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Preference Constellations in EU–Russian Crisis Bargaining over Syria and Ukraine

JONAS J. DRIEDGER[1] and ULRICH KROTZ[2]

[1]Department of International Security, Peace Research Institute Frankfurt (PRIF), Frankfurt am Main; Research Center "Transformations of Political Violence" (TraCe) [2]Institut Barcelona d'Estudis Internacionals (IBEI), Barcelona; Center for International Studies (CERI), Institut d'études politiques de Paris (Sciences Po), Paris; Harvard Kennedy School, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts

Abstract

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in early 2022 and the ensuing EU–Russian clash over the fate of Ukraine highlight the importance of explaining the outcomes of EU–Russian crisis bargaining. Complementing existing accounts, we argue that favourable preference constellations are key: The more determined, united and focused side prevails over its less interested, divided or unfocused counterpart. We first establish the inferiority of Russia's influence assets (economic, military, normative and allies) relative to the EU. We then use congruence analysis to reverse-engineer crisis bargaining outcomes in key cases of EU–Russian crisis bargaining, showing that favourable preference constellations allowed Russia, despite inferior assets and EU opposition, to ensure Syrian dictator Assad's political survival, finalize the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and keep Donbass out of Kyiv's control since then. Finally, we discuss the implications of these findings for related areas, as well as for current and future EU–Russian crisis bargaining, specifically over Ukraine.

Keywords: crisis bargaining; EU foreign and security policy; EU-Russian relations; Syria; Ukraine

Introduction

On 24 February 2022, Russia launched an all-out military invasion of Ukraine, overtly and egregiously violating a host of international laws, norms, and treaties. Ensuing combat in the first few weeks caused the loss of thousands of lives and the fastest growing refugee crisis in Europe since since the Second World War (Reuters, 2022). Russia demanded a total 'denazification and demilitarization of Ukraine' and legally binding assurances that Ukraine never join NATO. Right away, the EU and its member states sharply condemned Russia's actions, demanded immediate Russian withdrawal and enacted a series of unprecedented sanctions. Russia did not yield and enacted countersanctions (Council of Foreign Relations, 2022). The two parties had started to engage in intense crisis bargaining, understood here broadly as them disputing issues over a third party (Ukraine in this case) in a context of ongoing large-scale violence.

In past instances of crisis bargaining, Russia had repeatedly prevailed over the EU: In the next section, we lay out in more detail how, against the EU's stated interests, Russia had ensured the continuation of Bashar al-Assad's rule during the civil war in Syria since 2011; annexed the Ukrainian peninsula Crimea in gross violation of international law and standards in 2014; and, since 2014, prevented Ukrainian control of the Donbass region.

Russia had prevailed even though, on all gross indicators of influence assets in international politics (wealth, military assets, allies, and normative or soft power), it was and is significantly inferior to the combined weight of the EU, understood here as the

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ensemble of member states and the Union institutions that bind them together. This article lays out this disconnect between assets and outcomes and explains it.

We argue that crisis bargaining outcomes between Russia and the EU are largely explained by the constellation of political preferences within and between Russia and the EU. As we lay out in detail in the subsequent sections, during crisis bargaining, Russia prevails when its political elites prefer a more specific and focused set of outcomes, when they largely do not disagree on those outcomes and when they prefer these outcomes more intensely than do the relevant actors in the EU. Put colloquially, despite inferior influence assets, Russia gets its way when the EU, as a whole, does not have comparable interest in stopping it.

Our findings contribute to a wider and deeper understanding of EU–Russian relations and other instances of third-party crisis bargaining. Building on work on differing power assets and power dynamics between Russia and the EU (e.g., Casier, 2021; Cross and Karolewski, 2021), our results highlight the crucial role of preference constellations in determining how these assets and dynamics translate to crisis bargaining outcomes. Our findings also advance research on how individual member states (e.g., Schmidt-Felzmann, 2021) and EU institutions (Fernandes, 2021) affect EU–Russian relations by zeroing in on interactions amid violent crises. We pay particular attention to how more influential member states like France and Germany shape EU–Russian crisis interactions (e.g., Fix, 2021). Adding to research on influence competition between the EU and Russia in states located in the shared neighbourhood (e.g., Tolstrup, 2014), we shed light on crisis bargaining outcomes. Our results also further support research that has established that the EU's Russia policy was in part significantly shaped by increased Russian assertiveness over time (e.g., Cross and Karolewski, 2021).

Our findings indicate that, given a more unified, focused and intense preference constellation within the EU, the Union could secure much better outcomes towards Russia, take meaningful steps towards attaining 'strategic autonomy' (Aggestam and Hyde-Price, 2019), and better ensure European security with less or without American help (Meijer and Brooks, 2021). Our findings also further corroborate studies finding that the EU is vulnerable to divide-and-rule tactics by other powerful states, such as the United States and China (Chirathivat and Langhammer, 2020). Lastly, our analysis allows us to better understand EU–Russian relations writ large, which continue to deteriorate: Whilst Russia sharply condemned EU policies in its 2015 National Security Strategy, it still called for 'mutually beneficial cooperation with European states and the European Union' (Russian Federation, 2015, art. 97). In contrast, the 2021 National Security Strategy declares no such intentions (Russian Federation, 2021). Russia's military aggression against Ukraine starting in early 2022 marks a historical low point in the relations between the EU and Russia and highlights the importance of a deeper understanding of crisis bargaining between them.

To be sure, we do not seek to provide an all-encompassing account of the conflicts in Syria and Ukraine, nor of all interactions between the EU and Russia over them. We also do not hold that other arguments on EU shortcomings in international politics do not have significant merit. Rather, we argue that preference constellation is the crucial determinant of the EU's successes and failures in third-party crisis bargaining, completing some existing explanations and grounding them in a single, consistent framework.

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Our framework is applicable for other cases of crisis bargaining over third parties, provided that the influence assets of the two bargaining parties are not imbalanced to the extreme. We postulate that a party's assets and resolve interactively determine its bargaining clout. Thus, even a somewhat less capable party like Russia can prevail over the EU in crisis bargaining, provided that its relative resolve is much higher. However, the framework would be less applicable in cases with extreme asset imbalances, such as between the EU and contemporary Serbia.

We substantiate our argument with the three most clear-cut historically united cases in which the EU and Russia under Putin engaged in crisis bargaining over third parties: Assad's rule in Syria, ownership of Crimea and control of the Donbass until late 2021. At the time of writing, crisis bargaining over Russia's aggression against Ukraine in early 2022 just started and is ongoing. While we do discuss it in the conclusion, it cannot yet serve to test the validity of the framework in our analysis. In all three cases under investigation, both sides have been fairly transparent about their goals, thus allowing for within-case analysis of the factors leading to Russia's successes.

We evaluate evidence on relevant preference constellations and their connections to the outcomes, drawing on original sources including policy documents and other primary materials; interviews with government officials, diplomats, policy-makers and others; and a comprehensive survey of expert literature. In order to obtain relevant information, the interviewees were guaranteed confidentiality. We infer ranges of underlying preferences by surveying costly actions, implied values and insider information (Beach and Pedersen, 2016, 169-214). As we are interested in a heterogeneous class of complex cases with varying background conditions, qualitative analysis is appropriate. As we find little variance in the outcome (Russia prevailing), comparative analysis has little purchase (Beach and Pedersen, 2016, 239-241). Rather, we employ 'efficient process-tracing' (Schimmelfennig, 2014; also note Bennett and Checkel, 2014) or 'congruence analysis' (Beach and Pedersen, 2016, 269-301), evaluating within-case evidence as opposed to large-*n* correlations of variables across cases.

The article is divided as follows. We first outline how comprehensive and wide the asset gap between the EU and Russia has been and showcase how Russia still prevailed in our three cases. We then develop our preference-based argument and outline how we apply it to the cases. We also show how our framework complements and enriches other accounts of EU foreign affairs and EU influence in the world. We further outline how it fills explanatory gaps left by these other accounts when it comes to crisis bargaining. Subsequently, we show that, in all three cases, Russian elites intensely and consistently preferred a comparatively narrow set of outcomes. This caused Russia to self-select into these crises by escalating them through ramping up offensive military measures. In all three cases, Russia ultimately got its way due to favourable preference constellations. In Syria, increasing refugee flows into Europe, terrorist attacks and the rise of far-right parties increasingly caused EU actors to downgrade the removal of Assad in favour of stabilizing the conflict, minimizing the humanitarian catastrophe, securing EU borders and fighting terrorism. Whilst the EU consistently opposed Russia's annexation of Crimea and proxy war in Donbass, EU actors were unwilling to take more decisive measures in support of Ukraine. We conclude by discussing further implications of our results, in particular how they inform the analysis of current and future EU–Russian crisis bargaining over Ukraine.

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Table 1: Comparison of Influence Assets – EU, Member States and Russia.

Sources of influence	*EU and member states*	*Russia*
Economic/societal		
Population (2021)	450 million	142 million
GDP (as PPP, 2018)	$20 trillion	$4 trillion
GDP/c (2018)	$44 thousand	$27 thousand
Life expectancy	78 years	72 years
Normative/soft power		
Global Soft Power Index (2021)	Germany 1st, France 7th	Russia 13th
Military resources (exp., 2018)	$293 billion	$149 billion
Alliances/allies	NATO, United States	CSTO, Belarus

Note: If not otherwise stated, data retrieved from the World Factbook (cia.gov), figures rounded, military expenditures calculated by GDP (PPP) and share of military expenditure/GDP; only allies with significant presence in Europe are included.

Influence Assets and EU–Russian Crisis Bargaining

We distinguish four main categories of assets with which polities project influence in international politics: economic and societal, 'soft' (or normative), military and allies.[1] As Table 1 illustrates, Russia, consistently and by wide margins, is much less of a heavyweight than the EU. Even post-Brexit, the EU outclasses Russia by a factor of 3 in terms of population and more than 5 in terms of wealth. Notably, the chosen measurement, power purchasing parity, is skewed towards lower-labour-cost countries with hard power assets such as Russia (Cooper, 2018). Nonetheless, Germany alone exceeds Russia by this measure. Not only does the EU have more wealth to spare, average per-capita incomes are significantly higher in the EU, generating more disposable, per-person resources beyond meeting basic needs to project influence (Beckley, 2018).

Even though soft (or normative) power is notoriously difficult to operationalize, nearly any available gross measure puts the EU as a whole, and many of its member states individually, ahead of Russia. Less widely known is that EU member states collectively spend nearly double on their militaries than does Russia (we address specific capabilities in the next section). Lastly, the EU is closely allied with the United States, which is arguably still the most formidable actor in world politics, via a dense web of bilateral and multilateral ties, prominently via NATO. In sharp contrast, the only European ally Russia can count on is Belarus – a poor, weak and unappealing autocracy. The Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the Russian mirror institution of NATO, holds only few, largely uncommitted and weak members.

As we lay out in subsequent sections, despite its inferior assets, Russia prevailed over the EU in the three most prominent and consequential cases of crisis bargaining over third parties before Russia's full attack on Ukraine in 2022 (see Table 2). After the start of the civil war in Syria in 2011, the EU sided with the United States in calling for an end of the

[1]Whilst Beckley has argued that gross comparisons of influence assets between polities are best achieved by the product of GDP and GDP per capita (Beckley 2018), we also included other societal, normative, military and ally indicators to lend more robustness to our assessment. Of course, the utility of assets often varies by context. For example, the EU's alignment with Kyiv was arguably an EU asset in the Ukrainian cases but not in the Syrian case. As the indicators capture a wide array of relevant assets and are in line with other gross assessments (Krotz and Maher 2017; Moravcsik 2017), they nevertheless allow to demonstrate wide discrepancy in overall influence across the three cases.

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Table 2: EU–Russian Crisis Bargaining by Actors' Goals and Outcomes Before 2022.

	EU and member states	*Russia*	*Outcome*
Rule of Assad in Syria	Should end	Should continue	Continues *(Russia prevails)*
Crimean Peninsula	Remain with Ukraine	Incorporation into Russia	De facto incorporated into Russia *(Russia prevails)*
Donbass	Should come under full Ukrainian sovereignty	Should remain de facto independent	Remains de facto independent *(Russia prevails)*

Bashar al-Assad regime (Chen et al., 2020). Russia wanted Assad to remain in power and succeeded: Assad remains in power to this day.

When, in 2014, Russian soldiers in unmarked uniforms started to take control of the Crimean Peninsula to pave the way for integrating the Ukrainian territory into Russia, the EU called for Russian withdrawal and opposed the quickly organized referendum with which Russia sought legitimacy for its move. Russia ignored international opposition and de facto integrated Crimea into its territory (Allison, 2014).

Simultaneously, Russian operatives and Russia-backed fighters started to take over governmental institutions in Ukraine's Eastern provinces. In the ensuing battles between them and Ukrainian loyalists, the EU called for an end to hostility and the return of Donbass to Ukrainian control. Until early 2022, Russia wanted Donbass to be semi-autonomous, ruled by people favourable to Russia's foreign policy interests, to discredit the preceding Ukrainian 'Revolution of Dignity' and exert control over Ukraine's future policy (Åtland, 2020). Russia prevailed over the EU in this case as well.

Preference Constellations in Crisis Bargaining

We argue that Russia prevails over the EU in a crisis scenario when the preferences of key players in Russia are stronger than those in the EU. In crisis bargaining, determined actors can prevail over less interested, less united and less focused counterparts even in the face of significant influence disadvantages.[2]

We posit that the strength of a polity's preference in crisis bargaining is shaped by the preferences of its respective dominant societal and political actors. We distinguish three components that jointly constitute the strength or weakness of a polity's preference.

1. *Unity versus disunity*: If all or most actors in a polity seek the same goal, and if they all push for this specific goal, the policies adopted by their polity will be more determined than if they had pushed for diverse or even contradictory goals.
2. *Focus versus diffusion*: If actors' goals are narrow and specific, their polity will pursue them with more determination than if they are broad and vague. Furthermore, if many other policy goals are pursued in the crisis at hand, they can supersede the preference for the goals that stand in contest with those of the counterpart. Moreover, goals will be more diffused if some of them require the counterpart's co-operation to be realized.

[2]For example, North Vietnam was able to prevail over the vastly more powerful United States during the Second Indochina War.

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3. *Intensity versus dispassion*: If actors strongly prefer an outcome, lobbying will be stronger, and the resulting policy more determined.

The framework draws from, develops, and broadens liberal intergovernmentalism (Moravcsik, 1993, 1998; Moravcsik and Schimmelpfennig, 2019). In liberal intergovernmentalism, dominant societal groups' preferences shape state preferences. These groups pursue sectoral interests and shape national policy through logrolling coalitions (e.g., Narizny, 2007). These sectoral interests can be the pursuit of ideational or economic assets, or security concerns of these groups relating to how the counterpart in crisis bargaining could threaten or harm such valued assets (on the role of threats in liberal intergovernmentalism, see Narizny, 2017, pp. 164, 184–185).

In our analytical frame, such political or societal preferences can stem from a variety of sources. These include organized economic and societal interests; ideational or 'ideological' preferences of parties or party coalitions in parliament; domestic institutions and institutional contexts; and historically rooted constructions of identity and purpose (Goldstein and Keohane, 1993; Hall, 1997; Kaarbo, 2015; Krotz, 2015; Milner, 1997; Schirm, 2020). For the EU, particularly in the Union's foreign relations, the constellation of member state preferences, in turn, strongly shape policies at the Union level. The more member state governments push for a policy, the more likely this policy is to be adapted.

Through its unity–disunity variable, preference constellation allows us to account for differing effects of Russia's more unitary and autocratic structures compared with the democratic, pluralistic, law-based and semi-federal features of the EU. In the latter, Union-level policies are reached through politicking between member states and Union institutions. Consequently, individual member states' policies can undermine such policies (Orenstein and Kelemen, 2017). Our framework thereby builds on various insights on the complex sources of EU (non-)actorness. Amongst other findings, this research has established how interactions of various actors' preferences are aggregated within and outside of EU institutional setups to, at times, produce 'astrategic' and 'inadvertent' EU policies (e.g., Cottey, 2020; Gehring et al., 2017; Krotz, 2009; Krotz and Maher, 2011; Müller et al., 2021). We consider preference variations stemming from varying economic and energy ties between EU member states with Russia (e.g., Kustova, 2021), divergent historical trajectories (Krotz, 2015), and different threat perceptions stemming from varying geographical exposure (e.g., van Hooft, 2020).

Information is more readily available for EU actors, due to free journalism and largely transparent policy processes. However, insider information on elite decision-making in Russia is usually scarce and of questionable reliability. This is compounded by the arcane and complex power dynamics of the Russian regime. We can nonetheless assess Russian preference constellations, as research into Russian regime dynamics has robustly established that, especially in matters of high politics, Vladimir Putin and a small, selected and fairly continuous if shrinking group of elites around him hold operative power over Russian elite decision-making, representing themselves, or acting as conduits of, major institutional, ideological and economic power centres in Russia (see, e.g., Frye, 2021; Sakwa, 2021). For example, the influence, views and interests of the *siloviki* are largely determined by their position at the top of Russia's many security agencies, whereas the weakening group of economic liberals represents individuals and groups that stand to gain from international commerce. Thus, whilst it is not possible to assess with much

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certainty preference emergence that probably stems in part from an interplay of the various agencies, interest groups and key mid-level players, the highly visible small power elite of the Russian elite can serve as a focal point to identify operative preference constellations at the high politics level. These can be established by triangulating the implied costs and goals of adopted policies with insider information and public policies (Beach and Pedersen, 2016, 169-214).

While there had not yet been a framework directly dedicated to explaining EU–Russian crisis bargaining outcomes, there are other accounts that touch on aspects of it: security culture, different sorts or types of powers, hybrid warfare, and NATO. Our own framework provides a focused and encompassing account that fills explanatory gaps that these other approaches do not cover. In the areas of explanatory overlap, our framework provides a single causal logic, resulting in explanations that at times diverge from these approaches.

Some have argued that the EU is unwilling to engage Russian challenges more robustly due to its engrained *security culture* that shies away from military measures (Matlary and Heier, 2016). Relatedly, implicit in the arguments of others is the view that Russian successes can largely be explained by the *different 'kinds of powers'* that the EU and Russia respectively represent. Whereas Russia, in this view, is a traditional power using 'hard means' (intelligence and covert operations, military and hybrid measures), the EU is not. Rather, depending on the exact theoretical view, the EU is characterized as a civilian power (originally formulated by Bull, 1982, and Duchêne, 1972), a normative power (foundational: Manners, 2002) or a market power (Damro, 2012). In these views, when the conflict concerns areas in which hard power triumphs, Russia triumphs (e.g., Busygina, 2017; Karolewski and Cross, 2017; Schilde, 2017).

Whilst these approaches contribute significantly to our understanding of EU–Russian relations writ large, our framework zeroes in on EU–Russian crisis bargaining and accounts for underappreciated aspects therein. Various studies have established that EU responses to Russian actions became more militarized the more EU member states felt themselves threatened and that EU 'powerness' changed depending on experience and context (Driedger, 2021; Sperling and Webber, 2019; Vanaga and Rostoks, 2019). Our framework and findings allow to identify and explain these variations of the ways in which the EU exerts power (both in terms of intensity and in terms of 'style', be it 'civilian', 'normative', 'market' or military) by uncovering the role of underlying preference constellations, mediated through institutional and organizational features of the Union. The framework also captures how preferences on the Russian side translate to policies that then, interactively, determine outcomes in EU–Russian crisis bargaining.

Another related, implicit view is that Russia prevails over the EU because it excels in '*hybrid warfare*' (covert, integrated and 'full-spectrum' means to achieve goals) and the EU does not (Jonsson and Seely, 2015; Sutyagin, 2018).[3] Although current shortcomings in applicable EU resources partially explain failures in current crises, this begs the question of why the EU, after a long history of crisis bargaining with Russia, has not developed more capabilities to prevail. After all, EU member states have increased EU funding

[3]The very concept of 'hybrid warfare' has been criticized as describing the rather normal, and not specifically Russian, tendency for states to use full-spectrum measures to achieve their goals (Galeotti, 2016).

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and ceded core state powers when dealing with other threats they deemed salient, such as the financial crisis in the late 2000s.

One prominent view is that the EU member states that are simultaneously NATO members are not developing such capabilities, because the United States provides them. However, with ongoing US calls for burden-sharing and the United States' continued redirection of political attention to China and the Pacific, this argument continues to lose force (Silove, 2016). Whilst, until 2021, there have been recent increases in defence spending and Russia-oriented capability development, this certainly falls far short of what the member states would have been capable of and what would have been needed to more seriously engage Russia with traditional hard power means (Meijer and Brooks, 2021). The approach of preference constellations sheds light on and explains such apparent undermatching.

Syria

We find that, throughout the development of the Syrian civil war, Russian elites continuously held a unitary, focused and intense preference for Assad to remain in power. EU actors' preferences, while including the removal of Assad, were comparatively disunited, diffuse and dispassionate. This preference constellation largely stemmed from Kremlin concerns about regime security and Russia's global position. The Russian elite was concerned that, as in Libya in 2011, a Western intervention might help local forces to topple an autocratic, anti-Western government (Kofman and Rojansky, 2018, p. 8). Keeping Assad in power would prevent further precedents of such Western-supported interventions. It would also serve to combat Islamist extremism in the region, which is connected to the Caucasus region and Russia's largely Muslim Southern region (Allison, 2013; Kofman and Rojansky, 2018; Sutyagin, 2018).

Elite preferences made their way into official Russian policy. In May 2011, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov referred to Syria when he said '[the] calculation is that foreign players will get imbued with this problem and will not only condemn the violence there, but subsequently repeat the Libyan scenario, including the use of force' (Russian Federation, 2011a). Later in November, he proclaimed that '[some] leaders of the coalition forces, and later the NATO secretary-general, called the Libyan operation a "model" for the future. As for Russia, we will not allow anything like this to happen again in the future' (Russian Federation, 2011b). These views have persisted since. In subsequent foundational documents, Russia implied European and American agency when bemoaning the increasing practice of overthrowing what it considered legitimate political regimes, including in the Middle East (Russian Federation, 2015, art. 18), and called for a 'political settlement' of the situation in Syria (Russian Federation, 2016).

In the initial stages of the civil war, EU actors' preferences regarding Assad's rule increasingly unified. France took the early lead, lobbying within Europe to make Assad step down, seeking to promote democratization processes and increase its influence in the Middle East during the Arab Spring. France implied in November 2011 that military intervention was an option if the regime did not drastically change its internal setup. At the beginning of 2012, France demanded that Assad resign and announced that it would support the Syrian opposition and build an international coalition for a post-Assad Syria, the so-called Friends of Syria (Chen et al., 2020, pp. 31–61).

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Driven by similar interests, the United Kingdom soon sided with France in its support for the group, including military aid. Their demands for Assad's abdication predated those of the United States. The three Western states tried to pass a UN Security Council resolution that demanded a cease fire and would allow for 'further steps' should Assad violate the resolution (W. Bowen et al., 2020, p. 820; Chen et al., 2020, pp. 62–87).

The United Kingdom and especially France lobbied other EU members to support their policies and were somewhat successful in doing so. The Union first adopted sanctions in May 2011. Significant funds went to humanitarian aid in the region, and the EU officially acknowledged and supported Syrian oppositional groups and democratization. A resolution by the European Parliament on 16 February 2012 demanded that Assad step down. However, it also called on other states, including France and the United Kingdom, to cease arms supplies to Syria. Until January 2017, the EU and its member states provided more than 9.4 billion euros in aid to Syria and neighbouring states, rendering the EU the largest donor of such aid (Chen et al., 2020, pp. 10–30). France and the United Kingdom successfully lobbied the EU to end its Syrian weapons embargo in 2013. However, Germany continued to resist sending weapons (*FAZ.NET*, 2013).

Tensions flared when, in the summer of 2013, the Syrian regime used chemical weapons in a large-scale attack in the Damascus suburb of Ghouta. The United States had signalled that such an attack would cross a 'red line'. French President Hollande took the lead, stating that the attack was indeed a legitimate cause for direct intervention and preparing French forces. The British government followed but failed to get a mandate from Parliament. Consequently, US President Obama, still pursuing a policy of 'leading from behind' in the European neighbourhood, hesitated to go through with the strikes (Chen et al., 2020, pp. 16–17; Lewis and Tertrais, 2017).

In this situation, Russia managed to bypass French proposals and avert serious strikes against the Assad regime by the United States and its European allies. Moscow worked out an arrangement in which the Syrian regime would be involved in the delivery and destruction of the arsenal, thus safeguarding Assad's political survival, preserving his ability to fight Islamists and averting regime change (Lewis and Tertrais, 2017). Though this prevented Western states from weakening the Assad regime, the Russian scheme provided them a way to destroy the Syrian arsenal and avoid further political embarrassment.

From late 2014 on, four interconnected developments caused major changes in EU preference constellations and, consequently, policy towards Assad and Russia: (1) The Islamic State and other radical groups rapidly increased their influence and control of territory in Syria; (2) refugee flows to Europe further increased; (3) Europe experienced various terrorist attacks connected to the war in Syria; and (4) far-right parties rapidly gained popularity across the continent (Chen et al., 2020). Again, France, faced with the Charlie Hebdo and Paris attacks of 2015, led the way. It successfully pushed for UN Security Council resolution 2249, which enabled all member states to combat the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. In a historical first, it also successfully invoked article 42(7) of the Treaty of the European Union (Chen et al., 2020, pp. 37–57). Various EU member states joined a US-led coalition seeking to militarily defeat the Islamic State (Chen et al., 2020, p. 17). In 2015, vast majorities in all major EU member states supported US actions against the Islamic State. This even included 62% of respondents in Germany, despite the country's civilian security culture (Wike et al., 2015).

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In this situation, Russia decided to intervene in Syria. Following an official invitation of the Syrian regime, Russian troops became officially active in the country. This served two main purposes: First, Russia could more effectively fight the Islamic State and other Syrian opposition groups representing an imminent danger to Assad's rule. Second, the intervention thwarted ongoing plans by Turkey and the United States to establish a no-fly zone near the Turkish border. Thus, the Russian elite took effective steps to prevent a repetition of the 2011 Libya operation, in which a no-fly zone paved the way for direct Western support of anti-government forces and the toppling of Gaddafi (Kofman and Rojansky, 2018, pp. 9–10; Sutyagin, 2018).

With Russia creating facts on the ground and EU preferences shifting, the conflict over Assad's ongoing rule faded into the background. British Prime Minister Theresa May had her hands full with the unfolding Brexit process. German Chancellor Merkel stated in late 2016 that terrorism was the most significant test for Germany. Newly elected French President Macron declared in June 2017 that he did not see Assad as the primary target in Syria, instead prioritizing combating terrorist organizations and helping Syria to achieve peace and stability (Chen et al., 2020, pp. 56, 124–127). France, the United Kingdom, Denmark and the Netherlands carried out sorties against the Islamic State, but they sought to avoid hitting regime assets (Chen et al., 2020, p. 17). France and the United Kingdom did join the United States in striking selected Syrian government targets in 2018, responding to an alleged chemical attack by the regime. However, the attack was not intended to weaken the regime's position vis-à-vis oppositionists, and Russia chose to not use its advanced S-400 air defence system against the strikes, suggesting that Russian actors were aware that their main goals in Syria were not threatened (Allahverdi, 2018). Table 3 summarizes and compares the components of the EU's and Russia's preference constellations in Syria as well as the Crimea and Donbass cases.

Crimea

The Crimean annexation, carried out between February and March 2014, was planned out by Putin, who consulted with an extremely narrow group of people (high unity) (Treisman, 2016, pp. 47, 51). Whatever the other goals, securing control of the strategic assets in Sevastopol and the prestige of bringing the historically significant territory back under direct Russian control evidently were intense and highly focused preferences. Some days *before* the Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity had swept away the old 'pro–Russian' regime under Viktor Yanukovych, former chief of Russian general staff Yuri Baluyevsky had stated that events in Ukraine created new threats for Russia and that vital strategic areas in Russia's West, as well as the Black Sea Fleet, needed to be reinforced quickly (Allison, 2014, p. 1278, on the Crimea annexation, see also Driedger, 2023a, 2023b).

Table 3: EU and Russian Preference Constellations in Crisis Bargaining Before 2022.

	EU and member states	*Russia*
Assad's rule in Syria	Unitary (initially), unfocused, increasingly weak	Unitary, focused, intense
Ownership of Crimea	Unitary, (initially somewhat) focused, weak	Unitary, focused, intense
Control of Donbass	Not unitary, unfocused, weak	Unitary, focused, intense

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In addition, various data points suggest that the annexation served to discredit the Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity, minimizing the dangers of revolutionary sentiments spilling over into Russia. Throughout March 2014, Putin stated several times that he viewed the preceding events in Ukraine as an intentional plot by the United States and other Western powers to install a favourable government in Ukraine to undermine Russia's stability and strategic position. Putin also blamed Western policies for the revolutions throughout the 'Arab Spring'. He furthermore asserted that Kyiv's new NATO policy would bring NATO naval forces to Sevastopol and threaten all of Southern Russia (Allison, 2014, pp. 1291, 1289 [note 122], 1274). Systematic surveys of Russian elites in 2016 found that 88% of the respondents considered the United States to be hostile to Russia and that 48% believed it to be threatening. Over 75% of respondents stated that the Ukraine conflict had been caused by US attempts to foment a 'colour revolution' in Ukraine (Rivera et al., 2016, pp. 7, 12, 20).[4] These perceptions were also attested to during interviews with Russian officials (Interviews 4 and 5) and with experts and high-ranking Western officials possessing relevant working knowledge (Interviews 2, 3 and 6–8).

Notably, Russia had recently experienced anti-government protests between December 2011 and Spring 2012, the largest of their kind since the 1990s (Allison, 2014, p. 1289, note 122). Even before these protests, in early 2011, 49% of polled Russian respondents were willing to participate in such demonstrations (Allison, 2014, p. 1289). The decision to subvert and ultimately annex Crimea seems to have been made short term and mainly to secure the strategically important naval base at Sevastopol to prevent expulsion of stationed Russian troops by Kyiv or even a use of the base by Western forces. Putin told Daniel Treisman in October 2015 that the decision to seize Crimea was made spontaneously and not long in advance (Treisman, 2016, p. 47). A source close to Oleg Belaventsev, commander of Russian military operations in Crimea, stated in January 2016 that the Crimean operation was not primarily meant to stop eventual NATO accession of Ukraine but rather to prevent Ukraine from cancelling the treaties over the naval base and kicking out the Russian Black Sea Fleet (Treisman, 2016, pp. 49–50).

As outlined in more detail below, in February and March 2014, EU member states were surprised by the evolving annexation of Crimea. Nonetheless, their actions, non-actions and rhetoric evince an increasingly united opposition to Russia's infringement on Ukraine's territorial integrity. However, this preference was comparatively unfocused. Whilst all EU actors did show support for Ukraine's territorial integrity, they, collectively, clearly prioritized avoiding military escalation and a major deterioration of relations with Russia.

To be sure, since the start of the ongoing annexation, the EU had signalled its general disagreement. As events were still unfolding, it blamed Russia as the sole driver of the crisis, rejecting its claims that only local actors were to blame (Natorski and Pomorska, 2017, p. 60). The EU heads of state and government issued a proclamation on 6 March 2014 condemning the 'unprovoked violation of Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity by the Russian Federation' and demanding a withdrawal of Russian armed forces (European Council, 2014).

[4] On Russian elite perceptions of democratic spillover interacting with historically shaped security cultures, see Skak (2016).

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Nevertheless, EU preferences for Ukrainian territorial integrity were unfocused and weak. This was partly due to economic concerns. EU members initially disagreed on whether the Russian annexation should warrant any sanctions at all. The Baltic states pushed for them. Poland, France, the United Kingdom, Germany and Italy were in favour, albeit with some reservations, particularly in Berlin and Rome. The Netherlands and Luxembourg were overall hesitant. One participant described negotiations about the two dozen or so Russian individuals to be sanctioned as 'heated' (Natorski and Pomorska, 2017, p. 62). Extensive energy ties between Russia and various member states caused concerns on EU unity and resolve (Natorski and Pomorska, 2017, pp. 58–59). Only after arduous negotiations and the exemption of economic measures did the member states agree to sanction Russia. Initially, sanctions merely excluded Russia from international meetings, targeting specific people close to Putin and thought to be directly responsible for the Crimea annexation (Natorski and Pomorska, 2017, pp. 59–60, 63). It has been argued that even these limited early sanctions might only have been possible because the EU addressed concerns of energy vulnerabilities and interests that varied between member states (Natorski and Pomorska, 2017, pp. 62–63).

EU, NATO and member state statements at the time did not imply offers of military support or encouragement for military counteraction in Ukraine. For example, a 1 April 2014 statement by NATO foreign ministers reiterates the condemnation of Russian actions but only refers to Ukrainian security when announcing steps to 'strengthen Ukraine's ability to provide for its own security' (NATO, 2014).

The limits of EU commitment to Ukraine's territorial integrity shine through in the rather low and vague bar set for Russia. In early March, Merkel sought to convince member states to adopt some actions 'if there are no diplomatic options of any kind' and if there is 'no progress on Russia's side' (Natorski and Pomorska, 2017, p. 60).

As shown in the next section, with the war in Donbass, the focus of the EU shifted to preventing conflict escalation and supporting Ukraine in regaining control over its Eastern provinces. The issue of Crimean ownership received less and less attention, and the EU increasingly connected its demands and actions to Donbass, while tacitly letting the clash over Crimea fade out.

Donbass Until Early 2022

By mid-March 2014, Russia had completed the annexation of Crimea. It had carried out the operation tentatively, using measures that allowed for later deniability and retreat (Driedger, 2023a; see also Driedger, 2023b). The successful unfolding of the Crimea operation arguably contributed to the Kremlin's decision to gain maximum control over the strategically and ideologically important peninsula by fully annexing it, confident that, for more leverage over Ukraine, it could install a new conflict in the Ukrainian Donbass region, or the even larger 'Novorossiya', as Russian elites and 'volunteers' usually referred to it in 2014 (Allison, 2014; Treisman, 2016).

As with Crimea, evidence indicates that the small Russian elite with Putin at its head had a fairly unitary, focused and intense preference for wresting Donbass out of Ukrainian control to discredit the Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity, prevent long-term accession of Ukraine into NATO and the EU and retain leverage over Ukrainian policy. This was done by subverting Ukraine's Eastern provinces, co-ordinating and mobilizing fighters whilst

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wielding the threat of conventional Russian military invasion. Four bodies of evidence corroborate this interpretation. First, the timing and content of continuous Russian elite pronouncements are in line with this view. In late March 2014, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov called for Ukrainian regions to be granted extensive rights in their relations to other countries under a new and weakened Ukrainian federal structure (Allison, 2014, p. 1294). At the end of August 2014, when Ukraine declared its intention to proceed with the NATO accession policy, Putin responded that only by negotiating the 'statehood' of Ukraine could peace be achieved (Allison, 2014, p. 1273). Second, as one study documents, the design of Russia's semi-covert coercive measures in the Donbass implies the goal of gaining permanent leverage in Ukrainian politics over future EU and NATO integration (A. S. Bowen, 2019). Third, a study on the implementation failures of subsequent crisis mediation agreements on Ukraine, which draws on 42 key informants, shows that although the Russian goal had been a 'friendly' and 'stable' regime in Kyiv, it felt unable to achieve this and was hence hedging by continuing to destabilize any 'unfriendly' government by keeping conflicts active on a low scale and with bearable costs (Malyarenko and Wolff, 2018). Fourth, interviews with Russian officials and experts (Interviews 4–6 and 8), Ukrainian officials and experts (Interviews 10–12), and knowledgeable Western officials and experts (Interviews 1–3, 7 and 9) further evince the Russian elite's preferences.

Following Russia's support for anti-Kyiv forces in Donbass, the EU named Russia as the main culprit of this conflict, supported Ukraine and increasingly imposed sanctions on Russia. Whilst many observers were surprised that the EU had managed to impose such sanctions at all, the politics surrounding them revealed some disunity amongst the member states. Various member states, amongst them Finland, Hungary, Greece and Italy, had to be convinced through politicking, logrolling and side payments to agree to the sanctions (Natorski and Pomorska, 2017; Orenstein and Kelemen, 2017). Indeed, the Russian International Affairs Council, a Russian think tank, had identified these states as having favourable views for the Russian side in the ongoing EU–Russian dispute. They all had significant economic ties in Russia and had repeatedly spoken out against sanctions (Orenstein and Kelemen, 2017, pp. 92–93).

Individual member states also pursued unilateral policies that showcased EU disunity. Germany and others advanced the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project with Russia, Cyprus allowed Russian vessels at Cypriot ports and Hungary hosted Putin in Budapest (Orenstein and Kelemen, 2017, p. 97). These politics reflected disagreements amongst EU societies. In 2015, majorities in Poland, Spain and the United Kingdom supported Ukraine joining both the EU and NATO, whereas most Germans and Italians were opposed. In Italy, there was not even majority support for sending economic aid to Ukraine (Simmons et al., 2015).

The timing and targets of the sanctions also evince that EU member states would only accept limited economic costs to support Ukraine on Donbass (low preference intensity). Indeed, sanctions on Russian economic sectors were designed to be easily reversible, have a minimal effect on EU businesses and share the remaining burden amongst member states. Still, opposing EU actors succeeded in delaying these sanctions for several months, during which Russia finalized the annexation of Crimea, stirred conflict in Donbass and saw pro-Russian fighters make significant battleground gains. Only when the plane MH17 was shot down, likely by Russian-provided anti-aircraft capabilities, did public outcry in Europe tip the balance in Brussels for the EU to finally impose sectoral sanctions (Natorski and Pomorska, 2017, p. 63). Even then, the sanctions did not include major

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financial and energy sectors. This bears the handwriting of German interests in gas and energy and the role of Russian money in the City of London (Driedger, 2021, p. 101).

EU diplomacy evinces that EU preferences for Ukraine to effectively control Donbass were conditioned, and often superseded, by concerns to avoid further deterioration in EU–Russian relations and prevent military escalation (unfocused preferences). Amidst the completed annexation of Crimea and the start of hostilities in Donbass, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy met with the foreign ministers of Russia, Ukraine and the United States. The parties agreed to initiate steps to de-escalate tensions and called on 'all sides' to refrain from violence and disarm illegal groups. The EU High Representative called on Russia to 'take steps' and asserted that failure to do so might lead to sanctions (Natorski and Pomorska, 2017, p. 61).

In the summer of 2014, pro-Russian fighters continued to conquer territory. New Ukrainian President Poroshenko proposed granting the Donbass region some autonomy and, in exchange, allowing Kyiv to re-establish control of the region. Russia ignored this offer (Åtland, 2020, pp. 130–131).

On the backfoot, Ukraine agreed to the first Minsk protocol on 5 September 2014, accepting a series of crucial Russian demands: The territorial status quo was to be frozen in, and Kyiv had to acknowledge and thereby somewhat legitimize representatives of the renegade 'People's Republics' as negotiation partners – meanwhile, Russia was not even named as a mediator, let alone a party in the conflict. Germany and France acted as informal EU representatives and mediators, also tacitly accepting the way in which Russia shaped the negotiations (Interview 1, Åtland, 2020).

Hostilities started yet again, and pro-Russian fighters made further advances, culminating in the Minsk II agreement, which made Ukrainian re-establishment of control over Donbass contingent on a peaceful situation, thereby giving pro-Russian fighters effective veto-power. The ability of the pro-Russian side to freeze in the conflict was further sharpened with the 'Steinmeier formula', accepted in October 2019 (Åtland, 2020).

As Ukraine was highly dependent on economic and diplomatic support from the EU, it had to accept these increasingly unfavourable terms. With Russian successes locked in, fighting abated. By 2021, nearly all other aspects of the Minsk framework, such as the re-establishment of Ukrainian control over Donbass, remained unfulfilled. Whilst the EU continued to pay a price for supporting Ukraine's claims on Donbass in the form of existing sanctions, its role in these negotiations showcases that avoiding further tensions with Russia and military escalation had partially superseded this preference (Åtland, 2020, pp.132–133).

Several lines of evidence further illustrate that other preferences took priority over the EU's support for Ukraine. Majorities in six out of seven of the most populous EU member states opposed NATO sending arms to Ukraine (Simmons et al., 2015). Whilst the EU did embrace the new government around Poroshenko and concluded the Association Agreement with Ukraine, it did put a hold on the agreement's economic chapters and gave Russia a say in these negotiations (Haukkala, 2015, pp. 35–36). EU conditionality on the sanctions shifted away from the issue of Crimea, making sectoral sanctions largely dependent on progress in the Minsk framework. Lukewarm efforts in terms of the EU's defence spending and 'strategic autonomy', even when US commitment to Europe became seriously dubitable during the Trump era, further support the proposition that EU member states did not value highly their ability to put pressure on Russia (Driedger, 2021).

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Conclusions, Implications and the Russian Invasion of Ukraine in 2022

Over Assad, Crimea and Donbass, Russia got its way over a significantly more powerful EU because the Russian elite was united in its determined pursuit of a few focused, specific goals, whereas many EU actors had, by comparison, only limited, often varying and significantly less focused goals, which they pursued with less determination. The popular images of Russia punching above its weight, and the EU below, are well warranted in these prominent cases of crisis bargaining over third parties (see Table 3).

Our results regarding these three cases of crisis bargaining have five broader implications that provide cues for policy and further research. First, even though Russia has punched above its weight against the EU when it comes to crisis bargaining over high-salience issues in third countries, Russian elites have not felt triumphant when it comes to other aspects of EU–Russia relations. The expert literature has established a vast set of cases in which the Russian elite sought, but failed, to counteract effectively numerous influences stemming from the EU that went strongly against the Russian elite's preferences. Examples include Russian attempts to end EU sanctions; strong opposition to increased NATO presence in the Baltics; alarm over strengthened EU and NATO ties with Ukraine; attempts to thwart NATO accession of Balkan states; failed attempts to stop EU actors from publicly calling out Russian violations of international law and human rights; and efforts to overcome strong resistance within the EU on the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project (e.g., David and Romanova, 2019). Whilst this may partly represent mere attempts to increase regime popularity by propping up an external enemy, these issues relate to areas in which core preferences of the regime are affected and in which it is unable to impose them over the EU. We thus conclude, second, that the outcomes in EU–Russian disputes writ large are overall highly dependent on the context, issue area and stakes involved.

Third, in all three instances of past crisis bargaining, Russia self-selected into them by initiating or escalating violence on the ground. Unitary, focused and intense elite preferences thus do not just give Russia an advantage in crisis bargaining but tend to bring about the confrontation to begin with. However, there are also numerous situations in which Russia chose not to cause or escalate a crisis and, rather, quietly acquiesced (on Russian risk acceptance, see Driedger 2023a). For example, Russia opposed Finland's NATO accession and threatened repercussions if Finland went ahead. Nonetheless, Finland joined NATO in April 2023, and Russia remained largely inactive.

Fourth, in all three cases, the Russian elite seems to have sought to fend off specific perceived threats without being able to counter the underlying contexts from which these perceived threats had emerged. In Syria, this relates to religious extremism and autocratic instability, and in Ukraine to Russia's strategic decline and the regime's domestic fragility. Thus viewed, Russia has dealt with what it perceives as immediately pressing issues. Yet it seems to prevail only in dealing with symptoms and, minimally, with the deeper causes underlying them.

Fifth, preference constellations and the findings of past crisis bargaining allow to better understand current and future EU–Russian crisis bargaining over Ukraine. Right when Russia started the invasion on February 24, EU leaders condemned the attack in the sharpest terms and demanded immediate withdrawal. Starting the same day, the EU began to provide large-scale support, including 500 million euros in military aid, to Ukraine and put into place additional sets of extensive sanctions on Russia, including SWIFT bans for

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various Russian banks (European Council, 2022). These measures were in large part driven by an unprecedently high degree of preference unity, focus and intensity amongst EU institutions and member states. Apparently, this novel consensus was largely due to shared EU experiences over Crimea and Donbass in the past, with Russia's unprecedented and blatant disregard for international law and norms serving as a focal point around which EU elites could rally. This is particularly evident for Germany, which eventually joined, finally halting the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project, sending weapons to Ukraine and dramatically raising defence spending (Driedger, 2022). Conversely, the Russian elite apparently underestimated the extent of EU backlash that would follow the invasion, probably counting on similar intra-EU divisions as in the past. Risk acceptance by the Russian elite relating to goals towards neighbouring states like Ukraine has risen since the mid-2000s (Driedger, 2023), possibly indicating that Russian preferences towards Ukraine are becoming stronger in parallel with, and interaction to, those of the EU.

In line with our previous findings, Russia had yet again sought to counter adverse long-term developments by escalation. The crass demands for regime change ('denazification') in Kyiv, 'neutrality' of Ukraine and extensive unilateral concessions by NATO are well in line with the Russian elite's evident preferences during the past campaigns in Syria, Crimea and Donbass (Council of Foreign Relations, 2022).

Our findings highlight the importance of various factors that are likely to affect future preference constellations and bargaining outcomes. For example, further war crimes and violations of international law, as with the aforementioned MH17 incidence, would be likely to increase EU resolve, whereas resolve might decrease if refugee flows from Ukraine would lead to increasing popularity of nativist challenger parties in EU member states, as was the case over Syria. On the Russian side, though this is hard to assess with any certainty, an eventual removal, death, debilitating sickness, or political weakening of Putin would likely lead to different bargaining dynamics, as Putin's immense, albeit not exclusive, role regarding elite preferences within Russia would be reduced or disappear.

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Correspondence:
Jonas J. Driedger, Department of International Security, Peace Research Institute Frankfurt (PRIF/HSFK), Baseler Straße 27-31, D-60329 Frankfurt am Main, Germany.
email: driedger@hsfk.de

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Interviews

Interview 1	High-Ranking Diplomat at the Embassy of a major European state in Kyiv, 2017.
Interview 2	High-Ranking British Ministry of Defence Official (Russia portfolio), 2018.
Interview 3	High-Ranking Estonian Ministry of Defence Official (Russia portfolio), 2018.
Interview 4	Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Official 2018.
Interview 5	Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Official 2019.
Interview 6	Senior Russian Security Expert at a Major Russian Security and Foreign Policy Think Tank, 2018.
Interview 7	Two High-Ranking German Ministry of Foreign Affairs Officials (Russia portfolio), 2019.
Interview 8	Two Russian Security Experts at a Major Russian Security and Defence Think Tank, 2018.
Interview 9	Two High-Ranking US Defence Officials (Russia portfolio), 2018.
Interview 10	Ukrainian Security Expert and Ukrainian Diplomat until 2014, 2017.
Interview 11	Western Kyiv-Based Security Expert, 2017.
Interview 12	Ukrainian Observer of Donetsk, Lugansk and Crimea, by phone, 20 December 2021.

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