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Research article

Signalling and Balancing in the Conflict in Ukraine from 2014 to 2016: Ukrainian Actors, Russia and the European Union

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Abstract

This paper analyses the conflictual and cooperative signals of two domestic actors – the Ukrainian government and the Ukrainian separatists – and two international actors – the European Union and the Russian Federation – during the first three years of the conflict in Ukraine. Previous studies largely treated the actions of domestic actors as a dependent variable and the actions of international actors as an independent variable. Our results demonstrate that the European Union and the Russian Federation, far from being independent players, assume the role of an 'error correction mechanism' by counterbalancing and counteracting the unbalanced and non-reciprocal interactions of the Ukrainian government and the Ukrainian separatists, thereby transforming an otherwise asymmetric conflict into a symmetric one. The paper discusses liberal institutionalist, social constructivist and offensive realist explanations for the observed behaviour and demonstrates why the offensive realist explanation fares best in light of Russia's massive escalation in 2022.

Keywords: *Ukraine, Russia, European Union (EU), separatists, conflict, signals, reciprocity, realism*

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Introduction

This paper provides a quantitative analysis of the signals that were exchanged in the conflict in Ukraine between 2014 and 2016. While after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 the conflict is clearly an interstate war, this remains contested for the period under investigation.[1] For Arel and Driscoll (2023), the initial conflict was one between the Ukrainian government and Ukraine-born separatists, with the latter possessing considerable agency of their own. For Kazdobina, Hedenskog and Umland (2024), on the other hand, Ukraine and Russia were the main conflict parties from the very beginning, with the Russian-infiltrated separatists hardly possessing any autonomy. Tracking the parties' signals during the first three years of the conflict, our study promises valuable insights into the conflict's protagonists and, hence, the nature of the conflict.[2]

We find that the unbalanced and non-reciprocal signals exchanged between the Ukrainian government (henceforth Government) and the Ukrainian separatists (henceforth Separatists) are largely redressed by the European Union (henceforth EU) and the Russian Federation (henceforth Russia).[3] Through this 'error correc-

1 For samples of the different views, see the contributions in Hauter (2021a). For an overview, see Hauter (2021b, 2022).

2 Previous studies tried to determine the protagonists of the conflict through chronological analysis (Mitrokhin 2021; Schneckener 2021; Arel & Driscoll 2023), an expert survey (Matsiyevsky 2021), an analysis of casualty figures (Hosaka 2021), digital forensic process tracing (Hauter 2022) and an analysis of leaks (Kazdobina, Hedenskog & Umland 2024).

3 While it might be more intuitive to refer to the Ukrainian government as Ukraine, we decided against it for two reasons: firstly, to account for the fact that before Viktor Yanukovych fled to Russia on 21 February 2014, Ukraine was led by a pro-Russian government and, secondly, to avoid confusion with the Ukrainian separatists. The term Ukrainian separatists shall refer to the largely south-eastern Ukrainian people who seek unification with Russia. According to a poll carried out in February 2014, this applied to 41% of the people in Crimea, 33% of the people in the Donetsk province and 24% of the people in the Luhansk and Odessa provinces (see Malyarenko, 2016: 351). Another poll from February 2014 reports 28% of Donetsk residents and 30% of Luhansk residents being in favour of joining the Russian Federation (see Matsiyevsky 2021: 170). Despite this considerable support for union with Russia, there was no significant separatist movement before 2014 (Malyarenko 2016: 361–362; Matsiyevsky 2021: 170–172). Many separatists attained their goal with the Russian annexation of Crimea and Sevastopol in March 2014 and large parts of Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk and Zaporizhzhia in September 2022.

tion mechanism', the two international actors create a more symmetric exchange of conflictual and cooperative signals between 'the West' (including the Government and the EU) and 'the East' (including the Separatists and Russia). Russia's unilateral escalation of the conflict to a full-blown war in 2022 creates a puzzle to liberal institutionalists and social constructivists that explain the country's previous actions with a logic of consequences and a logic of appropriateness, respectively. We argue that offensive realism and its logic of opportunity can solve this puzzle as it attributes Russia's changed behaviour to a mere change in instruments, rather than a less likely change in the country's interests and identity.

The contribution of our paper is threefold: Based on our empirical evidence, we, firstly, argue that Russia already was a key player in the early period of the conflict and that, therefore, even the pre-2022 war was primarily an interstate war. As Russia's actions contributed to a more symmetric conflict, we, secondly, suggest that balancing is not only practiced in times of peace, where it works to prevent conflict, but also in times of war, where it works to prolong conflict. Moving from theory building to theory testing, we, thirdly, demonstrate that numerous International Relations (IR) paradigms can explain the observed pattern of reciprocity, but that only one of these paradigms can also account for Russia's breaking of that pattern.

We divided our paper into five sections. Section one defines key terms and traces general trends in events data analysis. Section two introduces our case study and research design. Section three contains our graphical analysis, while section four presents the results of our regression analysis. Section five discusses these results in light of liberal institutionalist, social constructivist and offensive realist approaches.

Key terms and general trends

In his seminal article 'Reciprocity in International Relations', Keohane (1986: 8) defines reciprocity as 'exchanges of roughly equivalent values in which the actions of each party are contingent on the prior actions of the others in such a way that good is returned for good, and bad for bad'. Reciprocity, thus conceived, has two distinctive elements: rough equivalence and contingency.

Contingency, on the one hand, means that there is a reaction to an action whereby the party responds to cooperation with cooperation and to conflict with conflict. If the action remains unanswered, scholars speak of 'policy inertia' (Goldstein & Freeman 1990) or 'bureaucratic routine' (Goldstein & Freeman 1991). If a cooperative (conflictual) action evokes a conflictual (cooperative) reaction, talk is of 'bullying' (Hirshleifer & Coll 1988) or 'inverse response' (Goldstein & Freeman 1991). In a sequential analysis of cooperative (conflictual) signals, an inverse response is evident when one party increases its cooperative (conflictual) signals and the other party decreases its cooperative (conflictual) signals, while a

reciprocal response is evident when both parties increase, decrease or maintain their cooperative (conflictual) signals. This paper shows that in most months, Government-Separatist interaction was reciprocal, and that in several months in which it was not, West-East interaction as a whole was, because the EU and Russia counteracted non-reciprocal responses.

Rough equivalence, on the other hand, means that the reaction must be roughly on the same level as the initial action. If the reaction is exactly on the same level, we can speak of 'strict equivalence' (Keohane 1986) or 'symmetry' (Richardson, Kegley & Agnew 1981). For reciprocity to be given, though, it is sufficient that the exchanged goods and bads are proportionate to the parties' capabilities. As such, 'reciprocity can also characterize relations among unequals' (Keohane 1986: 6). This paper shows that due to the asymmetric capabilities of the domestic actors, the exchanged signals of the Government and Separatists are not strictly equivalent, but roughly equivalent. However, if we add the EU and Russia, the aggregated signals of the West and East are approaching symmetry.

Having defined reciprocity, its distinctive elements of contingency and rough equivalence, and the related concept of symmetry, the remainder of this section traces some general trends in events data analysis from the Cold War to today.

After it had been found that arms races (Richardson 1960) and cooperative games (Axelrod 1984) are marked by a pattern of reciprocity, researchers set out to determine whether a similar pattern can be detected in international conflicts. Whereas some identified a tendency of states to respond in kind, others observed only a weak pattern of reciprocity or no reciprocity at all.[4] The mixed empirical findings seem to be partly due to the fact that many events data analysts, inspired by the events of their time, opted for an analysis of US-Soviet interaction,[5] which constitutes a 'weak case study' (McClelland 1983: 173–174) in that most superpower contests were carried out by proxies.

The post-Cold War years were characterised by the transformation of the bipolar system into, first, a unipolar and, later, a multipolar one. In response, events data analysts came to extend their bilateral to triangular studies, mostly by including China.[6] In their studies of the cooperative and conflictual signals sent by the US, USSR and China toward each other, Rajmaira and Ward (1988, 1990) found that each of the three dyads was marked by long-term reciprocal behaviour.

4 For tabular overviews, see Goldstein and Freeman (1990: 27) and Crescenzi, Best and Kwon (2017: 8–9).

5 See, for example, Holsti, Brody and North (1964), Corson (1970), Gamson and Modigliani (1971), Leng and Wheeler (1979), Thompson and Rapkin (1982), Ward (1982), Leng (1984), Dixon (1986) and Williams and McGinnis (1988).

6 In fact, these researchers were among the first to anticipate the rise of China, as the short-lived 'unipolar moment' (Krauthammer 1990) did not allow for action-reaction-style superpower analysis.

Goldstein and Freeman (1990, 1991) also found evidence for short-term reciprocity and, more ground-breaking, detected an inverse Soviet-Sino triangular response in that friendly interaction between the US and USSR evoked hostile reactions by China toward the USSR and that friendly interaction between the US and China evoked hostile reactions by the USSR toward China. While the evidence of triangular responses remains contentious (see below), triangular studies like these paved the way for the analysis of domestic conflicts with third party intervention.

A second characteristic of the post-Cold War years was a greater Western concern for human rights, giving rise to the 'golden era' (Wheeler & Bellamy 2008) of humanitarian intervention and to studies of internationalised domestic conflicts. In their analysis of the Bosnian war, Goldstein and Pevehouse (1997) found some support for a reciprocal triangular response by the West whose behaviour toward Serbia reflected the way in which Serbian forces behaved toward Bosnia. The two authors also confirmed the earlier finding of an inverse triangular response: NATO's air strikes caused the Serb forces to cooperate with the Bosnian government, effectively ending the war. In 1999, when NATO conducted another air campaign against Serbia to protect ethnic Albanians in Kosovo, Pevehouse and Goldstein (1999) repeated their study. This time, Serbian actions toward Kosovo showed no inverse triangular response to Western actions toward Serbia, making the two authors 'predict that bombing alone will not induce Milosevic to become cooperative toward the Kosovo Albanians' (Pevehouse & Goldstein 1999: 544). Another two years later, Goldstein et al. (2001) conducted an extensive analysis of triangular responses to US actions in the Middle East, reporting one inverse response, two reciprocal responses and 16 non-responses. In the spirit of these studies, Gleditsch and Beardsley (2004) examined how the actions of third parties affected the interactions of warring parties in Central America, discovering a mix of inverse and reciprocal influences of the US, the Contadora Group and neighbouring countries on the triangular responses by the Guatemalan, Nicaraguan and Salvadorian governments and guerillas.

What all these studies of internationalised domestic conflicts have in common is that they focus on how domestic actors respond to the actions of international actors, rather than on how international actors respond to the actions of domestic actors. Even Moore (1995: 136), who – in an earlier study of the 'Rhodesia Problem' – made the case for a 'domestic-international conflict nexus', was 'primarily interested in the behavior of the state in its conflict with dissidents and the dissidents in their conflict with the state' as they 'respond to the behavior of relevant states in the international system'. The general neglect of international actors' reactions to domestic actors' actions constitutes a gap in the literature that could not be filled by subsequent studies that (re)turned to the analysis of bilateral reciprocity in international (Lebovic 2003; Li 2009; Blinka & Kriz 2017) and domestic (Jaeger & Paserman 2008; Lyall 2009; Fielding & Shortland 2010) conflicts. Most recently,

the 'local turn' in peace and conflict studies has sparked interest in the spatial analysis of events (see Brigg & George 2020), producing a number of micro-level studies on county (Kibris 2021), district (Linke, Witmer & O'Loughlin 2012), municipality (Weidmann & Ward 2010) and grid cell (O'Loughlin & Witmer 2012) level that, while extremely valuable, tend to miss the bigger picture.

Case study and research design

One potential reason for the current lack of events data research on internationalised domestic conflicts is that said conflicts have become increasingly complex. The conflict in Syria, for example, was for a long time marked by at least four domestic actors – government, opposition (itself disintegrating into various, partly competing, groups), Kurdish forces (which are also divided) and the Islamic State – with at least four different goals – staying in power, seizing power, seceding from the state and supplanting the state. The conflict became even more diffuse when an increasing number of international actors with multiple interests – Iran, Israel, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the United States, to name just a few – entered the scene. The actors' multilayered relations and intricate alliances make it extremely difficult for events data analysts to correctly assign the coded events.

The initial phase of the conflict in Ukraine, in contrast, was marked by two domestic actors – the Government and Separatists – that were backed, first and foremost, by two international actors – the EU and Russia. While the Government sought greater association with, up to membership of, the EU, the Separatists sought greater association, up to unification, with Russia. In fact, the trigger of the conflict was when Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych, torn between European and Eurasian integration, suspended the signing of the EU-Ukrainian Association Agreement in November 2013. In protest, people wrapped in EU flags took to what became known as the Euromaidan. After the fleeing of Yanukovych, now in Russian exile, a controversial referendum was held in Crimea that led to the annexation of the peninsula by Russia. When people in the Eastern oblasts of Donetsk and Luhansk tried to break away, too, major fighting broke out in April 2014. By the end of 2016, open combat was largely replaced by trench warfare.

We drew our data from the daily updated but by now discontinued 'Ukraine Crisis Timeline' by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) that covers more than 2,000 events that were reported by an international panel of newspapers from November 2013 to February 2017. While CSIS is an independent think tank, it is a US-based institution and, as such, prone to a certain coverage bias (Weidmann 2015, 2016). Moreover, not every newspaper in the international panel might have the necessary regional expertise. The Uppsala Conflict Data Program, for example, has been criticised for its partly inaccurate depiction of events in the conflict in Ukraine (Brik 2021: 183–188). However, the CSIS timeline

is arguably more reliable than datasets that draw directly on reports from Russian and Ukrainian news sources[7] and certainly more comprehensive than datasets that do not focus on the conflict in Ukraine.[8]

Events were coded on a cooperation-conflict scale from 1 to 15 that was developed by the Conflict and Peace Data Bank (COPDAB).[9] Recognising the strengths and weaknesses of events data coding and scaling procedures, we will not recapitulate the debate about validity here.[10] Instead, we will focus on another quality criteria of scientific research – objectivity – which has received scant attention from events data analysts.[11] Objectivity is given when different coders obtain identical results.

In order to determine inter-coder reliability, we conducted a number of pilot studies. CSIS events data for the conflict in Ukraine was coded by six teams, three at a 'Western' university and three at an 'Eastern' university. All teams were composed of advanced undergraduate students of International Relations who had a decent knowledge of the conflict and who had been instructed with the coding practices. While students cannot be assumed to be as informed about the case and the method as country experts and experienced coders, we ensured that they had at least a common baseline of knowledge. A comparison of the results of the three coding teams at the Western university shows that coders agreed in 87% of the coded events. Inter-coder reliability for the three coding teams at the Eastern university was slightly lower with 85%.

In addition to intra-university variance, there was evidence of inter-university variance, hinting at the existence of a cultural bias. At the Western university, 94% of coders were EU citizens. At the Eastern university, 81% of coders were ethnic Russians. Although coders at the Western university and the Eastern university coded the same material, the mostly EU citizens at the Western university found the ratio of conflictual signals sent by the West to conflictual signals sent by the East to be nine percentage points smaller than their predominantly Russian

7 See, for example, the recently created Violent Incident Information from News Articles (VIINA) dataset.

8 See, for example, the Uppsala Conflict Data Program Georeferenced Event Dataset (UCDP GED), the Global Database of Events, Language, and Tone (GDELT), the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED) dataset and the Integrated Crisis Early Warning System (ICEWS) dataset.

9 The 15 event categories are shown in Figure 1 below. For a list of exemplary events for each event category, see the COPDAB codebook (Azar 1993).

10 See Howell (1983), Vincent (1983) and McClelland (1983).

11 One explanation for this is that many events data analysts using the World Event/Interaction Survey (WEIS) coding scheme have substituted manual coding with machine coding, which is less susceptible to human biases (Gerner et al. 1994; King & Lowe 2003). Machine coding, however, is less suitable for researchers using the COPDAB coding scheme and, in any event, less sensitive to the con- and subtext of event descriptions.

counterparts at the Eastern university. Western coders, thus, deemed Western actions as less hostile and Eastern actions as more hostile than Eastern coders did.

Sensitised by these exploratory studies, CSIS events data for the period of January 2014 (the month before the escalation of the crisis) to December 2016 (when front lines had stabilised and the volume of exchanged conflictual signals almost returned to the pre-crisis period; see Figure 4 below) was coded separately by two proficient coders, yielding an inter-coder reliability of 94%. Most disagreement was in regard to the sender, as the boundary between Russian forces and their Ukrainian proxies was occasionally quite blurry. In the few cases in which differences existed among the coders that could not be resolved by resorting to the pretest results and the relevant literature, including the 'Glazyev Tapes' (Umland 2016) and 'Surkov Leaks' (Shandra & Seely 2019), the respective signals were being left out. Further excluding signals whose sender and target were identical, signals whose sender or target was one we did not study, and signals that could not be attributed to a sender or target, we were left with a total of 1,626 signals (1,273 conflictual, 329 cooperative, 24 neutral) that were coded by category and sender (see Figure 1 below).

Probably the greatest controversy surrounding events data analysis revolves around the – ultimately arbitrary – temporal unit over which to aggregate the coded signals.[12] The advantage large units have over small units is that they are able to capture long-term responses. Unlike Russia, who tends to interpret reciprocity in a simultaneous way (i.e. actions are reciprocated immediately), the EU has been found to adhere to a more sequential understanding (i.e. actions are reciprocated with some delay) of it (Romanova 2014). To give one rather extreme example: In response to the Crimean referendum on 16 March 2014 that sealed Russia's annexation of the peninsula, the EU adopted travel bans and asset freezes for a number of Crimean and Russian officials on 17 March, cancelled a planned EU-Russia summit on 20 March, imposed an import ban on goods from Crimea on 23 June, suspended the signature of new financing operations in Russia by the European Investment Bank on 16 July, and eventually agreed on a first round of far-reaching economic sanctions against Crimea and Russia on 29 July. With annual units, we would capture all five responses; with monthly units only the ones on 17 and 20 March; with weekly units (Wednesdays to Tuesdays, as 1 January 2014 was a Wednesday) only the one on 17 March; and with daily units none at all.

Events data analysts using small units have helped themselves by assuming that the sent behaviour in the present unit is a function of the received behaviour in some previous unit(s). Daily units with a time lag of one day, for instance, would

12 For researchers of arms races who compare annual military budgets it makes good sense to use the calendar year as a time unit. This cannot be said of events data analysts who code the signals of conflicting parties because these signals are usually not bound to a year or, in fact, any other unit of time.

capture the response on 17 March. In order to capture all five responses, however, one would have to include 135 time lags. As statistical power tends to decrease with an increasing number of lagged terms (Goldstein & Pevehouse 1997: 523), this does not seem to be a viable option. Employing annual units for an observation period of three years, however, is not a viable option either. Compromising between the two, we deemed the month and one lagged term as the most appropriate unit and lag to capture as many responses as possible while, at the same time, having a sufficient number of observation points. Robustness checks by weeks and quarters as well as by more than one lagged term confirmed us in our choice. Aggregating the data into monthly units left us with 36 observation points over a total period of three years.

Graphical analysis

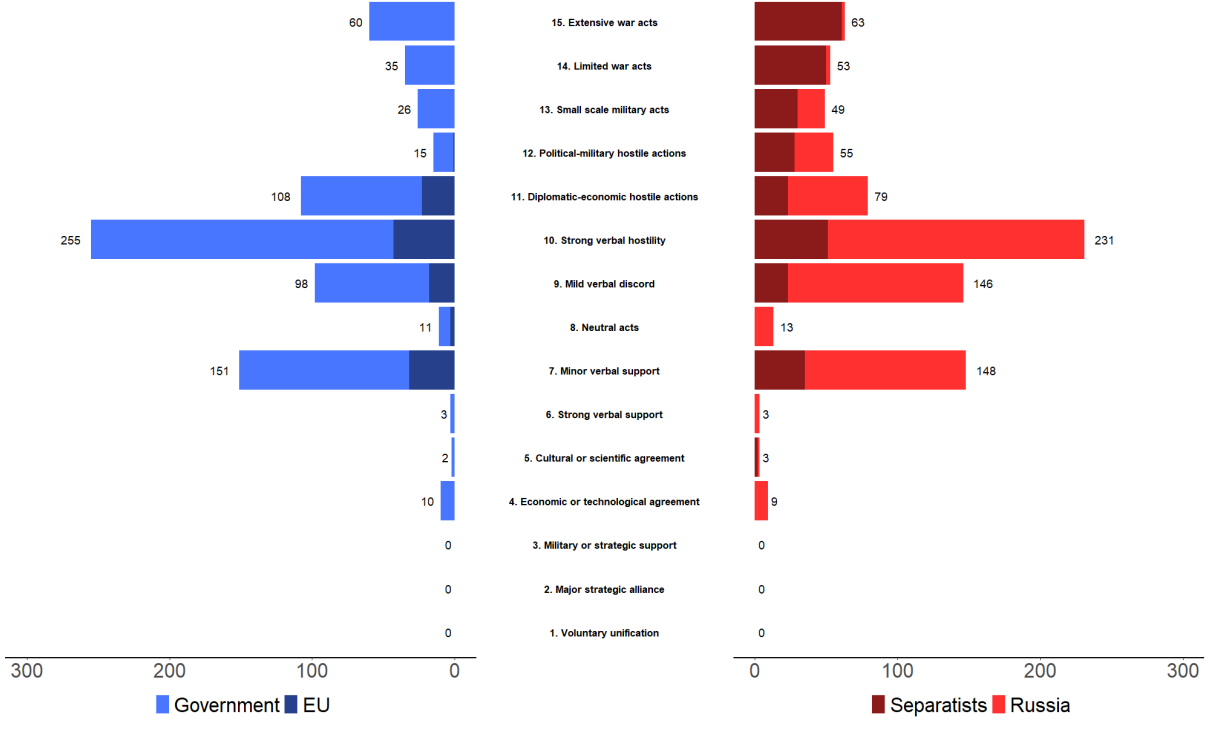
Figure 1 below presents the total volume of signals by category and sender. In the conflictual domain (scale points 15–9), we find signals of all categories, with 'strong verbal hostility' (scale point 10) being the most frequent one. In the cooperative domain (scale points 7–1), we only find signals of the four least cooperative categories, with 'minor verbal support' (scale point 7) being the most frequent one. Whereas the Government, Separatists and Russia make use of the full scale of signals in the conflictual domain, the EU does not move beyond 'political-military hostile actions' (scale point 12). Unlike the other three parties, the EU does not move beyond 'minor verbal support' (scale point 7) in the cooperative domain.

Figure 1 illustrates that the signals are mostly reciprocated in the same category in which they occur but not necessarily by the same actor: The Government's signals at the upper end of the conflictual scale are largely matched by the Separatists, whereas its signals at the lower rungs of the escalation ladder and in the cooperative domain are largely matched by Russia. If we compare the aggregated signals of the two blocks, we can see that the twelve bars to the left, by and large, are a mirror image of the twelve bars to the right – a first sign that the signals of the West and East are more or less symmetric.[13]

To substantiate this finding, we turn from a static to a sequential depiction of the data and analyse the resulting curves with a view to reciprocity and symmetry. Remember that reciprocity has two distinctive elements: contingency and rough equivalence. Contingency, on the one hand, requires that there is a reaction to an action whereby the party responds to more (less, unvaried) cooperation with more

13 As noted by an anonymous reviewer, the discovered symmetry in signals could also be due to efforts of international news media to present a balanced view – feeling obliged to mention an action by one side (however insignificant it may be) for every action by the other side. While this cannot be ruled out, the fact that signals are largely matched in the same event category (see Figure 1) and the finding that signals of the direct opponents (i.e. Government-Separatists and EU-Russia) are rather asymmetric (see Figures 2 and 3) suggest that this is not a big factor.

Figure 1: Total volume of signals by category and sender



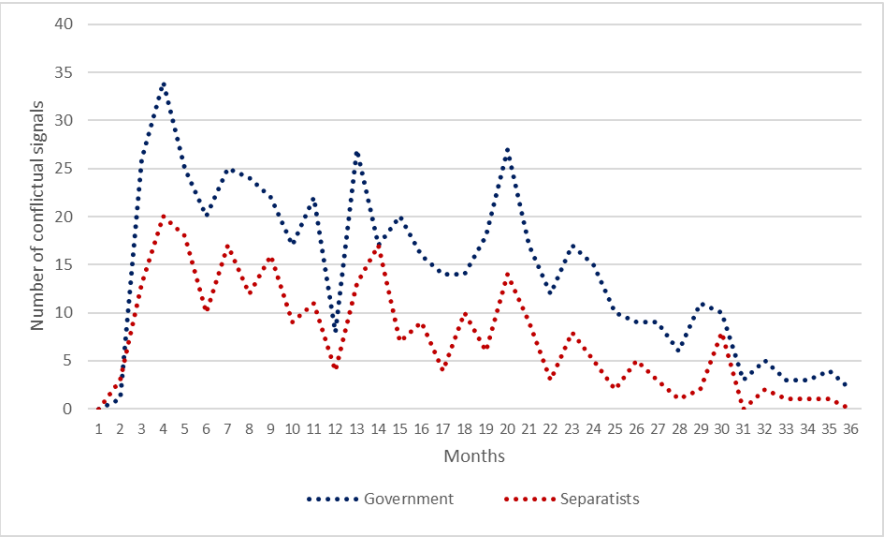
Source: Authors

(less, unvaried) cooperation, and to more (less, unvaried) conflict with more (less, unvaried) conflict – that is, both parties increase (decrease, maintain) their signals. Rough equivalence, on the other hand, allows the parties to do so on roughly equal levels. If they do so on exactly the same level – that is, if the curves are congruent – we have reached symmetry.

Figure 2 below presents the monthly volume of conflictual signals sent by the Government and Separatists between 2014 and 2016. In every month except for months 1, 2 and 14, the Government outperformed the Separatists, often sending twice as many conflictual signals. This is what can be expected from a conflict that pitches a well-equipped army against poorly-equipped rebels. Figure 1, however, reveals that the Government's lead in conflictual signals stems not so much from physical than from verbal signals.

Figure 2 further shows that the two curves are largely moving up and down together. In 25 out of 35 months the Government and Separatists simultaneously increased, decreased or maintained the number of conflictual signals. In seven months, one party increased the number of conflictual signals while the other decreased theirs (months 9, 14, 15, 16, 19, 26 and 30), and in three months one party maintained the number of conflictual signals while the other increased or decreased theirs (months 18, 27 and 35).

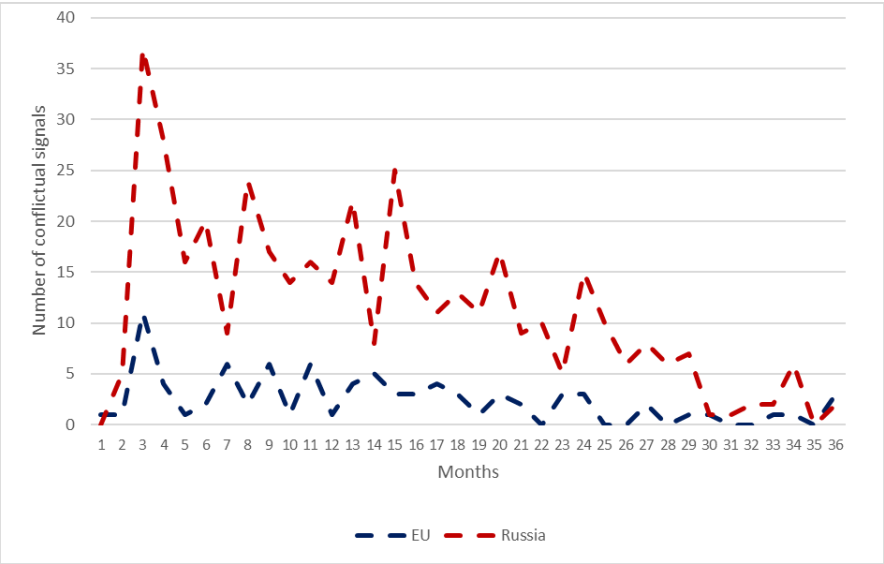
Figure 2: Monthly volume of conflictual signals sent by the Government and Separatists



Source: Authors

Figure 3 below presents the monthly volume of conflictual signals sent by the EU and Russia between 2014 and 2016. In every month except for months 1, 30, 35

Figure 3: Monthly volume of conflictual signals sent by the EU and Russia



Source: Authors

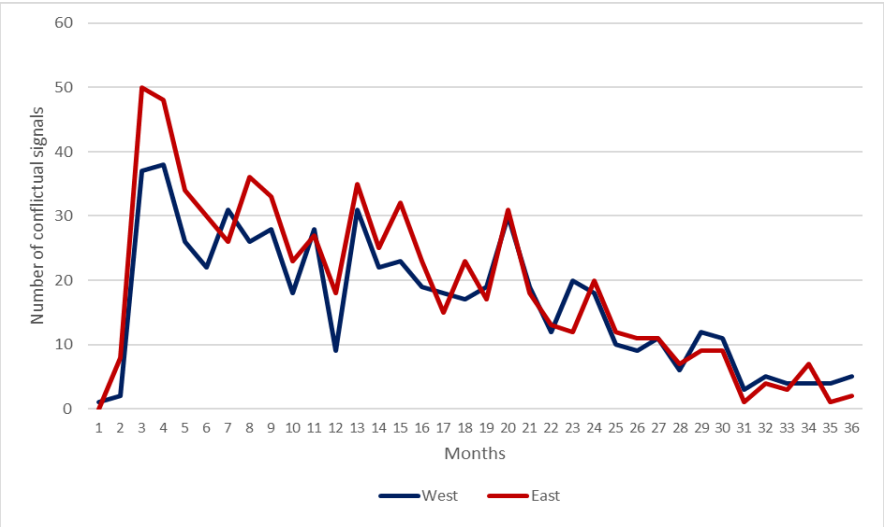
and 36, Russia outperformed the EU, sending up to 16 times as many conflictual signals. Comparing the curves of the EU and Russia to those of the Government and Separatists in Figure 2, it stands out that the former reached their peaks one month before the latter did, which is reflective of Russia's annexation of Crimea and the EU's resolute response in March 2014 (month 3).

Figure 3 reports reciprocal interaction for 17 months, inverse interaction for nine months (months 7, 8, 9, 14, 15, 17, 18, 22, 23) and the constellation where one party maintained the number of conflictual signals while the other increased or decreased theirs for another nine months (months 2, 16, 24, 26, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34).[14] This seems to make reciprocity a better predictor for Government-Separatist interaction than for EU-Russia interaction. To get an idea of what else drives EU-Russia interaction, we have to turn to Figure 4.

Figure 4 (being the sum of Figures 2 and 3) below presents the monthly volume of conflictual signals sent by the West and East between 2014 and 2016. Notably, the curves in Figure 4 are much closer together than the curves in Figures 2 and 3. The EU compensates for the high number of conflictual signals by the Government

14 Inverse responses often occur in a row (see, for example, months 14, 15, 16 for Government-Separatist interaction and months 7, 8, 9 for EU-Russia interaction). This suggests that the general pattern of reciprocity, once interrupted, takes a few months to be restored.

Figure 4: Monthly volume of conflictual signals sent by the West and East



Source: Authors

compared to the Separatists with a low number of its own conflictual signals compared to Russia. Conversely, Russia compensates for the low number of conflictual signals by the Separatists compared to the Government with a high number of its own conflictual signals compared to the EU. As a result, the conflictual signals of the West and East are almost symmetric: Whereas in the first half of our observation period (months 1–18) the East sent slightly more conflictual signals than the West, in the second half of our observation period (months 19–36) the two curves are more or less congruent.

It is also noteworthy that seven of the ten non-reciprocal responses in Government-Separatist interaction are offset by non-reciprocal responses in EU-Russia interaction. Although neither Government-Separatist interaction nor EU-Russia interaction is reciprocal for the months 14, 15, 16 and 26, West-East interaction as a whole is.

Lastly, we also consider and compare the monthly volume of cooperative signals.[15] As the total volume (329) of cooperative signals is rather low, the observations must be treated with greater caution. For this reason and for reasons of space, we decided to describe but not to depict the curves.

15 Whereas some researchers combine conflictual and cooperative signals on a single dimension by subtracting one from the other, we have chosen to depict them separately. This is because an account of net conflict/cooperation does not discriminate between an even volume of conflictual and cooperative signals, and no signals at all, reporting a zero for both.

In most months, the curve of the Government lies well above the curve of the Separatists, with only one month in which the Separatists sent more cooperative signals than the Government. The curves of the EU and Russia, too, are drifting far from another, with no single month in which the EU sent more cooperative signals than Russia. The curves of the West and East, in contrast, are intersecting several times and for the months 28–32 they are even overlapping. Accordingly, not only the conflictual signals, but also the cooperative signals of the two blocks are nearly symmetric.

Although on different levels, the curves of the Government and Separatists are largely moving up and down in tandem, with more than half of all responses being reciprocal in nature. The curves of the EU and Russia peak every few months but rarely in the same months, resulting in less than a third of reciprocal responses. Seven of the 15 non-reciprocal responses in Government-Separatist interaction are transformed into reciprocal responses when considering West-East interaction as a whole. This lends further support to the observation that the EU and Russia adjust their signals to 'correct' for non-reciprocal responses.

Regression analysis

As mentioned above, the second element of reciprocity – contingency – consists of two parts: It requires 1) that there is a reaction to an action and 2) that this reaction is in the same direction as the action. While we find substantial evidence for parties acting in line with one another, we have yet to determine whether this was mere coincidence or whether the parties were reacting to one another. To test the reactivity of the parties, and to further inquire into the reciprocity and symmetry of their (re)actions, we conduct a multiple linear regression analysis.

We start out by estimation of the classical 'mix-begets-mix model' of Ward (1982) with the following functional form:

$$(1) \quad \Delta X_t = a_1 X_{t-1} + a_2 Y_t + a_3 W_{t-1} + a_4 Z_t + C_1 + \mu_{Xt}$$

$$(2) \quad \Delta Y_t = b_1 Y_{t-1} + b_2 X_t + b_3 Z_{t-1} + b_4 W_t + C_2 + \mu_{Yt}$$

$$(3) \quad \Delta W_t = c_1 W_{t-1} + c_2 Z_t + c_3 X_{t-1} + c_4 Y_t + C_3 + \mu_{wt}$$

$$(4) \quad \Delta Z_t = d_1 Z_{t-1} + d_2 W_t + d_3 Y_{t-1} + d_4 X_t + C_4 + \mu_{zt}$$

where: Δ = first difference operator, X = number of conflictual signals of Separatists or Russia, Y = number of conflictual signals of Government or EU, W = number of cooperative signals of Separatists or Russia, Z = number of cooperative signals of Government or EU, C = intercept, μ = error term, t = month with 1 (January 2014) to 36 (December 2016).

We test all results on autocorrelation by employing the Breusch-Godfrey Test with lag orders 1 to 7 and on heteroskedasticity as detected by the Breusch-Pagan

Test. Additionally, we test for the normal distribution of the error term based on the Jarque-Bera Test and seek for possible misspecification of the model as indicated by the RESET Test. It turns out that the mix-begets-mix model yields considerable explanatory power as measured by an adjusted R-squared with values ranging between 0.44 (for the model with EU cooperative signals as dependent variable) and 0.88 (for the model with Government conflictual signals as dependent variable). Looking at the specification tests, we see some autocorrelation in two and heteroskedasticity in three models. There is some indication of non-normality of the error term and possible misspecification of the functional form.

Furthermore, we want to test whether there is a memory effect and additionally whether past behaviour of the opponent might also have an effect on the own current signal. Thus, we add the first order lags for all other variables to the mix-begets-mix model, leading to the following specification:

$$(5) \quad \Delta X_t = a_1 X_{t-1} + a_2 Y_t + a_3 Y_{t-1} + a_4 W_t + a_5 W_{t-1} + a_6 Z_t + a_7 Z_{t-1} + C_1 + \mu_{Xt}$$

$$(6) \quad \Delta Y_t = b_1 Y_{t-1} + b_2 X_t + b_3 X_{t-1} + b_4 W_t + b_5 W_{t-1} + b_6 Z_t + b_7 Z_{t-1} + C_2 + \mu_{Yt}$$

$$(7) \quad \Delta W_t = c_1 W_{t-1} + c_2 X_t + c_3 X_{t-1} + c_4 Y_t + c_5 Y_{t-1} + c_6 Z_t + c_7 Z_{t-1} + C_3 + \mu_{wt}$$

$$(8) \quad \Delta Z_t = d_1 Z_{t-1} + d_2 X_t + d_3 X_{t-1} + d_4 Y_t + d_5 Y_{t-1} + d_6 W_t + d_7 W_{t-1} + C_4 + \mu_{zt}$$

On average, the adjusted R-squared increases slightly, while the magnitude of the autocorrelative structure could be slightly reduced. With respect to heteroskedasticity-, normality- and specification-tests, the results are comparable to the previously estimated set of models. In order to immunise our statistical inference against the malicious standard errors, we present Newey-West heteroskedasticity- and autocorrelation-robust (HAC) standard errors along with the estimation results in the annex. For the ease of reading and for reasons of space, tables 1 and 2 below include a schematic overview of our results with respect to sign and level of significance.

Table 1 shows that all immediate responses to the direct opponent (i.e. Government-Separatists and EU-Russia) are positive and statistically significant on a 1%-level. The Government responds to every conflictual signal by the Separatists with 0.79 conflictual signals and the Separatists respond to every conflictual signal by the Government with 0.54 conflictual signals. The EU returns 0.29 conflictual signals for every conflictual signal of Russia, while Russia returns 1.09 conflictual signals for every conflictual signal of the EU.

Table 1 further demonstrates that all immediate responses to the indirect opponent (i.e. Government-Russia and Separatists-EU) are positive and statistically significant on a 1%-level or 5%-level. The Government counters every conflictual signal by Russia with 0.53 conflictual signals and the Separatists counter every

Table 1: Schematic presentation of results (conflictual signals)

	Rus	Sep	EU	Gov
Rus		-0.133	0.291	0.525
lag Rus	-0.975	0.172	0.047	-0.001
Sep	-0.252		0.275	0.788
lag Sep	0.294	-0.905	0.043	-0.153
EU	1.089	0.546		-0.347
lag EU	0.551	-0.289	-1.146	-0.047
Gov	0.677	0.537	-0.119	
lag Gov	-0.480	0.184	0.007	-0.951
Rus		0	+ + +	+ + +
lag Rus	- - -	0	0	0
Sep	0		+ +	+ + +
lag Sep	0	- - -	0	0
EU	+ + +	+ + +		0
lag EU	0	0	- - -	0
Gov	+ + +	+ + +	0	
lag Gov	- - -	0	0	- - -

Legend
0: coefficient included but not significant on 10%-level
+, ++, +++: positive and significant on 10%, 5%, 1%-level, respectively
-, --, ---: negative and significant on 10%, 5%, 1%-level, respectively

Source: Authors

conflictual signal by the EU with 0.55 conflictual signals. *Vice versa*, Russia sends 0.68 conflictual signals for every conflictual signal of the Government, and the EU sends 0.28 conflictual signals for every conflictual signal of the Separatists. Besides these reciprocal responses, there is evidence of a lagged inverse response in that Russia not only responds to every conflictual signal by the Government with 0.68 conflictual signals in the same month, but also with -0.48 conflictual signals in the subsequent month.

If we add the conflictual signals with which the Government (0.79) and the EU (0.28) respond to a conflictual signal by the Separatists, we can see that together (1.07) they send about as much conflict as they receive. If we add the conflictual signals with which the Separatists (0.54) and Russia (0.68) respond to a conflictual signal by the Government, we can see that together (1.22) they send only slightly more conflict than they receive. Given that Russia also decreases its conflictual signals in the following month, we arrive at an approximate ratio of 1:1 over the

Table 2: Schematic presentation of results (cooperative signals)

	Rus	Sep	EU	Gov
Rus		-0.113	-0.110	-0.220
lag Rus	-0.769	-0.081	0.142	0.255
Sep	-0.108		-0.192	0.895
lag Sep	0.883	-0.958	-0.094	1.074
EU	-0.119	-0.218		0.267
lag EU	-0.038	0.014	-0.913	-0.024
Gov	-0.119	0.505	0.133	
lag Gov	-0.313	-0.083	0.063	-1.469
Rus		0	0	0
lag Rus	- - -	0	0	0
Sep	0		0	+ + +
lag Sep	+ + +	- -	0	0
EU	0	0		0
lag EU	0	0	- - -	0
Gov	0	+ + +	0	
lag Gov	- - -	0	0	- - -

Legend
0: coefficient included but not significant on 10%-level
+, ++, +++: positive and significant on 10%, 5%, 1%-level, respectively
-, --, ---: negative and significant on 10%, 5%, 1%-level, respectively

Source: Authors

long haul. These one-by-one retaliations testify to the symmetry of the two blocks' conflictual signals.

Table 2 shows that the responses of the Government and Separatists to the cooperative signals of each other are positive and statistically significant on a 1%-level. With a coefficient of 0.9, the Government returns almost as much cooperation as it receives, and with a coefficient of 0.51, the Separatists return about half as much cooperation as they receive. With coefficients of -0.11 and -0.12, respectively, the responses of the EU and Russia to the cooperative signals of each other are negative, weak and, at any rate, not statistically significant even on a 10%-level. Except for a lagged inverse response of Russia to a cooperative signal of the Government, there are no statistically significant responses to the cooperative signals of the indirect opponent. This seems to confirm Azar's (1972: 186) remark that actors are 'more sensitive to the relatively hostile signals of their opponent than to the relatively cooperative ones' and Leng's (1993) finding that

coercive strategies have a higher tendency to be reciprocated than cooperative ones. The lower responsiveness to cooperative signals, however, could also be due to the small number of cooperative signals that we analysed.[16]

Discussion

The regression analysis has shown that all parties were responsive to the conflictual signals of their opponents. More than that, it could be established that the parties not only responded, but also responded in kind, at least if we consider their immediate responses. For the two blocks, there is even some evidence that they not only responded in kind, but also in magnitude. While this is not to suggest that foreign policy officials and commanders-in-chief monitor and analyse each and every signal – much as we did in this study – only to determine their reciprocal or symmetric response, there seems to be a general tendency to give tit-for-tat. In the following, we will discuss liberal institutionalist, social constructivist and offensive realist explanations for this tendency, apply them to the case at hand and demonstrate why offensive realism has the least problems to account for Russia's one-sided escalation of the conflict in 2022. While our previous analysis of exchanged signals from 2014 to 2016 can hardly tell us why Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, we suggest that Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 can tell us something valuable about the suitability of the three explanations under consideration.

Interests: Liberal institutionalism and the logic of consequences

Lacking a central authority, the international system is commonly seen as being anarchic. And yet it hardly resembles the Hobbesian state of war of all against all, which led Bull (1977) to speculate that states live in an anarchical society. The scholar of the English School identified the balance of power, international law, diplomacy, limited war and great power management as the five institutions that maintain international order. Regulating state conduct in the absence of a central authority and capturing the normative structure of the anarchical society, these institutions are also referred to as rules or norms.

Conspicuously absent from Bull's list is the norm of reciprocity. In times of war, in which at least two of Bull's institutions – international law and diplomacy – tend to break down, reciprocity becomes even more important as an ordering principle: While Russia violated international law by annexing Crimea, and diplomatic ef-

16 Tables 1 and 2 also attest to a negative memory effect on one's own signal in that the lagged endogenous variables are negative and significant on a 1%-level throughout. Except for the EU, who reacts to its own conflictual signal with a 1.15 reduction in the next month, and the Government, who reacts to its own cooperative signal with a 1.47 reduction in the next month, all other lagged endogenous variables assume a value that ranges between -0.77 and -0.98, implying a reverberation of the signal.

forts came to a standstill soon after they had begun, the conflicting parties still adhered to the norm of reciprocity. Indeed, following the work of the sociologist Gouldner (1960), who proposed the existence of a universal norm of reciprocity, scholars have come to recognise reciprocity as the 'linchpin' of international relations (Goldstein & Pevehouse 2017: 5). For Ward (1981: 230), reciprocity constitutes a 'golden rule of international politics' and for Keohane (1984: 214), it 'seems to be the most effective strategy for maintaining cooperation among egoists'.

What makes reciprocity particularly appealing to liberal institutionalists like Keohane is that it grounds international order in selfish motives.[17] While there might be occasions in which it appears beneficial to break the rules, the negative consequences of doing so are likely to outdo any short-term gains. As an illustration, Keohane (1986: 21) cites Gouldner:

> It is obviously inexpedient for creditors to break off relationships with those who have outstanding obligations to them. It may also be inexpedient for debtors to do so because their creditors may not again allow them to run up a bill of social indebtedness.

The same can be true of conflicts. As Schelling (1960: 99) notes:

> One side or both may be willing to accept limited defeat rather than take the initiative in breaching the rules, and to act in a manner that reassures the other of such willingness. The "rules" may be respected because, if they are once broken, there is no assurance that any new ones can be found and jointly recognized in time to check the widening of the conflict.

One possible explanation for the reciprocal behaviour of the parties to the conflict in Ukraine, then, is their common attempt to set limits and bounds to a war that threatens to spiral out of control and descend to mere anarchy (Käihkö 2021). Following a logic of consequences, the parties sought to uphold minimum standards and expectations of legitimate behaviour in an otherwise unchecked and unpredictable conflict.

Identities: Social constructivism and the logic of appropriateness

For social constructivists, rules and norms are not only of regulative but also of constitutive value 'in that they specify not just what an actor can do but, more

17 Even Hobbes (1998 [1651]: 104–105), who saw the solution to the problem of order in a central authority, believed egoistic individuals in the state of nature to come up with laws of nature that can be summarised by the golden rule of 'do not that to another, which thou wouldest not have done to thyself' and that oblige at least '*in foro interno*'.

fundamentally, what kind of actor that actor actually *is*' (Jackson & Jones 2017: 108). Reciprocating the actions of others, thus, is not so much a question of interest, but rather one of identity; not so much the result of a rational choice, but rather that of an acquired habit. Seen in this way, the norm of reciprocity is more than just another institution in the service of international order; it is part of our cultural values system – a *social* institution around which actor expectations converge (Kratochwil & Ruggie 1986: 764).

Even Keohane (1986: 21) seems to allow for this social constructivist reading when, citing the sociologist Blau, he writes:

> In the long run, reciprocity based on self-interest can generate trust based on mutual experience as a result of the "recurrent and gradually expanding character" of processes of social exchange.

It is through socialisation processes like these that the norm of reciprocity becomes internalised. As Onuf (1998: 59) puts it, 'social relations *make* or *construct* people – *ourselves* – into the kinds of beings we are'. Being part of our identity, the norm of reciprocity acts like a filter that narrows our actions. Since states generally want to be (seen as) 'good' states, they hardly escalate their conflictual signals unilaterally. This may explain why Russia initially sought to conceal the presence of its troops in Ukraine, sending infantry without insignia, and why the shooting of flight MH17, killing 283 passengers and 15 crew members, is being denied to this day. Because states care about their reputation, their actions tend to be driven by what is seen as appropriate behaviour (March & Olsen 1998).

In sum, the institutionalist logic of consequences and the constructivist logic of appropriateness provide powerful explanations for the observed tendency of Russia to play tit-for-tat, or at least its attempt to maintain the impression of doing so. But can they also explain Russia's massive escalation of the conflict in 2022 that violated the rules of the game? Although constructivist scholarship sees interests and identities as socially constructed and, hence, changeable, empirical research on national interests and strategic cultures suggests that interests and identities are fairly robust (Johnston 1995; Chafetz, Frankel & Spirtaz 1999), with fundamental change only occurring in light of critical events such as internal upheavals or external shocks (Katzenstein 1996; Chafetz, Abramson & Grillot 1996) – neither of which happened to Russia in 2022. In this context, Harnisch, Frank and Maull (2011: 253) distinguish between a rather uncommon 'role transformation', which entails a change in interests and identities, and a more common 'role adaptation', which includes a change in strategies and instruments. All other things being equal, paradigms that explain Russia's defection in 2022 with changing interests and identities are therefore less compelling than a paradigm that does so in terms of changing strategies and instruments. It is to such a paradigm that we will turn now.

Instruments: Offensive realism and the logic of opportunity

Structural realists commonly believe that a state's ultimate goal is survival. Where they part ways is over the question of how much power is enough to achieve that goal. Defensive realists like Waltz (1979: 126) assume that a state's attempt to maximise its power will be met with fierce resistance by other states. Expecting great power politics to be marked by a tit-for-tat pattern, Waltz argues that the best way to guarantee survival is not to try to break out of this pattern by seeking excessive power, but to play on it by establishing and maintaining a balance of power. If power is balanced, Waltz reasons, no state or alliance of states has an incentive to go to war, as it cannot act on the assumption to prevail. It is little wonder, then, that Bull identified the balance of power as one of the institutions that sustain international order in the absence of a central authority.

Although balance of power theory is a theory of state behaviour in times of peace, it may also explain the first years of the conflict in Ukraine insofar as the EU and Russia redressed the unbalanced interactions of the Government and Separatists, establishing overall equilibrium. Anxious about climbing up the escalation ladder, the parties' initial desire to score a quick victory was pushed aside by a desire to maintain a stable equilibrium. As DeRouen Jr., Newman and Bellamy (2025: 223) note:

> The contradictions inherent in intervening to ensure one's domestic client prevails without escalation can turn an intervener's objective of winning into simply not losing. Stalemated conflicts, and prolonged interventions, then occur as interveners do not provide the level of support required to win a decisive military victory. Instead, they provide support only sufficient to enable continued fighting . . . . Intervention leading to a balance of power between the warring parties will probably lengthen fighting as neither side can defeat the other.

Balance of power theory might thus not only be applicable to peacetime, where balancing helps to prevent conflict, but also to wartime, where balancing helps to prolong conflict. Like liberal institutionalists and social constructivists, though, defensive realists have difficulties to explain the abrupt breakdown of balancing in 2022.

In contrast to defensive realists, offensive realists like Mearsheimer (2011: 80) maintain that 'the best way to survive is to be especially powerful' because if a state has superior power, other states will be deterred from attacking it. 'This simple logic', Mearsheimer (2011: 80) goes on to argue, 'drives great powers to look for opportunities to shift the balance of power in their favour'. If we assume with Mearsheimer that the anarchic structure of the international system forces great powers to 'think and act when appropriate like a revisionist

state' (Mearsheimer 2011: 80), the question is no longer *why did Russia launch a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022?*,[18] but *why did Russia not launch a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2014?* when, after the ousting of the pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovych, the momentum was on Russia's side, at least more than in 2022.[19]

An offensive realist would argue that after the Russo-Georgian War of 2008, the Great Recession of 2008–2009 and the Snow Revolution of 2011–2013, Russia was in a position of weakness.[20] In this position, neutralising the Ukrainian conflict – after having annexed Crimea and inflamed the situation in Donbas – by giving tit-for-tat seemed to be the best option to maintain its relative power vis-à-vis the West. In fact, if we further assume with Mearsheimer (2014) that Russia's primary goal is to prevent NATO (and, to a lesser extent, the EU) from expanding eastwards,[21] neutralising the Ukrainian conflict to the effect that there is no victor and, hence, no end in sight actually looks like a solid strategy. Although there is no clause in the North Atlantic Charter that forbids the alliance to admit a country with an ongoing conflict,[22] Article 6 of NATO's (2008 [1995]) 'Study on Enlargement', commissioned by its member states to set out

18 Käikhö (2023: 244–246) offers three explanations: resolving the conflict with Ukraine once and for all, affirming Russia's great power status and boosting Putin's popularity. Ultimately, all three explanations remain unsatisfactory, as they cannot account for why the invasion happened in 2022 and not at an earlier or later point in time.

19 For Volodymyr Zelenskyy, the Russo-Ukrainian War since 2022 is a 'postponed war'. On the concept of postponed war, see Ilin and Nihmatova (2023) in the pages of this journal.

20 See, for example, Mearsheimer 2014: 9; Imedashvili & Siroky 2023. A similar argument could be made with regard to the United States, which, after Bush's costly adventures in Afghanistan and Iraq, steered a more isolationist course under the following administrations. This might explain why neither Russia nor the West under the leadership of the United States went 'all in' in 2014.

21 This assumption has been fiercely contested by liberal thinkers such as Michael McFaul. As shown elsewhere (Rolf 2025), McFaul's contestation stands on rather shaky grounds: By arguing that 'NATO expansion has not been a *constant* source of tension between Russia and the West, but a *variable*' (Person & McFaul 2022: 18–19; see also McFaul & Person 2024: 48; emphases added), McFaul undermines his earlier argument that NATO expansion, because of its constancy, cannot explain the alternation of Russian cooperation and confrontation with the West (McFaul 2014: 167). While we find merit in the argument that Putin perceives the eastward expansion of NATO and the EU as a threat to national security and regime stability, we do not share Mearsheimer's (2014, 2022) provocative assertion that the conflict in Ukraine is the West's fault.

22 Article 1 of the North Atlantic Treaty merely states: 'The Parties undertake, as set forth in the Charter of the United Nations, to settle any international disputes in which they may be involved by peaceful means in such a manner that international peace and security, and justice, are not endangered, and to refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force in any manner inconsistent with the purposes of the United Nations' (NATO 2023 [1949]).

the principles that would govern decisions regarding accession, explicitly states that accession countries with

> ethnic disputes or external territorial disputes, including irredentist claims, or internal jurisdictional disputes must settle those disputes by peaceful means in accordance with OSCE principles. Resolution of such disputes would be a factor in determining whether to invite a state to join the Alliance.

This article was included with a particular view to the post-Soviet states that, once admitted, could easily draw the alliance into a direct (nuclear) confrontation with Russia. Acting on the assumption that NATO will avoid such a risk, the creation of frozen conflicts from Transnistria to Abkhazia and South Ossetia to Crimea and Donbas has become an effective Russian strategy of preventing NATO from expanding eastwards. As Grossman (2018: 56) notes: 'What started as an accident in Moldova and evolved into an opportunity in Georgia would culminate as dedicated strategy in Ukraine.' For Shandra and Seely (2019: 79), too, there is 'no doubt that the separatist "states" plaguing each of Russia's reform-minded neighbours – Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova – are part of a Russian strategy to prevent their further integration with the West.'

This strategy was only changed in 2022 when Vladimir Putin – after consolidating his own power by crushing the opposition and rewriting the constitution, after increasing Russia's foreign exchange by flooding Europe with oil and gas, and after raising the country's military power by investing in its armed forces and external alliances – saw the opportunity to use that amassed 'latent power' (Mearsheimer 2001) to launch a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. All of this suggests that states follow what may be called a logic of opportunity, constantly 'looking for opportunities to gain more power' and doing so 'whenever it seems feasible' (Mearsheimer 2011: 81). Accordingly, Russia's contained war in Crimea and Donbas must be interpreted as a strategic choice in the face of limited capabilities. As soon as the country was in a position to maximise its power, it did so by changing towards an offensive strategy.[23]

Conclusion

Over the last years, a heated debate has arisen over the question of whether the early phase of the conflict in Ukraine should be classified as a civil war or an inter-

23 This is not to suggest that Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 was a rational act. Putin, whom Mearsheimer (2014: 8) describes as a 'first class strategist', seems to have underestimated both the will of the Ukrainians to resist and the resolve of the West to assist. Offensive realism tries to account for this by allowing for some miscalculation: 'Because states operate with imperfect information in a complicated world, they sometimes make serious mistakes' (Mearsheimer 2011: 80).

state war. While on the civil war reading of it, propagated by Russia, the conflict was a domestic conflict between Ukraine and the Separatists; on the interstate war reading of it, popular in the West, the conflict was an international conflict between Ukraine and Russia. Our analysis supports the latter reading. Sending almost twice as many conflictual signals as the Separatists, Russia already was the driving force in the early phase of the conflict. This being said, we can discern a 'division of labor' between Russia and the Separatists: While Russia engaged in all conflictual event categories, including extensive war acts, most of these signals came in the form of strong verbal hostility (including threats and accusations) and mild verbal discord (including objections and protests). While the Separatists, too, engaged in all conflictual event categories, these signals mostly came in the form of extensive war acts (including occupation of territory and causing many deaths and dislocations) and limited war acts (including shelling of military and industrial facilities). It thus seems that Russia initially tried to delegate the 'dirty work' to its Ukrainian proxies, which is why the early phase of the conflict can be best conceptualised as a 'delegated interstate war' (Hauter 2022).

Our analysis further indicates that the behaviour of international actors is conditioned by the behaviour of domestic actors in that the former 'corrected' for the unbalanced and non-reciprocal interactions of the latter. The EU counterbalanced the high number of conflictual signals by the Government compared to the Separatists with a low number of own conflictual signals compared to Russia. Conversely, Russia counterbalanced the low number of conflictual signals by the Separatists compared to the Government with a high number of own conflictual signals compared to the EU. Moreover, in several months in which Government-Separatist interaction was not reciprocal, West-East interaction as a whole was, because the EU and Russia counteracted the domestic actors' non-reciprocal interactions. Through this 'error correction mechanism', the international actors transformed an otherwise asymmetric conflict into a symmetric one. This suggests that balance of power theory is not only applicable in peacetime but also in wartime. Russia's unprovoked escalation of the conflict in 2022 creates a puzzle to liberal institutionalists and social constructivists that explain the country's previous actions with a logic of consequences and a logic of appropriateness. Offensive realism and its logic of opportunity promises to solve that puzzle as it can account for both Russia's reciprocal behaviour in the first years of the conflict and its abuse of reciprocity in 2022. Attributing Russia's changed behaviour to a mere change in instruments, offensive realism tends to fare better than liberal institutionalist and social constructivist approaches that demand a less likely change in the country's core interests and very identity.

In order to substantiate our findings, one could not only consider the frequency but – looking for appropriate weights – also the intensity of exchanged signals. Another promising avenue for future research is to extend the study to the time

period after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine as well as to actors – most notably, the US and Belarus – that assume a greater role in more recent events.

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Data appendix

Full presentation of results (conflictual and cooperative signals)

	Dependent variable:							
	Conflict				Cooperation			
	dX_Rus	dX_Sep	dY_EU	dY_Gov	dW_Rus	dW_Sep	dZ_EU	dZ_Gov
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
X_Rus		-0.133	0.291***	0.525***	0.221***	-0.014	0.054	0.169**
		(0.142)	(0.067)	(0.117)	(0.072)	(0.048)	(0.078)	(0.078)
lag(X_Rus)	-0.975***	0.172	-0.047	-0.001	-0.024	-0.043**	-0.092	0.081*
	(0.072)	(0.154)	(0.107)	(0.113)	(0.046)	(0.020)	(0.066)	(0.046)
X_Sep	-0.252		0.275**	0.788***	-0.058	-0.050	0.129	-0.113
	(0.220)		(0.117)	(0.160)	(0.074)	(0.075)	(0.137)	(0.086)
lag(X_Sep)	0.294	-0.905***	-0.043	-0.153	0.058	-0.010	-0.141	0.012
	(0.327)	(0.249)	(0.100)	(0.190)	(0.098)	(0.111)	(0.109)	(0.239)
Y_EU	1.089***	0.546***		-0.347	-0.262	0.080	-0.117	-0.183
	(0.230)	(0.175)		(0.357)	(0.156)	(0.130)	(0.163)	(0.188)
lag(Y_EU)	0.551	-0.289	-1.146***	-0.047	-0.054	-0.065	0.197	-0.212
	(0.328)	(0.334)	(0.210)	(0.358)	(0.126)	(0.070)	(0.153)	(0.147)
Y_Gov	0.677***	0.537***	-0.119		-0.022	0.031	-0.044	-0.013
	(0.132)	(0.144)	(0.105)		(0.078)	(0.063)	(0.077)	(0.060)
lag(Y_Gov)	-0.480***	0.184	0.007	-0.951***	0.115*	0.078	0.076	0.130
	(0.154)	(0.192)	(0.099)	(0.216)	(0.061)	(0.058)	(0.068)	(0.117)
W_Rus	1.536**	-0.212	-0.486*	-0.118		-0.113	-0.110	-0.220
	(0.672)	(0.296)	(0.281)	(0.463)		(0.129)	(0.228)	(0.509)
lag(W_Rus)	-0.832***	-0.133	0.423**	0.304	-0.769***	-0.081	0.142	0.255
	(0.281)	(0.270)	(0.174)	(0.409)	(0.099)	(0.135)	(0.114)	(0.167)

W_Sep	-0.093	-0.177	0.143	0.161	-0.108		-0.192	0.895***
	(0.359)	(0.318)	(0.320)	(0.379)	(0.193)		(0.191)	(0.153)
lag(W_Sep)	-1.305	1.119**	0.332	-0.937	0.883***	-0.958**	-0.094	1.074
	(0.768)	(0.508)	(0.424)	(0.549)	(0.268)	(0.367)	(0.338)	(0.737)
Z_EU	0.407	0.515	-0.235	-0.258	-0.119	-0.218		0.267
	(0.334)	(0.469)	(0.333)	(0.380)	(0.196)	(0.240)		(0.396)
lag(Z_EU)	0.314	-0.176	0.006	-0.356	-0.038	0.014	-0.913***	-0.024
	(0.277)	(0.394)	(0.186)	(0.297)	(0.200)	(0.140)	(0.249)	(0.251)
Z_Gov	0.634***	-0.225	-0.183	-0.038	-0.119	0.505***	0.133	
	(0.220)	(0.219)	(0.198)	(0.188)	(0.215)	(0.084)	(0.159)	
lag(Z_Gov)	0.209	-0.736***	-0.120	0.958***	-0.313***	-0.083	0.063	-1.469***
	(0.290)	(0.250)	(0.291)	(0.223)	(0.100)	(0.196)	(0.176)	(0.331)
Constant	-0.728	-1.268	0.906	1.226	0.833**	-0.215	0.299	0.246
	(0.817)	(1.284)	(0.638)	(1.609)	(0.365)	(0.337)	(0.434)	(0.627)
Observations	35	35	35	35	35	35	35	35
R^2	0.935	0.904	0.863	0.928	0.862	0.845	0.659	0.904
Adjusted R^2	0.883	0.828	0.755	0.871	0.754	0.722	0.390	0.828
Residual Std. Error (df = 19)	3.078	2.238	1.589	2.710	1.167	1.192	1.120	1.587
F Statistic (df = 15; 19)	18.146***	11.883***	7.967***	16.300***	7.936***	6.891***	2.452**	11.887***

Note: *p**p***p<0.01

Source: Authors