



# **Comparing the European Union's Sanctions Against Russia in 2014 vs. 2022: Energy Dependence as a Tool of Political Divergence**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The Russia-Ukraine War, stemming from the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, encountered a turning point on February 24, 2022, when Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. This paper conducts a comparative analysis of the economic sanctions imposed by the European Union (EU) against Russia in 2014 and 2022 and shows that energy dependence in Europe is a heavy influence on EU-Russian policy. The evidence suggests that, following 2014, EU countries prioritized their economic interests over human rights interests and continued to expand energy imports from Russia, disregarding Ukrainian sovereignty and failing to implement comprehensive sanctions. This was partly due to the fact that energy dependence was a tool for political divergence within the EU. In contrast, the traditional warfare in 2022 was seen as a disruption to the international order, leading the EU to impose harsh, punitive sanctions. These actions came at a cost as its reliance on Russian energy caused an EU energy crisis. Nonetheless, a silver lining in EU energy policy emerges as the region halts Russian manipulation, ensures energy security, and accelerates the transition to renewable energy sources.

## Introduction

An undiversified and unreliable pool of energy resources bears extreme risk to exogenous variables, exemplified by the current case in the European Union (EU). Since Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, scholars have argued that the trade of oil and gas energy is a tenet pillar of EU-Russia relations, and they have thus questioned Russia's reliability as an energy partner (Siddi 2022). After ignoring experts' warnings to diversify its energy suppliers, the EU now faces a massive energy crisis. This paper seeks to fill a gap in the literature on the EU's inconsistent response between 2014 and 2022 by answering the following questions: how did the EU's response to the 2014 illegal annexation of Crimea differ from its response after February 24th, 2022? And how did energy dependence influence these reactions?

This paper suggests that the EU's response to the 2014 crisis was weak, and economic sanctions were largely symbolic in nature. European countries failed to coordinate strong, comprehensive sanctions against Russia and instead focused on expanding trade relations, particularly in the energy sector. In contrast, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 prompted the EU to overcome its reliance on Russian energy and agree to harsh, isolating economic sanctions against Russia.

## Literature Review on 2014-2022/of EU's Different Reactions in 2014 and 2022

EU-Russia relations have received vast scholarship attention since 2014, especially with regards to energy relations. Siddi (2022) argues that academic publications have tended

to lean toward the pessimistic side, noting that energy supply has been a tenet of their economic relationship and that 2014 marked the beginning of a long-term regional crisis. The author compared works on EU-Russia relations between 2014 and 2021. Cross and Karolewski's book, *European-Russian Power Relations in Turbulent Times*, claimed that the EU had adapted to Russia's increasing boldness since the early 2010s. This coincided with van Bergeijk's (2022) argument regarding the EU's failure to establish a firm stance in response to Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014. Van Bergeijk argues that, since 2014, the EU lost its credibility to impose smart, comprehensive, and broad-based sanctions that would have a significant impact on the Russian economy—at least to a point that it would stop the Kremlin from continuing to pursue its geopolitical goals. Both Siddi (2022) and van Bergeijk (2022) concur in the notion that, following 2014, Putin's government increased its political resiliency and became more autocratic whereas the EU lost credibility in imposing comprehensive sanctions.

Thane Gustafson's book, *The Bridge: Natural Gas in a Redivided Europe*, discusses how Russia became Europe's largest and most competitive gas supplier. Siddi concludes that energy trade is the most vital economic facet of EU-Russia relations, and among all the politically-sensitive energy sources, gas remained the primary one. Prisecaru's (2022) analysis argues that the eurozone's lack of diversification in the energy supply is deeply grounded in the EU's liberalization of energy markets in 1996. This movement granted private companies the

authority to procure and secure energy for their respective nations. These companies, driven by economic incentives, disproportionately leaned towards cheap Russian energy prices, thereby subordinating supply diversification and energy security for the EU.

Prior to the 2022 invasion, Johanneson and Clowes (2020) examined the economic and business causes of the Russia-Ukraine War in 2014. Because Russia is highly dependent on exporting gas to Europe through Ukraine, the Kremlin would lose privileged access to its energy deposits and pipeline system if Ukraine joined the EU. Therefore, Russia's aggression towards Ukraine was grounded in the threats it perceived to the security of its energy market. Although this prediction of Russian motives was not shared by other scholars (e.g., Snyder, Gardels, Rutland, and Tsygankov), it does allude to the importance of Russia's energy market, the interconnected relationship with different spheres of European affairs, and how it shapes the Kremlin's geopolitical and military targets.

Post Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, scholars, such as Prisecaru, Osička, and Černoch, discussed the collateral effects of the invasion on the EU's energy insecurity. Prisecaru (2022) argued that the Russia-Ukraine War revealed the eurozone's strong reliance on Russian fossil fuel imports. Prisecaru called for the EU to overhaul its energy security strategies. They should distance themselves from Russian imports and decrease the use of fossil fuels altogether. Likewise, Osička and Černoch (2022) examined the silver lining of the 2022 EU energy crisis. Their article

analyzed how Russia weaponized its gas supplies to Europe. Although this caused an energy crisis across the continent, the EU could seize the moment to transition to renewable energy sources. Nonetheless, these authors warn that the EU must be careful and strategic to prevent a social fallout (i.e., an unintended negative consequence that arises from a political decision), given that energy price spikes impact household and business operations. Overall, within the academic community, there appears to be a gap in the analysis and comparison of the EU's different reactions to Russian aggression in both 2014 and 2022, as well as in the examination of the underlying reasons and consequences behind them.

### **The EU's Response to Russian Aggression Between 2014 and 2021**

After Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea, Germany immediately rose to become a pivotal player in the agenda-setting and decision-making process towards EU sanctions against Russia. This came about for two reasons. Firstly, Germany has the largest economy in Europe, which gives it significant influence in the EU. Secondly, Germany was more reliant on Russian energy suppliers, compared to the EU average. In 2014, Russian sources accounted for 39% of Germany's oil imports and 36% of its natural gas imports (Fuchs 2014). Additionally, Germany is the EU country that expanded most of its energy trade relations with Russia between 2014 and 2021 due to its investment in the construction of Nord Stream 2, a new \$11 billion undersea gas pipeline through the Baltic Sea (BBC News 2022). This high stakes

investment, paired with Germany's gas imports from Russia peaking at 55% in imports in 2021, signified Germany's high degree of vulnerability toward Russian energy exports (BBC News 2022).

The EU's initial response to the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 was primarily spearheaded by Germany's chancellor Angela Merkel (Kundnani & Pond 2015). Merkel, who is fluent in Russian, engaged in direct talks with President Putin during the crisis, requesting that he pull back from Ukraine. Once the issue reached higher-level discussions in the European Council, Germany initially resisted the idea of sanctions and lobbied for the EU to engage in diplomatic talks with the Kremlin.

Notably, in 2014, Germany already had direct energy trade relations with Russia via the Nord Stream 1 gas pipeline inaugurated in 2011 while the Nord Stream AG expansion project (i.e., Nord Stream 2 pipeline) was under evaluation (European Commission 2022). Nord Stream 2, a route from Russia to northern Germany via the Baltic Sea, signified a supply of secure and relatively inexpensive gas to Germany and other European countries that already received a supply from Nord Stream 1 (Siddi 2022). Critics argued that Merkel responded mildly to Moscow due to the perceived influence of a German pro-Russian business lobby during the decision-making process at the European Council (Kundnani & Pond 2015).

The official European Union response in 2014 was not much different from the interests of Germany. The critical tone of the political discourse that the EU released was, to a certain extent, incongruent with its actions.

On March 1, 2014, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Catherine Ashton, stated, "I call on all sides to decrease the tensions immediately [...]. The unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine must be respected at all times and by all sides. Any violation of these principles is unacceptable" (EEAS 2014,1). This statement implies that the EU was deeply concerned about Ukraine's sovereignty and Russia's "unacceptable" behaviour and that it would not hesitate to take strong, punitive measures against Russia. Nonetheless, the EU's actions expressed the contrary. After the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, scholars argued that the EU's response was weak, naive, and inefficient (van Bergeijk 2022; Siddi 2022).

During the pseudo-referendum for Russia's annexation of Crimea (i.e., an illegitimate and widely controversial referendum held by Russia to justify the annexation of the region into the Russian Federation), the EU imposed targeted sanctions, also known as smart sanctions, in the form of travel restrictions and by freezing the assets of 151 individuals and thirty-seven (Aleksashenko 2016). However, studies have demonstrated that financially hitting oligarchs and officials through targeted sanctions has an insignificant effect on altering Putin's political and military decisions (van Bergeijk 2022). Targeted sanctions (e.g., asset freezes, travel bans) mainly impose costs on specific individuals or sectors and thus, have minimal impact on the broader economy. Conversely, comprehensive sanctions (e.g., restrictions on imports and exports, limitations to financial transactions) have a more widespread

effect as they have a broader impact on the receiving country's political economy. They affect multiple economic sectors, access to goods and services, and overall economic stability. The EU's 2014 sanction packages against Russia, mostly in the form of travel bans and asset freezes, were merely targeted sanctions, instead of comprehensive sanctions.

Van Bergeijk (2022) argues that all sanctions have a low success rate: comprehensive sanctions have a 66% failure rate and targeted sanctions have an 80% to 90% failure rate. This refers to the percentage of cases where sanctions did not achieve their intended objectives. Although the failure rate for comprehensive sanctions is still high, they are comparatively more effective than targeted sanctions. Arguably, countries that implement targeted sanctions are aware of the low repercussions that they have on the sending and receiving countries. Therefore, they are predominantly symbolic.

Furthermore, the EU's 2014 economic sanctions against Russia did not target Russia's primary source of foreign currency income: energy exports. A boycott of Russia's energy exports would have severe repercussions on Russia's economy; however, the EU did not choose to pursue this because it would also harm itself. Russian gas pipelines beside Nord Stream 1, such as Yamal, Turk Stream, and Blue Stream, supplied 23% of European gas consumption in 2014 (Kirby 2014). European politicians and the media expressed awareness that negative relations with Russia would impact their supply of Russian energy. In a March 2014 press conference, Polish then-Prime Minister

Donald Tusk expressed, "Germany's dependence on Russian gas may effectively decrease Europe's sovereignty. I have no doubts about that" (Reuters Staff 2014, 4). Therefore, European reliance on Russian energy influenced EU politicians in the decision-making process. In fact, the energy dependence between Russia and many European countries created challenges for the EU in reaching a collective decision on economic sanctions against Russia (Adérito 2022).

Put simply, the EU's 2014 targeted sanctions against Russia were an easy way out for the EU to avoid experiencing a fallout with Russian energy supplies. This knowingly un-harmful course of action was delivered in conjunction with a symbolic message: a statement to the international community that the EU condemned Russia's actions against international law. At the same time, the EU's response also overlooked the sovereignty of Ukraine by downplaying the significance of the breach of territory within the country. A major contributing factor to this is Ukraine's location and historical ties with the Soviet Union, which made the international community view it as part of Russia's sphere of influence (Valenza 2022). Eventually, this allowed the EU to continue its energy trade relations with Russia throughout the latter half of the 2010s.

In actuality, Russia's aggression in Crimea and Donbas in 2014 did not prevent European countries from continuing to pursue further energy trade relations with Russia. The EU failed to recognize that the more it increased energy trade relations with Russia, the more its bargaining power decreased. This left European

countries in vulnerable positions when it came to energy security, and essentially, European countries that relied highly on Russian energy imports were left at the mercy of the Kremlin's directives in energy policy.

The EU's response to Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 has been criticized for its weakness. In particular, critics argue that it highlighted Europe's vulnerability to Russia and the EU's inability to properly organize comprehensive sanctions (van Bergeijk 2022). It lost its reputation as a credible and threatening organization able to penalize a country that commits illegal actions using comprehensive sanctions (van Bergeijk 2022). On February 24, 2022, the EU's past failure to deter Russian expansionism and prevent European reliance on Russian energy was emphasized with Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the emergence of the EU energy crisis (Adérito 2022).

### **The EU's Response to Russian Aggression in 2022**

Russia's full-scale military invasion of Ukraine began on February 24, 2022, and signified that traditional warfare was happening within an EU-bordering country. The perceived threat to the EU was considerably higher compared to the Crimean Crisis of 2014 due to the geographical proximity of war, resulting in heightened, real-time security concerns for Ukraine's European neighbours. Due to existing Russian energy dependence posing a large threat to the European economy, the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine became a multi-issue affair for the EU. European countries had con-

tinued to develop their energy trade relations with Russia between 2014 and 2021, such that by 2021, EU countries imported a total of 155 billion cubic metres of Russian natural gas, summing up to 45% of the EU's total gas imports (IEA 2022a).

Unlike in 2014, the EU's critical political discourse regarding Russia's invasion of Ukraine did match its actions. On February 24, 2022, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrel, stated, "The European Union will respond in the strongest possible terms" (EEAS 2022, 3). This time, the EU committed to implementing the most punitive series of sanctions in its history, and thus far, it has carried through by blocking access to key technologies and markets. Similar to 2014, travel restrictions were imposed, and assets were frozen, but to a much larger extent—totalling 205 entities and 1473 individuals (European Council 2023).

Particularly, comprehensive trade sanctions were implemented across different sectors. Import and export bans limited much of the trade flow between Russia and European countries. Import bans include restrictions on crude oil, refined petroleum products, coal, steel, gold, cement, wood, paper, plastics, seafood, liquor, cigarettes, and cosmetics. Export bans include cutting-edge technology, some transportation equipment, certain oil refining goods, energy industry equipment, aviation and space industry goods, maritime navigation goods, dual-use goods, luxury goods, and firearms (European Council 2023). These punitive measures against Russia have been far more effective than those in 2014, considering that

the Kremlin's decisions have caused Russian citizens to be confronted with daunting levels of unemployment, inflation, expensive credit costs, travel bans, capital controls, food crises, and shortage of goods—all of which have contributed to civilian anti-war demonstrations and protests. As of November 2022, more than 19,000 Russian protesters have been detained due to widespread disapproval of the war (Kara-Murza 2022), highlighting the immense economic turmoil that the Kremlin's actions have brought upon the nation.

Bans on Russian media outlets and sanctions on transport are other measures the EU has employed. The EU banned Russian and Belarusian road transportation into the EU to disrupt road trade and to restrict Russia's capacity to obtain goods. All types of Russian carriers are banned from flying over EU airspace, and the EU has closed its ports to over 2,800 Russian vessels (European Council 2023). The EU executed financial sanctions as well, banning the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunications (SWIFT) from ten Russian and four Belarusian banks, which targets their ability to access secure and efficient communication among global financial institutions (e.g., access foreign currency or transfer assets abroad). This magnifies the impact of economic sanctions because it damages business operations and oligarchs' assets (van Bergeijk 2022).

To date, the energy sector has suffered the greatest impact in EU-Russia trade relations. In May 2022, the EU agreed on a compromised deal to ban up to 90% of oil imports from Russia by the end of 2022 (European Council 2023). Likewise, in December 2022, a price

cap on Russian crude oil was set to \$60 per barrel, notably after it surpassed \$100 per barrel that year, and in February 2023, the EU banned refined petroleum products after discovering a loophole in EU sanctions that allowed for ongoing imports of refined Russian oil (European Council 2023). However, Russian gas remains untouched as of February 2023, and no sanctions on this energy source have been agreed upon. This is because Europe heavily relies on Russian gas to sustain operations in both households and industry, considering that Russia supplied 40% of the EU's total gas consumption in 2021 (IEA 2022a). Additionally, banning the import of gas is politically sensitive in nations that are highly vulnerable to fluctuations in the supply of Russian gas. However, the amount of gas currently supplied by Russia to the EU is reportedly negligible (BBC News 2022). During the first ten months of 2022, pipeline-based Russian gas supply decreased over 55%, dropping 80 billion cubic metres compared to levels observed in 2021 (IEA 2022b), and Russian gas imports in early 2023 sit above 10% compared to 2021 levels. Overall, the evidence has demonstrated a noteworthy reduction in the inflow of oil and gas imports subsequent to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

This steep decline in Russian gas imports is less of a consequence of EU actions but rather a consequence of the decisions of the Kremlin to weaponize its gas supplies. Osička and Černoch (2022) claim that "Russia has made natural gas what renewable energy used to be: unreliable and expensive" (1). Arguably, Putin is using energy blackmail as a strategy to meet its geopolitical goals during the war: by plum-



meeting Europe into an energy (and economic) crisis, it would weaken the West in order to break and decrease support for Ukraine. The EU is facing an energy shortage and economic crisis because of its reliance on Russian energy supplies and Putin's weaponization of its energy sources, which can be observed by an 8% inflation rate in 2022 and an expected 7% in 2023 in the eurozone (OECD 2022). As a result of this crisis, EU countries are scrambling to fill their energy supply from alternative sources.

Although the EU accomplished meeting its energy supply goals for the 2022-2023 winter season, the real challenge for full independence lies in the 2023-2024 season (IEA 2022b). This creates tensions among civilians and politicians; however, Osička and Černoč (2022) argue that the energy crisis brings optimism and opportunities for the EU's future in terms of energy sources. It is predicted that in the short-term, the EU will shift away from Russian manipulation and decrease their trade dependence on the Russian Federation. In the medium-run, European countries will diversify their energy suppliers, thus increasing their energy security. Finally, in the long-term, the EU energy crisis will be a strong lesson for Europe to accelerate their transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy sources, which is essential to mitigating climate change and reducing greenhouse gas emissions. While diversifying gas supply in the short-term may seem a challenge for the EU, the benefits of transitioning to cleaner energy sources will ultimately benefit the national security of European countries (IEA 2022a).

Nonetheless, Osička and Černoč (2022) also warn that the EU must be extreme-

ly coordinated in its response. Failure to do so may result in a social crisis characterized by civil unrest and protests, eventually leading to a political crisis marked by anti-EU sentiments. This, in turn, could trigger a legitimacy crisis, resulting in a loss of public trust and confidence, and ultimately, the risk of European fragmentation. The International Monetary Fund writes, "the energy crisis poses an immense challenge that no European state can navigate alone" (Zettelmeyer et al. 2022, 8). This demonstrates the enormous risk that Europe bears if EU nations do not coordinate their response.

Considering the EU's 2014 response, February 24, 2022 marked a turning point for Brussel's approach to Moscow. The soft and symbolic approach to Russia since 2014 only emboldened Russia by making it more resilient, autocratic, and powerful, while the EU grew more vulnerable to and reliant on Russian energy supplies. Nonetheless, following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the EU started implementing more restrictive measures to penalize Russia for its actions, as discussed in this section.

## Conclusion

The evidence contained in this paper demonstrates that the EU's response to Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 is significantly different from its response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24th, 2022. This comparative analysis of sanctions validates that the EU did not act decisively in 2014 and gave the illegal annexation of Crimea little importance, which can be partially attributed to Germany's influence as it stood to benefit from

such actions. The role of energy dependence as a tool for political divergence within the EU was highlighted by the EU's failure to collectively agree upon comprehensive sanctions that would deter Russia from continuing to pursue its geopolitical goals. The weak, targeted sanctions that were imposed following Russia's 2014 violations were merely symbolic and did not change the course of the Russia-Ukraine War. At the same time, the EU's response overlooked the sovereignty of Ukraine by belittling the breach of international law in Crimea, and EU countries continued to strengthen energy trade relations with Russia, particularly with the construction of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline.

The fostering of EU-Russian energy relations enabled Russia to weaponize its energy supplies against European countries in reaction to the stronger EU sanctions after February 24th, 2022. Overall, energy dependence played a large factor in determining the response of the EU; however, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine was a turning point for Brussel's approach to Moscow. The European Union overcame its hesitancy to wean off Russian energy dependence and implemented strong, comprehensive sanctions against Russia. The 2022 EU sanctions against Russia differ significantly from those imposed in 2014, as the Kremlin's invasion of Ukraine not only posed a threat to the international order but also jeopardized the security of European countries. This concern was further intensified due to Ukraine's political alignment with the EU, as it favoured closer ties with the EU over Russia. Despite the challenge that the EU faces in the short-term to re-

duce its dependence on Russian energy sources, there is a silver lining to this predicament, as the transition to cleaner energy sources and increased energy security is expected to provide long-term benefits to the eurozone.

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