

# The EU's Approach to Sanctions on Russia: A Critical Analysis of the Existing Literature

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## **Abstract**

*This article focuses on the EU's sanctions against Russia, which were adopted in several rounds after Russia's aggressive actions against Ukraine in 2014 and 2022. This article reviews and critically examines the existing academic works on this topic. In particular, it identifies, distinguishes and analyses five types of the existing scholarship, each of which relies on a different explanatory perspective on why the EU has adopted its sanctions against Russia. These are: (1) convergence of normative views within the EU, (2) national preference-based bargaining, (3) emotional resonance and (dis)trust in relation to the Russia-Ukraine conflict, (4) the EU's ambition to be an active political-security actor and (5) threat perception of the EU's geographical proximity with Ukraine. Additionally, the article reviews the debates on the (in)effectiveness of the EU's sanctions on Russia. Although the extant literature offers different perspectives and has been expanding, there are still some gaps in the existing scholarship, which are also discussed in the article.*

**Keywords:** EU, sanctions, Russia, EU-Russia, Russia-Ukraine conflict

*First published online on 27 September 2024, issue published on 27 September 2024*

## **Introduction**

Since the crisis in Eastern Ukraine and Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, the European Union (EU) has adopted sanctions as the key policy response targeting Russia's aggressive behaviour. These restrictive measures were applied by the EU in multiple rounds and packages and gradually became the cornerstone of the EU's policy towards Russia. However, they remain a subject of controversy. They are frequently perceived as suboptimal and inadequately considered measures, primarily driven by the EU's inability to come up with a prompt military response to Russian actions (Baron 2022; Berlin 2022; Sivis 2019; Laruelle 2016). Despite – or perhaps due to – all these uncertainties regarding the effectiveness of sanctions, there is a growing interest in exploring why these sanctions were imposed.

This article reviews and examines how the existing academic works make sense of the EU's sanctions against Russia, while also considering how they assess the impact of history and external and internal environments on the EU's policy-making and decision making connected with the adoption of sanctions. As Snyder et al. (2003) suggest, understanding why international actors adopt specific behaviour and policies requires examining the decision-making processes (the 'how' question). Alongside that, this article also tries to identify which theoretical perspectives and approaches have been used in the existing literature and what their strengths and limitations are when explaining policy-making process.

This article reviews scholarly works regarding the EU's sanctions on Russia published between 2014 and 2023. It distinguishes five main streams of academic works which rely on different explanatory perspectives on why the sanctions have been adopted by the EU: (1) convergence of normative views within the EU, (2) national preference-based bargaining, (3) emotional resonance and (dis) trust in relation to the Russia-Ukraine conflict, (4) the EU's ambition to be an active political-security actor and (5) threat perception of the EU's geographical proximity with Ukraine. Each of them is discussed in a separate section in this article. These categories are established by looking at and distinguishing the approaches and methodologies used in the concerned works. Additionally, the article examines how the widely debated question of the (in)effectiveness of sanctions against Russia is addressed in the existing literature. This is discussed in the last section of the article.

## **Convergence of normative views within the EU**

Several existing works discuss how the convergence of normative views among EU actors and member states has played a significant role in the EU's decision to impose sanctions. As they demonstrate, the convergence arose after meticulous deliberation of the EU's commitment to maintaining the principles of self-determination, territorial integrity and Ukraine's sovereignty (Bosse 2022b; Hayashi

2020; Sjørusen & Rosen 2017). The existing literature emphasises deliberation of norms, supported by an empirical evaluation of situations in Ukraine, as a key mechanism that enables the EU and its member states to evaluate the normative reasoning of others, exchange their normative arguments and ensure the binding nature of the imposed sanctions (Bosse 2022a). Nevertheless, the deliberation of norms did not necessitate member states' compliance (Risse 2018) with the EU's sanctions policy implementation. The deliberative mechanism naturally consists of three stages: claim-making, justifying and learning (Eriksen 2018; Ganuza & Csis 2012; Squires 2008). Consequently, this approach contributes to the analysis of how the claim-making had been made in regard to the importance of the sanctions policy, how the sanctions policy had been justified and how learning helped address the internal discrepancy between member states.

The sanctions implemented in 2014 were a clear indication of this deliberation of norms. The EU had emphasised its moral and ethical principles to preserve peace, stability, prosperity and human rights in Ukraine as a duty to its fellow human beings and sovereign actors. Additionally, the EU cited its long history of close cooperation with Ukraine as justification for making sanctions the appropriate response. Consequently, Italy and Hungary adjusted their positions to align with the EU's political stance and normative arguments, even though their domestic public opinion still favoured amicable relations with Russia (Bosse 2022b; Schuette 2019; Balfour et al. 2019).

The cases of Hungary and Italy are further elaborated by Sjørusen and Rosen (2017). Both nations, which were initially opposed to sanctions, issued statements asserting that member states bore a special responsibility for resolving the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. The Italian prime minister emphasised the necessity for the EU to take action, particularly in the form of support for the Ukrainian government. Meanwhile, the Hungarian prime minister emphasised the necessity for the EU to maintain its values and principles, disregard internal disputes and comply with international law. The standard of moral authority implemented by the EU was incorporated with a mechanism of deliberation of norms to enable member states to evaluate moral and ethical justifications. Thereby, it enabled the EU to institute unilateral sanctions as preferred measures. On the other hand, Sjørusen and Rosen (2017) also suggest that Italy and Hungary only altered their stances and statements to preserve their political credibility within the EU when they continued to secure their self-interest by not fully implementing sanctions on Russia.

Bosse (2022b) slightly differs in her explanation by introducing the concept of value-based norms, which denotes the EU's duty to respond to specific situations of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and exhibit collective solidarity with and responsibility for those experiencing hardship. The value-based norms were driven by shared understanding, a common identity or a sense of belonging represented by the conception of 'us', meaning Ukraine as a part of the European community.

Bosse (2022b) emphasises that this factor prompts both the activation of the EU's Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) and the imposition of EU sanctions. Additionally, value-based norms have compelled Hungary to implement the TPD, despite its close bilateral relations with Russia.

Another example of the conversion of norms within the EU is the establishment of the EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Mechanism through the exchanges of normative viewpoints between the European Parliament and the European Council. This particular regime would enable the EU to impose sanctions on individuals and entities that violated universal human rights. Parliamentarians then dedicated a significant amount of time and effort to the elucidation and exchange of normative arguments and rationales in order to provide member states with the necessary information to support and implement a sanctions framework (Szep 2022).

These existing scholarly works, which include the most important ones from Sjursen & Rosen (2017), Bosse (2022b) as well as Szep (2022), have endeavoured to elucidate the EU's ability to develop normative claim-based sanctions. Although the existing literature that uses a deliberative method has important explanatory strengths, it rarely explores how the EU's intricate interactions with other actors and institutions, on both regional and global scales, underpin its endeavours to convert certain normative principles into specific policy preferences (Eriksen 2018; Schimdt, 2010; Wiener, 2006). When there are interactions within the Union and between the Union and its international partners, there must be either power dynamics or power inequality. However, the deliberative approach lacks the capacity to scrutinise the connection of these aspects of power and the EU's sanctions policy-making. Other obstacles in this deliberative approach include the difficulties of comprehending (a) how democratic entities, such as the EU, utilise institutional tools and engage policy entrepreneurs (both state and non-state actors) to address internal polarisation, (b) how member states accommodate domestic opinion to decide to support the EU's sanctions policy and (c) whether normative deliberation is the sole method or procedure employed by the EU to strengthen consensus on sanctions policies over time (Curato et al. 2022).

### **National preference-based bargaining**

The imposition of sanctions after the annexation of Crimea was the result of a consensus reached through the bargaining processes within member states during the EU's policy-making process, as argued by Orenstein and Kelemen (2017) and Stoop (2016). These works analyse the policy-making process from the perspective of liberal intergovernmentalism and assess how states' national interests are expressed and negotiated at the institutional (EU) level. More precisely, they examine how member states negotiate with other EU policymakers to promote their preferred policies. Drawing on Putnam's concept of the two-level bargaining

game (Dyson & Konstantinides 2013), liberal intergovernmentalism also acknowledges that domestic groups at national level can evaluate the government's preferred policy and provide feedback and arguments either in favour of or against it, thereby allowing their government to either alter or modify its initial policy.

Nitoiu (2018) and Shagina (2017) illustrate that the United Kingdom (UK) played a significant role in condemning Russia's illegitimate actions and advocating for stricter sanctions against Russia after the annexation of Crimea 2014. The UK proposed sanctions that were specifically designed to target Russia's defence and security sector, with the potential for lifting these sanctions if Russia withdrew its military forces from Ukraine.

In contrast, Germany and France initially opted for a relatively neutral stance in response to the annexation of Crimea 2014. Both countries hesitated to impose sanctions while simultaneously condemning Russia's actions in Crimea and Ukraine (Marangé & Stewart 2021). Germany, in particular, prioritised economic interests over security concerns when leading the coordination of the EU's sectoral sanctions. Correspondingly, Germany and Russia continued a discussion regarding the Nord Stream 2 project during a period of military hostilities in Donbass. This continued discussion was influenced by Germany's new Ostpolitik, which sought to establish a stable political environment through the integration of diplomacy, economic engagement and conflict resolution (Siddi 2016).

Conversely, France thought the seizure of Eastern Ukraine and Crimea was of less relevance than crises in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), which are key areas for France's geopolitical interests. Paris stressed that the emergencies in MENA had the potential to escalate and become more perilous and intricate if the EU did not allocate adequate attention to them. Furthermore, France perceived the threats emanating from the Islamic State and Syria as paramount and held them accountable for major acts of terrorism in Europe. Given its limited economic ties with Russia, France proposed financial sanctions rather than defence-related sanctions and suggested lifting the sanctions if Russia met the EU's conditions (Cadier 2018).

Nevertheless, after the crash of Malaysian Airlines Flight 17 in July 2014, Germany's stance underwent a change, resulting in an agreement on more stringent sanctions across various domains. France also suspended the delivery of Mistral military vessels to Russia. Germany's policy shift had a significant impact on France. Moreover, Germany's tougher position represented a shift from its previous passive reaction to Russia's military intervention in Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008. In 2008, Germany and France were relatively benign to Russia and signalled that the EU should perceive Russia as an equal partner. In this context, the EU's response was rather mild, such as the threat of suspending EU-Russia partnership talks, and the EU failed to reach a consensus on imposing serious sanctions against Russia in 2008 (Shagina 2017).

However, following the crash of MH-17, prominent EU member states such as the UK, Germany and France, which wield considerable influence in the EU decision-making processes, said that EU foreign ministers should be ready to step up sanctions. This signal empowered the EU to coordinate for final commitments and consensus. The EU's lobbying efforts eventually persuaded Greece, Italy, Bulgaria and Hungary, initially resistant to sanctions due to influences from domestic populist factions, anti-American sentiments from Putin's Russia and entrenched historical economic ties with Russia. The EU facilitated member states in assessing the potential economic ramifications of imposing sanctions on Russia for their domestic economies and business sectors. Lobbying also centred on austerity measures and alternative energy sources aimed at mitigating the impact of sanctions costs. Consequently, these states acquiesced to the sanctions policy (Stoop 2016).

Poland, being geographically close to Ukraine and having a historical memory of Russian annexation during World War II, originally supported more stringent sanctions compared to the UK, Germany and France. Poland warned the Baltic states about the possible resurgence of Russian imperialism, drawing on its historical experiences. Poland viewed the EU's approach as pragmatic in addressing the challenges to democracy in Ukraine and restraining Russia's aggressive actions in Eastern Europe (Sus 2018; Shagina 2017; Stoop 2016).

Another contribution on the relationship between national interests and the EU's policies towards Russia is offered by Portela and her colleagues (2021). They show that member states other than the UK, Germany and France also contributed to agreements in Council negotiations regarding the EU's sanction policy. Unlike other works, their research demonstrates how domestic economic, political and social groups could influence or moderate their governments' final political positions and foreign policy regarding the EU's sanction policies, while focusing on Poland and Spain as their main case studies. Poland's civil society and political groups persistently advocated stricter sanctions. However, business associations criticised this policy, by pointing out that Poland heavily depended on its significant agricultural exports to Russia, particularly apples and on imports of Russian fossil fuels for its industry. Poland adjusted its position in the EU and suggested sanctions after receiving feedback from business groups.

Meanwhile, Spain originally kept a 'business as usual' approach because of its heavy reliance on the Russian market, which included the docking of Russian naval ships at its ports. Nevertheless, Spain's civil society and opposition groups began to blame Russia for the situation in Eastern Ukraine, even though they did not fully support sanctions against Russia. As a result of this situation, the Spanish government ultimately reached an agreement with the EU to toughen sanctions against Russia, irrespective of Madrid's specific implementation of them.

Within the literature focused on national preference-based bargaining, the EU is often depicted as a facilitator rather than a policymaker. The EU only exerted influence to promote the desired sanction policies of relevant countries. By utilising its institutional resources, the EU sought to persuade member states to have different opinions to support these decisions. For instance, Germany, representing the EU, visited Greece on 11 April 2014 to urge Greece to impose sanctions against Russia (Hooghe & Marks 2019; Kleine & Pollack 2019; Stoop 2016). Essentially, the EU's institutional lobbying assisted the UK, Germany and France in legitimising the implementation of their preferred policies.

Generally speaking, liberal intergovernmentalism can show that most member states lack full control over policies (Coskun 2015) as they are embedded in multilevel institutional complexities (Portela et al. 2021; Stoop 2016). Nevertheless, the existing literature that employs liberal intergovernmentalism fails to elucidate how the EU, as a supranational and international actor with its own autonomy, interests and roles, navigated external complexities and sustained its sanctions policy against Russia in the long term. This explanatory limit is caused by the focus of intergovernmentalism on member states' interests and expectations, while ignoring the EU's actorness and role conception. Moreover, in this theoretical context, member states' ultimate policies are largely perceived as being driven by their economic interests and the attractiveness of the EU's economic bargaining tool, rather than by other motives and mechanisms (for example, epistemic community) (Hooghe & Marks 2019; Kleine & Pollack 2019). Additionally, in the context of sanction adoption, the works that are close to the liberal intergovernmentalist research tradition seem to lack the ability to probe the degree to which positive or negative feedback from government and business sectors either support or compromise the EU's insistence on sanctions against Russia.

### **Emotional resonance and (dis)trust**

The literature that discusses institutional bargaining as a crucial element in the EU's policy-making and sanction-adoption process does not provide a comprehensive insight into the impact of psychological factors, prompting other authors to examine psychological aspects (for example, emotions) in greater details. Such psychologically-oriented approaches are capable of comprehending the motives and decisions of international actors by investigating intangible factors, such as emotion and trust, in the policy-making process (Levy 2013; Kehler, 1998). For instance, there is limited research on the potential psychological influences that contributed to the EU taking a firm stance against Russia four months after the annexation of Crimea. One of these influences was the emotional resonance created by the United States (USA), which established the EU's emotional connection (Beauregard 2022).



To illustrate the importance of emotional resonance, Beauregard refers to Obama's speech on 28 May 2014. Obama described the situation in Ukraine as 'Russia's aggression toward former Soviet states', evoking memories of the Cold War and framing it as a struggle between the 'free world' and the Soviet Union (Beauregard 2022; Obama 2014). This historical narrative aimed to elicit powerful sentiment and urged the EU to take a swift response by utilising its considerable normative influence. Obama strategically crafted his statements to elicit intense emotions in light of the major political and security conflict between Russia and the West. Furthermore, the escalation of the crisis in Ukraine, which involved military clashes in Donetsk and Luhansk between Ukrainian forces and armed rebel groups, further heightened the EU's outrage, particularly in France and Germany, against Russia's aggressive policies. The shooting down of aircraft MH17 by Russian forces served as an additional catalyst, which reinforced Obama's sentiments and prompted the EU to impose broader sanctions on Russia in various sectors. The EU also acknowledged the vulnerability of certain members to sanctions and their cautiousness about potential repercussions. This situation prompted the EU's engagement with the Commission and the European External Action Service (EEAS) in preparatory works in order to clarify the scope of travel bans and asset freezes, and inform member states about the potential economic and political impacts of sanctions (Beauregard 2022).

The emotional resonance as part of a psychological approach used in Beauregard's (2022) study helps to identify Obama's implicit and explicit meanings by delving into the diction in his political statements. The language and diction in political statements aim to rationalise or morally justify the senders' action (Alvarez 2018; Schüler et al. 2018; Rasmussen 2017; O' Mahoney 2012; Gordon & Arian; 2001; Ducasse 1966). Obama's diction successfully underpinned the emotion and cognition of the EU's leaders to have a sense of shared identity ('we-feeling') with the USA as allies in the Cold War and to impose tougher sanctions against Russia as the USA did.

Furthermore, other scholars highlight an additional psychological dimension – either trust or distrust – which suggests that Germany's lack of trust in Putin after Russia's hybrid war in Eastern Ukraine, along with the MH-17 disaster, bolstered the EU's determination to impose stricter sanctions. Consequently, Italy and Hungary reduced their trust in Russia and began to believe that Germany and France would prioritise the collective interests of the EU and continue to mediate between Russia and Ukraine in the Minsk negotiations (Natorski & Pamorska 2017). Furthermore, Ukraine's increasing trust in the EU's dedication to assisting its efforts in reestablishing democratic rule and independence played a role in strengthening the EU's preparedness to enforce sanctions (Yamakami 2019).

The (dis)trust as a part of the psychological approach applied in these scholarly works can underscore the roles of socialisation and information-sharing (Levy 2013) in altering the cognition of sceptical and opposing member states regarding the



necessity of sanctions against Russia. The existing literature applying the psychological approach also takes into account shocks (events) like the Malaysian Airlines tragedy related to Russian actions in Ukraine as intervening factors to elucidate the enhanced trust between the EU and member state and their increasing distrust toward Russia. Then, the concept of (dis)trust can explain the linkage of the nature of interactions and the policies of international actors (Hewer & Lyon 2018). For instance, the EU's sense of shared identity ('we-feeling') and commitment to support Ukraine enhanced their mutual trust, empowering the EU itself to reinforce sanctions policy.

Nevertheless, the psychologically-oriented approaches appear to have limitations in elucidating the specific types and components of trust that were present within the EU, between its member states and between Ukraine and the EU— whether the trust is particularised or generalised. It also neglects to include the frequency at which the EU and/or its member states, along with Ukraine, mentioned (dis)trust as a rationale for the EU's policy preferences (Hoffman 2022; Fjaeran & Aven 2021; Levy 2013). Furthermore, there is insufficient analysis of the extent of compliance of member states in the implementation of sanctions policy, when the theory of normative deliberation can explain that the member states did not need to adopt the implementation of the EU's policy into their own foreign and/or domestic policy (Mercer 2005).

Moreover, the existing literature using this kind of approach falls short in delivering a comprehensive analysis of strategic and political contexts within foreign policy-making (Levy 2013); for example, how psychological factors of the EU's international partners could influence its perceptions of specific strategic and political conditions at institutional and international levels and how this possible linkage led the EU to adopt, reinforce or constrain the EU's sanctions policy. The existing literature also does not combine analyses of psychological factors and other aspects. As such, it cannot produce sufficient explanations of how international actors adopt and implement the policy and how policies have evolved, institutionalised and become entrenched over time with international actors or within regional organisations.

It is worth noting that it is possible to integrate analysis of psychological aspects with certain approaches and methods, such as correlational, quantitative, historical and comparative analyses, even though it can bring along challenges in terms of data management. However, these challenges can be mitigated – for example, by using advanced digital data analysis tools (Hudson 2019; Uslander 2018; Harsch 2015; Levy 2013).

### **Actorness recognition**

Unlike the scholarly works mentioned above, other studies utilise the concept of actorness to explain the EU's capacity and competence to act and account for

its external ambition in response to Russia's aggressive policies in Ukraine. The analyses based on actorness predominantly posit that the sanctions imposed by the EU operated independently from those of the USA. The EU's approach to sanctions demonstrates that the EU acted differently from the USA during a critical international event when responding to Russia's actions in Ukraine. The EU's sanctions policy was seen as a tactical measure to counterbalance Russia's authoritarian regime, which sought to advance its own policies that contradict the principles of universal democracy, and as the EU's effort to integrate Eastern Europe (Giumelli et al. 2021; Noutcheva 2018; von Soest 2015). The EU confirmed its position that Russia's assertive foreign policies were unacceptable. Concurrently, the EU solidified its values within its foreign policy by formulating, enforcing and advocating its sanctions strategy (Tiilikainen 2014).

The EU showcased its autonomy, capacity to act and cohesion in policy-making by implementing sanctions on Russia with high frequency and intensity (Giumelli et al. 2021). Autonomy refers to the ability of the EU to operate independently in establishing a policy-making agenda. Regarding the EU's response to Russia's actions in Crimea and Ukraine, the EU employed its market power to impose sanctions on Russia as part of its high-political strategies. Moreover, the EU's capability to take action displays its aptitude for formulating a sanctions strategy, participating in internal deliberations and evaluating possibilities such as the potential extent, effectiveness and acceptance of its sanctions policy. The EU's imposition of sanctions is also influenced by its assessment of Russia's propaganda against the progress of democracy in Ukraine. Then, cohesion refers to the EU's success in finalising policies, persuading member states to unanimously delegate their sanctioning authority to the EU and ensuring sanctions are in line with normative objectives, such as promoting democratic values in Ukraine. It also encompasses strategic objectives, such as deterring further aggression from Russia towards NATO members and upholding the Euro-Atlantic community and its values. Both cohesion and the capacity to act required the EU to optimise institutional resources for imposing sanctions aligned with normative goals, as well as to persuade other member states (Giumelli et al. 2021; Portela 2021; Veebel 2021; Veebel et al. 2020; Gehring et al. 2017; Veebel & Markus 2015).

The EU could expand the reach of its sanctions application to include other countries beyond the EU by utilising its particular sanctions model and through alignment and adoption. Cardwell & Moret (2023) distinguish alignment from adoption. Alignment refers to the official invitation extended to neighbouring states to implement the EU's sanction and to make a public statement about their sanction imposition. Adoption refers to the process by which non-EU states adopt the EU's sanctions without their governments explicitly stating that their state followed the EU's sanctions. During the alignment and adoption

phases, the EU may use its institutionalised communication practice to prompt other actors to assess and determine the culpability of various parties involved in certain crises. The wider the range of countries using this kind of sanctions, the more robust the EU's economic profile and CFSP became.

Through alignment and adoption, the EU could underpin others' perceptions of its responsibility and presence and showcase the economic power and normative leadership that set it apart from the USA. In this context, leadership is equivalent to the EU's primary actorness reinforcing a sanctions regime at the European level. Norway was one of the states that aligned with the EU's sanctions model, while Iceland voluntarily adopted the EU's sanctions without its government's statement. Then, the EU had substantial talks with Switzerland and the UK about sanctions on Russia. Both Switzerland and the UK finally adopted various parts of the EU's sanctions model (Cardwell & Moret 2023; Hofer 2021; Portela 2021; Sossai 2020; Cardwell 2015).

As indicated by these scholarly works, particularly Giumelli et al. (2021), applying the concept of 'actorness' naturally provides a framework for analysing EU foreign policy by concentrating on specific variables: autonomy, capacity to act and cohesion. These works shed light on the EU's capacity to comprehend the contextual intricacies of conflicts, which serve as a prerequisite for the EU to fulfil its roles. Additionally, they evaluate how the EU utilised its resources and capabilities to achieve its goals. The concept of actorness tends to generate a more descriptive explanation of policy-making (Rhinard & Sjostedt 2019), but it helps to illustrate the sequences of phases in which the EU effectively utilised its institutional resources to support policy-making and identify opportunities for the development and implementation of sanctions models.

Moreover, Portela (2021) demonstrates that the EU as an actor was more effective than in the event of the Chechnya-Russia War in 1999. At that time, the EU opted to lift sanctions against Russia despite Russia not meeting the necessary criteria for their removal. This decision came after the Council of Ministers agreed only to suspend scientific agreements with Russia and associated funding, subsequently reallocating these funds to the humanitarian aid sector.

Härtel's research (2023) indicates that in the context of Ukraine, contrasted with the EU's symbolic sanctions in response to the Georgia-Russia conflict, its robust sanctions policy on Russia since 2014 had paved the way for the EU to pursue coherent political approaches and direct conflict management in the forthcoming security landscape in Europe, particularly in the post-Soviet regions. The EU had increasingly invested in its capacity for sanctions management and allocated resources towards peace negotiations between Ukraine and Russia to enhance its role as a more active participant in political-security affairs. As added by Veebel (2021), Veebel et al. (2020) and Fischer (2017), the EU also promised that the lifting of sanctions would be contingent upon Russia

embracing democratic principles, the rule of law, human rights and the security framework established by the EU in partnership with its allies.

The concept of actorness proves its explanatory strength to answer the EU's consistency in its sanctions policy in order to be an active political and security actor. Particularly, the explanations emphasise value cohesion and tactical cohesion (Niemman & Bretherton 2013). Value cohesion is how the EU, through its sanctions policy, managed common goals to coerce Russia to negotiate. Tactical cohesion is how the EU used available methods (such as diplomacy) relevant to sanctions policy to make diverging goals (coercing Russia and appearing to be an active political and security actor in Europe) fit one another.

However, the concept of actorness may encounter challenges in analysing the diverse range of actors contributing to the dynamic nature of the EU's policy-making (Čmakalová & Rolenc 2012). Furthermore, the concept overlooks the comprehension of how the altering political and security environments, in which the EU operates, (re)formed its perception of the issue in Ukraine. This consequently restricts the in-depth analysis of the possibility and extent of changes in the EU actorness in a historical context (Lena Kirch 2021; Rhinard & Sjostedt 2019). Regarding these concerns, Costa and Barbé (2023) advocate for the necessity of incorporating the EU's external environment and its associated worldview into analyses of the EU's actorness.

Although the EU has always shown an ambition to participate in important global matters (Koops & Macaj 2015), Costa and Barbé (2023) assert that the EU's worldviews influence how a changing international system impacts policy-making. Costa and Barbé (2023) suggest a departure from traditional variables such as autonomy, capacity to act and cohesion, as proposed by the concept of regional actorness. Instead, they clarify a fragmented liberal international order (LIO) as a prevailing pattern in the current external environment.

For instance, Costa and Barbé (2023) illustrate how Europeanists and European-Atlanticists hold contrasting perspectives regarding this pattern. In detail, fragmentationist Europeanists want EU independence in competition with other regional blocs. Anti-fragmentation Europeanists see the globe as a cooperative framework with multiple regional orders and seek to strengthen the EU's unifying role. Additionally, European Atlantists, who support the USA as the Atlantic alliance leader and accept fragmentation, see the EU as a responsible ally for the USA in countering global challenges from other blocs. European Atlantists, who support the leadership of the USA but are against fragmentation, have confidence in the USA's capacity to maintain a universal order and really appreciate their relationship. European Atlantists, who oppose US leadership and fragmentation, ally with Europeanists who seek a universal order. Finally, European Atlantists, who reject US leadership but admit fragmentation, believe Western bloc interests are divided. They believe the EU can demonstrate its independence without the USA.

Costa and Barbé (2023) contend that their analysis can be a valuable reference for understanding other instances related to EU foreign policy, particularly regarding sanctions and policy-making, even though their primary focus is on the fragmented liberal international order in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Furthermore, they suggest that incorporating a historical perspective would offer a more comprehensive understanding of the evolution of the EU's responsibilities as regards enhancing sanctions policies over time, despite the obstacles posed by the international structure.

Thus, the concept of actorness has limitations in explaining how the intricate international system, which may have undergone changes and divisions, interacts with the EU's historical experiences. It also fails to fully address how this interplay shapes the EU's understanding of Russia's actions in Ukraine and the EU's role in Europe. Additionally, it does not sufficiently explain to what degree the growing uncertainty and dynamic power in the regional and international system (caused by this fragmentation) influence the EU's evolving preference for sanctions against Russia over time.

### **Threat perception: the EU's geographical proximity with Ukraine**

While the previously mentioned literature overlooks the role of geography and cognition, other scholarly works aim to fill this gap by addressing how threat perception is influenced by Ukraine's geographical proximity to the EU and how this factor underpinned the EU's decision to adopt sanctions against Russia. Hofer (2021), Horbelt (2017) and Costea (2015) elaborate on threat perception regarding geographical proximity with Ukraine as a main explanation for the EU's imposition of sanctions against Russia's aggressive behaviour. According to Petrov (2023), the EU imposes sanctions on Russia in response to the annexation of Crimea and the crisis in Eastern Ukraine. He understands sanctions on Russia as a significant factor supporting Ukraine. He also highlights that the final outcome of the conflict between Ukraine and Russia will indeed define the geographical borders of Ukraine and it can potentially impact its sovereignty in matters concerning its security and its capacity to join the EU. Additionally, the EU has heightened its concerns about peace and stability in Ukraine since the Cold War. The EU previously focused on Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific as its main favoured partners; however, its main concern has been replaced by its priority on a partnership with Ukraine (Portela 2005).

The geographical proximity with Ukraine prompted the EU to perceive political and strategic threats from Russia, leading to the adoption of more punitive sanctions aimed at maximising costs for Russia. It is so despite the fact that the EU member states differed in their perceptions of the extent of the Russian threats. Moreover, within the EU, Russia had been increasingly viewed as a potentially hazardous adversary for European security, so the EU recognised the seriousness

of Russia's aggressive policies faced by Ukraine, which could potentially have spill-over effects for EU members such as Poland (Pezard et al. 2017).

The rationale behind this geopolitical perception is rooted in the combined concepts of milieu and possession goals, which relate to the direct relevance of situations to EU security and objectives (Kreutz 2005; Portela 2005; Starr 2005). Although the existing literature on the EU's sanctions against Russia may not explicitly mention these concepts, earlier studies, such as Kreutz (2005) and Portela (2005), underscored that the EU tended to impose sanctions more often and to a greater extent on countries closer to its borders, particularly when ongoing conflicts were posing a direct threat to political and security aspects, such as democracy and regional stability. Both Kreutz (2005) and Portela (2005) elucidated how the EU had increasingly focused on Eastern Europe in its regional agenda since the end of the Cold War. As part of this agenda, the EU actively promoted the adoption of its standards and principles, including democracy and human rights, among the countries that were formerly part of the Soviet Union. Consequently, in the event of instability arising in this region, it had become imperative for the EU to respond collectively, resulting in the implementation of sanctions against accountable individuals and governments.

Furthermore, Meissner (2023a) reveals that the EU's imposition of robust economic sanctions was primarily motivated by significant political and security concerns, including the potential escalation of Russian military actions and the resulting casualties in Donbas. Interestingly, Meissner observes that these rationales for the implementation of the EU's economic sanctions were inextricably linked to the pressure exerted on the EU leaders by the USA. Meissner (2023b) and Meissner and Graiziani (2023) further argue that the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 exposed substantial geopolitical threats, prompting the EU to respond with a more comprehensive framework of unprecedented sanctions. These sanctions intended to impose political and economic costs on Russia and to showcase the EU's geostrategic influence. Meissner's works excel in their ability to match with Sprouts' ecological triad (Sprout & Sprout 1969), which consists of three elements: the entity, its surrounding environment and the interactions between the entity and its environment. Sprouts' concept (Sprout & Sprout 1969) is fundamentally grounded on the ideas of milieu and possession goals. It posits that international actors, as entities, typically react to the issues and the surrounding environment associated with those issues, perceive them and attribute significance to them (Starr 2005).

Regrettably, the scientific publications by Meissner and other scholarly works do not provide a comprehensive analysis of the causal mechanisms that underlie the policy-making process. Although they suggest that threat perceptions primarily stem from geographic proximity to Ukraine, they (except Horblet 2017) do not mention the exact theories or concepts they use. This article concludes that the

explanations of Horblet, Meissner and existing scholars are primarily based on Portela's (2005) concepts of milieu and goal possession. This article also discovers Sprout's ecological triad which has similarities with the concepts of milieu and possession goals.

As indicated by Breslauer (2019), Glucker et al. (2018) and Dawisha (1975), policy-making must consider assessments of the interplay between the external environment and the internal environment including historical factors/experiences of the past. This external environment encompasses the complex interactions among various actors, including conflict, cooperation and alliances at both regional and international levels. It also includes the structures, such as anarchy, the balance of power, the dynamics of alliance expansion and fragmentation in the international order that shape those interactions (Seandeera 2023).

We can use the example of the Israel and Palestine conflict as described by Gordon and Arian (2001) to underscore the necessity of additional analysis regarding the integration of historical factors and external environmental factors into the policy-making of actors. Gordon and Arian argue that Israel's antagonistic foreign policies towards Palestine are influenced by a combination of its history and threat perception of geographical proximity and international instability.

Israel perceives its freedom as being threatened by any dangerous manoeuvres from Palestine, especially Hamas or Hezbollah. Subsequently, Israel always looks at the history of the Holocaust, as well as the ongoing wars and terror assaults in other countries or regions. Its worldview regarding these external patterns of interactions and the foregoing experience increasingly prints a lesson and a belief that if they do not defend themselves, despite possessing sufficient diplomatic and military capabilities, they will be annihilated. Despite fragmentation between secular and religious Jews within Israel's internal landscape, Israelis are compelled to unite, maintain moral solidarity and endure together due to a combination of these three factors.

Therefore, the concepts of milieu and possession goals and similar ones fail to analyse how the EU's historical factors and geopolitical perception of the Ukraine crisis and of Russia's challenges to a global order can underpin the EU's decision to impose sanctions on Russia. On the other hand, historical factors can provide a useful narrative to address how the EU develops geopolitical perception amid the rising uncertainty due to the crisis in Ukraine. Besides, the existing literature does not include other events and intricate patterns of relations beyond the EU's territorial borders. As noted by Kaufholz (2004) and Mebee (2011), these interactions can be interconnected with the central issue or event and add possible threats to the central issues – for example, China's influences in Asian region, Russia-China bilateral ties and its possible involvement to help Russia's actions in Ukraine. The use of the concepts of milieu and possession goals and similar ones prevent extended analysis on how the economic relations between Russia and



China develop the EU's threat perceptions towards the war in Ukraine, leading the EU's (continuous) sanctions policy against Russia.

### **Ineffectiveness of the EU's sanctions against Russia**

Besides analysing various reasons for why the EU imposed sanctions against Russia, the existing literature has also widely debated the (in)effectiveness of the EU's sanctions on Russia between 2014 and 2021. More specifically, the literature has predominantly focused on their effectiveness by empirically identifying the economic impacts on Russia (Morgan et al. 2023) while some of the works, such as Sivis (2019), Portela (2016) and Baron (2022) intended to explain why the EU's sanctions were ineffective between 2014 and post-Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Simola (2022) highlights the negative effects of the EU's sanctions on Russia's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). As a result of these sanctions, the Russian GDP growth experienced a substantial decline, falling from 2.3% prior to the annexation to 0.8% between 2014 and 2015. Christine (2016) contends that the second round of the EU's financial sanctions, which were put into effect in August 2014, inflicted the most significant economic damage on Russia. These sanctions had significant repercussions on Russia's international trade and financial activities, resulting in a reduction in capital inflows to the country. This reduction appeared to prompt Russia's perception that the EU was likely capable of causing further economic harm. This perception might lead Russia to agree with the initiatives and proposals such as the ceasefire in Donbas and the signing of Minsk Agreements 1 and 2.

More specifically, according to Hamid-Mechiev (2019), Bojang and Okrah (2017) and Connolly (2015), capital outflows from Russia totalled USD 7.8 billion after the implementation of the EU's sanctions in 2015. Subsequently, certain Russian enterprises, particularly those engaged in the energy and defence sectors, experienced a significant decrease in foreign investments. This situation had an impact on the Russian military industry and deep-water and offshore oil exploration, including those on the Arctic shelf. The revenue challenges faced by numerous Russian energy companies were further exacerbated by the decline in global oil prices.

Overall, the economic growth of Russia decreased to an average of 0.2% from 2014 to 2018. This decline was ascribed to a variety of restrictions that were imposed on Russian companies, which impeded their capacity to expand their assets, access foreign loans and export products (Simola 2022).

However, Portela (2016) argues that the incremental implementation of sanctions since 2014 weakened their coercive pressures on Russia. She underscores that the EU's sanctions on Russia were adopted in distinct phases, in part to mitigate the EU's own financial burdens. At first, the EU came up with measures such as the restriction and suspension of certain bilateral communications and meetings. Subsequently, in the second phase, the EU implemented measures which

included visa bans, asset freezes and an arms embargo. Nonetheless, doubts still exist regarding the EU's readiness to enforce more stringent targeted sanctions.

Moreover, Korhonen (2019) and Coote (2018) underscore Russia's efforts to mitigate the detrimental impacts of sanctions, including on Russia's energy sector. Russia actively tried to find new trading partners and strengthened its relations with China between 2014 and 2017. For example, the prohibition imposed by the EU on investors from financing Russian state-owned banks and agricultural banks, such as Rosselkhozbank, led to a significant increase in food prices in Russia. In spite of this predicament, the Kremlin pursued alternative measures, such as facilitating more investment deals and importing substitute goods from its allies, particularly China (Korhonen 2019).

Furthermore, Coote (2018) highlights that in order to avoid an economic collapse, (1) Russia chose to shift investment deals to its allies in order to mitigate the impacts of the sanctions, although the EU's sanctions tried to make Russian financial investments in Crimea more expensive to prompt Russia's withdrawal from this peninsula, (2) Russia implemented various strategies to enhance the competitiveness of its energy enterprises in the global market. These efforts encompassed the offers of gas supplies to many Asian countries, the gas exports to Turkey, the execution of the Yamal gas pipeline project, which was funded by China, and the gas transfer from Russia to China's mainland, and (3) Russian energy companies successfully improved domestic oil exploration and production through the government's financial support and upgraded horizontal oil drilling technology. As a result, Russia's relatively low oil production costs enabled it to sustain its oil sales, particularly those to China.

Moreover, Russia opted to deepen and broaden its cooperation with other BRICS countries, especially after its invasion of Ukraine in 2022. BRICS refrained from bandwagoning the EU's or the USA's sanctions against Russia. Rather, they bolstered trade and investment relations with Russia, which aided in Russia's recovery from the effects of Western sanctions, particularly unprecedented sanctions imposed by the EU. For example, they intensified imports of gas and oil from Russia and continued the operations of their firms in Russia (Edinger 2023; Baron 2022; Júnior & Branco 2022).

Baron (2022) investigates other reasons for the ineffectiveness of the EU's sanctions against Russia both before and after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and highlights three critical factors. First, he suggests that the functional aspect of the sanctions (coercing, limiting and signalling) themselves have been disempowered. He argues that the sanctions made a greater impact on ordinary citizens than they had on official authorities. Second, Baron points out that the EU faced unintended consequences which undermined the efficacy of subsequent sanctions. For instance, Russia garnered domestic support by skilfully shifting blame onto the EU's sanctions imposition and portraying Russia as a nation endeavouring

to overcome economic decline that the EU's sanctions caused. This narrative bolstered Putin's approval ratings, particularly among populist nationalist and communist parties. Moreover, in response to the EU's sanctions, Russia retaliated by imposing sanctions on the EU's agricultural exports to Russia and cutting gas supplies to Europe (Gold et al. 2023; Alexsee & Hele 2020; Aris 2014). Third, related to the previous point, Baron underscores the importance of historical factors, such as Russia's enduring trauma connected with the collapse of Soviet Union. He suggests that the ineffectiveness of the EU's sanctions could be attributed to Russia's unwavering commitment and ambitions to restore its great power status and reclaim its control over the post-Soviet states, which it perceived as rightfully belonging to Russia, regardless of any circumstance it had to encounter.

## **Conclusion**

In the current body of literature that addresses the EU's foreign policy and the EU's sanctions against Russia, five main ways of explaining such sanctions can be identified. They are, first, a convergence of normative views within the EU, second, interest-based bargaining among the EU member states and the process of achieving consensus, third, emotional resonance and (dis)trust, fourth, the EU's ambition to be an active political-security actor and, fifth, the threat perception of the EU's geographical proximity with Ukraine.

Despite the fact that the literature on the EU's sanctions against Russia is rich and still expanding, this article suggests that there are some limits and gaps in how the extant literature addressed this topic. Based on the previous discussion, this review identifies five of them. First, only weak research puzzles have been formulated in the extant literature. The existing works mainly intend to address why the EU impose sanctions against Russia. However, this is primarily a political problem rather than a genuine academic (theoretical) puzzle in a strong sense (cf. Gustafsson & Hagström 2018). Genuine research puzzles are expected to arise when there is a contradiction in the existing knowledge – for example, the tension between the causes of the EU's sanctions against Russia and the ineffectiveness of these sanctions. To put it more coherently, why does the EU persist in imposing sanctions on Russia despite the lack of desired outcomes, such as deflecting Russia's aggressive actions in Ukraine or changing a political regime in Russia? Additionally, scholarly works singularly focused on evaluating to what extent and why the sanctions have been (in)effective may inadvertently neglect a broader and more nuanced analysis. For instance, such studies might overlook the potential diversity of motivations or rationales underlying the sender's persistent imposition of sanctions (Jones & Portela 2020).

Second, most of the existing literature discussing the EU's reasons for sanctions targeting Russia does not clarify the design or type of the EU's sanctions on Russia, particularly in the context of economic sanctions as parts of CFSP (Meissner 2023a; Bapat et al. 2020).

Third, there is currently limited inquiry into the connections between historical factors and the dynamics of external environment, internal environment or institutional structures. The existing literature has also understudied the role of uncertainty generated by the changing environments in the EU's adoption of sanctions against Russia (Morgan et al. 2023; Bapat et al. 2020; Ogbonna 2017; Leenders 2014; White 2001; Drezner 2011). In addition, the existing literature does not address the extent to which the interactions and arrangements among the EU, its member states and non-state actors underpin the process of shaping the EU's insistence on (economic) sanctions, as well as the phases of strengthening or weakening such policies and their implementation (Mintrom & Luetjens 2017).

Fourth, the literature examining the EU's rationale for adopting sanctions against Russia is devoid of a comprehensive analysis that would be more closely integrated with the existing international relations theories. Such an analysis could consider the impact of the EU's internal institutional and power structures, historical influences and legacies and external regional and extra-regional structures.

Fifth, the extant literature has not fully utilised the complete range of the available social scientific methods which could strengthen our insights into the EU's sanction policy. In particular, process tracing has been ignored while it could help produce detailed explanations of causal mechanisms, including timing, phases, sequences and the interactions of relevant actors.



### **Acknowledgments**

This article is a part of the dissemination of the author's ongoing PhD dissertation on the EU's sanctions policy funded by Landesgraduiertenförderung (LGFG) of University of Tuebingen. The author wants to thank Professor Thomas Diez and Professor Nathalie Tocci who have been providing supervision on the author's dissertation until now. Thank you to the anonymous reviewers and the (Chief) Editor of CEJISS who have provided their suggestions to enhance the academic nuance for this article. All shortcomings and mistakes are the author's own.

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