated from affect, reason can be reduced to strategic and goal-oriented behaviour, thus introducing challenges to relationships, expressed through conflicts. Paths for mutually profitable achievements in terms of spiritual interests and satisfaction are thus being closed (Lebow 2008: 514).

Emotions are arguably involved in decision-making, in the sense that they help prioritise important information. While the negative effects of emotions have been treated extensively in political science, their positive effects in cooperation still remain under studied.

In terms of the role of emotions in negotiation strategies, the Cultural Theory suggests that the perceptions of potential punishments and rewards have important implications for the process itself. Most importantly, the carrot-and-stick approach is more often than not perceived as humiliating and usually leads to highly uncooperative behaviour.

Moreover, the assumption of the interconnectedness between identity and interest introduces different perspectives on the efficient ways of approaching conflict. Simply addressing the interests and thus ignoring the actors' ambitions for honour and standing may be insufficient, denying the potential of reaching an agreement.[6]

Finally, identity, interests and behaviour are assumed to be socially determined. However, actors are not restricted to socialisation. Moreover, through their behaviour they actually have the power of reshaping interests and identities, with potential effects on the systems in which they interact. Actors are influenced by their beliefs, which are shaped by their experiences, education, etc. In turn, their definitions of the environment are influenced by all such constituting factors (Lebow 2008: 563f). Taking these possibilities for agency into account arguably allows for new perspectives on world politics, their development and possible future paths for cooperation.

The theoretical assumptions of constructivism, and the insights from Lebow's Cultural Theory more specifically, provide new paths for approaching conflict and arguably allow for more transformational approaches.

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[6] This phenomenon is widely known as inefficient diplomacy, which is arguably due to the dominant neo/realist approach of balancing interests in a mere conflict management approach.

2.1.2   Contemporary Conflict Resolution

Conflict is adherent to human society and has a varied range of origins, such as social and cultural change, psychological and political developments, etc. These are genuinely in conflict with one another. However, they only develop their full scope when conflict parties are formed which then introduce incompatible goals or conflicting perceptions of such goals (Ramsbotham et al. 2016: 9). This then results in the emergence of conflicted relationships, introducing the quest for finding the most efficient ways of handling such relationships and preventing them from turning toxic.

The conflict management approach starts from the idea of incompatibility of interests and values. Violence arises as a natural consequence of historical and power relationships. If the unresolvable nature of conflicts is interpreted in such a way, conflict management portends itself to contain them through political settlements and other means where minimal cooperation is sufficient, and coercion is used (Miall 2004: 3). While conflict management approaches involving the use of power resources are most effective in bringing about settlements in the short run, their long-term efficiency in terms of transforming the conflict is comparatively poor (Berkovitch 1996). Moreover, conditions and constraints such as exclusion or coercion are generally believed to be an antidote to trust.

Väyrynen criticised conflict management theory for its limited view on issues, actors and interests, taking them as given. This unfortunately just focuses simply on mitigating or eliminating contradictions between them. Furthermore, he stressed that the conflict management approach neglects completely the fact that the issues, actors and interests change over time as a consequence of the social, economic and political dynamics of societies (Väyrynen 1991: 4).

In terms of the success of conflict management, the definition of the former depends greatly on the type of conflict, its dimensions and contexts. When dealing with violent conflicts, the main goal is clearly ending the violence. However, research shows that today such a definition of successful conflict management is not satisfactory and needs to be extended to comprise the termination of hostilities combined with

governments' durably stabilising the situation (Wallensteen and Svensson 2014). This implies that a peace agreement meant to bring about long-term success necessarily needs to be accompanied by concrete institutional peace arrangements on territorial and political power-sharing, be backed by third party security guarantees, binding legal provisions, etc. However, most importantly, discursive transformations on various societal levels have to take place.

This leads to the concepts of conflict resolution and conflict transformation. The former tries to look beyond political power and involves the possibility of transcending past the conflict and looking at positions and interests from new perspectives, encouraging third party assistance and the search for creative solutions. The ultimate goal of such attempts lies in helping the conflict parties to move from zero-sum to constructive outcomes.[7] Galtung's notions of "negative peace," as the cessation of direct violence, and "positive peace," as the overcoming of structural and cultural violence provides a framework for assessing the different stages of conflict resolution (ibid).

Finally, the concept of conflict transformation takes account of the specifics of contemporary conflicts, encompassing conflictual relationships which go beyond the explicit conflict matter. Hence, conflict transformation aims at transforming such relationships, by dealing with the interests and discourses which sustain the violent conflict. It therefore regards constructive conflict as a way of achieving change on a gradual, long-term level (Lederach 1995).

The complex transformative nature of the conflict flows from two characteristics. First, conflicts sometimes develop towards vicious or benign spirals. The common pattern for conflict development is to broaden (draw in new issues), widen (draw in new actors) and intensify (draw in new victims). Second, conflicts can be transformed as parties shift positions and adopt new goals, new actors emerge, and new situations develop bringing about new relationships and changed structures (Miall 2004: 7).

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[7] Here the distinction between constructive vs. destructive conflict is of paramount importance.

The quest for finding the most effective way of treating a conflict is a prominent endeavour within the research on conflict resolution. The notion of conflict as an element inherent to human behaviour brings in the need of developing new ways of dealing with conflict situations but also of preventing future escalation. The most prominent definition of conflict is that of perceived goal incompatibilities between two or more parties (Berkovitch et al. 2016).

The definition of parties to a conflict, while obvious at a first glance, becomes somewhat blurry if one tries to identify them in concrete situations of conflict. The definition of whether or not a unit or an actor is party to a conflict may depend on factors such as influence by other, wealthier actors, the level of autonomy of the party, the rationality of their behaviour as well as their perceived identity within the conflict. The latter is especially intriguing. While the observer may identify an actor as party to conflict, the actor himself may consider this issue differently.[8] Moreover, the aggregation levels play an important role in determining the levels of symmetry and asymmetry; The relationship dynamics vary across individual, national, international types of organisation of parties to conflict (ibid).

Moreover, such divergencies among parties to conflict influence how the issues of conflict are defined. The definitions of conflict issues depend on various factors, such as context, values and needs, historical experiences and lessons derived therefrom, the interpretations and, last but not least, the predominating narratives. Here, the attitudes to conflict as well as the factors influencing conflict attitudes and behaviours are decisive. Perceptions are arguably formed over time through culture, experiences, etc., and therefore often result in differing understandings of the subject of the conflict, as well as the consequent goals of conflict resolution and paths for its transformation. While they often complicate dialogue between parties over the to-be-defined issues, the assumption of perceptions as something that is subject to change and

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[8] As such is the role of the Russian Federation within the Eastern Ukraine conflict as both party and mediator is a particular case in point.

transformation and not predetermined by superior factors allows for a wider scope of potential transformation.

The concept of conflict mediation aims at resolving a conflict through negotiations, by appealing to the common wish of ending violence and ultimately preventing its recurrence (Wallensteen and Svensson 2014). Research points to the trend that conflicts nowadays end through negotiations more often than through classical military victories (Beardsley and Lo 2014). Moreover, while conflict resolution through mediation tends to take longer, the resulting peace also tends to last longer than peace achieved more rapidly through coercive means (ibid.). However, mediation can only be successful if it pays enough attention to the underlying social constructs and beliefs surrounding the conflict. The awareness of these conditioning factors, however, is arguably neglected in practice.

Recent research of conflict has been mainly focused on structural factors, such as regime type and levels of democracy of the state parties to the conflict, as the main explanatory elements for the success and failure of conflict negotiations (Parlar Dal 2018). In this line of research, Chyzh (2014) demonstrated that personalist party-based regimes are likelier to enter into agreements than democracies. However, they are at the same time less likely than democracies to eventually comply with such agreements, which is considered to make them less trustworthy in conflict negotiations in the long run. Additionally, her findings suggest that strategic behaviour plays a stronger role when personality- and party-based regimes are involved, to the extent that agreements are more easily signed in such settings. At the same time, however, the parties are less likely to eventually comply with such agreements. Moreover, these findings suggest that domestic institutional constraints influence the behaviour of leaders on the international level in both democratic and autocratic regime settings, albeit to different degrees. Thus, while autocratic leaders perhaps do not experience restraints from the electorate as much as democracies do, their rule still depends on the support of domestic actors, which vary in size and levels of influence (ibid.).

While the influence of the internal-external nexus on conflict negotiations certainly plays a in major foreign policy decisions and clearly produces spill over effects to the diplomatic levels; the under-researched field of the diplomatic level of negotiations as a rather independent sphere, provides grounds for assuming that other factors, and trust being one of them, may have important impacts on the success of conflict resolution attempts and on the eventual transformation paths for conflicts resolved on the diplomatic level.

2.2 Theoretical framework

A holistic approach to conflict goes in hand with a holistic approach to its resolution, which is comprised within the concept of conflict transformation. Trust is assumed to be essential, since it might be potentially relatively easy to come up with some material solutions to the presumed conflict issues. Implementing them with success or even transcending conflicted relationships, however, might turn into a stalemate situation, if the emotional and identity related elements are overlooked. In the following, a conceptualisation of trust for analysing conflict relationships and developing ways for their transformation will be elaborated upon.

2.3 Conceptualising trust in conflict transformation

Under the general presumption towards mistrust and adversarial relationships in international relations, it becomes difficult to imagine situations in which conflicts can be transformed into cooperation. Head (2012) suggests the trinity of trust, empathy and dialogue as an essential combination toward a holistic understanding of conflict relations as well as their potential evolution into relationships of mutual understanding.

The growing body of research on trust, empathy and communicative ethics by disciplines such as psychology, communication and political sciences could be brought together to emphasise the relational and dynamic nature of these elements within the field of international relations. Such an interdisciplinary approach would open space for new questions into the role of emotions in dynamic processes of trust,

empathy and dialogue as well as their role in negotiations and conflict transformation. Moreover, it would provide space for new investigations into the conditions under which adversarial relationships may transform into cooperative ones. Accordingly, an analysis of this kind requires a holistic approach, which takes the agency of multiple actors at multiple levels into account. This certainly poses limitations for the methodology, which will be discussed in the following chapter.

Considering trust as a conditioning element in relations between state actors requires some reflexions on its rationality. This question has been addressed by rationalists in terms of interests and pay-offs, which are believed to determine the levels of cooperation. In this sense, if circumstances of the players change, so does the willingness to cooperate. Thus, the nature of cooperation becomes relatively tricky and risky. Nonetheless, the recognition of promises as essential elements of trusting relationships makes actors more inclined to keep their promises despite possible selfish gains. This phenomenon is labelled as the binding approach – meaning that actors assume responsibility for the continuation of a trusting relationship as one that has to be maintained through reliable cooperation. This implies certain judgements on values and obligations. The rational cooperation model as well as the assumptions of the binding approach provide for an understanding of trust as possessing both a rational as well as an emotional dimension. Trust can thus be understood as a cognitive activity which is at the same time reflected against interpersonal feelings (Head 2012: 359f).

In this line of thought, Mercer (2005) defines trust as an emotional belief, which influences the interpretation of the counterpart's behaviour. He considers emotion a reinforcing factor when assumptions about the trustworthiness of others are made involving "certainty beyond evidence" (Mercer 2010). Since emotional beliefs are neither objective nor fixed, they can transform over time. This in turn opens up the possibility of transforming conflicts. New evidence and empathy are thus believed to be the influencing factors for transforming trust and conflict relations.

Lebow also emphasised emotions as being fundamental to actors' decision to cooperate. Moreover, he argued that it is insufficient to explain behaviour only as a

reaction to external incentives. Instead, first and foremost, identity and interests, which are intersubjective and based on collective experiences and relationships, should be addressed. They arguably play an essential role in the ways in which actors act and react to change. Such an assumption demands for an analysis of the internal incentives and beliefs of the actors, which again requires a multilevel analysis of actors as individuals as well as representatives of collectives (2005: 284). This certainly is a complex endeavour, the empirical consequences of which will be discussed in the methodology part of this thesis.

While neorealists assume that it is the anarchy that provides fear and mistrust, constructivist provide a different assessment. In this context, Crawford argues that it is not the structural and systemic pressures which open up paths for conflict, but the way fear and mistrust influence the perceptions and identities of the decision makers that plays a crucial role. She thus suggests that emotion and knowledge are highly interconnected, and meaning is usually strongly attached to feelings. This allows for the assumption that behaviours are sensible to cognitively and culturally constructed influences (Crawford 2000: 131-136).

Emotional beliefs have a dynamic nature which enables them to change over time. Possible sources of change are new evidence and empathy. New evidence, processed through culturally constructed lenses that are based on particular theories and normative expectations, may lead to results that are different from those than a rational choice theory would suggest (Mercer 2010). Hence, different conclusions based on the same knowledge are often made in international politics, which is explainable by the influence of emotion and culture. Empathy on the other hand can again be categorised into two kinds. The affective element is expressed through sympathy with another. The cognitive element implies understanding the other's perspective and emotions, but in a manner that is differentiated to self. Notwithstanding, emotions are crucial in both these kinds of empathy, with a strong effect on the cognitive one thus having the capacity of influencing motives and intentions (Head 2012: 364).

Moreover, empathy is also open to transformation and evolves over time. As such it is not only present during the communication encounters but develops continuously. The actor's ability of expressing empathy is influenced by socio-cultural factors such as: individual and collective identity, traumatic memories (Bell, 2006; Fattah and Fierke, 2009) and historical narratives (Hammack and Pilecki, 2012; Monroe, 2002). Furthermore, the individual capacity to exercise empathy as well as common communicative practices strongly influence the extent to which empathy is expressed.

This leads to the issue of communicative ethics. They are deemed crucial within the conflict negotiation processes. Discourse ethics and validity claims can be summed up into questions, such as is the argument sincere, accurate, comprehensible; or are the communicative behaviours normatively appropriate? A critical interrogation of the actor's communicative practices may consequentially impact the decision to exercise empathy. In this sense, empathy is defined as:

> *The capacity to transport oneself by means of feeling across cultural distance into alien and prima facie incomprehensible life conditions, patterns of reaction, and interpretive perspectives; it is an emotional precondition from the ideal taking over of roles, which requires each person to adopt the standpoint of all the others.* (Habermas in Dews, 1992: 269)

Such an almost Kantian definition of empathy sounds idealistic at first. Nonetheless, it is also the only plausible way of entering into conflict negotiations with a prospect for success. The difficulty with such an ideal type of empathy lies again in the fact that it is also sensible to social influences. For example, there are potential blocks to empathy, such as language, culture, social norms, class, gender, nationality and race. Moreover, obstacles to empathy might arise through spatial distance, time and lack of familiarity or identification. Additionally, there are various procedures,

institutions, and interactions which sustain, shape and constrain interactions in international politics (Frevert, 2011: 185-192; Cameron, 2012b).

Another critical aspect with emotions in international politics is in the question of how to make actors examine the role of their feelings within their judgements. Evaluating the levels of inclusion, presence of coercion, the recognition of different groups within the society, the plurality of perspectives, etc., is helpful as all these factors derive from and result in various forms of social, political, or linguistic pools. As such they eventually negative effect the transformation of conflicted relationships into cooperative ones and even block the process of building of trust.

Hence, the subjective degree of un/trustworthiness of the other rests on states' selection and interpretation of the evidence, past experiences and interactions, dominant historical and emotional narratives, appropriation and use of traumatic memory to frame relationships and, finally, the feelings of foreign policy elites of vulnerability or fear. The latter are tightly related to the element of communicative ethics. Issues such as whether setting up negotiations based on fulfilment of preconditions by one side is fair or whether mutual respect, dignity and the perceived equality between the negotiating partners are given, are all tightly related to the quality of negotiation settings as well as their results. More often than not conflict parties react in certain ways not simply because of the material effects of their actions, but out of fear to make themselves vulnerable through demands perceived as harmful to their sense of security, pride, and cultural and national identities (Head 2012).

Reflexive capacities of dialogue, empathy and trust can act as catalysts in transforming relationships and interactions. The intentions, behaviour, reasons and emotions are expressly communicated by actors within a conflict context. Interpreting such signals accordingly requires acknowledgement of the cognitive and emotional elements involved. Additionally, a reflective stance allows to take account of different perspectives and actors, allowing for greater comprehension within negotiations over contested historical and emotional narratives which are widely acknowledges as elements fuelling conflicts. Moreover, literature on conflict resolution supports the

argument that people are not motivated by facts but by their perceptions of the facts and their interpretations thereof, as well as their feelings about the facts (Ramsbotham, Woodhous, Miall 2005). Emotional beliefs are thus a significant factor in shaping conflict resolution in international politics.

Demonstrating the impact of emotional beliefs such as trust, empathy and dialogue as intervening factors in conflict allows to highlight their potential as vehicles for conflict transformation.

3 Methodology

3.1 Approach, tools and data sources

As the main element of my research interest is embedded within the question of why conflict resolution stagnates and what possible challenges there could be to transforming such protracted conflicts, the most appropriate methodological approach was assumed to qualitative methods. The reasons supporting it are manifold: from its usefulness in terms of interpreting and contextualising the elements of interest to getting in-depth insights into the underlying patterns of behaviours, social structures and identities (Druckman 2005).

The research design is set up as a combination of semi-structured interviews and primary and secondary sources analysis. The interviewees were selected on the base of their experience and involvement within the conflict resolution processes. The main focus being on the OSCE's role as conflict transformer, the interviewees were thus the permanent representatives of the respective countries as well the Special Representative of the OSCE in Ukraine and the Trilateral Contact Group (TCG) who has been chairing the negotiation process almost from the offset of the Minsk Agreements as well as with the Strategic Policy Support Unit of the OSCE, who has also been involved in the negotiations in during the Austrian Chairmanship in 2017 which focused on building trust. Moreover, multilateral negotiations professionals were contacted for sharing their experiences and insights into the perceptions of the actors. As far as

primary data sources are concerned, the Minks Agreements, their respective annexes as well as the Discussion Paper issued by the Joint United Nations/OSCE Mission to Eastern Ukraine (UNJOMEUK) served as the main data for the analysis.

The questions focused on the perceived presence of trust and empathy within the parties and their representatives within the framework of the TCG negotiations as well as the role of identities in such settings.

Additionally, an analysis of the major narratives communicated by the leading actors in relation to the conflict but also to their perceptions was executed. The main focus was on elements of identity and assumptions about the other.

Due to the uncertainties and the circumstances related to the outbreak of the COVID-19 the execution of the originally planned interviews came under scrutiny. Interviews in-person were not possible due to contact restrictions, work schedule disruptions, etc. The option of online interviews did not appear suitable for most of the contacted persons. In the end an interview with the former Special Representative as well as with an expert specialised on Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union were held over Skype.

Limitations in terms of quantity of interview material were compensated by recourse to related statements and communiqués to the respective actors as well as secondary sources. Nonetheless, it is acknowledged that future research under more appropriate conditions would be necessary to get more in-depth insights from the respective actors.

3.2   Case selection

The conflict in Eastern Ukraine has extensively been explained by the neo-realist scholarship, focusing mainly on the systemic and interest-based competition for power between the actors involved, mainly striving for security and ending up in security dilemma situations (Mearsheimer 2014). While such an approach clearly states the origins and causes of the conflict on a rather general level, it seems that such analyses fall short of understanding how the conflict came about prior to the escalation, and,

moreover, how it has been possible for it to sustain itself over time and how potential ways out can be found.

The liberal approach to analysing the conflict, being concerned with the game theory and prisoner's dilemma issues (Axelrod 1984; Dawkins 1986), focuses on material gains and losses, thus falling short in assuming the underlying socio-cultural elements emanating within the conflict. It deals primarily with the mutual payoffs of cooperation and the various scenarios of how such might be achieved and the trust dilemmas which thereby arise (ibid).

In this thesis, however, I investigate a different understanding of trust and its conceptualisation within the conflict in Eastern Ukraine and the related contexts. In particular, I analyse the specific social and emotional components active within the conflict relationship as well as how they have evolved over time, especially by focusing on the perceptions and assumptions of the actors involved.

In my hypothesis I assume that a set of narratives have contributed greatly to the development of the conflict over Eastern Ukrainian territories. More precisely, I expect that the dynamic nature of the conflict-trust relationship plays an important but neglected role within the conflict resolution. On the one hand, particular identities and perceptions of interests and emotions are expected to have impacted the trust relationship greatly, and, in turn, trust to have influenced the evolution of the conflict relations. Hence, these processes taking place simultaneously are expected to influence each other in a two-way relationship, impacting the development of conflict transformation.

The peaceful dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991, which was introduced through the Belovezha Accords, provided for a peaceful transition of power, as well as the establishment of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), bringing about a new regional order for the post-Soviet space. The former Soviet republics became independent in the most optimistic manner and so the levels of mutual trust and assistance to the aspirations of liberty and democracy between the newly established independent states were pointing towards a peaceful regional development.

The new-old leadership[9] easily assessed their counterparts in negotiations and were rather sure in their assumptions of the other. Over time, however, the societies and the leadership have undergone important transitions. *For things to remain the same everything must change,* and so certain leaders had to take decisions at some point, which turned out to be controversial and opened critical policy windows which blew important winds of change and challenges.

Thus, the post-Soviet optimism did not last for long as territorial and ethnic conflicts with interstate components broke out in the regions of Transnistria, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as well as in Nagorno-Karabakh. Later followed the wars in Chechnya and the annexation of Crimea as well as the secessionist fighting in the eastern Ukrainian regions of Donetsk and Luhansk (Certain Areas of Donets and Luhansk Regions, CADLR).

While the former group of conflicts has been turned into frozen conflicts, the latest territorial escalation in the post-Soviet area – the crisis in Eastern Ukraine – actually has the potential of being resolved due to the ongoing conflict management attempts involving the OSCE with the Trilateral Contact Group as well as the Normandie Format setup.

The Ukrainian case of conflict resolution is specifically interesting as it is still ongoing for six years now, with interesting patterns of trust and identity in the post-Soviet space coming into play. Firstly, the common cultural-political heritage of the post-Soviet region and the way this common past is activated in contemporary settings, in terms of the underlying inherited structures but also the individual characteristics of decision makers due to their past experiences, makes for an interesting case to investigate deeper into the issue of identities and trust. Secondly, the ethnic and religious affiliation and the way they, too, have been activated in different ways at different points in time during the conflict provide interesting insights into how the narratives around these elements evolved and more importantly how they influenced the

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[9] The transition of power after the dissolution of the Soviet Union was marked by a certain continuity of actors on the leadership level.

reasoning within the conflict. Thirdly, the common structures of the post-Soviet area which evolved in specific ways in the aftermath of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, such as the oligarchic structures and the state capture schemes, contribute greatly to the understanding of the agency of particular actors. Finally, the changes in leadership have had important impacts on the developments within the conflict management (first exchanges of prisoners of war, reappointments of negotiators, etc.) and thus it seems to demonstrate that individuals bring about change in trust relations and in the evolution of conflict resolution.

Thus, I assume that there are underlying socio-cultural effects on the state actors' action in situations of conflict as well as on their resolution attempts. Additionally, I assume that the strong influence of the realist paradigm within this specific conflict is especially pronounced in the way conflicts are perceived, structured and analysed. My analysis thus investigates this, acquiring context and insights into how they are pronounced within the foreign policy discourse. Specifically, the role of Brzezinski's Grand Chessboard on the education level, but also special personal development paths of the leadership are of interest. Moreover, the insistent use of the realist lens on both sides of the conflict as well as the third party involved seem to play a decisive role on the way conflict negotiations have evolved.

My research approach is embedded within the constructivist assumption of perceived realities that are strongly interconnected with culture, education, beliefs and previous experiences.

By emphasising agents, the role of identity and the importance of language and discourse I envisage to bring the analysis of the conflict management further by extending the dominant neo-realist and liberal approaches to it with an analysis based on the insights from the constructivist theoretical thought. The assumption being that the socially constructed nature of the conflict plays a determining role in the possible ways of dealing with its resolution. Moreover, the interdependence of agency and structure, in the sense that they form and influence each other in a dynamic and continuous way, makes it possible to analyse the question of identity of the actors and

their agency within the structures as well as their influence on these structures. Thus, normative elements and ways in which they construct meaning, identities and interest become particularly interesting for approaching the question of how this particular conflict became possible as well as how its resolution developed into a deadlock. The particular interest lying in the question of how trust has transformed within these conflicted relationships and how it transformed them as a consequence. Here, the identities of "self" and "other" and the consequences of manipulating them (dehumanising of "other", etc.) become especially interesting (Galtung 2007: 16).

As mentioned before, the narrative laden nature of the conflict appears particularly striking, and the components such as national myths, political symbols, cultural norms, popular and historical memory have arguably been instrumentalised to important extents (Jackson 2009: 181). Moreover, the problematic conceptualisation of the existing norms such as that of sovereignty and anarchy appear to have played an important role in terms of structuring the identity and the immersion of the self-perpetuating security dilemmas and their respective interconnectedness with trust.

4 The ambiguous role of the OSCE as conflict transformer in Europe

If we consider conflict transformation as a holistic concept which aims at encompassing multiple levels of conflictual relationships, the establishment of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), which later became the Organisation with the same purpose, can be considered as the major vehicle for a profound approach to dealing with persisting conflicts on the European continent. The following brief overview of the establishment and the general notions of the organisation draws upon the rather ambiguous picture of the OSCE's aims and capabilities.

Already during the Cold War ways for East-West cooperation and peaceful and even peace-promoting dialogue were sought. With first preparatory talks already in 1972 and the first summit in 1975, which included the signing of the Final Act, the first milestones towards open and comprehensive negotiation of existing and potential conflicts were set. However, the ideas about the purpose of such a new platform varied greatly between the Eastern and the Western partners. The former sought recognition of the territorial and political status quo as well as economic concessions; the West was interested in disarmament and peaceful change of borders, with free movement of persons and free flows of information.

Notwithstanding, back then there was a third group of actors, the Neutral and Non-Aligned (N+N: Austria, Switzerland, Finland, Sweden, Yugoslavia, Cyprus, Malta, Liechtenstein, San Marino) who were also interested in designing the framework for Europe's security and cooperation instead of passively letting it be settled over their heads. Due to the special character of their political positioning, they decided to contribute to the transformation of relations by taking over the "bridge-building" tasks such as good offices, coordination of final rounds of negotiations as well as by assuming the role of a mediator in situations of persisting conflicts.

The differences in goals and perceptions became visible in the main principles of procedure for the CSCE, which relied on the notion of consensus, understood as

the absence of any objection. Such an approach allowed for generally accepted out-comes, on the one hand, while on the other hand meant an agreement on a very low common denominator with rather general formulations which in turn allowed for multiple differing interpretations and ways of implementation.

The CSCE Helsinki Final Act was then finally signed in 1975 and relied on the three so-called baskets, which focused on questions relying to i) security, ii) economics, science, technology and environment and iii) humanitarian issues. The first basket contained a Declaration on Principles Guiding Relations between Participating States, as well as an agreement on subjective confidence-building measures, such as early notification of military manoeuvres (Final Act 1975). The content of the second basket had the task of providing for solid cooperation and exchange on issues concerning the prosperity on the continent as well as to serve as a pillar for peaceful exchange on common grounds. The third Basket represented the perhaps most important area for the Western allies; human rights, the expansion of contacts between the western and the eastern people, freedom of travel and reunification of families.

The Final Act was a non-binding piece of soft law and therefore, from the legal perspective, not of much weight. Its political content and implications for the East-West relations in Europe and beyond, however, were of remarkable importance. It thus can be considered as a major step towards a positive transformation of the East-West relationship. Following the end of the Cold War, the Conference was institutionalised at the Paris Summit through the Charter of Paris for a New Europe and now became the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe. Its role, however, has been questioned by all sides and diminished somewhat in the eyes of the international community.

Notwithstanding, today experts (Lehne 2015; Neuhold 2019) see the OSCE as reviving paradoxically through the conflict in Eastern Ukraine. The importance of the OSCE with its comprehensive approach to security and conflict in Europe became in high demand again. This development is arguably a sign of the revival of perceptions

of East-West confrontations, posing the question of whether the OSCE has the potential of resolving them in today's changed contexts.

There is a growing scholarship supporting the assumption that failed diplomacy has negative effects on conflict as it demonstrates how far apart leaders and states are on questions of great political or strategic importance (Lebow 2018: 220). This is arguably the effect that has developed among the broader masses of populations in the conflict-ravaged regions of the OSCE on its perceived inefficiency and inability to bring the parties and their diverging goals and interests together. This has been said to flow from the complexity of the processes and procedures which tend to take longer, but more importantly due to the overarching differences in perceptions about the exact issues of the conflict. The former will be addressed in this chapter, while the latter will be discussed more extensively in the following chapter.

The organisation's methods and strategies are developed in a way that allows it to address multiple levels of the conflict, the Trilateral Contact Group being setup out of special Working Groups which address security, political, humanitarian and economic issues of the conflict as well as those resulting from the conflict in the area. The working group for security discusses questions related to the identification of additional disengagement areas of forces and hardware, as well as works out and implements demining plans, etc. The political working group elaborates aspects related to the special status of certain areas of Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine and the implementation of the 'Steinmeier formula'[10] as foreseen by the Minsk Agreements. The humanitarian working group prepares the releases and exchanges of conflict-related detainees, as well as issues of simultaneous opening of additional entry-exit crossing points (EECPs) on the line of contact. The economic working group addresses issues of water supplies across the line of contact, but also financial aspects related to

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[10] The Steinmeier formula was suggested in 2016 by the then Foreign Minister of Germany as a solution to the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. It calls for elections to be held in certain areas of Donetsk and Luhansk, under Ukrainian legislation and the supervision of the OSCE. If the OSCE judges the balloting to be free and fair, then a special self-governing status for the territories will be initiated and Ukraine will be returned control of its easternmost border.

the circumstances of the frozen conflict. Such a distribution of tasks allows for a holistic assessment of the issues of conflict as well as the management of the immediate consequences of the conflict on the daily life in the area and the control over the military situation through the Special Monitoring Mission.

Notwithstanding, the OSCE's contributions to the settlement of the conflict are criticised as slow, minimalist and cumbersome, with massive critique on the organisation's perceived deliberate inaction.

The notion of the process chain from negotiations to end conflict and negotiations to implement the agreements is strongly present in the TCG's negotiation rounds. The chairman of the negotiations highlighted that the Minsk Agreements and their ensuing rounds of negotiations were moving in vicious circles due to restrictions from the top levels of leadership. Possible explanations for the latter are encompassed within the idea of an overarching set of interests on the global scale as well as the lacking trust in agreements reached on lower levels of conflict.

In this context, the Austrian Chairmanship of the OSCE in 2017 was devoted to building trust between the immediate stakeholders to the conflict in Eastern Ukraine (BMEIA 2017). These efforts, however, did not contribute to the progress of conflict negotiations, as was stressed by an OSCE official involved in these trust building efforts. The overall unwillingness of the parties to acknowledge the OSCE's efforts of confidence building measures, such as finding common denominators on indirectly related issues such as environment and culture, turned out to be a rather frustrating factor for promoting conflict settlement.

The insights gained through the interview with the former chief negotiator to the Trilateral Contact Group suggest that the OSCE and its instruments for conflict settlement managed the immediate consequences of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine as well as mediated between the representatives of the stakeholders involved. Nonetheless, negotiations on the leadership level, within the Normandie Four Format (France, Germany, Russia, Ukraine) were decisive in moving the conflict resolution

processes forward. He further stressed that growing trust on the elite level was highly influential on the progress at the negotiation table.

5 Trust and the post-Soviet space

5.1 Common identities as common differences

A common historical and cultural heritage arguably promotes a sustainable base for communication and negotiations. The common Eastern European and especially Soviet heritage, which once transformed the societies provides for common societal realities, patterns of behaviour, institutional settings and culturally common grounds. Notwithstanding, from this same Soviet heritage conflicting perceptions may arise if, for instance, negative elements of this past are brought in contemporary contexts and are sustained by instrumentalised narratives. Thus, even generally unifying factors such as language, ethnical relatedness and religion can turn into divisive features. This dual relationship of the Soviet heritage was identified as an essential element of the current conflict relations and therefore decisive for assessing the context for the conflict resolution.

In all of the post-Soviet countries the new national elites appropriated historical narratives, myths and symbols as important instruments of nation building to forge a sense of historical continuity and common cultural identity (Zhurchenko 2014). The main identity challenges concerned and still concern the nation building and the relation to the soviet legacy, but also finding a place within the international system as sovereign nation states. Such identity struggles brought up questions of legitimacy and continuity of a tradition of statehood, forging new communities of heterogenous populations, integrating minorities, but also handling issues of soviet nostalgia, especially among the older generations.

In this context, Putin's rise to power brought about a redefinition of the Russian self with a discourse of a cultural and historical grandeur and the uniqueness of the "Russian soul" as its defining element. This has been further reinforced through

Russia's recent territorial and cultural expansion attempts. With Putin a new and old anthem has been brought about: The Soviet melody and an adapted text. Other important state symbols were redefined and reintroduced into the public sphere and discourse. Russia's prominent litterateurs and artists were reintroduced to the public more prominently and brought up on the pedestal of the Russian identity. Perhaps one of the most decisive changes to the Russian identity since Putin has been the reintroduction of Orthodoxy as the key constituent of the Russian self.

In Ukraine, the questions of the Ukrainian identity have been a major issue during the last three decades of independence and were arguably a major element in public debates around the Orange Revolution and later the Euromaidan uprisings. The ethnic, economic and political orientations diverged between the West and the East of the country. The West embraced a strong Ukrainian national identity and focused its narrative on a Western orientation, while the East embraced the Soviet nostalgia of better days when the Donbas was called the "heart of the USSR" with important economic power due to its coal industry. This Soviet nostalgia has especially been growing as a reaction to the hardships of the post-Soviet transition.

Soviet legacy means at the one hand, that certain levels of trust are given due to commonly known and understood realities and practices. It was arguably reinforced during the early transition period of the 90s, which, at least at the microlevel, brought people closer together due to the aforementioned hardships of the economic, political and societal transition. At the same time, however, the post/Soviet legacy involves controversial questions of restoring historical justice within and between the former Soviet republics, denouncing crimes of the former regime, rebuilding institutions and restoring trust in them, etc. Moreover, the question of the orientation on the international scene but also of new ways of cooperation between the former Soviet republics as well as with the rest of the world had important political implications (Zhurzhenko 2014). As the current crisis shows, almost 30 years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, most of these issues remain unsolved.

The re-invention of Russia's international identity as a world leader began when Putin took power in the Eve of 2000. Russia has been facing questions of identity over most of its modern history, reinforced during critical political moments, most recently with the dissolution of the Soviet Union and its economic re-emergence in the 2000s. The debate over Russia's identity within the Western-Eastern duality, however, is an old one and had already started with Peter I and his opening to Europe. Some decades later, communism brought about a new culture, new identities. Its sudden collapse left Russia and all the other former Soviet republics with an identity vacuum. Putin's rise to power brought about a redefinition of the Russian self with a discourse of cultural and historical grandeur and the uniqueness of the "Russian soul" as its defining element, which has been further reinforced through Russia's recent territorial and cultural expansion moves.

Russia's strive for greatness has been strongly pronounced over the centuries and arguably still constitutes one of the if not the most important element in Russia's foreign policy today. Geographically, Russia is the largest country in the world. Economically, however, it has the ambivalent position of a weak and relatively underdeveloped economy, highly dependent on the export of its primary resources such as gas and crude oil as well as dependence on Western technological and infrastructural supply chains. It thus constitutes an important economic partner for Europe. Russia shares not only important economic but also historical ties with the West and its affiliation to Christianity makes it a close and important partner on various levels. Notwithstanding, Russia's recent hard stance on issues of LGBTQIA+ rights and freedom of press developed into a divisive element on the values level. While the conditions within and outside Russia changed significantly over the past few decades, the identity of a great power has been marked by a certain continuity.

Further, recent years have brought remarkable challenges to Russia's standing as an influential actor on the continent as well as on the global scale. While cooperation on questions of terrorism presented an element of possible cooperation,

diverging approaches in Syria and more importantly in Ukraine have introduced grave lines of conflict and competition.

While current conflict resolution scholarship envisages cosmopolitan approaches to conflict, wherein a certain global citizenship, cooperation, co-management and the overarching power of international law appear central elements, Russia seems to struggle with this very idea of international rules (perceived as dictated by one of the major powers) and the international community prevailing over the principle of state sovereignty. This diverging approach lately became visible with the introduction of an amendment reducing the prevalence of international law over Russian domestic law,[11] among other moves.

The question of why Russia recently acts as it does has been explained extensively in the literature as well as in public debates. Most prominently the geopolitical reasons such as access to the warm water ports of the Black Sea in the case of Crimea; the security dilemma caused by NATO's potential expansion and EU's expansionism toward East (Mearsheimer 2014), and even Russia's wish to restore the Soviet Union[12] appear within the context of defining Russia, and Putin more precisely, as the aggressive challenger to the liberal world order and its quest to dominate it.

Russian attempts of sustaining its influence in the region were done through the use of material resources at its disposition as well as the discourse of brother nation. Later, this approach was extended to the use of its military power. Nonetheless, material resources are only one component of power, and the extent to which they

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[11]This idea and its implementation as well as real implications are highly debated within the Russian legal circle as well as abroad against the background of the VCLT.

(RU) "Who has the saying here: is there a need for establishing the priority of the constitution over the international agreements ?", LF Academy, March 2020. Web access: https://lfacademy.ru/sphere/post/kto-zdes-glavnyi-nuzhno-li-zakreplyat-prioritet-konstitucii-nad-mezhdunarodnymi-dogovorami

(RU) „Looking for a new formula", Zakon.ru, January 2020, Web: https://zakon.ru/blog/2020/1/22/popravki_v_konstituciya_i_prioritet_mezhdunarodnogo_prava_v_poiskah_novoj_formuly

[12] This has repeatedly been derived from Putin's state of the nation address in 2005 that the dissolution of the Soviet Union was „the greatest geopolitical tragedy of the 20th century". Putin was surprised by the way the West interpreted this message and emphasized on several occasions that he referred to the devastating humanitarian consequences that followed the collapse.

contribute to it depends upon the investment in the right kinds of capabilities. Such power is still only one source of influence. This implies that military power if applied in the wrong situation (RU in UA) can eventually lead to a loss of influence or at least notably reduce its potential. Influence is believed to be rather dependent on persuasion, and that relies at least as much on knowledge, skill, and friendships, as it does on power. This concept provides an explanatory pattern for why great powers are sometimes incapable of translating their power into influence and why Russian attempts of regaining control over Ukraine led to the exact opposite.

In identity terms, the idea of a strong Russian nation which projects its power to the surrounding states has been revived by Russia's president during his presidencies. It is expressed in his quest for having "raised Russia from its knees" by re-establishing the economic interconnectedness with its neighbours, which has been further positioned as his greatest achievement for decades now. This was certainly the case after the "wild 90s," which proved to be a socio-psychological plague for the people as well as the state as an institution. Today, however, the use of this rhetoric to sustain Putin's leadership in lack of new achievements could be argued as instrumentalised, at least to some extent. The debate about the need to keep Putin as president for yet another term sustained by the argument of Russia's regaining grandeur being an example thereof:

We must pay tribute to what has been done in the development of the country by Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin over the past 20 years," added Matvienko, the Chairwoman of the Russian Federation Council, to the debate. "He *raised the country from its knees*, ensured the progressive development of the economy destroyed at the time, recreated a capable effective *army*, *returned Russia to its role in the international arena*. And most importantly, I think – he returned *dignity to the country and its citizens*. Today our President is recognised in the world as one of the world's top leaders, and this is a fact.[13]

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[13] V. Matvienko during a debate in the Russian Duma on 12/03/2020. Italics by OLS.

The concepts of sovereignty and national interest as leading forces in international relations became the general base for assessing a country's foreign policy options, and, in a sense, this determinist idea of the international relations became a self-fulfilling prophecy. In the case of Russia's foreign policy prerogatives, the proliferation of neo/realist conceptions and strategies of and for the world order is remarkably influenced by Brzezinski's *Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives* (1997), this book being one of the key international relations bibles for Russian political elites. This book dictates a polarisation the interstate relations or at least stipulates that it is the only possible way for interaction on the international scene. Brzezinski's ideas about how to keep Russia at the level of a marginal regional player and ways in which the US could achieve this goal, as well as the potential conflicts that might arise therefrom in a way became a self-fulfilling prophecy for the Russian foreign and security policy.   As suggested by Lebow, in spirit-driven societies winning or preserving honour is of paramount importance. The foreign policy decisions in such societies tend to be highly risk-accepting, since risk-taking is usually associated with honour gains. This is especially the case with states claiming the great power status, their behaviour being comparatively aggressive the more their past has been marked by serious suffering or humiliation. The latter is strongly present in today's discourse about the hardships of the 90s and the US role in inflicting such sufferings on the Russians.[14]

For Russia and its citizens who have witnessed the major role the Soviet Union used to play on the international scene as well as the sudden decline of its power and standing since the collapse of the USSR, regaining honour and its competitive if not superior role in certain fields as a major power in general, became a prerogative. The means for achieving such ends are manifold: from extensive economic growth over increased participation in worldly matters to the strengthening of its

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[14] A very recent case of such rhetoric: Russian national TV channel broadcasted a very famous Russian blockbuster with cult character from 1997, which portrays the ambiguous path of democratisation through suffering and societal breakdown. Instead of the closing titles, pictures of the Black Lives Matter protests and the acts of looting across the USA were shown in a somewhat free-for-interpretation way.

military capacities and even territorial expansion. Russia clearly has been pulling all its strength together to be recognised as a major power again.

Another key characteristic of parvenu a state is the (re-)emergence of a uniqueness discourse. Perhaps the most pertinent issue was, and to an extent still is, placing Russia's identity within the Western-Eastern duality. It started with Peter I and his opening to Europe with intellectuals disputing over the correct cultural and spiritual path for Russia: the European or the Eurasian. With St. Petersburg and the progressist ideas of that time's leadership, Russia's integration into the Western powers' network seemed to be the obvious path for some. For others, questions of the uniqueness of the Russian soul and its unique vocation, sometimes even reinforced through spirituality and the quest for cosmos[15] and Russia's calling to it, seemed more adequate.

Russia has been returning from the periphery of the international arena since the early 2000s, re-claiming its international role of a leader or at least of a balancing power. In the past two decades Russia's standing has been perceived as an ambivalent one by the international community and certain actions and communications have clearly developed in ways that no longer allow for a swift and constructive approach on cooperation. The leading strategy being that of confrontation on both sides of the Atlantic, combined with the non-existent communication channels on the higher levels of leadership, hinder the transformation of existing conflicts and the prevention of new ones.

The international political arena is often compared to a chess game, especially since Brzezinski's Grand Chessboard, implying attack as the best defence and the competition for the centre and spheres of influence as its main prerogatives. However, even in a chess game, cooperation, on both sides, is key if one wants to enjoy a pleasant game.

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[15] Juliette Faure, "Le Cosmisme, Une Vieille Idée Russe Pour Le XXIe Siècle," Le Monde Diplomatique, 2018.

5.2 Levels of trust within the Eastern Ukrainian conflict

Splitting the rather abstract notion of trust into several levels have been identified as crucial for assessing the trust relationship as a dynamic process within the conflict: interpersonal trust at the elite level and generalised trust on the civil and economic levels, but also at the microlevel of relationships (Alekseyenkova 2015). The notion of interpersonal trust on the elite level as well as trust at the microlevel turned out to be most decisive for the conflict resolution. However, generalised trust on the societal and economic level as well as institutional trust seem to have an important transformative character.

Inner-elite trust is highly important since in the end it is the elites who play the most important role in forming international narratives and discourses, which predetermine whether trust or mistrust becomes the leading narrative. Within the post-Soviet context, Mikhail Gorbatchev's good interpersonal relations with Ronald Reagan as well as Boris Yeltsin's friendship with Bill Clinton prominently support the argument of the constructive power of interpersonal relations on the top elite level.

Trust at the microlevel (family, small social groups and social networks), on the other hand, plays an important role on trust between the countries and their citizens. This type of trust develops as a result of a common cultural and historic past, high levels of migration, the existence of transborder business relations, good communication channels, etc. This type of microlevel trust has been strongly present between populations of the former Soviet Union in the form of strong social ties. The development of trust on the microlevel is a tedious process which develops through a multiplicity of everyday practices of cooperation. Thus, declarations of trusting relationships at the elite level may not result in an immediate re-appearance relationship of trust on the population level. Currently, travel between Ukraine and Russia is highly restricted, impacting strongly the relationships at the microlevel and blocking the strong ties between relatives and friends between the countries. The only channels of exchange are social media, with polarising effects and spread of questionable and unreliable content and debates.

Generalised trust at the civil society and trade levels determines whether the counterpart state is considered trustworthy for cooperation. Favourable trade conditions, cooperation on general societal issues, etc. are all factors which influence this level of trust. It goes in hand with the institutionalised trust, which can be understood as trust in the institutions of the counterpart state which is expressed through free trade agreements, suspension of travel restrictions and open boarder agreements, common currencies, etc., and may eventually result in integration. Moreover, institutional trust also implies trust in international institutions and third-party organisations, as trust in collectively established rules of the game, conforming to which allows for an increased predictability of the other's behaviour.

In assessing trust in the Eastern Ukrainian conflict, the question of whether the Ukraine crisis impacted on trust between the respective stakeholders Ukraine, Russia, EU, USA or whether mistrust has been an important component of their relations even before the crisis and evident throughout, becomes pertinent (Alekseyenkova 2015).

The pronounced break of trust can be dated with the events of the 2013 negotiations around the association agreement between Ukraine and the EU. On the official discourse level Russia perceived it as a threat to the economic relations between Ukraine and Russia, a potential Ukrainian membership within the NATO as well as the loss of the Black Sea fleet. Moreover, the prospect of an economically strong Eurasian Union began to fade. Russia thus expressed feeling of mistrust, argued through the channel of the security dilemma.

On the other side, Russia's attempts at negotiating with Ukraine's leadership over the signing of the association agreement, first by means of friendly convincing and later by economic coercion, were perceived by the West and Ukraine itself as an attempt of meddling in the sovereign decisions of an independent state, thus symbolising intrusion from the Russian side.

The resulting discourses in Russia as well as in the West fastened the division into friends and foes, the offender and the victim, harming a relationship which has been generally marked by mutual benefits of trade and cooperation. Thus, the power

of discourses highlighted the changed patterns of conflicts as they seemed to have more weight than interdependences and arguably even national interests.

On the level of institutional trust Russia is perceived as a revisionist power, violating international norms, agreements and principles of the contemporary world order such as sovereignty, territorial integrity and inviolability of frontiers. Moreover, the trust in the Russian institutional setup and legislation is very low, since it is perceived that they are subordinate to the will of one person, the current constitutional reform being a prominent example. Cooperation with Russia on the level of international organisations has been gradually diminishing.

On the level of generalised trust, it can be argued that the trust in Russian society is very low as well. This is arguably due to the information policy of the Russian mass media, which strongly supports the actions of the leadership, thus resulting in high rates of approval of the elite's policies towards Ukraine. One of the most obvious and decisive elements is that of interpersonal trust or the lack of it. This situation is partly due to the pre-existing low levels of trust in Putin within the "former KGB and communist" rhetoric and has been further reinforced through the so-called Russiagate in the context of the 2016 US elections, but also Putin's recurrent presidential terms. Furthermore, trust on the microlevel, within and between families, friendships and the social networks of relatives, the latter being typically widespread across former Soviet nations, diminished strongly due to aggressive mass media campaigning around the conflict. Thus, it can be derived that narratives and mistrusting relationships on the elite level can rapidly result in reduced trust on all other levels. That these microlevel trusts have been evolving over long periods of time demonstrates they may take even longer to rebuild.

When addressing the issues of trust, the elements of the perceptions as well as narratives and discourses about the other are essential. If the counterpart is pictured as the major threat to the world order, especially if such narratives are reciprocal, a constructive dialogue aimed at increasing trust is difficult to impossible. Moreover,

the existence of direct channels of communication is essential, especially in situations of high tension. Unfortunately, in such circumstances the opposite is usually the case.

6   The Minsk dis-agreements

Up until recently, the Minsk Process has served as the only channel of communication between the parties to the conflict in eastern Ukraine. The peace process for the conflict in the Donbas region is widely known under the label of the Minsk Agreements. The two agreements have been signed in the Belarusian capital Minsk in September 2014 and February 2015, respectively, by Ukraine and Russia, overseen by France, Germany and the OSCE. These agreements were signed amid periods of intensive military fighting and predominantly were aimed at establishing a ceasefire and an eventual road map to a lasting peace in eastern Ukraine. While the Minsk agreements helped to deescalate the fighting, they have not yet managed to eliminate it completely. As the agreements were both hammered out quickly during intense phases of the fighting, they were vaguely worded, allowing each signatory to interpret the details as they saw fit, such as the sequence of steps toward peace, in differing ways.

Moreover, the context of their emergence during important losses on the Ukrainian side (Debaltsevo battle) allowed to include great concessions, due to military pressures, the implementation of which turned out highly difficult on the political level. Furthermore, with the elite change in Ukraine in 2019, the Minsk Agreements, which were signed by Poroshenko, the former president with a confrontational approach, are posing challenges for today's conflict resolution under new political actors.

The new president Zelensky who came to power as a challenger to the old post-Soviet elites and ideas, is today assuming the political consequences of a peace agreement at odds with the current understanding of a new and independent Ukrainian identity. Within his campaign promise for achieving peace in the Donbas during

his first and only presidential term, he is now trying to introduce flexibility to the Minsk Process.

The chief negotiator to the TCG identified the common Soviet heritage as useful and unifying within the conflict settlement process under the OSCE's chairmanship. This effectiveness is considered to be due to the common identities and patterns of behaviour but also the similarity of the institutionalised processes. As a consequence, the level of interpersonal trust at the negotiating table is relatively high. However, as has been demonstrated in the previous chapter, such common identities adapt rather quickly to changing contexts and may even transform into main divisive lines on the level of identities. Arguably, the conflict parties do not simply act out of material concerns, but also out of fear of making themselves vulnerable through demands which are perceived harmful to their sense of security, pride as well as cultural and national identity. This dynamic is visible on the Ukrainian side, refusing to accept the self-proclaimed leaders of the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk people's republics as legitimate negotiating partners. Moreover, the emotional element becomes more pertinent if the levels of inclusion are low and coercion is strongly present. The Minsk process has arguably been marked by such elements, which reduce trust and introduce stagnation to the conflict resolution process.

Besides the interpersonal trust, a somewhat technical trust was identified at the TCG negotiation level, since at this diplomatic level the competences and capacities of the representatives play a major role for achieving and implementing agreements. They concern questions of whether or not the counterpart has the competence to enforce the agreed conditions and whether he/she can guarantee that they will hold. Nonetheless, the chief negotiator stressed that even if the interpersonal and technical trust are given, they do not automatically guarantee for successful negotiation outcomes resulting at the diplomatic level. He observed that even though the representatives got along well and involved in constructive discussions, the progress was only as great as the higher elites allowed for it to be. This is arguably a common issue with interstate organisations and the limits of their agency imposed by the participating

states, but also the ambivalent position of representatives in elaborating binding decisions.

Nonetheless, the regularity of the Trilateral Contact Group's meetings brings about important amounts of closeness and routine, which make for familiar relations and enables a stable negotiation base on the emotional level. Furthermore, fruitful outcomes on the field positively also influence the climate at the negotiating table. Notwithstanding, on the level of the working groups, especially those dealing with security and humanitarian issues, routines of emotionally negatively laden exchanges took hold.

When assuming the potential of agency within the context of international relations and their socially constructed nature, it seems vital to understand how exactly the actors are shaped, and, further, how their ability to influence the structures is enabled. Actors are influenced by their beliefs, which are shaped by their experiences, education, etc., influencing their definitions of the environment.

The main political actor in Russia is indisputably V.V. Putin. His personal paths and experiences, especially in the years prior to his first presidency, have surely influenced his perceptions of the global structures and Russia's role therein. Putin's experiences within the KGB and especially his personal perceptions during the emergency situation during the Fall of the Berlin Wall are believed to have formed V. Putin's personality as well as his leadership style. However, I argue that also the way he is perceived by other actors is highly influenced by what they know about his pre-presidential past, especially having an influence on the levels of trust at the interpersonal level.

At the same time, it is important to highlight that actors and their identities are also subject to change and evolve over time as reaction to changes in the environment. Therefore, contributions for reshaping the international environment in ways that reduce conflict potential have to be of a mutual character. Perhaps the best way in achieving such ends is through dialogue between the leaders/decisionmakers but also on the institutional level. Especially as far as negotiations are concerned, respecting that identity and interest are closely related becomes of paramount importance.

Simply addressing the material interests and thus ignoring the actors' ambitions of honour and standing, among others, might prove insufficient in terms of achieving a durable and satisfactory agreement. Mutual understanding of the other combined with empathy and dialogue at eye level would have the potential of contributing to accommodation and mutually beneficial outcomes.

One such milestone has been brought about when the so-called Steinmeier formula conditions were signed on 1 October 2019. Being a precondition for potential talks on the leadership level from the Russian side, this step has been received by the Ukrainian population as a rather critical concession. Notwithstanding, the ensuing Paris Summit between Zelensky and Putin, supported by the presence of Merkel and Macron on 9 December 2019, resonated as a major breakthrough for the settlement of the conflict so far. The exchanges of detainees that followed shortly before the New Year's Eve had the symbolic character of a new start for the peace process. Moreover, the advent of this first meeting on the leadership level since 2016, the prospect for accommodation between the two neighbours seems to be emerging.

7 Conclusion

Conflict relationships often seem to be the rule rather than an exception of state interactions at the international level. While some approaches tend to regard states as the major constituents of an anarchic system of competing interests and recurse to self-help. Others suggest bringing in the social factor and addressing elites and their agency as crucial in shaping the international relations.

Under the assumption that issues, interests and actors change over time as a consequence of social, economic and political dynamics within the societies, this thesis provided for an alternative analytical approach to the strongly realist-shaped approach to the conflict in the Donbas region of Ukraine. It was argued that this limiting approach to the conflict impacted the chances of its resolution to important extents. An alternative approach was introduced by bringing in the element of a trust as a decisive factor with the potential of transforming conflictual relationships between states and their actors.

This was done by recurring to R. Lebow's (2008) Cultural Theory, which focuses on identity and its role in the international relations, as well as to N. Head's (2012) reflexions on the role of emotions in negotiating conflicts. Additionally, Alekseyenkova's division of trust into interpersonal, generalised and institutionalised levels, to break the abstractness of this notion, was used as part of the framework for analysing trust in the Eastern Ukraine conflict.

The material for the analysis was collected through semi-structured interviews with OSCE officials; moreover, the Minsk Protocols as well as the related annexes were analysed. Additionally, historical elements of the conflict, especially the Soviet legacy and its influence on the relations in the post-soviet space were introduced.

The analysis elaborated on the OSCE's evolution as mediator and potential transformer of the conflicts in Europe, and especially within the East-West context. Moreover, the Soviet heritage and its impact on the identity, and, in further consequence, on the relationship of trust within and outside the post-soviet space were

identified and analysed in the context of the Donbas conflict. The relevance of these findings for the conflict resolution within the framework of the Trilateral Contact Group established by the Minsk Agreements was assessed against the recent developments within the settlement process.

All in all, the results of this thesis provide for a strong case in support of the argument that seeking reassurance and accommodation by bringing in trust into the conflictual relationships is key for transforming the latter. Rebuilding trust is a tedious process, especially after its complete destruction. However, the findings of this thesis suggest that leadership and elite behaviour, especially when combined with self-reflexion, have the potential of changing the underlying patterns of conflict in ways which allow for its transformation. By approaching trust issues on various levels, especially the interpersonal trust on the elite as at the microlevel by means of transformed narratives, the stagnating conflict resolution could be brought in motion. To that end it appears necessary to acknowledge the interconnectedness of identity and interest within the conflict transformation processes as a key element.

The findings point towards the Soviet's legacy strong influence on both the identities and interests of the successor states. The Soviet heritage's ambiguous relationship between continuity and change was identified as an important source of conflict within the post-Soviet space, but also inside the post-Soviet states which now build their identities around the nation-state concept.

Moreover, the projection of such ambiguities to the international scene was identified as an important factor for the states' international identities. The conflicted relationship of the latter is expressed through aggressive foreign policies. The ambiguity of Russia's identity as the Soviet Union's successor state, implying strong leadership ambitions on the global level, on the one hand, as well as its identity within a European framework on the other, make for an actor trapped between the prerogatives of strong leadership as well as cooperative partnership. Ukraine's identity is that of a nation striving for independence, but at the same time being caught in strong dependencies, both economically and politically.

The effects of the conflicted trust relationship which was arguably influenced by these conflicts in identities exhibited themselves strongly within the Minsk negotiations. Therefore, they are believed to require a stronger presence within the resolution process so as to help transform the current conflict towards new ways of positive relations.

Finally, it can be concluded that the transformation of conflicts would be best approached if governments based their security on mutual trust rather than mutual fear.

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