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Research article

Weaponisation of Interdependence: Unpacking European Ontological Anxieties?

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Abstract
Traditional scholarship on economic interdependence assumes that economic ties primarily function as stabilising mechanisms or strategic tools for leverage. However, they neglect how identity and ontological concerns can securitise interdependence. This study addresses this critical gap by integrating Ontological Security Theory to move beyond materialist explanations and offer a novel framework for understanding how economic ties are redefined in response to crises. Using an interpretative process-tracing approach, combined with Critical Discourse Studies, the study examines how EU institutional narratives reconstructed interdependence with Russia from a cooperative mechanism into an existential security threat. Unlike conventional sanctions research focused on costs or strategic outcomes, this analysis spotlights the discursive mechanisms that enabled the EU's shift from managed interdependence (pre-2022) to economic coercion (post-2022). The findings identify a three-phase transformation: (1) Managed Interdependence, (2) Ontological Crisis and Reflexive Routinisation and (3) Weaponised Interdependence and Strategic Deterrence. The EU's move from 'smart sanctions' to full-scale economic coercion was driven not solely by material interests, but by the need to reaffirm its normative identity amid ontological insecurity. This perspective offers new insights into economic statecraft, international political economy and EU security policy.

Keywords: *weaponised interdependence, ontological security, sanctions, EU-Russia relations, critical discourse studies*

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Introduction

Economic interdependence has long been hailed as a guarantor of peace. Yet in the wake of Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the European Union – perhaps the most integrationist project – mobilised interdependence as a weapon. This paradox raises a central question: Why did the EU move from fostering cooperative ties to dismantling them through one of the most comprehensive sanctions regimes in history? The cognitive model of interdependence – embedded in EU policy routines – guided its post–Cold War expansion and integration of Central and Eastern Europe (Shimmelfennig 2001) and its European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), presented as a vehicle for promoting liberal democracy (Noutcheva, Pomorska & Bosse 2013; Noutcheva 2018). Yet this vision was not universally shared. Russia, in particular, interpreted the Eastern Partnership as geopolitical interference rather than a stabilising initiative, framing it as a challenge to sovereignty. The EU's export of capitalism, institutional integration and rule-of-law norms clashed with Russia's emphasis to sovereignty, nationalism and spiritual-cultural autonomy (Macharychev 2018; Cerruti & Lucarelli 2008; Kaunert & de Deus Pereira 2023). Over time, this normative divergence deepened political tensions. Russia' violations of the EU's rule-based order intensified anti-Russian sentiment in Europe (Boman 2023), culminating in the 2023 Eurobarometer finding that 80% of surveyed Europeans supported stronger sanctions. For the first time, all EU member states unanimously adopted comprehensive sanctions against Russia, reflecting a broad consensus that Moscow posed a threat to European Security. This historical trajectory challenges liberal and neoliberal expectations that interdependence inherently promotes peace. While realist perspectives (Mearsheimer 2001; Huntington 1996) attribute conflict outcomes to material power and strategic calculations, they overlook the deeper ideational dimensions of international conflicts. As Guzzini (2012: 7) provocatively asks: Was the resurgence of geopolitical thinking after the Cold War not inevitable? If so, it may be because geopolitical competition is not solely about power accumulation, but about the preservation of collective identities and ontological security. This paper builds on Guzzini's interpretivist framework and socio-cognitive discourse studies to examine how ontological anxiety drives the weaponisation of interdependence, with a focus on EU-Russia relations. The central proposition is that the EU's shift from cooperative economic engagement to coercive economic statecraft after 2022 cannot be explained solely by material asymmetries or strategic leverage.

Instead, the full-scale invasion of Ukraine constituted an identity shock that redefined interdependence as a security liability, legitimising its transformation into an instrument of *ontological coercion* – economic measures intended not just to impose material costs but to destabilise the target's self-conception. The study therefore addresses the following Research Question: How does ontological security drive the weaponisation of interdependence, and in what ways do these mechanisms reshape EU-Russian relations – particularly through the interplay of perceived disorder and recurring identity-based conflicts? To answer this, the paper integrates Ontological Security Theory (Mitzen 2006) as a critical supplement to Complex Interdependence Theory (Keohane & Nye 1977) and Weaponised Interdependence (Farrell & Newman 2010, 2014, 2019), addressing their limitations in explaining how economic interdependence is securitised through identity driven anxieties. Methodologically, it employs interpretative process-tracing, enriched by Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) (Fairclough 2010; van Dijk 2008; Wodak 2001), to reconstruct how EU institutional discourse, policy framings and sanction design evolved through three distinct phases:

1. **Managed Interdependence (Pre-2022)**: Despite tensions, EU-Russia relations remained structured by economic interdependence, where trade, institutional cooperation and regulatory mechanisms sustained stability.
2. **Ontological Crisis & Reflexive Routinisation (2022 Invasion)**: Full-scale invasion of Ukraine disrupted EU identity, triggering discursive reframing and escalations of sanctions.
3. **Weaponised Interdependence & Strategic Deterrence**: Interdependence reframed as an existential threat; sanctions become acts of ontological coercion aimed at identity disruption and strategic deterrence.

By foregrounding identity-based anxieties, this analysis advances a richer understanding of economic statecraft, showing how strategic economic measures can serve as tools of existential and ontological contestation in Global Politics.

The paradox of interdependence: peace without ideological convergence?

The liberal promise of interdependence

Keohane and Nye's (1977) Complex Interdependence Theory (CIT) emerged as an ideal-type model contrasting with realism, portraying how dense networks of economic, institutional and social ties as mechanisms for reducing conflict. It assumes: 1a) multiple, overlapping channels of interaction between states; 2a) strong economic relations inversely correlated with political conflict; 3a) absence of a rigid, hierarchical security agenda. This framework predicts that mutual vulnerability fosters stability, and that asymmetries in dependence will diminish over time. However, it underplays scenarios of deglobalisation and deliberate disruption, where interdependence becomes fragile and exploitable, as in highly

contested environments states may engage in costly signaling, incurring economic damage to demonstrate resolve (Schelling 1966; Gartzke 2010). Or, as Zheng (2021) demonstrates in the EU-Russia case, embedded economic ties can serve as points of weakness in times of geopolitical-ideological tensions. While CIT recognises asymmetries through the concepts of sensitivity and vulnerability, it assumes that such asymmetries will fade over time – an assumption increasingly challenged by contemporary geopolitics.

The structural turn: Weaponised interdependence

Drawing on CIT, Farrell and Newman's (2010, 2014, 2019) Weaponised Interdependence (WI) reframes asymmetric economic and technological networks as sources of coercive leverage. They argue that global economic networks are inherently asymmetrical, granting disproportionate power to states controlling critical nodes in trade, finance and technology. Weaponised Interdependence identifies two mechanisms: the Panopticon Effect, where control over infrastructures (e.g. SWIFT, telecoms) enables surveillance and restriction; and the Chokepoint Effect, where states can sever access to essential flows to coerce adversaries. It shifts the focus from mutual vulnerability to strategic asymmetries, showing how dominant actors can exploit interdependence to coerce others. Rather than producing mutual restraint, globalisation has created a strategic environment in which states exploit economic and technological infrastructures for coercive purposes (Pearlstein 2017). This transformation is reflected in the rise of sanctions regimes, technology restrictions and financial exclusion mechanisms – practices that traditional interdependence theories inadequately theorise. WI de facto captures the structural conditions enabling coercion, as seen in the EU's post-2022 sanctions where financial and technological restrictions were deployed as strategic tools rather than routine regulatory measures. Yet it retains a materialist bias: It privileges control over physical infrastructures and overlooks cognitive and normative logics that make such leverage politically legitimate. It also struggles to explain 'semi-costly' coercion, such as pre-2022 sanctions against the Russian Federation, where states acted despite lacking clear structural advantage.

Conceptual gap and contribution: Ontological coercion

In short, if CIT explains interdependence under ideal-type conditions, and WI explains how asymmetries can be exploited, neither explains why actors sometimes reinterpret interdependence itself as threatening, nor why they pursue coercion even at high material cost. Here, Ontological Security Theory (OST) provides an essential conceptual lens. OST (Mitzen 2006; Huysmans 1998, 2004; Lupovici 2012; Giddens 1991, Kaunert & de Deus Pereira, 2023) argues that states seek not only physical survival but also a stable self-identity. Disruptions to routine relationships – whether from external shocks or perceived threats – can

provoke ontological insecurity. In such cases, coercive strategies (e.g. sanctions) may restore stability by reaffirming identity, even at economic cost. In EU-Russia relations, material disputes over trade, energy and security are underpinned by deeper normative and identity conflicts (Casier 2016, 2018, 2019; Samokhavlov 2018). Both actors promote competing visions of order in Eurasia: the EU emphasising liberal norma and rule-of-law governance, Russia stressing sovereignty and nationalism (Akchurina & Della Sala 2018). Since 2014, these divergences have intensified, with sanctions functioning not only as economic measures but also as instruments of identity assertion and political legitimacy. This study introduces the concept of Ontological Coercion to capture this phenomenon. Ontological coercion refers to the use of economic statecraft not merely to impose material costs, but to destabilise an adversary's self-conception and normative order, while reinforcing the sender's own identity. As Mitzen (2006) notes, states can become locked into self-reinforcing conflicts, even when such confrontations undermine their material well-being. States can be inclined to self-preservation of the status quo, not if a sense of major psychological disruption is perceived (the re-emergence of existential anxiety in purely philosophical terms drawn from existentialist scholarship). When the disruption happens, the 'routine' (in this case the European sanctioning policy) can restore the pre-existing routine or generate new or intensified ones due to cognitive destabilisation and consequent change in perceptions of the Other *par excellence*.

A theoretical framework for analysis: Ontological coercion

This study builds on Guzzini's (2012) interpretivist approach and van Dijk's (1998, 2008, 2014) socio-cognitive discourse theory to conceptualise foreign policy change as rooted in meaning-making, identity and cognitive models. Ontological insecurity is not treated as a measurable variable but as a constitutive condition that reshapes actors' perceptions of interdependence and legitimacy. In this framework, process-tracing is used not to confirm hypotheses in a positivist sense but to reconstruct the phases of discursive transformation through which institutional behaviour changes. Following Wendt's (1998) critique of causal-realist epistemology, the aim is to identify the constitutive mechanisms that turn economic interdependence into an instrument of ontological coercion. Materialist approaches have dominated explanations of the interdependence-conflict nexus: While the frameworks explain the structural possibility of coercion, they do not account for the identity-based and cognitive conditions under which interdependence is reframed as a threat. They remain focused on material infrastructures, overlooking how shared meanings, collective memory and identity narratives condition conceptions of materiality and foreign policy choices. If actors seek a stable self-identity alongside physical survival, routinised relationships – including economic ties/informational ties – help sustain this identity. The current configuration of

global markets is shaped by hierarchical structures and centralised financial and informational nodes that are susceptible to exploitation. As Marx (1859: 5) argues, the conditions under which individuals produce and reproduce their material life fundamentally shape their social and intellectual existence – highlighting a dialectical relationship between materiality and consciousness, perceptions and ideologies. From a cognitive perspective, it follows that many so-called social facts, such as money, institutions or markets, are observer-dependent: They are defined, categorised and sustained through human interpretation and discourse (van Dijk 2008: 39). In this sense, economic interdependence and the belief systems it generates can be understood as components of a shared social mental model which derives from a certain shared knowledge discursively generated via mental processes and mental/context models). Cognitive approaches to knowledge describe mental models as subjective representations shaped by perception, experience, prior models and socio-cultural knowledge which defines our interpretation of events. These models are not stored as isolated propositions but structured representations used to construct our representation of world events, instantiating social knowledge in specific contexts.

In general, the EU shared social mental model on interdependence has shaped policies and relations with other actors on the international arena, as well as with the Russian Federation. In fact, the conflicts before 2022 were not perceived as disruptive cognitively as the shock in 2022 which generated a phenomenon of generalised anxiety. From 2014 to 2021 Sanctions were framed as smart, targeted in the sense that they were aimed at having an impact only at specific areas. The shared knowledge about Russia and the related mental models in relation with 'how to sanction Russia' responded to certain cognitive expectations, justified by an interdependent routine and by the shared perception of the EU as a normative power, together with the narrative on the 'unthinkability of a war', not inside and not at the borders (Mitzen 2016, 2018). Based on a discursively constructed and socially shared mental model, EU-Russia economic interdependence was, prior to 2022, framed as a stabilising and mutually beneficial relationship. This model was underpinned by liberal assumptions about globalisation, institutional integration and the EU's identity as a normative power. Within this framework, conflicts such as the 2014 annexation of Crimea were not perceived as existential threats but as manageable disruptions that did not fundamentally challenge the dominant representation of interdependence. As such, sanctions adopted between 2014 and 2021 were designed and discursively framed as 'smart' and 'targeted' (Giumelli 2013) – measures intended to signal normative disapproval while maintaining the overarching logic of cooperation (semantic conceptual memory of the EU epistemic community). The model rested on a set of shared social facts: that Russia remained an indispensable energy partner, that economic ties could moderate geopolitical tensions and that selective sanctions could compartmentalise political conflict.

These expectations were cognitively stabilised through mental models that encoded prior experience, institutional memory and legitimating discourses. The 2022 invasion, however, ruptured this representational equilibrium, producing widespread ontological insecurity (resurgence existential anxiety) and prompting a discursive reconstitution of interdependence itself – from a logic of engagement to one of strategic vulnerability, where sanctions design completely shifted from what we were used to see. De facto, if knowledge and as a consequence social facts are discursively reinterpreted and re-legitimised within society, what happens in the case of a cognitive shock? Or a discursively represented collective identitarian threat? For these reasons, it is important to respond to the following question:

> *How does ontological insecurity drive the weaponisation of interdependence, and in what ways do these mechanisms reshape EU-Russian relations – particularly through the interplay of perceived disorder and recurring identity-based conflicts?*

When Giddens (1991) introduces the concept of ontological security, he defines it as a 'sense of continuity and order in events', a stable cognitive condition that enables individuals to trust in the constancy of their social and material environment. This conceptualisation has been criticised for its rationalist bias and implicit status quo orientation. Giddens's example of women remaining in violent relationships illustrates a paradox: Individuals may prefer harmful routines over disruptive change because routine provides a sense of existential stability. This cognitive dynamic can be extended to international politics, where in-group/out-group logics shape the behaviour of collective actors.

Agency, as Mitzen (2006: 342) argues, requires a stable cognitive environment. It follows that the primary response to uncertainty is an attempt to reduce psychological stress. Minor disruptions may be tolerated, as actors anticipate that routines will eventually reassert themselves. This dynamic characterised the post–Cold War relationship between the EU and Russia: Despite persistent tensions, both sides maintained routinised interactions that reinforced their roles, and sanctions remained targeted rather than comprehensive. Because the conflict did not generate existential anxiety, drastic policy shifts such as isolating Russia were avoided.

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, however, produced a massive cognitive rupture. Ontological security theory helps explain why the invasion was perceived not only as a military threat but also as a profound challenge to Europe's self-conception as a peaceful, rules-based actor. Previous routines of engagement and partial sanctions no longer offered normative or psychological stability. From a cognitive perspective, this disruption necessitated a reconstruction of interpretive frameworks. The belief that economic interdependence could moderate Russian behaviour became untenable, prompting both discursive reframing and cognitive

restructuring (see Table 1). In other words, the EU's interpretive apparatus – the scripts and schemas through which it understood interdependence – underwent a fundamental shift, giving rise to a new logic of weaponised interdependence.

Table 1: Discursive phases of interdependence in EU-Russian Relations

Discursive Phase	**Meaning-Making Mechanism**	**Observable Expressions**	**Interpretative Significance**
Managed Complex Interdependence	Interdependence framed as stabilising and cooperative; EU identity anchored in regulatory power	Official communications stress dialogue, sectoral integration, and limited, symbolic sanctions	Reinforces the EU's normative self-image and its belief in economic diplomacy as a stabilising force
Ontological Insecurity Crisis	Existential threat perceived as destabilising EU identity; routinised tools reinterpreted as inadequate	Press releases shift from legalistic to moralistic and urgent language; sanctions broaden to symbolic sectors of Great Power	Represents a rupture in the EU's self-conception – from a 'regulatory power' to a 'geopolitical actor' under threat
Weaponisation of Interdepenence	Economic instruments reframed as existential tools for identity preservation; sanctions as ontological reassertion	Sanctions justified as long-term strategic necessity; discourse highlights 'unity', 'defense of European values', and 'existential threat'	Transforms interdependence into a threat structure and legitimises coercion as identity-protecting policy

Source: Author

The EU's sanctions experience prior to 2022 was primarily symbolic and signaling-oriented. A complete disruption of economic ties or an 'informational annihilation' of Russia would have undermined the EU's own self-conception as a normative power. From 2014 to 2021, the threat was discursively constructed as manageable rather than existential. This helps explain why sanctions remained limited and targeted: They signaled disapproval but preserved routinised patterns of interdependence. Once such routines were established, however, escalation became a latent possibility. When a threat is subsequently perceived as existential, intensification of conflict tools appears both natural and unsurprising. In this sense, sanctions evolve from symbolic gestures into instruments of ontological coercion – measures that directly affect the sense of self and stability of the targeted actor. By contrast, the weaponisation of interdependence, though not historically

characteristic of EU sanctions policy, emerged in response to a perceived ontological crisis. In line with the reflexivisation hypothesis, the EU's attachment to established routines meant that the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 produced a radical cognitive rupture. What had previously been experienced as 'tensions' now constituted an existential threat, justifying the transformation of interdependence itself into a threat structure. This discursive shift – from 2014's legalistic language and calibrated sanctions to 2022's urgent moral discourse and expansive measures – illustrates how sanctions were redefined as acts of ontological coercion. The EU no longer sought merely to impose costs but to undermine Russia's identity projection and destabilise its normative influence. We conceptualise these measures as ontological sanctions: strategies that disrupt an actor's identity performance and normative authority by severing its integration into global supply chains, symbolic infrastructures and discursive arenas. Ontological sanctions thus function not only economically, but also reputationally and ideologically. They delegitimise the target's role in international society, discredit its narratives and fragment its perceived authority within contested communities. This form of coercion is primarily informational and psychological, operating through normative, reputational and material channels. It explains why sanctions escalate and persist despite their high economic costs: They do not merely punish but seek to redefine strategic relationships and contest ideological hierarchies by attacking the ontological security of the adversary. The EU's responses to Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its full-scale invasion in 2022 illustrate this transformation. Through these cases, we trace how discursive and symbolic processes reshaped the meaning of sanctions, shifting from signaling tools to mechanisms of ontological coercion.

Rather than testing hypotheses through causal inference, this study employs interpretive process tracing (IPT) (Guzzini 2012, Norman 2015) to reconstruct how the EU's discursive framing of interdependence and sanctions has evolved in response to external shocks. Rooted in Guzzini's (2012) phased approach, this method traces how meaning is constituted, stabilised and transformed across time – particularly in institutional contexts where identities and norms are central to policy behaviour. While the theoretical lens explains why actors are driven by the need for ontological security, IPT provides the analytical tools to examine how such needs are discursively articulated, challenged and reconstituted in EU foreign policy discourse. To capture these evolving discursive formations, the study integrates tools from Critical Discourse Studies (CDS), particularly van Dijk's socio-cognitive model. CDS enables close attention to semantic shifts, lexical patterns and ideological framing across institutional texts – thus illuminating the rhetorical mechanisms through which interdependence is re-signified and sanctions are legitimated. The design is particularly suited to capturing: 1a. the sequencing and escalation of meaning shifts; 2b. the role of cognitive disruptions in triggering policy reframing; 3c. the ideational consolidation of sanctions as a tool of ontological coercion.

Before the rift (2014–2021): EU-Russia managed interdependence

Rather than treating sanctions as purely material instruments, this paper argues that their nature and scope were co-constituted by the EU's ontological security needs at distinct moments. Material measures correspond to psychological necessities, shaped by and enacted through dominant cognitive frames. In this sense, sanctions are not only economic tools but also symbolic responses to identity threats. Despite repeated legal violations by Russia, the EU maintained a policy of calibrated and reversible sanctions between 2014 and 2021. This restraint was not merely strategic but discursively enabled: Russia was not yet constructed as an existential adversary. The conflict remained manageable, allowing the EU to preserve its self-conception as a normative, rules-based actor committed to diplomatic engagement. I argue that controlled interdependence – where economic ties persist despite political conflict – is sustained when identity-based threats are not perceived as ontological. In this phase, interdependence functions as a cognitive stabiliser, maintaining the status quo and preventing escalation. Conflict intensity remains low as long as there is no perceived need to reimagine the Self in relation to the Other. Sanctions in this phase are signaling, but not substantial – that is, they do not aim to 'spiritually isolate' the target or annihilate it materially and ideologically in the global order. This is something for which I find evidence in economic data and in the juridical frameworks used before the full-scale invasion. The discourse in this phase does not frame Russia as a *par excellence* enemy which clearly has an impact on mainstream media representation of a conflict and, as a consequence, on public opinion.

Conceptualising managed complex interdependence

Contextually, before 2022 EU-Russia relations are framed differently. Some studies argue that intensive economic relations promote cooperation (Keohane & Nye 1977; Copeland 1996). If we look at the data considered in Pascariu and Simionov's model (2017) where key interdependence indicators are FDI, total trade and sectoral dependencies, with energy being the most significant area of EU reliance on Russia, we notice that in 2021 as per official European Commission reports economic data are as follow:

- In 2021, Russia ranked as the EU's fifth-largest trade partner, accounting for 5.8% of total EU trade in goods. Conversely, in 2020, the EU was Russia's largest trade partner, comprising 37.3% of Russia's total trade (European Commission n.d.).
- The total trade in goods between the EU and Russia in 2021 reached €257.5 billion. EU imports amounted to €158.5 billion, primarily mineral fuels (€98.9 billion, 62%), wood (€3.16 billion, 2%), iron and steel (€7.4 billion, 4.7%), and fertilisers (€1.78 billion, 1.1%). EU exports to Russia totaled €99 billion, including machinery (€19.5 billion, 19.7%), motor vehicles (€8.95

billion, 9%), pharmaceuticals (€8.1 billion, 8.1%) and electrical equipment (€7.57 billion, 7.6%) (European Commission n.d.).

- Trade in services also played a crucial role, amounting to €29.4 billion in 2020, with the EU exporting €20.5 billion in services to Russia and importing €8.9 billion (European Commission n.d.).
- The EU maintained a strong investment presence in Russia, with FDI outward stock reaching € 270,493.1 Million in 2021, while Russia's inward FDI was estimated at € 159,229.9 Million (Eurostat n.d.).
- Given Russia's $1.83 trillion GDP, EU trade constituted a substantial share of its economic activity, affording the EU considerable leverage (World Bank n.d.).

Drawing on Keohane and Nye's interdependence theory, the EU-Russia economic relationship before 2022 fostered a shared cognitive frame of stability, where mutual benefits were expected to deter conflict. However, the asymmetric structure of the interdependence – Russia's 37.7% trade reliance on the EU vs the EU's 5.8% reliance – shaped different perceptions of risk. While the EU enjoyed strategic flexibility, Russia faced greater structural vulnerability. These dynamics manifested in perceived sensitivity (short-term shocks) and vulnerability (long-term exposure), reinforcing interdependence as both a material condition and a cognitive lens shaping policy restraint. It is crucial to underscore that the EU's normative foreign policy – grounded in rule-based diplomacy and soft power (Manners 2002) – has long contrasted with Russia's civilisational worldview, shaped by Slavic traditionalism and a strong emphasis on spiritual security and sovereign autonomy. As Bettanin (2018) suggests, the roots of EU-Russia tensions lie in conflicting identity-based aspirations: The US perceived itself as the 'indispensable nation', the EU positioned itself as the normative embodiment of Europe and Russia clung to its great power status, rooted in historical tradition and symbolic continuity. In the immediate post-Soviet period, Russia viewed integration into Western-led institutions as a pragmatic path to recovery. Despite political misalignments and NATO's eastward expansion, the 1990s and the early 2000s were marked by cooperation, driven more by necessity than shared values. Russia's foreign policy oscillated between strategic adaptation and wounded resentment – particularly following the NATO intervention in Kosovo and the US-led invasion of Iraq, which undermined trust in the West and challenged the credibility of international norms. Still, integration was pursued, not abandoned.

In the early 2000s, Russia still prioritised cooperation with the Euro-Atlantic alliance for the sake of regional stability. From the European side, the EU consistently framed Russia as a strategic partner. This is evident in key institutional milestones: the 1997 Partnership and cooperation agreement (PCA), the 2003 For Common Spaces Framework and the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) launched in 2004. These initiatives aimed to normalise and socialise Russia

into a European-led normative order, reinforcing the EU's own identity as a post-sovereign power exporting stability through interdependence. The 2003 European Security Strategy formalised this vision, depicting a rules based international system anchored in law, cooperation and shared values. For Russia, this interdependence was not merely a vehicle for modernisation – it also served as a tool to assert strategic relevance and to resist US unipolarity from within the global system. Russia's accession to the WTO in 2012, despite its vocal critiques of Western-led global governance, reveals this dual logic: to contest hegemony while participating in its institutional architecture. In this way, the EU served a dual function for Russia – as both a normative interlocutor and a counterweight to US dominance, enabling Russia to project itself as a global actor on its own terms in the existing multilateral frameworks. However, by the mid-2000s, cracks in this cognitive alignment began to show. In his 2007 Munich Security Conference Speech, President Putin sharply criticised the unipolar word order and demanded recognition of Russia's role in global governance, signaling a clear departure from earlier cooperative rhetoric (Putin 2007), where strategic cooperation with strategic partners should be preserved as evident in the Foreign Policy Concepts of 2008 and 2013 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2008;2013). Putin's (2013) strategy was that of collaborating but calling out for a more democratic international arena where Russia could contribute to the security of the post-Soviet space and beyond. Even amid these ideological divergences, it was maintained as a discourse of cooperation between the parts. As stated in the First Commission Report on the implementation by Russia of the Common Steps for a visa-free regime, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Catherine Ashton remarked:

> Much effort has been made on both sides in preparing for future visa liberalisation under the EU-Russia Common Steps and I hope we can continue our work on this in the same way. We are looking forward to concluding the visa waiver agreement for short term travel once the identified concerns and recommended actions have been addressed. (European Commission 2013)

Ultimately, this period laid the foundation for what can be termed managed interdependence – a relationship marked by increasing political and normative divergence yet sustained economic and diplomatic engagement. By 2014, when the Crimea crisis erupted, these historical contingencies shaped the EU's sanctioning response: calibrated, symbolic and structured to preserve interdependence while asserting normative boundaries. Sanctions cannot be analysed without considering the socio-historical context and the broader discourse generating tensions as well as the general knowledge about something – for both actors' interdependence was a key factor in their foreign policy behaviour and for their role in the global

order. The preservation of this is cognitively important from this point of view. This is why although some sanctions are imposed, they are not aimed to disrupt Russia – they only have a deterrent and signaling objective, that is they aim at maintaining the relationships with Russia and avoid further deterioration of the interdependence by sending an institutional, normative message to the target and at the domestic, international level. As reported by Valdai Club (Timofeev 2018) starting in 2014, the EU and the United States closely coordinated their sanctions policies in response to Russia's annexation of Crimea and its destabilising role in Eastern Ukraine. The first wave of EU measures came with Council Decision 2014/145/CFSP (17 March 2014) (see Table 2), which imposed targeted sanctions on 21 individuals from Russia and Ukraine, including asset freezes and travel bans. Over time, this list expanded significantly, reaching 161 individuals and 41 entities by September 2018 (Valdai Club 2018). On 23 June 2014, the EU adopted Decision 2014/386/CFSP, introducing a ban on imports from Crimea and Sevastopol, formalising the EU's non-recognition policy of the annexation. This was followed by Decision 2014/933/CFSP (18 December 2014), which extended restrictions to real estate, finance, investment, tourism, and critical goods and technologies linked to Crimea. A major turning point came on 31 July 2014, with Decision 2014/512/CFSP, which launched sectoral sanctions targeting Russia's defence, banking and energy sectors. Till 2021 as is evident by looking at the content on EUR-LEX and comparing all the Council Decisions, these frames constitute the main legal basis for European Sanctions. The approach until December 2021 was targeted; in fact, except for 31 July 2014 with Decision 2014/512/CFSP (see Table 3), all the rest of the decisions list specific individual and entities.

This analysis demonstrates that the EU's sanctioning strategy following the annexation of Crimea in 2014 was not designed to sever ties with Russia, but rather to signal disapproval while preserving the broader framework of managed interdependence. All the measures in this period are legally proportional; they are only limited and do not disrupt the entire supply chain management of a state and/or an entity. They target mostly individuals who exposed a favourable opinion on the illegal annexation of Crimea. Sanctions were deployed incrementally and symbolically, reflecting both institutional restraint and the cognitive framing of Russia as a necessary – albeit difficult – partner in the European order. This approach aligns with the EU's normative identity, rooted in rule-based diplomacy and economic leverage, and reflects a shared belief (until 2022) that the conflict remained non-ontological and therefore manageable. The coexistence of sanctions and continued trade relations illustrates the EU's strategic dilemma: balancing normative responses to violations of international law with the pragmatic need to preserve systemic stability. Ultimately, the EU's sanctions regime from 2014 to 2021 exemplifies a logic of ontological containment rather than rupture, where the goal was to uphold the normative order without fully dismantling the

interdependent structure on which both sides relied. The cognition at work is clearly traceable in the overall discourse on sanctions as part of a foreign policy continuum which for instance includes the legal discourse (the frameworks), the overall mediatic discourse where we include the institutional discourse and the justifications.

Table 2: Sanctions Design and legal basis: Council Decision 2014/145/CFSP (March 17, 2014)

Council Decision 2014/145/CFSP (17 March 2014)	**Description**	**Design**
Targeted sanctions	Identifying specific **individuals, entities,** or sectors that are believed to be supporting the targeted behavior	**Asset freezes:** Preventing the target from accessing or controlling their assets, including bank accounts, property, and investments. **Travel bans:** Restricting the target's ability to travel to or through specific countries. **Restrictions on financial transactions:** Prohibiting financial institutions from engaging in transactions with the target. **Trade restrictions:** Limiting the export or import of specific goods or technologies to or from the target. **Denial of access to services:** Blocking access to certain services like banking, insurance, or legal representation.

Source: Author

The March 2014 European Council press release (European Council 2014) follows an extraordinary meeting on 3 March 2014, addressing Russia's military intervention in Crimea. The EU 'urged' Russia to withdraw its forces and warned that failure to de-escalate would lead to suspending bilateral talks on visa matters and the New Agreement. The tone is formal, authoritative and legalistic, avoiding emotionally charged rhetoric while maintaining a strong condemnatory stance.

Table 3: Decision 2014/512/CFSP (31 July 2014)

Decision (31 July 2014)	**Description**	**Design**
Ban on dealing in new bonds, equity, and similar instruments >90 days maturity from 5 named Russian banks (Sberbank, VTB Bank, Gazprombank, VEB, Rosselkhozbank)	Applies to banks listed in the Annex, and their >50% owned subsidiaries	Sectoral – not a full asset freeze; first use of 'capital access' tool
Arms Embargo	Total ban on export/import of arms, related materiel, services, financing, and brokering	Classic arms embargo with broad extraterritorial scope
Dual-Use Export Controls	Ban on dual-use items **if for military use or military end-users in Russia**	Civilian dual-use exports still allowed in 2014 if not for military use
Energy Technology Restrictions	Prior authorisation needed for exports related to **deep water, Arctic, or shale oil** projects	No license granted if end-use is in restricted energy project types
Anti-Circumvention Clause	Ban on knowing or intentional efforts to bypass restrictions	Standard clause for enforcement integrity
Liability Shield (Good Faith)	No liability if actor did not know and had no reason to suspect violation	Encourages due diligence; does not waive obligations

Source: Author

The press release frames Russia's actions as unlawful, labeling them a 'clear violation' of international law and the Ukrainian constitution and defining them as 'acts of aggression' – a term consistent with international legal discourse. This legal framing is reinforced by references to the UN Charter, OSCE Helsinki Final Act, Budapest Memorandum (1994), the Bilateral Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation and Partnership (1997), and the Ukrainian Constitution. The structured parallel constructions listing these violations enhance clarity and argumentative strength. At this stage, the EU's response remains diplomatic, serving as a warning rather than an immediate imposition of sanctions. The press release also signals continued openness to engagement with Russia, stating that 'the EU ambitions

and openness to a relationship with Russia' persist despite the crisis. The 2014 EU rhetoric reflects a strategic wait-and-see approach, wherein the EU strongly condemns Russia's actions but avoids immediate, irreversible measures, preserving space for negotiation and economic stability. The EU's decision to delay harsher sanctions at this stage suggests a cautious approach, balancing normative concerns with strategic pragmatism. The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation from 2016 criticises the Western states in general in point 61 for their containment policy against Russia, but at the same time in point 63 states that 'the EU remains an important trade and economic and foreign policy partner for Russia' (Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, approved 30 November 2016). The tone is still open to cooperation, but critical.

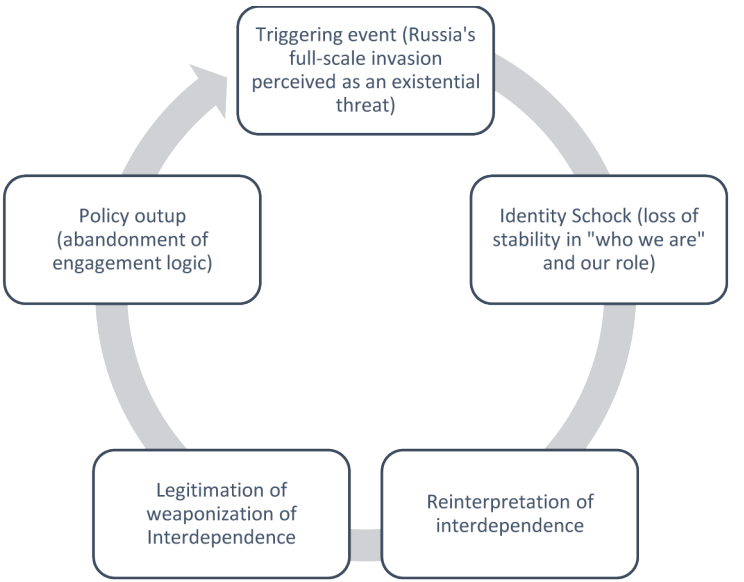
After the rift (2022): Fractured identity and the road to ontological coercion

Ontological security was not merely a parallel development but a primary causal driver shaping the form and scope of the EU's weaponised interdependence. I define security as a mental state where communities and states perceive stability due to attachment to existing routines. In this sense, the meaning we associate with material concepts and social facts is de facto a discursive and ideational phenomenon, since meanings depend on this mental state. When there is a shock, perception of social facts might change and one could cling to conflict intensification to preserve its identity (Giddens 1991; Mitzen 2006). The 2022 discursive shift suggests not merely a pragmatic adaptation to material threats, but a fundamental reconfiguration of how the EU conceived of its relationship with Russia, where sanctions regime does not represent a quantitative escalation from 2014, but a qualitative reorientation of economic statecraft (see Figure 1). Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was framed in official EU discourse as an existential challenge to the European security order and self-identity. Josep Borrell described the moment as 'particularly dangerous for Europe' (22 February 2022), while Ursula von der Layen characterised the attack as 'not only on Ukraine, but on the European way of life' (European Commission 2022). Material threat indicators, alliance pressures and coercive capacities were already present in 2014, yet they did not produce comparable escalation. What changed was not the EU's capacity for coercion, but the meaning assigned to interdependence and to Russia's actions. This reinterpretation was participated by the identity shock and the perceived need to restore ontological stability.

The EU-Russia relationship illustrates the limits of complex interdependence. While economic integration initially fostered cooperation, normative divergences – particularly in governance models – undermined long-term stability (Stent 2008; Casier 2019). The EU's strategy to integrate Russia into a European-led order failed due to ideological incompatibilities (Bengtsson & Elgström 2021).

While economic interdependence initially encouraged cooperation, the EU's commitment to democracy, human rights and the rule of law contrasted with Russia's political trajectory under Putin (Stent 2008). As a result, the EU viewed Russia as an ambivalent partner rather than a fully integrated actor (Casier 2019;

Figure 1: The road to Ontological Coercion



Source: Author

Lynch 2004; Tocci 2020). The European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) exacerbated tensions, culminating in Crimea's annexation, which media narratives framed as a crisis rather than a structural shift in EU-Russia relations. Despite this, Russia remained a strategic partner. The 2022 exposed the limits of diplomacy grounded in role conceptions, showing that identity-driven conflicts may sustain rather than resolve tensions. The identity shock of February 2022 arose from the perceptions that Russia's full-scale invasion was not merely a breach of international law or a challenge to Ukraine sovereignty, but a direct assault on the EU's self-conception as a unified, normative power able to preserve peace and stability in its neighbourhood. In ontological security terms, this meant a rupture in the EU's 'routinised' relationship with Russia – a relationship that, even after Crimea 2014, still rested on managed interdependence in trade, energy and diplomacy, and thus maintained a degree of predictability. The invasion destroyed that predictability in three ways: It revealed that deep economic interdependence did not deter large-scale war; it invalidated the EU's self-image as a successful peace project in Europe; and it publicly exposed the limits of EU diplomacy, undermining its claim

to shape regional order though law and dialogue. This triple rupture – strategic, normative and reputational – transformed Russia from a difficult partner into an existential adversary, triggering the cognitive and emotional recategorisation of interdependence from stabilising asset to structural vulnerability. This identity shock triggered a reframing of legitimised measures via deliberately targeting the rival's capacity to sustain its self-identity via attempting at:

- Eroding symbolic resources of great power identity: e.g. Central Bank sanctions, SWIFT exclusion
- Severing prestige networks: e.g. banning Kremlin-backed medias, suspending visa facilitation, excluding Russia from cultural and sporting events, main trade areas, prohibiting FDI, pushing supply chain management disruptions
- Undermining legitimacy of target – e.g. more aggressive signaling/contesting sanctions (most of the Duma members & major elite figures, 'propagandists')

These three spheres translate in the aim of having an impact on domestic and international symbolism (Lindsay 1986; Nossal 1989; Baldwin 1999; Hufbauer et al. 2007; Drezner 2011; Peksen 2019; Whang 2011; Giumelli 2011; Biersteker, Eckert & Tourinho 2016; Onderco 2016; Baldwin 2020) to target the ontological security of the rival. Russia official discourse confirms this identitarian dimension. In the briefing by Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova (Moscow, 3 June 2022) it is literally mentioned that, in the context of 'anti-Russia' sanctions:

> It looks like this is only being done to destroy everything related to our common culture. It is obvious that the European Commissioners' commitment to support and protect the variety of cultures as expressed in their joint statement is far from EU's actual intentions. I would put it differently. Maybe they want to protect and develop the cancel culture – but that's a different story.

Linking ontological security and EU sanctions policy

While in 2014 Sanctions were framed as regulatory enforcement acts, by 2022 they were justified as an existential security measure (see Table 4). This shift illustrates how the EU discursively reconstructed intense economic coercion as a defensive necessity rather than a diplomatic instrument due to the high identitarian threat. Sanctions tend to be harsher when they are ideological – this is why they require a framework (ontological coercion) that addresses to understand the level of identitarian aspects sanctions are aiming to have on the perception of the target on the world order. The highest the ideological-identitarian conflict, the more sanctions and discourse over sanctions and foreign policy will be designed to have an impact on system-wise globalised nodes which presupposes target integration and fair competition in global markets and to have a psychological impact

on public opinion on the level of domestic and international symbolism. Via the analysis of discourse, we can understand the intensity of the anxiety and of the ideological threat that produce certain type of policies, in this case sanctions.

Table 4: Discursive Themes 2014 versus February 2022

Factors	**March 2014 (Crimea annexation)**	**February 2022 (Full-Scale Invasion)**
Sanctions justifications	'encouraging compliance'	'defending European values'
Threat perception	Violation of sovereignty	Existential security threat
Rethorical tone	Legalistic, diplomatic	Moralistic, securitised
Key lexical choices	'dialogue', 'pressure', 'law'	'aggressions', 'barbaric', 'severance'
Policy framing	Sanctions are temporary and conditional	Sanctions are permanent and irreversible

Source: Author

The February 2022 press release (EEAS 2022) marks a fundamental shift in discursive framing, as High Representative Josep Borrell adopts a more confrontational, moralistic and securitised tone (e.g. 'acte d'une extrême gravité', 'républiques fantoches'; 'an act of extreme gravity; puppets republics'). His lexical choices construct a moral dichotomy, presenting Russia as an aggressor with direct personification of an 'Evil' ('Monsieur Poutine a décidé': Mr Putin has decided), eliminating diplomatic ambiguity. The framing of Donetsk and Luhansk Republics as 'fantoches' (puppets) implies Russian manipulation, reinforcing the EU's portrayal of Russia as a revisionist power actively destabilising Europe. The absence of modal verbs strengthens the declarative and authoritative tone, signaling a definitive shift from diplomatic engagement to confrontation. A key rhetorical strategy in Borrell's speech is the invocation of existential threat, framing Russia's actions as an unprecedented crisis ('a particularly dangerous moment for Europe'). The phrase 'for Europe' expands the threat perception beyond Ukraine, framing it as a direct challenge to the European security order, reinforcing collective existential insecurity. The 'Kremlin's playbook' analogy presents Russia as an expansionist actor with a pattern of aggression, linking 2022 to previous conflicts (2014, 2008). The shift from legalistic discourse (2014) to securitised rhetoric (2022) reflects an ontological security crisis, wherein Russia is no longer a strategic partner but an existential adversary. This transformation aligns with securitisation discursive frameworks, as Russia's actions are framed as a direct attack on European

identity and normative order. The phrase 'sanctions will hurt Russia, and it will hurt a lot' underscores a new punitive and deterrent logic, moving beyond previous regulatory sanctions. This discursive shift legitimised the EU's move from symbolic/signaling economic restrictions (2014) to full-scale economic warfare (2022), reinforcing a geopolitical transformation in EU foreign policy. No longer merely an enforcer of international law, the EU now presents itself as an active geopolitical power, engaged in deterrence, strategic coercion and confrontation. The theme of gravity, central to the press statement, is reinforced through parallelism, as seen in the phrase 'alpha and omega' This reference, with its biblical connotations, highlights the contrast between Russia's past commitment to the Minsk Agreements and its current violations. Russia had previously presented these agreements as essential to peace and stability, yet its recent actions render that framing hypocritical and self-defeating. This linguistic choice removes any suggestion of negotiation or flexibility, signaling a clear shift from diplomatic caution to firm condemnation. Additionally, Russia is framed as ‚déchirer' (tearing up), which amplifies the distinction between legitimate agreements and their destruction. This framing, combined with the reference to UN Secretary-General António Guterres's words, strengthens the EU's rhetorical strategy of presenting Russia's actions as an irrevocable breach of international norms. The statement is resolute and definitive, setting the stage for a firm escalation in EU responses. The tone of the EU's February 2022 press release is urgent, alarmist and moralistic, reinforcing the perception that the European Union faces a threat to its self-identity. Russia is no longer framed merely as a violator of international law but as a direct aggressor challenging the foundations of European security. The statement describes this as a 'particularly dangerous moment for Europe', emphasising its unprecedented nature. The metaphor 'this story has not finished' conveys unpredictability and continued escalation, while the term 'aggression' explicitly assigns an expansionist motive to Russia. This is further reinforced by the reference to 'the Kremlin's playbook that we already know from 2014 and 2008', framing Russia as an actor with a historical pattern of territorial revisionism. This historical framing strengthens the EU's justification for a more confrontational stance. The shift in sanctions rhetoric is also significant. The phrase 'this package of sanctions will hurt Russia, and it will hurt a lot' presents sanctions as punitive and impactful rather than symbolic, signaling a departure from regulatory enforcement toward economic coercion. The assertion that 'sanctions are only a part of our response' underscores that the EU is no longer solely relying on economic pressure but is integrating broader foreign policy tools, including military. The phrase 'a major conflict in the heart of Europe' further reinforces existential proximity, framing Russia's actions as not just a violation of sovereignty but as a threat to the European order itself. The metaphor 'we keep ammunition in our toolbox' marks a rhetorical transformation in the EU's self-perception, shifting

from diplomatic mediator (2014) to strategic defender (2022). While this figurative military language does not imply direct intervention, it aligns security with identitarian concepts, such as democracy and territorial sovereignty, legitimising the EU's assertive response.

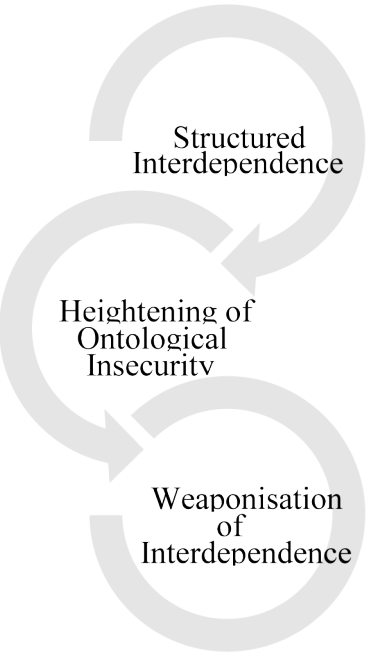
Borrell's 2022 speech demonstrates a fundamental shift in EU discourse, incorporating collective crisis narratives and coercive language. The reference to 'so-called' Donetsk and Luhansk puppets delegitimises Russian territorial claims, while the emphasis on an existential crisis constructs Russia as an immediate threat not only to Ukraine but to European stability as a whole. By 2022, the discursive stance had shifted from regulatory enforcement to securitisation, with themes of collective crisis, imminent conflict and strategic deterrence/containment dominating the rhetoric. This shift reflects an ontological security crisis, wherein Russia is no longer perceived as a difficult but manageable partner, but as a direct aggressor threatening the EU's foundational values. The transition from legalistic language to securitised discourse allowed the EU to justify harsher, irreversible sanctions and a broader strategic realignment. This discursive transformation underscores a broader evolution in EU foreign policy, transitioning from a norm-enforcing actor to a geopolitical power actively engaged in weaponisation of interdependence. The transition from diplomatic caution to full-scale securitisation not only legitimised harsher sanctions but also reinforced the EU's self-conception as a unified, value-driven entity defending its existential security order against external aggression.

Weaponised interdependence for ontological coercion: The discourse after 2022

Weaponised Interdependence occurs when states leverage their centrality in global networks to turn interdependence into a tool of coercion by denying, restricting or monitoring access to critical economic, financial, technological and informational infrastructures in order to pressure routines adversaries. The European Union, by its very nature, should not logically embrace the weaponisation of interdependence, as it contradicts the foundational principles of the EU's identity and economic model. In this context, I introduce the concept of ontological coercion, which extend beyond identity-contesting or symbolic measures. Whereas symbolic sanctions merely signal disapproval and affirm moral boundaries and identity-contesting challenge legitimacy or recognition, ontological sanctions work at a deeper level. They exploit network chokepoints of interdependence – such as central banking systems, financial infrastructures or consumer markets – to destabilise the very continuity of identity and routines of the sanctioned actor. At the same time, the signaling and contesting spheres become more credible due to the consistency of the measures and the quantity. In this way, the EU's embrace of weaponised interdependence in 2022 was not

simply a shift in *degree* of coercion but in *kind* – i.e. sanctions ceased to function primarily as symbolic or recognition-challenging acts and became instruments of ontological disruption (see Figure 2). This marks both a transformation of the EU into a geopolitical actor and a reconstitution of the global order, where interdependence itself is mobilised to redraw the boundaries of belonging and exclusion. For our analysis, it is important to focus on the first deliberative packages (nine by December 2022) which due to ontological security concerns were shaped in order to isolate the target and not only affect certain sectors of the economy, but to majorly: 1a. exploit chokepoints of interdependence (finance, energy, technology, consumer goods); 2a. target continuity and routines, producing ontological insecurity in the sanctioned society (corporate exodus, SWIFT ban for supply chain management disruption); 3a. disrupt collective self-conceptions, forcing states and societies to renegotiate 'who they are' (Russia as an energy superpower, consumer modernity or scientific hub). In Great Powers logic these nodes represent symbolic legitimation of 'Greatness' and from 2007, Russia had struggled to be recognised as such in IR.

Figure 2: Structured Interdependence and Its Transformation Under Ontological Insecurity



Source: Author

It is important to note that by October 2021, as per EU official data, restrictive measures were applied to a total of 185 persons and 48 entities (Council of the

Table 5: Type of Ontological Sanctions

Type of Sanction	Chokepoint of Interdependence	Ontological Intent	Expected Ontological Consequence
Financial (Central Bank freeze, SWIFT ban)	Global financial infrastructures, cross-border payments, foreign reserves	Destabilise predictability of economic routines; undermine Russia's confidence in financial sovereignty	Erosion of daily financial stability (savings, trade, investments); ontological insecurity of Russia as a reliable financial actor
Energy embargoes (oil, coal, partial gas restrictions)	Resource trade networks; EU-Russia dependency structures	Break Russia's narrative as an indispensable 'energy superpower'	Forcing Russia to reconfigure identity from 'indispensable supplier' to isolated petro-state
FDI restrictions & services prohibition on certain sectoral areas	Consumer infrastructures, global corporate networks, everyday products, FDI restrictions	Undermine Russia's self-image as part of global consumer modernity	Daily life disruption; ontological insecurity in middle-class identity; symbolic loss of 'belonging to the West'
Technological bans (semiconductors, software, aviation parts, Visa/Mastercard suspension)	Tech supply chains, digital infrastructures, scientific/industrial ecosystems	Remove Russia from global knowledge and tech economy; disrupt routines of modern production/consumption	Ontological rupture of Russia's identity as a technologically integrated modern state
Informational sanctions (ban on RT, Sputnik; restrictions on disinformation outlets; platform content moderation)	Global information flows, media legitimacy, reputational networks	Silence Russia's ability to project alternative narratives; delegitimise Russia's identity claims in international society	Ontological insecurity in narrative self-presentation; loss of recognition as a legitimate voice in global discourse
Transport & mobility restrictions (airspace bans, maritime restrictions, luxury goods bans)	Physical mobility infrastructures, symbolic consumption	Restrict symbolic and material integration with Europe	Ontological rupture in elite routines (travel, prestige goods); further isolation from European modernity

Source: Author

European Union n.d.). While by March 2022, as reported on the EU Sanctions Timeline page, the list comprises a total of 862 individuals and 53 organisations. Of course, the quantity of imposed sanctions matter because it creates supply chain management disruptions and compliance chaos: The empirical evidence is the so-called corporations exodus. The first nine packages of Sanctions (February 2022 to December 2022) (see Table 5) amount for more than only nine Council Decisions. These nine packages cumulatively imposed chokepoints across financial, technological, energy and informational infrastructures. The initial Central Bank restrictions (Council Decision 2022/264) and SWIFT exclusion (2022/346) destabilised Russia's claim to financial sovereignty. Export bans on aviation and dual-use goods (2022/328) undermined its image as a technological power. Simultaneously, restrictions on state media outlets delegitimised Russia's informational authority. Crucially, the quantitative escalation from 185 individuals and 48 entities sanctioned in late 2021 to over 862 individuals and 53 organisations by March 2022 translated ontological anxiety into systemic disruption: Sanctions no longer merely targeted elites but penetrated the routines of firms, banks and consumers. This scale ensured that sanctions were experienced not only as material costs but as attacks on Russia's identity as a global, modernised economy. The contrast between the first sanctions imposed in 2014 (see Table 2) and those adopted in early 2022 is striking, not only for the difference in quantities, but for the essence or the design of Sanctions. In 2014, EU measures were limited in scope, primarily targeting Crimean officials, separatist leaders and a narrow circle of Russian elites, alongside a ban on imports from Crimea unless certified by Ukraine. There were also some informational sanctions against propagandists, but the territorial scope was limited as well as the intent. The 2014 sanctions were signaling and contesting. This could not generate a high material impact; this is why 2014–2021 shows low intensity and a mere signaling intent. By contrast, the first wave of sanctions in February 2022 represented a qualitative shift: Restrictions immediately extended to Russian sovereign debt, major financial institutions and trade with the occupied Donetsk and Luhansk regions, coupled with broader technology and sectoral measures also covering for informational nodes in a major way. This marked the EU's transition from symbolic messaging to systemic disruption, where sanctions were designed to weaponise interdependence, destabilise routines and induce ontological insecurity within Russia's political economy which had fought to be recognised as an on-par partner by the western bloc from 2007.

Since 2022, the European Union has escalated its restrictive measures against Russia by targeting state-backed disinformation, political influence operations and diplomatic engagements (see Figure 1). The sanctions aim to curb Russia's ability to manipulate public discourse, interfere with European democratic institutions and maintain diplomatic leverage. These actions reflect the broader strategy of weaponising interdependence to limit Russia's political and informational

influence within Europe. The EU's sanctions framework against Russia is one of the most extensive in modern history, targeting financial infrastructure, energy exports, transport capabilities, military technology, raw material trade and professional services. By leveraging its economic and regulatory influence, the EU aims to debilitate Russia's financial stability, restrict military advancements and weaken industrial production. The inclusion of service sector restrictions further isolates Russia from global corporate networks, making compliance with sanctions more stringent. By disrupting key dependencies, these sanctions exemplify the weaponisation of interdependence, aligning with economic warfare strategies aimed at the long-term structural weakening of Russia's geopolitical power. Since 2022 they have published 18 packages of comprehensive Sanctions against Russia. It is true that the conflict dynamics drastically changed as stated in the first part of the Borrell statement 'we are witnessing a full-fledged war directly on our borders' where the tone is completely different from the tone in 2014, as the feeling that emerges from the first words is panic at our borders or anxiety. Borrell transmits anxiety which is a psychological sentiment that can play a role in disrupting rational decision making, hence lead to a disruption of the status quo. Both the problem and the escalation are described as Putin (personification of the fault which amplifies the sense of enemy), who is trampling Ukrainian identity and its people – international humanitarian law is being violated – the right to have an identity that coincides with the European one', thereby strenghtening the sentiment that the war is not only against Ukraine. The statement clearly opens with two contraposing frames: the violator of humanitarian law and the resistant army people (Ukrainians) who are on the same page as Europe. This sets place to the following justification: 'another taboo has fallen. The taboo that the European Union was not providing arms in a war. Yes, we are doing it. Because this war requires our engagement to support the Ukrainian army'. The nexus between people and army people is created in the first part of the statement: The ideological implication here is evident – the focus on the speech is identitarian – the enemy must be resisted and we need to stand by Ukraine as European identity is at stake. The army of resistant people needs to be defended with the use of weapons, even 'lethal' because the aggressor is murdering our identity and our values. Ukraine is part of our spatial borders and identitarian. It is a physical response, justified by psychological and ideological factors. 'We live [in] unprecedent times . . . we are facing the pest of war, like in the biblical times. This will be the first time in history that the EU will be providing lethal equipment to a third country'. This passage is fundamental in understanding the EU crusade; in these words the parallelism with the bible is strategic in first alluding to some of EU foundational values and to depict this act of supporting a war (or a crusade) as necessary and justified by higher values – those of humanitarian law. It must defend the identity of the good people. Projection of union sentiment is furtherly amplified in the

sanctions package announcement: All the 27 Member States are unanimous on how to proceed also in the sanctions area. They have been swift in taking the decision to punish the enemy system: The SWIFT measures will close access to more than half of the Russian Central Bank reserves. Airspace will be closed to Russia and Russia's information manipulation will have an end.

The weaponisation of informational networks is the most important part of the statement. First, it finds its justification in identitarian anxiety and its roots in the biblical necessity to crusade against the aggressor of our European values. Second, it justifies the isolation of a country in a globalised arena which is not in line with liberalism and neoliberal paradigms, but it is important because of the ontological nature of the conflict. 'Because Putin does not want only to conquer the land, he also wants to conquer the spirits of the people with toxic messages through lies'. The use of a metaphor such as 'we are killing the snake from its neck' vividly illustrate the EU's strategy to cut off the source of disinformation at its root. The snake symbolises the threat posed by Russian propaganda (biblical reference) and the act of killing it from the neck signifies a decisive and effective measure to neutralise this threat. This metaphor aligns with the hypothesis by emphasising the existential danger posed by disinformation.

'Turn off the tab for Russia's information manipulation' will protect the 'spirits' because it implies control of the networks and the ability to stop the spread of harmful narratives, reinforcing the idea of weaponising informational networks. It is a struggle against toxicity: 'toxic' emphasises the harmful nature of the disinformation, suggesting that it is not just false but actively damaging. The weaponisation of informational networks within the European Union is deeply rooted in identitarian anxiety and the historical imperative to defend European values against perceived aggressors. This strategy not only justifies the isolation of non-compliant countries in a globalised world, but also strategises the willingness of the European Union to defend its sovereignty. By blocking Russian Central Bank reserves and banning propaganda outlets like Russia Today and Sputnik, the EU aims to curb the influence of toxic narratives and support Ukraine in its struggle against aggression. These actions underscore the Union's resolve to protect its member states and uphold the principles of truth and democracy in the face of ontological threats. By weaponising, Europe is defending its own ideology and the nature of its power.

Conclusions

This study has examined how ontological insecurity – existential anxiety triggered by threats to identity and represented in discourse – reshaped EU-Russia relations in the wake of the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Sanctions are now the European Union's most frequently deployed foreign policy instrument, yet their identity-driven dimension remains underexplored. Addressing this gap, the study

has shown that ontological insecurity was a decisive factor in the EU's shift from managing interdependence to weaponising it. Before 2022, EU-Russia relations were marked by structured interdependence: Deep economic ties coexisted with institutional competition and the limited, targeted sanctions imposed after 2014. The full-scale invasion disrupted this fragile equilibrium, intensifying ontological insecurity and prompting a fundamental policy transformation. Reflexive routinisation led EU policymakers to default to economic coercion as a mechanism of stability, reframing interdependence from a framework of cooperation into a structure of vulnerability. This shift was not merely strategic but deeply identity-driven. The invasion was discursively constructed as an existential challenge to the EU's normative order, legitimising sanctions not only as punitive tools but as instruments of identity assertion and defense. In this context, the weaponisation of interdependence became both a strategic resource and an ontological necessity, enabling the EU's transition from regulatory enforcement to ontological coercion: measures that destabilise an adversary's routines, self-conceptions and claims to legitimacy. The study advances international relations scholarship in three ways. First, it extends debates on weaponised interdependence, showing that it functions not only in great power rivalry but also as a mechanism of self-preservation for actors confronting existential crises. Second, it refines securitisation theory by demonstrating how ontological insecurity drives not only discursive shifts but concrete policy transformations. Third, it highlights tensions within the EU's identity as a normative power, revealing how existential threats can override commitments to regulatory governance and multilateral diplomacy. This evolution underscores how existential concerns shape material decisions, offering new insights into the role of identity in economic statecraft. Yet it also raises critical questions: Do ontological sanctions foreclose avenues for diplomatic resolution? Can escalating sanctions inadvertently exacerbate crises? And will war remain unthinkable for the European Union, or has its identity as a peace project been permanently unsettled? Future research should explore how ontological insecurity influences economic strategies in other regions, broadening our understanding of identity-driven economic policies in global politics.

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