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HONESTY: NOT ALWAYS THE BEST POLICY?

An analysis of the European reaction to Russia's denial of its 2014 military intervention in Ukraine.

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Introduction

On February 27, 2014, at the height of tensions between pro-Russian and pro-Euromaidan supporters in Ukraine's Crimean peninsula, masked armed men wearing unmarked military uniforms arrived in the region's capital Simferopol and took control of two government buildings, erecting barricades outside and raising the Russian flag (Higgins & Erlanger, 2014). The men, whom locals had soon nicknamed the "little green men", did not confirm their origins but were seen driving lorries with Russian number plates, carrying Russian military equipment, and speaking with Russian accents. Russian President Vladimir Putin, however, insisted that he had not yet sent any troops into Ukraine and that these troops were likely local self-defence groups resisting the new government in Kiev, who had bought their uniforms and equipment in shop (Lally & Englund, 2014; Shevchenko, 2014). It was soon clear, however, that this was no amateur effort but rather the beginnings of the first annexation of another European country's territory since the end of the Second World War. It would also mark the first phase of Russian military intervention in the country that would gradually escalate the next six months, culminating in Russian soldiers actively fighting Ukrainian forces in the east of the country in August that year.

As Russia's military intervention in Ukraine progressed from the "little green men" in Crimea to tanks crossing into the eastern Donbass region, Moscow's denials also ramped up. Not only did they reject the notion that the Russian government might be behind the military activity as in Crimea, they denied the presence of their military in Eastern Ukraine full stop. For most observers, however, these claims did not hold water. From the moment the "little green men" arrived, local and national media outlets were referring to these soldiers as "Russian invaders" and "occupiers from Russia" (quoted in Schevchenko, 2014). While the international community was largely united in condemning the annexation of Crimea, the reaction to Russian troops entering Eastern Ukraine to support and fight with separatists in August was mixed. In the West, NATO and US leaders led the charge in criticising Russia for the fighting in Eastern Ukraine. NATO, in particular, played a critical role by publishing satellite images of the Russian army crossing the border into the Donbass region (NATO, 2014). The EU's reaction to Russia's military interventions, however, was

mixed. Although its member states were willing to speak out against the annexation of Crimea, it appeared to be slow to match this tough rhetoric with sanctions. Even NATO's photographs of Russian troops in Ukraine were met with remarkable uncertainty and ambivalence in some parts of the alliance. How could the EU as a whole respond appropriately to what Roy Allison (2015, 1257) later described as "a frontal challenge to the post-Cold War European regional order", if its members could not agree among themselves as to what was actually happening?

This problem is the subject of this paper's research. In the following chapters, it will seek to understand why EU member states assumed contradictory positions on Russia's military intervention in Ukraine, and whether Moscow's denials had any effect on the divergence between member states, considering how implausible they were. The research question this paper will seek to answer, therefore, is: ***How did Russia's denial of its military intervention in Ukraine affect the EU's sanctions response?*** It is hoped that in answering this question, this paper will contribute somewhat to the recent body of literature that questions the assumption that covert action must carry plausible deniability to be effective. Instead, this school of thought highlights how "implausible deniability" can bring its own benefits for the sponsor of the action.

In order to do so, this paper will study the hypothesis that by denying its actions, Russia provided its adversaries with an excuse to not impose tough sanctions in response. In order to test for this hypothesis, the two main empirical chapters of this paper will examine the reactions of four EU member states - Germany, France, Poland and the UK - to Russia's actions in 2014, as well as their relations with Russia at that time in order to identify a possible reason why they may or may not have wanted to appear to believe Russia's implausible denials. Since the end of the Cold War, many EU member states have developed close ties with Russia. This paper will discuss some of the main links in each case that may have shaped their willingness to sanction Russia. Therefore, the subquestion that this paper will address in order to answer the main question is: *Why did some EU member states appear to accept Russia's denial of its military intervention in Ukraine when others did not?* In addition to discussing what scholars have previously said about implausible deniability, this paper will review the literature on Russian military strategy in order to see how these denials may have been part of larger concerted

hybrid warfare strategies being deployed in Ukraine, as well as the literature on EU foreign policy decision-making in order to examine how these denials may have hindered its ability to impose appropriate sanctions.

This paper will study the first six months of the Ukrainian conflict, from the arrival of the “little green men” at the end of February, 2014, to the end of August, following the publication by NATO of its satellite images. It will distinguish between two phases of Russian denials that mirror the two distinct phases of the conflict itself during this period: the first phase being the “little green men” and Russia’s use of its military in the annexation of Crimea, the second phase being its support of pro-Russian separatist forces and direct involvement in fighting in Eastern Ukraine between April and August 2014. This paper will focus on denials of military intervention rather than the other lies Moscow was accused of inventing, such as the narrative about how Russia needed to reclaim Crimea to protect ethnic Russians. This is because the denials around its military activity are more easily disproven and therefore more theoretically useful.

Context & Relevance

Regarding the second phase, it is important to highlight some of the evidence of Russian intervention that the EU’s allies were producing during this time, in order to demonstrate why the ambivalent statements of certain EU member states regarding these events raise questions regarding their motives that this paper will be addressing later. On July 23, for example, US intelligence officials announced that they had been tracking the movement of a significant amount of military equipment, including weapons, tanks and rocket launch systems by the Russian army across the Ukrainian border, as well as the training of separatist forces by the Russian army at military bases in Rostov, in south-western Russia (Euractiv, 2014a). NATO issued a press release a month later in mid-August condemning Russia for continuing to escalate its Russian military involvement in Eastern Ukraine, by employing its artillery support against Ukrainian armed forces from both Russian territory and within Ukraine (NATO, 2014). As mentioned, NATO followed this press release by issuing photographs of Russian armed forces in Ukraine helping rebels in their fight against

government forces two weeks later (NATO, 2014). As members of NATO, all four countries being examined had access to the same information.

Before this paper can begin answering the research question, it is also necessary to elaborate on the assumption implicit in it, that the EU's sanctions response was in some way weak or slow. The EU has a range of restrictive measures at its disposal that are essential tools of its Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). These measures are grouped into three tiers. The first tier consists of diplomatic sanctions, such as the suspension of EU-Russia partnership talks, the second tier covers individual or entity sanctions, including travel bans and asset freezes, and the third tier consists of economic sanctions, which are decided at the level of heads of state and government (Russell, 2016). These measures are introduced on a case-by-case basis, however Tier 3 sanctions are generally reserved for "major transgressions, such as the outright crossing of borders with military force" (Council of the European Union, 2004; Euractiv, 2014a).

It wasn't until four months after the annexation of Crimea in July, however, that the EU imposed Tier 3 sanctions on Russia. Up until this point, they had only introduced Tier 1 and 2 measures, but eventually in late July, two weeks after the downing of flight MH-17, they agreed that Russia's actions in this phase of the conflict merited these tougher measures. Interviews conducted by Helene Sjursen and Guri Rosén (2017, 30) with representatives of Member States and EU institutions show that although the MH-17 incident strengthened the commitment of member states' to sanctions, it was not the decisive factor: "instead, interviewees argued that a point of no return was reached once it was clear what had actually happened in Crimea". These Tier 3 measures were strengthened on September 12, two weeks after NATO published their satellite images. Although the divisions between EU states may not have impeded the alliance from imposing measures completely, the EU consistently lagged behind its US allies in both introducing and strengthening its sanctions as the conflict escalated. Scholars have even argued that what measures they did introduce failed to reach the most critical sectors of the Russian economy, and that any economic decline that Russia experienced at the time was, in fact, due to the collapse in global oil prices (Veebel & Markus, 2015; Ashford, 2016). A full timeline of the various measures imposed by the EU and the US during this period has been included in the Appendix.

In the following chapters, this paper will seek to understand how this came to be by examining the possible explanations within the member states themselves, and also within the information warfare strategies employed by the Russian military. In doing so, it hopes to develop some insight into how an EU member state's interests and external relations dictate how it responds to an instance of implausible deniability. Understanding more about this dynamic is particularly relevant today in light of recent developments in the Gulf of Oman, where some EU leaders seem less inclined than their US allies to blame Tehran for attacks on two oil tankers on June 13. While the US has released video evidence that it says shows Iranian forces using mines to damage the vessels, EU officials have called for "maximum restraint" until further evidence is provided. German Foreign Minister Heinko Maas, for example, has said that the German government "will take our time for this", adding that so far the evidence "has come from one side in particular" and therefore it cannot say for sure who is behind the attacks (quoted in Deutsche Welle, 2019).

Literature Review

"Implausible Deniability" Literature

Traditionally, covert action has been understood as "policy action undertaken by a government outside its own territory without official acknowledgment that most observing audiences do not know about or cannot attribute to the actor" (Carson & Yarhi-Milo, 2017, p.125). Fundamental to this orthodox understanding is the ability for the sponsor of the action to plausibly deny their actions should they be exposed by the target or other actors (Cormac & Aldrich, 2018). According to Treverton (1987), plausible deniability became dogma in the US in 1948 following attempts by the CIA to interfere in the Italian elections. Other scholars have even referred to the early years of the Cold War as "the age of plausible deniability" (Radsan, p.520). However, recent scholarship is casting doubt on this traditional understanding of covert action. Rory Cormac and Richard Aldrich argue that the received wisdom of plausible deniability and secrecy has not been subjected to sufficient critical analysis. They claim that the idea that the state must be able to deny involvement during and after the operation creates "a conceptually neat but monodimensional understanding of covert action, in which secrecy is both binary and assumed" (Cormac & Aldrich, 2018, p.478).

The work of scholars like Cormac and Aldrich has opened up a previously conceptually non-existent grey area for further examination. This paper will explore this scarcely examined grey area of deniability further by looking at the case of Russian intervention in Ukraine in 2014. It will argue that Cormac and Aldrich's concept of "implausible deniability", although originating from their study of US covert operations, applies in this recent case also (Cormac & Aldrich, 2018, p.478). In doing so, this paper will ultimately seek to understand what exactly the benefits of denying the seemingly undeniable might be. As Cormac and Aldrich write "the complexity of deniability in covert operations [...] suggests that there must be a reason - beyond self-delusion - to explain why policy-makers returned to this option time and again" (Cormac & Aldrich, 2018, p.487). The literature on the subject offers a few

possible benefits of implausible deniability, however at the core of each is the notion that it allows states to create a level of ambiguity and uncertainty regarding their actions, in spite of exposure, that can then be strategically exploited. (Cormac & Aldrich, 2018).

By blurring "accountability, the identity of actors and the constitutional implications", actors can muddy the waters between illegitimate and legitimate action ("internal disorder and external intervention, state and non-state activity"), test the responses of opponents, communicate resolve to a particular audience, generate credibility, and reduce the risk of unwanted escalation (Brown, 2013; Carson & Yarhi-Milo, 2017; Cormac & Aldrich, 2018, p.481-491; Poznansky & Joseph, 2018). The hypothesis that this paper will draw from Cormac and Aldrich's (2018, p.490) work on "exploitable ambiguity" is that Russia denied its actions in Ukraine in March 2014, however implausibly given the considerable evidence to the contrary, in order to revive and capitalise on the divisions between key EU states on the stance to be taken with Russia. By giving certain states an excuse to not punish, their denial inhibited the EU's ability to respond in a powerful, unified manner. Notably, the dominant trend in the literature, both 'traditional' and recent, is that it is US-centric and applies the theory mostly to examples of American covert operations in the twentieth-century (Corke, 2007; Daugherty, 2006; Knott, 1996; Cormac & Aldrich, 2018; Carson & Yarhi-Milo, 2018). Therefore, the hypothesised benefits to implausible deniability proposed in the literature have not yet been tested outside of a US context.

Russian Strategy Literature

This paper will argue that Russia's actions in Ukraine, and the subsequent denial thereof, can be considered a continuation of the hybrid strategies employed by Russian military forces in recent years. Therefore, in order to understand the possible benefits of this denial in the case of Ukraine, it is worth looking at how the literature has explained the rationale behind such strategies in recent years. According to Mark Galeotti (2018a), recent Russian military action has become synonymous with hybrid warfare. Although the concept of hybrid warfare has long been criticised as vague and lacking a strong empirical and historical foundation, Russia's actions in early

2014 were seen by many scholars as a clear manifestation of the kinds of hybrid tactics that they had long claimed Russia had been employing (Gawthorpe, 2018; McKew, 2017).

In a now-famous article published in 2013, Russian Chief of General Staff Valery Gerasimov described an approach to warfare that later became known as the "Gerasimov Doctrine", where the use of non-military means like propaganda and subversion are supplemented by "military means of a concealed character" to achieve political and strategic goals (quoted in McKew, 2013). When it became clear that the events in Ukraine matched what Gerasimov had described the previous year, analysts were quick to take his words as a blueprint for understanding Russian military strategy (Galeotti, 2018b). Although Mark Galleotti (2018b), who first coined the term 'Gerasimov Doctrine', subsequently expressed regret at the use of the term doctrine, arguing instead that, in reality, Russia's actions are "largely opportunistic, fragmented, even sometimes contradictory", Gerasimov himself later openly endorsed the use of hybrid tactics by Russian military forces in March 2019 (Kramer, 2019). The 2014 Russian military doctrine also emphasised the importance of information operations to Russia (Embassy of the Russian Federation to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, 2015).

According to Uri Friedman (2014), Russia employs hybrid warfare tactics to create ambiguity around their actions. Andrew Gawthorpe (2018) explains that this calculated ambiguity, in turn, can be beneficial for two reasons: first, they try to obscure their true intentions to make it harder for adversaries to take appropriate countermeasures, and secondly they do so to be able to plausibly deny responsibility for their operation. In the case of Ukraine, this paper will argue that although Moscow obscured its intentions in order to hinder its adversaries' ability to retaliate appropriately, the plausibility of this denial was less important. In the Soviet Union, the strategy to achieve this end was called "reflexive control" and scholars of Russian military techniques argue that it is still in use today (Thomas, 2004; Snegovaya, 2015; Iasiello, 2017, 54). Timothy L. Thomas defines reflexive control as "a means of conveying to a partner or an opponent specially prepared information to incline him to voluntarily make the predetermined decision desired by the initiator of the action". Emilio Iasiello (2016, 56) argues that Moscow continually denied the involvement of its military in Ukraine in order to "de-escalate the crisis while increasing the chaos".

Maria Snegovaya (2015, 7) adds, however, that Russia would not have been able to keep the EU and US “largely passive” had Western leaders been “determined to stop Russian aggression and punish or reverse Russian violations of international law”. Snegovaya’s ‘passive’ label might appear harsh given that the EU managed to agree on a wide range of sanctions against Russia in the end. However, the doubts raised by EU leaders as to Russia’s actions, and the delayed responses that followed, certainly suggest that this was an example of Russian reflexive control at work.

EU Foreign Policy Literature

This paper will analyse why certain EU states may have been receptive to this form of information warfare in later chapters. First, in order to understand how Russia’s denials might have impacted the EU’s ability to coordinate an effective response, it is worth examining how the intergovernmental nature of the EU’s CFSP shapes how it can respond to crises like that which occurred in 2014. Iasiello (2017, 57) says that Russia extracted a more favourable response from the EU by “operating within Western decision-making loops”. How does decision-making work in EU foreign policy and sanctions policy? What challenges does it face that Russia may have targeted?

For alliances like the EU that are required to govern across a wide range of policy areas, successful cooperation can be challenging, and of the many positions for states to harmonise on, the alliance’s position in relation to adversaries can be one of the most problematic. “The principal common interest in any alliance”, Snyder (1990, p.113) explains, “is holding it together, the principal source of conflict is the stance to be taken toward the adversary or adversaries." Importantly, whether a state can afford to abandon the alliance’s stance towards the adversary correlates to their dependence on the alliance, their own strength, and their relationship with the adversary (Snyder, 1990). Some scholars have argued that the development of the EU’s CFSP enhanced the capacity of member states to act collectively on matters of foreign and security policy in a substantial way (Orenstein & Kelemen, 2016; Howorth, 2012). Others, however, have claimed that the EU’s efforts in foreign policy are characterised more by disaggregation than cooperation (Karolewski & Cross, 2016; Orenstein & Kelemen, 2016).

Over the past 30 years, various foreign policy crises have been claimed as evidence by both sides of the debate. The defection of Germany in 1991 from the EU position on the recognition of Yugoslav successor states is said to have diminished the EU's leverage over these states' policies on minority rights, while the absence of any defection from the common stance in 2001 at the outbreak of ethnic conflict in Macedonia is hailed as having helped prevent civil war in the country (Crawford, 1996; Wagner, 2003). Later, the ability of the French Presidency of the Council to broker a ceasefire between Georgia and Russia in 2008 is also cited as an important example of the EU's ability to act effectively abroad. Evidently, foreign policy cooperation within the EU is not impossible. What explains the variation in its success? The literature on the CFSP highlights a number of factors that can hinder cooperation that are worth considering when examining the case of Ukraine. Some scholars have emphasised the impact of long-standing divisions within the alliance when trying to explain instances of ineffectiveness in foreign policy. Christopher Bickerton (2011, 7) argues that because the CFSP is "constituted out of considerable institutional rivalries and conflicts", it cannot prevent individual states from having their own contradictory stances on these issues and therefore cannot act in a unified, and thus effective, manner. Some of the main divisions within the alliance, according to Bickerton (2011), are between what Donald Rumsfeld called 'old' and 'new' European states, between Atlanticists and Europeanists, and between those who are for and against close ties to their Russian neighbour.

Wolfgang Wagner (2003) notes, however, that these divisions have not impeded the EU's trade competencies to the same extent. He argues that their significance in foreign policy can be explained by the structure of the CFSP. Whereas the EU has long since delegated negotiating power on matters of foreign trade to the EU Commission, CFSP decision-making is intergovernmental and requires unanimity, with every state given the right to veto a decision. This structure, Wagner argues, often deprives the EU of a unified and powerful voice like the one with which it conducts international trade negotiations. In addition to these structural factors, Wagner highlights two realities of the EU's foreign policy activities that explain how these divisions can affect the alliances ability to act: first, EU foreign policy activity is dominated by crisis management and second, this crisis management is a fast coordination game, whereby member states share a common interest in influencing

international affairs but often disagree over the contents of the common position to be held, yet need to reach one urgently given the considerable time pressure present. Given that many member states hold traditional national positions and long-established patterns of support on key CFSP issues, coming to a unanimous agreement quickly can be difficult (Wagner, 2003). Even when member states manage to cooperate on foreign policy matters, it is often claimed that these inherent handicaps mean that what is agreed is on the basis of the 'lowest common denominator' (Nuttal, 2000; Hyde-Price, 2006; Bickerton, 2016). While this paper will analyse the impact of these internal obstacles on shaping the EU's response to Ukraine, it will also consider how external factors, such as Russia's denial of its actions, may have influenced the response directly, or indirectly by exacerbating these internal issues.

Before progressing to the analysis of the four countries, it is important to note that not all scholars agree that the intergovernmental structure of the CFSP precludes the ability of particular states to influence decision-making. Although the right to veto means that larger countries are not be able to enforce compliance (Sjursen & Rosén, 2017), in reality, Stefan Lehne (2012) claims, larger countries like those studied in this paper can influence the decision-making process. "The process of making foreign policy in the EU", Lehne explains, "is currently based on an unwritten bargain between the bigger countries and the rest. The bigger countries, which own the major share of the EU's assets in this area, play an informal leadership role in shaping EU foreign policy". Some of this influence, Lehne explains, is due to the fact that only large states have the capacity "to assess a situation and suggest a policy line" (Lehne, 2012, 3).

While we cannot prove empirically whether bigger states have greater bargaining power or clout regarding the development of policy, there is no formal mechanism for them to force their allies to take a particular action. Ultimately, Helene Sjursen and Guri Rosén (2017, 22) argue, "a collective decision on what to do must come about voluntarily". Sjursen and Rosén argue that whatever action the EU took against Russia in 2014 did not come about as a result of any one state's efforts, nor as a result of allies balancing against a prevailing threat as realist scholars claim (Mouritzen, 2017). Instead, they claim that the EU's cooperation on sanctions came about as a result of a sense of commitment to two norms: the principles of

sovereignty and self-determination. In this constructivist perspective, they argue that member states were driven by a collective sense of commitment to these principles, even if they were not necessarily concerned about the territorial integrity of the EU itself, because they underpinned the policy structure that they relied on (Sjursen & Rosén, 2017).

As this paper will later show, the commitment to sovereignty and the rule of international law is particularly obvious in the rhetoric of the EU's political leaders following the annexation of Crimea. Although Sjursen and Rosén's theory on normative convergence is useful for explaining how the EU managed to reach agreement on imposing sanctions at first, this paper seeks to go beyond this yes-no assessment of sanctions cooperation. It will examine how the EU fared when some member states started calling for sanctions to be strengthened as the conflict progressed; sanctions that would pit the desire to protect these norms against the significant material interests of individual states. In essence, it will assess whether the EU's response was greater than the 'lowest common denominator' among its member states positions, and how Russia's denials affected its ability to achieve this.

Methodology

In order to answer the research question and subquestion, this paper will conduct a structured, focused comparison of four EU member states: Germany, France, Poland, and the UK. This structured, focused comparison will analyse two classes of cases. The first class will be those countries whose response showed a clear instance of what this paper will term 'implausible doubt' concerning Russia's actions, and the second class will be those countries that expressed no doubt in this regard. The term 'implausible doubt' is used to describe when a country appears to doubt the facts of a situation, in spite of concrete evidence of these facts. Each class of cases will be covered in its own chapter. Before conducting the analysis of the key variables for each country, both chapters will first outline the country's response to Russia's denials to test for this doubt.

For each class of cases, this paper will try to identify the possible factors that dictated whether or not they expressed 'implausible doubt' regarding Russia's actions, and thus their stance on imposing Tier 3 sanctions on Russia. In order to do so, all four countries will be compared across three broad areas of relations with Russia in order to see how these variables differ between each case and what conclusions can be drawn from this. These three areas are: economic relations and energy interdependence with Russia, how Russia is viewed in domestic politics and public opinion, and diplomatic relations with and foreign policy towards Russia, both current and historical. It is hoped that the scope of these three topics will be sufficiently broad to cover the most important aspects of each state's relations with Russia while still allowing for a focused comparison between the cases. However, should the literature in each case cite an important factor that falls outside of these areas, it too will be assessed. By looking at what ties each country had with Russia, this paper will essentially aim to identify what each country may have had to lose from imposing stronger sanctions. This paper will consult a wide range of primary and secondary sources to do so, including government statements and media reports from that time, as well as policy papers and academic articles that examine each country's relations with Russia from the Cold War to 2014.

As George and Bennet (2005, 210) explain, the purpose of a structured, focused comparison is “to study historical experience in ways that would yield useful generic knowledge of important foreign policy problems”. Therefore, it is hoped that this method will be helpful for understanding the foreign policy problem looked at in this paper, namely why EU member states reacted differently to Russia’s denials in spite of the fact that they all had the same information. Ultimately, the objective of this research is to reach theoretically useful conclusions about the overarching issue of how implausible deniability, as a strategy of Russian information warfare, might affect the EU’s ability to use sanctions.

Given the constraints of this paper, it is not possible to compare all 28 member states of the EU in the necessary detail. In order to reach a conclusion about how the EU’s CFSP copes with implausible denial, it is necessary to compare member states that are of a roughly similar size and strength. As discussed in the literature review, whether more powerful states have a greater influence than smaller states on the EU’s CFSP decision-making is contested. Therefore, selecting larger countries of similar influence should allow for this variable to be kept as constant as possible. Although Poland is not normally considered in the same league as the other three countries in terms of foreign policy influence, its unique history and geographical location (it borders both Ukraine and the Russian province of Kaliningrad) gave it added leverage in the Ukraine crisis. Poland’s elevated importance in this case was evident when it was one of three EU member states to be called in by former Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych to negotiate a peace deal in February 2014, along with France and Germany (Easton, 2014). The UK too was considered to have played a particularly important role within the EU in pushing for a firm response (Sjursen & Rosén, 2017). Furthermore, all four countries are members of NATO. This is significant because NATO published the images of the Russian military in Eastern Ukraine which evidenced what Moscow had long been denying. As members of the alliance, all four countries had the same information at the same time, even if their acknowledgement of the information varied.

In addition to being confined to examining only four countries, there are a number of other limitations in terms of sources that must be noted. Previous studies of implausible deniability that have looked at twentieth century US covert operations have benefitted from declassified documents which provide a level of insight into the

true intentions of Ronald Reagan or Jimmy Carter that is not available for Vladimir Putin. However, unlike these earlier studies, this paper's conclusions about the benefits of implausible deniability will be drawn from the perspective of the target audience; it will focus less on what caused Russia to act in this way, but instead on how the EU member states reacted to the publicly available evidence of Russia's covert operations. Arguably a more significant limitation, therefore, is the absence of transcripts for the EU Council meetings where sanctions were discussed. While it would be interesting to see what reasoning the states which expressed implausible doubt gave in these debates, the objective of this paper is to understand why these countries adopted the divergent positions that they took into these meetings, and how exacerbating these divisions may have allowed Russia to weaken the EU's sanctions response. This angle should therefore allow this research to produce theoretically useful conclusions in spite of these source limitations.

Chapter 1: Germany & France

Germany

Reaction to Russian denials

Phase 1: Annexation of Crimea & 'little green men'

In its first statement on Crimea on March 3, the German Federal government called out Russia's "intervention" as a breach of international law while underlining its support for Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity (Federal Government, 2014a). Chancellor Angela Merkel's first policy statement on the situation in Ukraine on March 13 discussed broad topics such as globalisation and European integration but made no mention of the involvement of Russian troops in Crimea, as the UK government had done 9 days earlier (Federal Government, 2014b). Instead, Merkel called for the need for patience in resolving the conflict and for an international observer mission to be sent to Ukraine to gain an "objective picture" of the situation. It was only on March 19 that the government labelled the intervention an annexation and condemned the involvement of Russian military troops - two weeks after the UK had done the same (Federal Government, 2014c).

Phase 2: Direct involvement of Russian military in conflict in Eastern Ukraine

Germany's response to the second phase of Russian denials was its most glaring instance of implausible doubt. On August 28, the same day that the UK and Poland condemned the presence of Russian troops in Eastern Ukraine and called for international action, Merkel spoke of "reports of an increased presence of Russian soldiers" in Ukraine, without saying that there were troops actually on the ground (quoted in Akkoc & Winch, 2014; Reuters, 2014). The following day, a government spokesperson repeated this ambiguous line, saying that Germany wanted an explanation from Russia "regarding the reports of repeated violations of the Ukrainian border", while reiterating Germany's commitment from March to strengthening

sanctions if it was clear that Russia had escalated the conflict (Federal Government, 2014d).

Analysis

Summary of position on sanctions

Analyses of Germany's initial policy response to the Russian military intervention in Ukraine have been mixed. Some have praised Merkel's coalition government for swiftly and firmly condemning Russia's intervention as a violation of international law, and setting an example for other European countries (see Forsberg, 2016; Daehnhardt & Handl, 2018). Others have been more critical, claiming that the response was "reluctant" and "soft" on Russia, accusing Germany of holding back on appropriately tough measures in order to protect their economic interests (Sjursen & Rosen, 2017, 28; Kundnani, 2015, 111; Szabo, 2014). Germany's approach, however, was consistent with its foreign policy norms throughout the crisis: before condemning Russia's actions, Merkel sought to open a dialogue with Russia and to give Putin a chance to explain what was happening before proceeding with stronger sanctions. Merkel was quick to denounce the occupation of Crimea by the "little green men" as a violation of international law, and soon tried to persuade Putin to cancel the referendum in Crimea (Forsberg, 2016). When Putin not only allowed the referendum to go ahead but also subsequently annexed Crimea, Merkel advocated for Tier 1 and 2 sanctions, but she made it clear that Tier 3 sanctions would not be considered unless Russia escalated the conflict (Forsberg, 2016). Once Russia's actions reached this threshold in August, however, Merkel was reluctant to acknowledge the escalation and impose the more targeted economic measures that it had committed to. A variety of structural and agency-based explanations have been suggested for Germany's response throughout the conflict which will be reviewed below.

Economic Relations and Energy Dependence

Several commentators have claimed that Germany was reluctant to impose tough economic sanctions on Russia because of the negative effects this would have on German industry and the country's oil and gas supply. According to Stephen F. Szabo, Germany's defines its national interest in economic terms: "business and

finance, especially export-oriented commerce, play a dominant role in shaping foreign policy" (Szabo, 2014, 119). Therefore, he argues, the extent to which Germany sought to impose sanctions on Russia depended on how this course of action would shape its economic interests. Since the end of the Cold War, Szabo contends, Germany's relations with Russia have been 90% economics. Germany began exporting more to Russia, while hundreds of thousands of Russians emigrated to Germany, and, crucially, Russian energy companies started to power growing German industries.

But how interdependent were these two countries in 2014? In terms of trade, only 3.2% of German exports went to Russia, and only 4% of German imports came from there (Frick & Carmichael, 2014). German banks had €17 billion of loans to Russian companies and individuals, half of the exposure of French banks (Piliu, 2014). However, Russo-German energy relations tell a different story. For a number of years leading up to the crisis, the European Union as a whole was more dependent on Russia for its energy supply than any other country (Fuchs, 2016). Germany, in particular, epitomised this trend, receiving 38% of its oil and 36% of its gas from Russian companies in 2013. This was compounded by Merkel's decision in 2011 to phase out nuclear power which actually increased Germany's reliance on Russian gas in the short term (Kundnani, 2015). Clearly, Germany was vulnerable to any interruption in the supply of Russian gas. Although it had begun to take on the mammoth task of diversifying its energy supply and transitioning towards renewable energy sources in 2011, such efforts were hugely costly and would take years to come to fruition (Fuchs, 2016).

Meanwhile, Merkel's EU counterparts were expressing concern about the consequences of Germany's dependency for the EU's ability to act effectively against Russian aggression. On March 10, Donald Tusk, the Prime Minister of Poland, said in a news conference that he had no doubt that "Germany's dependence on Russian gas may effectively decrease Europe's sovereignty", and that he would talk to Merkel "about how Germany is able to correct some economic actions so that dependence on Russian gas doesn't paralyse Europe when it needs...a decisive stance" (quoted in Reuters, 2014). If so many EU countries are dependent on Russian energy, he added, "we will not be able to efficiently fend off potential aggressive steps by Russia in the future". According to Hans Kundnani (2015, 113), Tusk's concern was

ultimately justified: German energy dependency “caused Berlin to shy away from sanctions”, blunting the EU’s ability to take appropriate measures.

Considering the fairly limited economic and trade interdependence between the two countries, this paper finds that Kundnani and Szabo’s ‘Germany Inc.’ conception of the country’s behaviour in international relations offers too narrow a lens to understand its response fully. However, Germany’s reliance on Russian energy also does not explain its behaviour, particularly in the second phase of the conflict. While this dependency arguably rendered an oil and gas embargo, similar to the ban the EU placed on Iran in 2014, too costly, it does not explain its apparent reluctance to impose Tier 3 economic sanctions in the second phase of the conflict. In general, a high level of energy dependency has proven to be a poor indicator of a country’s enthusiasm for sanctions. Estonia, for example, one of the most hawkish EU states according to a study by Open Europe, received 100% of its gas from Russia (De Micco, 2014; Open Europe, 2014a). Hungary, on the other hand, one of the most outspoken countries against sanctioning Russia, received 80%, more than twice as much as Germany (De Micco, 2014). Therefore, it is likely that there were more significant pressures at the forefront of Germany’s leaders’ minds.

Germany Foreign Policy Towards Russia

Several scholars have emphasised the constraining effect of a long-standing position of engagement with Russia in German foreign policy, as well as domestic political factors, in shaping Germany’s actions. Regarding German foreign policy towards Russia, Merkel’s preference throughout this period for negotiation and diplomacy instead of tougher sanctions could be understood as a continuation of a decades-old approach to dealing with its former occupier. In an interview with the German newspaper Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung on March 15, Merkel said that although Russia’s annexation of Crimea was a return to nineteenth-century thinking of global politics in terms of spheres of influence, there was no need for a fundamental change from the existing ‘Ostpolitik’ approach, insisting instead that the partnership with Russia would be continued (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 2014). The Ostpolitik, or “Eastern Policy”, approach to Russia began in West Germany under Chancellor Willy Brandt (Kundnani, 2015). Brandt believed that forging closer political and economic links with Russia could eventually lead to German reunification. After the Cold War,

this policy of economic and political engagement was expanded further, in particular by the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) (Kundnani, 2015).

Imposing a range of tough sanctions on Russia, therefore, would have marked a departure from its traditional Ostpolitik stance, in which Germany had sought to play the role of “Russia’s chief interlocutor in Europe” rather than its adversary (Forsberg, 2016, 36). Whether Germany’s response in 2014 deviated from Ostpolitik-style thinking is debated. Daehnhardt and Handl (2018, 450) argue that because “Moscow destroyed the capital of mutual trust which Germany had painstakingly been developing for decades”, Germany’s political class now saw Russia as a threat to international security order and peace, which breached the core ‘never again war’ foreign policy principle. Tuomas Forsberg, on the other hand, explains that journalists and analysts had been claiming that Germany had begun to abandon its traditional Ostpolitik position in international relations since 2012, declaring instead that Russo-German relations had entered a new ice age, or ‘Frostpolitik’ (Neukirch & Schepp, 2012; Forsberg, 2016). Forsberg (2016) and Kundnani (2015), however, dispute this decline. Although Merkel strongly condemned the annexation, Forsberg argues that Germany’s preference for diplomacy and negotiation over sanctions did not indicate a major shift in foreign policy.

Domestic Politics and Opinion

A variety of positions regarding Russia were visible in German society and politics in 2014. According to a YouGov poll carried out in April 2014, 43% of the German population supported the imposition of trade sanctions on Russia, while 36% were opposed, the highest of any country polled (YouGov, 2014). When asked where their sympathies lay, 32% said with the new Ukrainian government, 10% with Russia, and 53% were ambivalent (YouGov, 2014). Germany’s domestic politics too have long been unique among Western European countries in terms of attitudes towards Russia. Pro-Russian sentiment is not the preserve of far-right parties as is the case in France or Italy, for example, but also of more mainstream parties. For example, the reaction of the Social Democrats, one of the members of the coalition government in 2014, to the situation in Ukraine revealed a sympathetic instinct towards Russia. Most SPD members, Forsberg (2016) explains, were reluctant to impose sanctions and hoped that they could eventually be lifted when Russia accepted the result of the

Ukrainian presidential elections in May. Compared to their Christian Democratic Union (CDU) coalition partners, they were less likely to criticise Russia openly, pushed for a resolution that was more accommodating of Russia's perspectives, and were generally "more willing to follow the cooperative Ostpolitik tradition in German foreign policy" (Forsberg, 2016, 38). Many former SPD politicians publicly backed Russia and criticised the West, including former Chancellors Schröder and Helmut Schmidt, with the latter calling sanctions against Russia "stupid" in March 2014 (quoted in Zeit Online, 2014; Forsberg, 2016).

Until May 2014, Foreign Minister Steinmeier, himself a former leader of the Social Democrats, was considerably more cautious about imposing any level of sanctions than Merkel. By July, however, Steinmeier's position largely aligned with that of the Chancellor's (Forsberg, 2016). Sjursen and Rosén (2017) have argued that the primary obstacle to Germany not taking a harder line in these first few months was, in fact, this internal division between the Chancellor and Foreign Minister. Another prominent agency-based explanation for Germany's reticence is the influence of business interest groups. This explanation, rooted in Szabo's understanding of policy being driven by economic interest, posits that powerful lobbyists for Germany successfully dissuaded the coalition government from imposing tough economic sanctions on Russia in order to protect domestic industry interests. However, most of these lobby groups had come to accept sanctions by July (Kundnani, 2015). Thus their position mirrored that of many others in the German political establishment, who came to accept sanctions at the point when it no longer appeared reasonable nor sensible to continue to publicly oppose the measures being pushed at the EU-level.

France

Reaction to Russian denials

Phase 1: Annexation of Crimea & 'little green men'

Like Germany, France did not shy away from denouncing Russia's intervention in Crimea as a violation of Ukrainian sovereignty and thus of international law. Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius labelled it as such in an interview with French radio on March 3 (Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, 2014a). However, he was less keen to acknowledge the involvement of Russian military personnel on the peninsula. When asked whether Russia's actions constituted a military intervention, Fabius dodged the question and simply replied that "Unfortunately Crimea is, de facto, under Russian control". Two days later, however, he explained that it was now clear that Russia had sent troops to Crimea; "that's called a military intervention" he added (quoted in Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, 2014a).

Phase 2: Direct involvement of Russian military in conflict in Eastern Ukraine

On August 28, Hollande, like his German counterpart, did not challenge Russia's implausible claim that its military was not in Eastern Ukraine, despite concrete evidence from NATO to the contrary. "If there is evidence that Russian soldiers are present on Ukrainian soil," Hollande said, "it would be intolerable and unacceptable" (quoted in 20 Minutes, 2014). As France's EU allies were denouncing the presence of such troops in Ukraine, Hollande only went so far as to call on Russia to respect Ukraine's sovereignty and cease its support of separatist fighters. Hollande also mentioned that if it were to be proven true, France would push for sanctions to be maintained or even strengthened. Despite the fact that NATO had already published such evidence, Hollande continued to champion the diplomatic approach and a "deepening of relations with Russia" (quoted in 20 Minutes, 2014).

Analysis

Summary of position on sanctions

An analysis of the statements, press briefings and interviews given in early March 2014 by Hollande and Fabius show a very similar initial response to Germany. While Fabius was keen to stress that Russia was “a friend, a long-standing partner of France”, he assured on March 3 that sanctions would be imposed if Russia proved unwilling to de-escalate and come to a solution (Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, 2014a). On March 6, Hollande also acknowledged that imposing sanctions would be a possibility, but he urged Russia to “open up the path of dialogue and finally enable Ukraine to be able to choose its destiny” to avoid this scenario. Fabius and Hollande favoured Tier 1 and 2 measures initially, but acknowledged that if Russia were to take further military action then stronger measures would have to be considered (Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, 2014a). Like their German neighbours, the French government advocated for dialogue and diplomacy with Russia throughout the crisis. However, unlike Germany, this was not a purely normative preference. As this section will discuss, French leaders publicly expressed concern at the prospect of heightening sanctions to a level that would compromise defence equipment contracts between EU member states and Russia.

Economic Relations and Energy Dependence

France’s economy and energy supply was even less exposed to the potential blowback of economic sanctions than Germany’s. France’s exports to Russia amounted to €7.6 billion (1.8% of total exports) in 2013, compared to €36 billion (3.2% of total exports) for Germany (Giumelli, 2014), making Russia its 10th biggest trading partner (Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, 2014b). These exports were largely in the aviation, pharmaceutical, perfume, and automotive industries (Piliu, 2014). The sector of the economy that French commentators feared would be most exposed was the banking sector, as French banks had around €36.5 billion of loans to Russian companies and individuals (Piliu, 2014). Yet, for comparison, French loans to Italy in 2014 - where its banks had most exposure - amounted to €351 billion (Piliu, 2014). Furthermore, Russia is a relatively small player in the French energy sector. In 2013, France was the largest energy producer in the EU, producing 17.1% of the EU’s total energy, and was the highest producer of nuclear energy and third

largest of renewable energy (Bluszcz, 2016). Its imports of natural gas and oil were also highly diversified, with only 16% and 7% coming from Russia respectively (Lopez, 2014). This reduced dependency on Russia for energy distinguished France and meant that it did not share the fundamental concerns of Poland or Germany around energy supply post-sanctions.

Mistral Warship Contract

In light of this economic and energy independence from Russia, why did France not "signal the beginning of a stampede" and push for tougher punitive measures from the start (Lowe, 2014)? The most cited reason in media and academic reports for their preference for the diplomacy route instead of Tier 3 sanctions is their controversial warship deal with Russia (see Bond, 2014; Lopez, 2014; Lowe, 2014; Piliu 2014b). The deal to sell two Mistral helicopter carriers worth €1.2 billion to Russia was signed in 2011 by Hollande's predecessor, Nicolas Sarkozy, in spite of significant opposition from the US and other NATO allies (Willsher, 2015). In the first few days of the crisis when EU sanctions were first touted, French leaders suddenly found themselves defending the deal once again. When asked in a radio interview on March 3 whether France would suspend its arms contracts with Russia as part of the first round of EU sanctions being discussed, Fabius insisted that they were "not at that stage yet" (Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, 2014a). Hollande and Fabius continued to rebuff suggestions of cancelling the deal over the next few months as the crisis escalated and Russia's military involvement in eastern Ukraine became more blatant. In response to the mounting pressure, Jean-Yves Drian, the French Defence Minister, tried to downplay the deal in May by claiming that they were delivering unarmed "civilian hulls" (Gordon, 2014).

The pressure exerted on France to pull out of the deal, which would create one thousand jobs in France (RFI, 2014), noticeably intensified after the MH-17 incident in July. On July 21, UK Prime Minister David Cameron, who had previously called on his EU partners to stop selling military equipment to Russia, said that proceeding with the sale of warships to Russia after the downing of MH-17 would be "unthinkable" in Britain (quoted in Euractiv, 2014a). That evening, Hollande disregarded Cameron's slight and confirmed that the first warship would be delivered as planned in October (Euractiv, 2014b). Whether the second Mistral would be delivered, Hollande explained, would "depend on Russia's attitude" but "for the time being, a level of

sanctions has not been decided on that would prevent this delivery" (quoted in Euractiv, 2014b). A French government official interviewed that day by Euractiv revealed that France was in no rush to impose Tier 3 sanctions at this point. This official explained that for the delivery of the second ship to be cancelled, new sanctions would have to be decided at the level of EU heads of state and government, and that though EU foreign ministers were due to meet the following day to discuss further sanctions in the wake of the MH-17 incident, specific measures to target the provision of defence equipment to Russia were not in the pipeline; "for now, France wants the sanctions to be financial, targeted and quick" (quoted in Euractiv, 2014b).

French Foreign Policy Towards Russia

France's bilateral relations with Russia had been relatively harmonious since the end of the Cold War. Pernille Rieker (2017) has described France's approach to Russia since the Cold War as a constant balancing act similar to Germany's, whereby it has sought to foster closer ties with Russia without harming its existing Western alliances, a challenge clearly exemplified by the Mistral warship deal. The pendulum swung furthest towards Russia in the early 2000s as former President Jacques Chirac fostered a warm relationship with Putin, and in doing so cemented his reputation among Western allies "as a one-man wrecking ball, aimed at France's international reputation" (Financial Times, 2006). France's rapprochement towards Russia continued under Chirac's successor, Nicolas Sarkozy, who, during France's presidency of the Council of the EU, negotiated an end to the 2008 Russo-Georgian on terms that were criticised as being more favourable to Russia than Georgia (van Herpen, 2010).

The approach towards Russia taken during the resolution of the conflict in Georgia marked the beginning of "Sarkozy's new honeymoon with Russian leadership", according to Marcel van Herpen (2015), that culminated in the signing of the Mistral warship deal in 2011. The 2013 French White Paper on Defence and National Security, however, reveals a return to the delicate balancing act described by Rieker, as areas of cooperation in Mali and Afghanistan, as well as the provision of military equipment, needed to be balanced with disagreements regarding Syria. Nevertheless, cooperation with Russia remained a key political objective (Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, 2014c).

Domestic Politics and Opinion

A similar mix of stances towards Russia was visible in the French political sphere during this period. In the European elections in May 2014, Marine Le Pen's Eurosceptic Front National party triumphed, topping the polls with nearly 25% of the popular vote (Galiero, 2014). Le Pen's pro-Russian stance and admiration for Putin was well-known. In an interview given a week before the European elections in May 2014, she advocated fostering an alliance between France and Russia instead of its existing relationship with NATO's command (Daley, 2014). Later in 2017, she would go on to say that she did not believe that Russia's annexation of Crimea was in any way illegal. An April 2014 poll by YouGov on public opinion in Europe towards the situation in Ukraine also highlights a significant pro-Russian trend in French society at the time. Of the countries polled, opposition in France towards imposing trade sanctions on Russia was second only to Germany at 31% (41% in favour) (YouGov, 2014). However, when asked about where their sympathies lay, the French public's answers were marked by ambivalence: only 6% sympathised with the Russian government, 10% with the new Ukrainian government, and 60% said neither - the highest of any country polled (YouGov, 2014).

Conclusion

In many ways, France and Germany's responses mirrored one another. In both cases, immediate condemnation of Russia's actions in Crimea soon mellowed into calls for a diplomatic solution. However, their leaders also made it clear that were Russia to escalate the conflict, they would be willing to agree to tougher measures. When this time came, however, they hesitated and appeared to doubt what was plainly visible to their allies. Both countries had enjoyed long periods of cooperation with Russia since the end of the Cold War that had survived earlier Russian infractions, with both preferring to make amends with Russia than to punish it. While the motivating factor for their implausible doubt of Russia's intervention in late August 2014 cannot be conclusively proven, it would appear that their reluctance to sever diplomatic ties with Russia and undo years of progress was fundamental.

This was particularly true of Germany, whose deeply-rooted Ostpolitik stance reflected the profound links to Russia within Germany society and politics. Although not insignificant, it is unlikely that commercial interests alone, and their lobbies, played a decisive role in deterring the German government from sanctions. While Germany's energy dependency on Russia made imposing an oil and gas embargo incredibly costly, it does not explain their general sluggishness with other economic sanctions. The French government, on the other hand, seems to have been highly sensitive to the potential material losses also at stake. Hollande and his government official's comments about the nature of EU sanctions in the wake of the MH-17 crisis in July certainly suggest a reluctance to ramp up the severity of the existing sanctions to a level that would jeopardise Europe's most lucrative defence equipment contract with Russia.

Chapter 2: Poland & The United Kingdom

Poland

Reaction to Russian Denials

Phase 1: Annexation of Crimea & 'little green men'

The Polish government's first statement on Crimea on March 7 called for "stopping provocative movements of troops on the Crimean Peninsula", while appealing to Russia to respect Ukraine's sovereignty and international law without specifically addressing the presence of unidentified soldiers. The statement warns that "any decisions that will be taken in the coming days, including of military nature, could have irreparable consequences for the international order" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2014).

Phase 2: Direct involvement of Russian military in conflict in Eastern Ukraine

On August 28, Polish Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski expressed no ambiguity regarding the presence of Russian soldiers in Ukrainian territory, though he offered little detail on the nature of Russia's military involvement. He denounced the deployment of Russian troops in Eastern Ukraine as an "aggression" and called for immediate international action (quoted in BBC, 2014).

Analysis

Summary of position on sanctions

Although it was still more reliant on multilateralism to be effective than the other countries in this study, Poland's unique political and geographical relationship with both Russia and Ukraine meant that it was a key player in shaping the EU's response (Thornhill & Cienski, 2014). Its response was also the most hawkish out of all EU member states, according to Open Europe's Dove/Hawk scale, which plots where member states stood on sanctions against Russia (Open Europe, 2014a). Poland's

Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski was particularly outspoken throughout this period, consistently advocating for a hard line to be taken against Russia by the EU. From the beginning, Sikorski pushed for punitive measures to be taken against Russia, regardless of the cost the EU member states would incur: “Sanctions are hard and costly and double-edged,” he said, “but they are cheaper than the consequences of war between Ukraine and Russia” (quoted in Thornhill & Cienski, 2014). In an interview with German newspaper Der Spiegel on March 10 2014, Sikorski openly criticised Poland’s EU allies for the slow and inadequate response, saying “The same thing applies to the Union as to the Vatican: God's mills grind slowly but surely” (quoted in Der Spiegel, 2014). Sikorski certainly did not share Germany and France’s view of using diplomatic means in response to Russian aggression: “I have always supported working together with Russia when it is possible and when it serves the interests of both sides. But what we are dealing with right now is an attempt to change borders with the use of force. A course of action like that demands a clear response” (quoted in Der Spiegel, 2014).

Polish Security Concerns

To understand what shaped the combative character of Poland’s response, it is necessary to consider the importance of history and geography in shaping their relationship with the main actors in the conflict. Unlike Germany or France, Poland’s attitude towards Russia’s military intervention in Ukraine was driven by security concerns. The fact that Russia showed clear disregard for the borders of a former Soviet Union state by violating Ukraine’s territorial integrity triggered acute security concerns in Poland. Although Polish leaders would not realistically have feared a similar invasion of their country, were Russia to have taken more territory in Ukraine, they could have envisaged a scenario whereby Poland would find itself “playing the role of a border country in some sort of a new Cold War” (Chafuen, 2014). To understand why Russia’s actions were perceived as a security threat by Poland, it is also worth considering Putin’s strategic ambitions in Central and Eastern Europe. As Stefan Bielanski (2017) writes, one of the ultimate goals of Putin’s foreign policy is “a radical change of the current spatial design of Central and East Europe with the intention of rebuilding Moscow's direct or indirect power over these territories”. As a Polish diplomat told the Guardian newspaper in August 2015, “in 2014, with the Russian annexation of Crimea and the Russian assault in the Donbass, the unthinkable became reality” (quoted in Nougayrède, 2015). Because of these

growing security fears, the Polish government wanted Eastern European borders to be treated as sacrosanct, and any violation of them as an intolerable infraction deserving of tough punitive measures in response.

Furthermore, as Sikorski highlighted in an interview with the Guardian newspaper in 2015, Poland's precarious geography and location made it "a fundamentally vulnerable country because it has no natural barriers against more powerful countries in the east and west, which was a curse in our history" (quoted in Nougayrède, 2015). As a largely flat plain without any large mountain ranges or rivers situated between two of Europe's major powers with a history of trying to achieve regional dominance, Poland has suffered greatly at the hands of its neighbours in the past (Vignoe, 2015). The invasion of Poland by both Russia and Germany in 1939, sixteen days apart, epitomises the country's struggles which have led to Poland being hyper-sensitive about geopolitical events like the annexation of Crimea. As the smaller power, Poland is reliant on its EU and NATO allies for support to counter Russian aggression. This relative weakness, according to Sandy Vingoe (2015), led the Polish government to particularly vocal in calling for tougher measures against Russia throughout this period.

Polish Foreign Policy Towards Russia

The hangover of Poland's traumatic history with Russia has made a harmonious relationship between the two countries difficult, though not impossible. According to statements made by Sikorski in August 2014, the Polish government had made considerable efforts in recent years to improving Polish-Russian cooperation, citing the introduction of local border traffic with the Kaliningrad province as the most notable example (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2014). Another significant marker of how relations had improved in recent years was the visit of Vladimir Putin to the Katyn forest in 2010, where Soviet secret police murdered thousands of Polish prisoners during the Second World War (Thornhill & Cienski, 2014). During these periods of harmony, however, Sikorski elaborates that the Polish government was "never pretending that all ghosts of the past are gone" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2014). The shadow of the Second World War has also made fostering good relations with Germany challenging, although greater progress had been made in this regard. While Poland's slowly-warming relations with Russia cannot be considered part of any 'Ostpolitik'-type policy, they have made considerable efforts to ally with Berlin.

Sikorski was very keen for Germany, which he viewed as the EU's "indispensable nation", to take the lead in responding to Russia, adding that at this stage he "feared the country's inactivity more than its exercise of power" (quoted in Thornhill & Cienski, 2014).

The Polish government's improved relations with Germany were part of its policy of integration with the West that had been in place since 1989. Poland's integration with the West helped to modernise Polish society, while its admittance to NATO and the EU also acted as "virtual life insurance policies" for the vulnerable nation (Nougayrède, 2015). In May 2014, after ten years of membership, 80% of Poles said they were satisfied with EU membership - the highest of any EU country at the time (Day, 2014). This enthusiasm was helped by the fact that Poland was the only EU member state to have avoided recession in over two decades (Thornhill & Cienski, 2014). Sikorski argued in 2014 that EU and NATO membership had not only made Poland more secure and more prosperous than ever before, but that this unprecedented stability had changed its standing within Europe: ""Twenty five years ago we were eastern Europe. When we joined NATO and the EU, we became central Europe. Now, because of our resilience in the face of the financial crisis, we are northern Europe" (Thornhill & Cienski, 2014). This perception among Polish leadership of Poland being dependent on the EU for security and prosperity, as well as being a key player within the alliance, helps to explain why it pushed so hard for a strong response from its EU allies.

Domestic Politics and Public Opinion

The fears that arise from Poland's history and precarious position in Europe are evident in the public's opinion of Russia and the political parties they elected in 2014. According to Pew Research Centre's spring 2014 survey, 81% of Poles had an unfavourable view of Russia, an increase of 27% since the previous year (Devlin, 2015). The two main political parties in Poland were similarly wary of Russia. Since the early 2000s, two political parties had dominated Polish politics: the Civic Platform (PO) party on the left, and the Law and Justice (PiS) party on the right. Although the left in Poland, like in Germany, was traditionally perceived as more Russia-friendly, the tough stance taken by the ruling PO party in 2014, spearheaded by its Foreign Minister Sikorski, shows that this was not the case regarding Ukraine (Ras, 2017).

The opposition party, PiS, advocated an even more assertive foreign policy regarding Russia (Ras, 2017).

Economic Relations and Energy Dependence

Could a limited dependency on trade with Russia have contributed to Poland's willingness to impose sanctions? Though it's economy was not as interlinked with Russia as other EU allies, Poland still stood to lose a great deal from economic sanctions on Russia. Trade between Poland and Russia in 2014 was worth €32.8 billion, with Polish exports only consisting of €9.4 billion of this amount, less than a third of total German exports to Russia (Giumelli, 2014; Jakimowicz, 2016, 89). However, Russia was Poland's largest trading partner outside of the EU at the time (European Values, 2014).

Poland was highly dependent on Russian energy at the time. In 2013, the country imported 60% of its gas from Russia (The Economist, 2014). However, in the years preceding the Ukraine crisis, it had already taken a number of measures to wean itself off Russian gas that would protect it somewhat after 2014, including diversifying its supply to include gas from Germany and the Czech Republic, and the construction of a liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminal which would allow Poland to import gas on tankers from Qatar in 2015 (The Economist, 2014). However, Poland still had a long-term gas supply contract with Russia's Gazprom until 2022 which meant that if Poland were to decide to stop importing gas from Russia, they would still have to pay for the contracted amount (The Economist, 2014). Even though Russian gas was also cheaper than the prospective LNG imports, Sikorski preferred this unprofitable option because at least it would "fly a Polish flag" (quoted in The Economist, 2014).

United Kingdom

Reaction to Russian Denials

Phase 1: Annexation of Crimea & 'little green men'

The UK's overall response to Russia's intervention was prompt and assured. In two speeches made on March 4, one by British Ambassador Mark Lyall Grant to the UN

Security Council meeting, and the other by Foreign Secretary William Hague to the British Parliament, the UK not only condemned Russia's actions as a violation of international law as all of the countries studied had, but it also systematically refuted the Russian government's denials and justifications. "The pretence is now over," Lyall Grant told the Security Council. "The world can see that Russian military forces have taken control of the Crimean Peninsula, part of the sovereign territory of Ukraine (...) It is a clear and unambiguous violation of the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of Ukraine, and is a flagrant breach of international law" (Foreign & Commonwealth Office, 2014a).

Phase 2: Direct involvement of Russian military in conflict in Eastern Ukraine

The UK government was similarly unequivocal about Russian troops fighting in Eastern Ukraine. On the same day that Merkel and Hollande spoke about "reports" of Russian troops in Eastern Ukraine, Lyall Grant gave a comprehensive and detailed description of the "irrefutable evidence" of Russian soldiers operating in Ukraine, including the numbers of soldiers and types of equipment being used, as well as of the military equipment it had been supplying to separatist groups for several months prior (Foreign & Commonwealth Office, 2014c). "It is simply not credible," he insisted, "for Russia to continue claiming to the whole world, including to the Russian people, that Russian soldiers are not present on Ukrainian territory" (Foreign & Commonwealth Office, 2014c).

Analysis

Summary of position on sanctions

The UK was considered to have played an important role within the EU in putting the issue of responding to Russia's actions high on the EU agenda, and in advocating for a strong response when others favoured a less combative approach (Sjursen & Rosén, 2017). While France and Germany were keen to resist the imposition of Tier 3 measures until it was proven that Russia's military had moved beyond Crimea and entered eastern Ukraine, the UK government considered Russia's annexation of Crimea to be the threshold at which trade, financial, and economic sanctions should be imposed. As UK Prime Minister David Cameron said on March 19, "We said that if there was further action to destabilise the Ukraine, and this annexation is that action,

further consequences need to follow" (quoted in Waterfield & Freeman, 2014). Cameron was particularly vocal in calling for tougher sanctions throughout this period, in spite of initial concerns about their possible negative consequences for the City of London: "We should recognise that, yes, there may be consequences from some of these things, consequences perhaps for the City of London…But we should proceed knowing that what we are doing is sensible, legitimate, proportionate, consistent and right." (Open Europe, 2014b).

Sjursen and Rosén (2017) argue that this notion of doing the right thing was evident in the UK government's rhetoric regarding the appropriate response. In calling for a strong collective response, the UK emphasised the security concerns that Russia's actions in Ukraine raised in Central and European countries (Sjursen & Rosén, 2017). Sjursen and Rosén (2017) argue that the UK government was driven by a sense of solidarity for these regions, rather than any fears for their own national security. This solidarity with Eastern Europe reflected the UK's strategic position regarding European security at the time. The UK were major proponents of NATO (and thus the US) playing a significant role in European security and had long favoured expanding the alliance eastward (Niblett, 2014). Throughout all of the European security issues of the previous decade, the UK had advocated for engagement with NATO, rather than its EU allies, in its response. The Ukraine crisis was no exception.

Economic Relations and Energy Dependence

Although Cameron's rhetoric suggested that he was willing to impose Tier 3 sanctions in spite of possible repercussions for the British economy, the actual predicted economic impact of these measures was relatively minor. An analysis by Open Europe in March 2014 of Russian investment in the City of London showed that the City's exposure to possible sanctions was limited. Though the stock of Russian investment amounted to a sizeable £27 billion, it counted for only 0.5% of total European invested assets. Similarly UK financial services provided to Russia amounted to only 1% of total UK exports of financial services. Open Europe's (2014b) study concludes that it is unlikely, therefore, that the UK government would seek to block tougher sanctions to prevent losses to the City. The UK's trade relations with Russia were also relatively weak. In 2013, only 1.6% of total British exports went to Russia, and only 1.8% of British imports came from Russia, making it

the UK's 15th and 14th most important trading partner respectively (Stratfor, 2013). The UK was also largely independent of Russia in terms of energy supply, with only 7% of its oil imports and 2% of its natural gas supply coming from Russia (Stratfor, 2013).

Domestic Politics and Public Opinion

The British government faced little opposition from the general public and opposition parties regarding its hard line. According to an April 2014 YouGov poll, the British public were not particularly concerned about imposing trade sanctions on Russia, with 50% in favour of these measures and 23% against, with 27% undecided. Although these figures might suggest that the British public were not quite as resolute as their political leaders, the two-to-one margin puts them among the more pro-sanctions countries in the EU. When asked with whom their sympathies lay in the conflict, only 6% of respondents sympathised with Russia, 47% with the new Ukrainian government, and 33% undecided (YouGov, 2014). In terms of domestic politics, all of the UK's main political parties in 2014 condemned Russia's annexation of Crimea. The United Kingdom Independence Party's (UKIP) leader Nigel Farage, however, placed the blame for the Ukraine crisis firmly with the West, claiming that "if you poke the Russian bear with a stick he will respond" (quoted in The Guardian, 2014).

UK Foreign Policy Towards Russia

Unlike Poland, the UK was not advocating for strong measures in spite of major negative consequences for the UK economy or energy supply, or for the City of London's finances. What of the UK's relations with Russia? Did the British government have to break strong diplomatic ties or undo years of an 'Ostpolitik'-type approach to Russia to take this hard line? In reality, the UK's relationship with Russia since the Cold War has been more turbulent, and its foreign policy far more West-facing, than many of its EU partners. Since the end of the Second World War, the UK has tried to develop a 'special relationship' with the US, based on close cooperation in a range of areas, including in security and military matters. Unlike Germany, which has traditionally tried to act as the go-between for the EU and Russia, the UK has positioned itself as an interlocutor between Russia and the US. Though the extent to which this special relationship has had a material, rather than purely symbolic, impact

is disputed (Dumbrell, 2009), Maxine David (2011) explains that it has had real consequences for the UK's relations with Russia. In general, David (2011) explains, the UK's alignment with the US has been harmful for its perception in Russia. By tying itself to the US, the UK has suffered collateral reputational damage whenever Russia has disapproved of US policy, while it has also fallen foul of Russian leadership who have criticised the UK's ability to act as an effective interlocutor between the two powers, claiming that it has consistently sided with the US.

Unlike other EU states, however, the UK does not rely on the EU to manage its relations with Russia: "in successive foreign policy documents," David explains, "the EU is referenced as just one of a wider circle of arrangements through which the UK's relations with Russia are conducted" (2011, 201). While Germany and France were determined to use the EU as the forum through which it could negotiate with Russia in 2014, the UK was keen to keep the US and NATO involved in the response to Crimea. This reflected a trend that had been ongoing since the early 2000s, whereby the UK has sided with the US in opposition to Russia over a number of foreign policy disputes. However, the UK's post-Cold War relations with Russia show that the special relationship does not preclude productive engagement with Moscow. Since the early 1990s, there have been periods of diplomatic harmony between the two countries, owing largely to successful cooperation on economic and trade matters (David, 2011). However, these periods of good relations have been continually punctuated by a series of disagreements in foreign policy. The immediate post-Cold War years were promising for the relationship, with Russian President Boris Yeltsin appearing receptive to efforts from UK Prime Minister John Major to integrate Russia into the West by developing strong economic and trade links (Mankoff, 2007; David, 2011). Relations prospered for most of the 1990s until the two countries faced their first major foreign policy clashes over NATO enlargement and its bombing of Serbia (Mankoff, 2007).

Although relations picked up again somewhat with the arrival of Putin in 2000, who Blair considered someone with whom the UK "could do business" (quoted in David, 2011, 203), a number of significant international incidents in the following years would create tensions between the two countries that would last through to the Ukraine crisis and beyond. During disputes over Kosovo, the second Chechen War, and the Iraq War, Blair called for engagement with Russia but ultimately sided with

the US every time, even when key EU allies did not (David, 2011). The fact that France and Germany sided with Russia on the Iraq war, for example, did nothing to change the UK's stance, but it was another example of how Moscow had fared better with Paris and Berlin during this period (David, 2011). The nature of the UK's response to the brief Russo-Georgian war in 2008 would foreshadow in many ways how the country would respond to the events in Ukraine in 2014. UK Prime Minister Gordon Brown heavily criticised Russia's unilateral action and, like Hague in 2014, reiterated the importance of continuing to "strengthen the transatlantic relationship" and "reflecting on a NATO response" (Brown, 2008).

As David (2011) notes, many of the clashes between the UK and Russia at this time arose as a result of disagreements over the broader question of state sovereignty in the international system. The assassination of ex-spy Alexander Litvinenko in London in 2006, however, put both countries in a direct confrontation where either party's relations with the US and EU were largely irrelevant. The subsequent murder inquiry and British efforts to extradite the main suspect, former KGB agent Andrei Lugovoi, would ensure that this incident would sour relations between the countries for at least the next decade, with the official inquiry only closing in 2016 (David, 2018). It also served to reinforce the perception that Putin was determined to push Russia further away from the US and UK and their values (Mankoff, 2007).

Conclusion

While the UK and Poland adopted a very similar approach to Russia's military intervention in Ukraine, this paper has found that they did so for very different reasons. Poland was far more willing to wield the double-edged sword than other member states, in spite of similar material consequences, because it framed Russia's intervention as a legitimate security issue. Its location and history in Europe compelled it to take a hard line, no matter what the cost, and it worked hard to convince its EU allies to do likewise at a time when Western European countries likely felt that terrorism and migration posed a greater threat to their security. The UK, on the other hand, had very little material cost to consider. The efforts of successive British governments to prioritise their transatlantic ties meant that the UK largely lacked the sorts of links to Russia that had caused its German and French

counterparts to hesitate regarding tough sanctions. Furthermore, the UK had no recent history of sustained cooperation with Russia, while the fallout from the assassination of Litvinenko in London only served to exacerbate the tensions between the two countries further. The resolute and unambiguous response of both countries was also deeply affected by their allegiances in international relations. Russia's actions offered Poland a chance to show how far it had come since the time when it was a Soviet satellite state; by leading the charge among its new allies against its old master, Poland was affirming its embrace of the West which it saw as vital to its security and prosperity. The UK's special relationship with the US, meanwhile, not only meant that it acted largely independently of its EU allies, but also that it would be in constant opposition to Russia on foreign policy and security matters.

Conclusion

In light of these findings, this paper's subquestion can now be addressed: *Why did some EU member states appear to accept Russia's denial of its military intervention in Ukraine when others did not?* From the analysis of the four countries carried out in the previous chapters, we can see that a variety of factors can influence a government's policy response to another state's infraction. Independent of the broader context of the state's relationships with the offender, however, none of these factors are necessarily decisive. This is particularly true of economic and energy links; for example, both Poland and Germany were highly dependent on Russian energy in 2014, yet their responses to Russia's actions differed significantly. The conclusion that this paper draws from the analysis of these factors is that the best indicator for how a country responded is the state of its diplomatic relations with Moscow and its foreign policy towards Russia, both recent and historical.

In 2014, the UK and Poland both had difficult relations with Russia, be they because of recent diplomatic incidents or a more deep-seated mistrust. The external relations of both countries were defined by their ties with the West; the UK had worked hard to foster a special relationship with the US, while Poland had fully embraced being part of the EU and had come to view it as vital for its security and prosperity, along with NATO. Therefore, when it became clear that Russia had crossed a line that required some form of reprehension from the West, adopting an anti-Russian stance was frictionless. Indeed, taking strong action could have been seen as enhancing their credentials as leading Western actors in global politics.

For Germany and France, on the other hand, taking such a stance required a 180 degree shift in their foreign policy towards Russia. Both countries had enjoyed long periods of good relations with Russia that had weathered similar incidents in the past. Germany's foreign policy, in particular, had been devoted to maintaining strong ties with Russia since the 1970s. This pro-Russian stance also enjoyed significant public support in both countries. However, comments by French officials also show that the Mistral warship deal was a decisive factor in terms of what level of sanctions France wanted the EU to impose. Based on the analysis of what material interests Poland,

for example, was willing to sacrifice to punish Russia, it is likely that the French government would have been quicker to cancel this deal had it impeded their overarching foreign policy objectives.

This paper finds, therefore, that Germany and France appeared to accept Russia's denials in order to preserve some aspect of their relations with Russia. How does this conclusion help answer this paper's main research question: ***How did Russia's denial of its military intervention in Ukraine affect the EU's sanctions response?*** Before we can understand the impact Russia's denials had on the EU's collective sanctions response, it is necessary to look at how they affected individual member states' stances on the conflict. This paper finds that the hypothesis outlined in the introduction has proven true: Russia's denials gave its adversaries an excuse not to impose a level of sanctions that they did not want to impose. Although not all states wanted an excuse, it is clear that some took this opportunity to preserve some aspect of their relations with Russia. How did Russia's denials facilitate this? This paper argues that by denying their actions, Russia lowered the cost for EU member states of defecting from their allies, as it provided these countries with a rationale it could use to explain why it was reluctant to escalate sanctions. Instead of having to say that they didn't want to strengthen sanctions in order to protect a warship deal, for example, they could plead with their allies to hold out until the facts of the situation were clearer. Based on these case studies, the plausibility of the denial does not appear to matter significantly. Perhaps this is due to a hesitancy in global politics to condemn a state for taking another government, with whom it had good relations, at its word.

Crucially, this cost/benefit calculation differed between the first phase of denials and the second. In spite of significant differences in their relations with Russia, the four member states studied were relatively closely aligned during the first phase of the conflict, with all four speaking out in condemnation of Russia's military intervention in Crimea. For France and Germany, the cost of condemning this intervention was relatively low. Agreeing to travel bans and asset freezes for a small number of Russian officials was unlikely to significantly harm their ties to Russia; their relationship had arguably survived worse during the 2008 Russo-Georgian war. On the other hand, the cost of not being seen to defend the rule of law and the principles

of sovereignty and self-determination by their EU allies and the West would likely have been far higher.

The second phase of Russia's denials, however, presents a more interesting foreign policy problem, as the stakes were higher. This paper finds that Russia's intervention in Eastern Ukraine marked a tipping point for France and Germany whereby the costs of condemning outweighed the cost of buying into Russia's deliberately-created ambiguity. Unlike Crimea where it was the presence of Russian troops that was being disputed, in Eastern Ukraine, Russia was denying that its forces were actually fighting a sovereign state on the EU's borders. Therefore, agreeing to the proportionate response was a far more daunting task for France and Germany. Not only would openly acknowledging that Russia was lying about its military intervention in Eastern Ukraine be harmful for certain material interests, it would also involve a total departure from their existing foreign policy. The analysis of these case studies suggests that states are slow to take any action that would contradict an existing foreign policy position. In the fast coordination game that is EU foreign policy, where states are under pressure to come to an agreement quickly, France and Germany's first instinct was to express implausible doubt in order to deflect calls for tougher measures that would jeopardise these ties, without appearing to openly condone Russia's aggression on the EU's border. Thus, while Germany and France's expressions of implausible doubt may have appeared irrational given the contradictory evidence, this paper finds that, per the Realist understanding of state behaviour, both were acting rationally.

What impact did changing the cost of defection for EU member states have on the level of sanctions imposed by the EU as a whole, then? As discussed in the literature review, Sjursen and Rosén argue that the EU managed to come to an agreement on sanctions because the principles of sovereignty and self-determination trumped the protection of whatever interests states may have had. This paper has found this to hold true only for Tier 1 and 2 sanctions. When it came to imposing Tier 3 sanctions, however, the cost/benefit calculations of some states changed and the concerns outlined in the literature around the EU's ability to act effectively through its CFSP were realised; Tier 1 and 2 sanctions represented an agreement based on the lowest common denominator of what states felt was appropriate. The divisions between EU member states, facilitated in part by Russia's denials, meant that the EU was slow to

implement Tier 3 sanctions in the first place, and to strengthen them thereafter in line with Russia's escalation of the conflict. It could be argued that the EU's response during the first few months was the result of a desire to engage with Russia diplomatically, and not the product of a lowest common denominator. Although this was the preference of both Germany and France early on, both countries assured that stronger sanctions would be imposed if Russia escalated the conflict. Their delay in doing so shows that the reality of this 'diplomatic route' narrative was that it was pursued in denial of the facts.

This conclusion - that divisions within the EU can weaken its ability to act effectively in foreign policy - has been well covered in the literature. Although the EU has frequently managed to reach agreement on foreign policy action in the past, there are a number of challenges it must overcome to do so, from the intergovernmental nature of its CFSP, to the requirement of unanimity and the right of each country to veto a decision. Where this paper has sought to contribute to the literature, however, is by showing how Russia's information warfare strategies have targeted these potential vulnerabilities to great effect. This paper argues that altering the cost of defection through denial is a particularly effective example of Russia's reflexive control strategy, which causes the target to "voluntarily choose the actions most advantageous to Russian objectives by shaping the adversary's perceptions of the situation decisively" (Snegovaya, 2015, 7). By exacerbating the existing divisions between member states, Russia stifled the EU's ability to agree on tougher measures from within the alliance.

These findings also contribute to the literature on implausible deniability. This paper has shown that intergovernmental organisations like the EU are particularly vulnerable to calculated ambiguity. Contrary to the traditional understanding of covert operations, perfect secrecy was not a requirement for Russia's military operations in Ukraine to be successful. Given the existing vulnerabilities of the EU's CFSP, mere non-acknowledgement was sufficient. By denying their involvement, Russia threw a spanner in the works of EU foreign policy decision-making that hindered its ability to respond quickly. Their denials gifted certain members of the alliance a rational pretext to not inflict tough measures that states were reluctant to impose, for whatever reason. In many ways, this is the perfect strategy for the Information Age, where a large covert military operation in Europe would be incredibly difficult to carry out

without being exposed by formal or informal media channels. The effectiveness of this strategy in 2014 meant that Russia returned to this option again in 2018 following the poisoning of Yulia and Sergei Skripal, and will likely continue to do so for as long as it hinders the EU's ability to respond. Therefore, further research that exposes how it works in practice, as this paper has sought to do, is vital for weakening the pretext it offers EU member states and keeping the cost of defecting from the alliance high.

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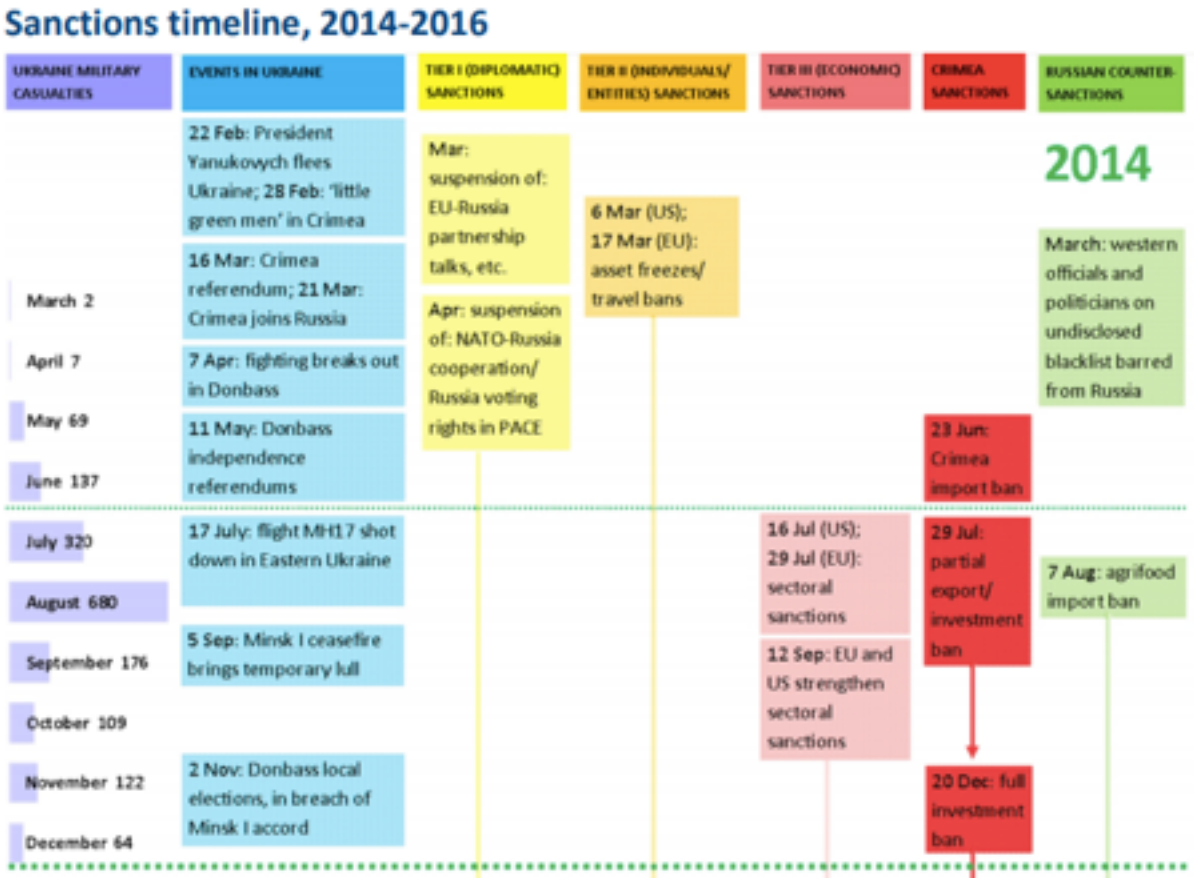
Appendix

The following chart was produced by the European Parliament Research Service in 2016. It details the when each Tier of sanctions was implemented by the EU.



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