Perceptions of EU mediation and mediation effectiveness: Comparing perspectives from Ukraine and the EU

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Abstract
A small but growing literature has started to analyse the European Union (EU) ‘as an effective peacemaker’. We make a contribution to this field by investigating EU mediation effectiveness in the Russia–Ukraine conflict. The focus is on perceptions of effectiveness. Based on information from semi-structured interviews, we compare EU self-images with Ukrainian evaluations of EU mediation efforts. How effective is the EU, including its Member States, deemed to be? What factors are believed to lie behind perceived (in)effectiveness? We concentrate on four such factors, derived from the mediator literature: perceived (im)partiality, coherence and credibility and, finally, evaluations of the EU’s mediation strategies. Both internal and external views singled out EU member states as the most effective actors in current mediation. The role of EU was seen in ambivalent terms by both sides. All the four determinants of mediation effectiveness are discussed in our material, but differ considerably in the degree of attention given to each of them. While (im)partiality is not a factor that is linked to effectiveness in any straightforward way, EU incoherence is associated with inconsistent and weak policies, notably in the Ukraine material.

Keywords
Coherence, credibility, EU perceptions, (im)partiality, mediation effectiveness, Russia–Ukraine conflict

Introduction
The Russia–Ukraine conflict, with its focus on Crimea and eastern Ukraine, created challenges for European Union (EU) diplomacy. While rapidly assuming a mediator role, the EU also forms a part of the conflict as it pushes for Ukraine’s rapprochement towards the Union within the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and its Eastern Partnership (EaP). Russia, as expected, was opposing this rapprochement (Kanet, 2015: 519). Both
the EU itself and several Member States, \textit{nota bene} France and Germany, were active participants in the different negotiation ‘formats’ that tried to end hostilities and create a favourable environment for a peace agreement. Apart from mediation activities, the EU also engaged in coercive diplomacy in the form of economic sanctions against Russia. It also provided financial and structural aid to Ukraine, exerting conditionality without offering a prospect of EU membership.

A small but growing literature has started to analyse the EU ‘as an effective peace-maker’ (Bergmann and Niemann, 2015; Bergmann et al., 2018). Much of this research has questioned the effectiveness of the EU, referring to the contested coherence of EU external action and to an alleged lack of impartiality in many conflicts (Thomas, 2012). Still, we know very little about the achievements of the EU in the field of international mediation, not least in terms of its impact. This article makes a small contribution to this end by investigating EU mediation in the Russia–Ukraine conflict. The focus is on \textit{perceptions} of effectiveness. We compare EU self-images with Ukrainian evaluations of EU mediation efforts. How effective or ‘successful’ is the EU, including its Member States, deemed to be? In what ways, and how much, do EU self-images differ from Ukraine perceptions? What factors are believed to lie behind perceived (in)effectiveness? We concentrate on four such factors: perceived (im)partiality, coherence and credibility and, finally, evaluations of the EU’s mediation strategies.

The article proceeds as follows. We start by introducing our theoretical framework, with an emphasis on potential determinants of mediation effectiveness. After a brief outline of the EU’s mediation in the Russia–Ukraine conflict, we turn to a description of our methodological choices. In the main empirical part, we first scrutinize Ukrainian perceptions of the EU’s mediation activities, followed by an analysis of EU self-images and a comparison between the two images of EU effectiveness. In the Conclusion, we discuss the role of the perceived determinants of policy effectiveness.

\textbf{Theoretical perspectives on mediation effectiveness}

Determining the effectiveness of mediation is no easy task. Indeed, for some cases of mediation, there is no clear delineation between ‘success’ and ‘failure’ (Greig and Diehl, 2016: 106) as such assessments depend significantly upon the time horizon of the conflict. \textit{Effectiveness} may be measured objectively (such as formulation of a peace agreement, its quality, etc.) or subjectively. Subjective measures rely on \textit{perceptions} of goal attainment. In this article, we only investigate such subjective evaluations, that is, the EU’s and the Ukrainians’ own assessments of the EU’s effectiveness as a mediator. Addressing the conflict parties’ subjective views allows us to comprehend their interpretations of an extremely complex situation, where ‘objective’ measurements of success are highly controversial. Comparing their interpretations helps us understand how different definitions of the situation create obstacles to EU–Ukraine co-operation, potentially impeding conflict resolution.

A review of relevant international mediation research leads us to focus on four factors that are generally considered to be major determinants of mediation effectiveness. Three of these refer to mediator characteristics, one to mediator behaviour. In all cases, we are only interested in actors’ \textit{perceptions} of these characteristics and actions. Thus, we will
in each empirical section investigate first how Ukrainian and EU elites perceived the EU’s effectiveness as a mediator and then turn to perceptions of its coherence, credibility and impartiality, as well as evaluations of the strategies used by the mediator and the causal relationships between these factors and effectiveness.

Although the importance of coordination and coherence in situations where several mediators are involved has been noted in the general literature on mediation (Wallensteen and Svensson, 2014: 321), coherence as a major determinant of mediation effectiveness has primarily been emphasized in the (sparse) literature on the EU as mediator (Bergmann and Niemann, 2015; Maoz and Terris, 2009; Thomas, 2012). This comes as no surprise as achieving foreign policy coherence is a challenge in a polity with 28 Member States, an active (and sometimes in itself divided) Commission and an increasingly interventionist Parliament. It is usually assumed that a coherent EU approach sends strong signals of resolve and determination, at the same time as it leaves little room for conflict parties to engage in divide-and-conquer activities (Bergmann and Niemann, 2015). Vice versa, if for example Member States introduce mediation activities that compete with, or even go against, joint EU initiatives this would plausibly have a negative effect on the EU’s mediation effectiveness. Consistent with the main thrust of this article, we are studying perceptions of coherence: parties to a conflict may well entertain contrary evaluations of actor unity. Thus, we hypothesize that if the EU is perceived as a coherent and unitary actor, its mediation is expected to be effective (H1).

The perceived credibility of the mediator – defined as ‘the extent to which disputants believe the mediator’s statements, threats, or promises and her ability to deliver the promised agreement’ (Maoz and Terris, 2006: 409; cf. Kydd, 2003) – is our next variable. The more credible a mediator is perceived to be by a disputant, the more willing is this actor to accept the mediator’s offers. High credibility is therefore believed to result in high effectiveness. Credibility is closely associated with a mediator’s reputation and with the resources at his disposal.1 Every mediator carries with him a track record, as perceived and interpreted by other actors, which may give clues regarding his credibility. Resources – material and immaterial – provide leverage (Beardsley, 2009; Bergmann and Niemann, 2015: 962) and are essential in determining if a mediator’s promises or threats are deemed credible or not. If a mediator’s commitments are not backed by access to useful resources (economic, military or administrative), they are probably not considered credible. Thus, we hypothesize that if EU action is perceived as backed up with access to enough resources and thus deemed credible, high effectiveness in the mediation is expected (H2).

For many observers, impartiality is considered a necessary item in the tool-box of the successful mediator (Carnevale and Arad, 1996: 40–41; Young, 1967: 309; see also Elgström et al., 2018). The third party should, according to these scholars, preferably have no ties to any of the parties and no stake in the negotiated outcome. These traits are supposed to increase the parties’ readiness to accept the mediator (Maoz and Terris, 2006: 411), but also to enhance the possibilities of getting information from the disputants and increase the perceived fairness of the proposed solutions (Kleiboer, 1998: 29). Therefore, impartiality is associated with mediator effectiveness.

Partiality can be understood in three ways. It may refer to the kind of relationship a mediator has with the disputants, relational partiality. Secondly, we have processual
partiality, where the mediator favours one of the parties during the process, for example by revealing privileged information to one of them, and, finally, outcome partiality, which means that the mediator deliberately favours one of the parties in its proposals for conflict settlement (Elgström et al., 2003). Thus, we hypothesize that if the EU is seen as impartial in those three dimensions, the effectiveness of the mediation is expected to be high (H3a).

The necessity and advantages of impartiality have increasingly been questioned by other mediation scholars who argue that bias can also be helpful to mediation ‘under the assumption that the mediator delivers the agreement of the party toward which it is biased’ (Touval, 1975, 1982; Touval and Zartman, 1985; Zartman, 2008: 305). Touval and others hold that active interventions by a third party affect both the substance and the likelihood of an agreement. One logic at play is that only mediators that are believed to be ‘on your side’ can credibly counsel concessions or restraint (Kydd, 2003; Savun, 2008), another that impartial mediators have incentives to hasten the reaching of an agreement at the expense of its quality, while biased mediators will take care to ensure that the interests of ‘their’ side are guaranteed (Svensson, 2009). In brief, mediation analysts today assert that neutrality is problematic and that the effectiveness of impartiality is contingent: under some circumstances, impartiality results in efficiency, but this may not be true in other contexts (Elgström et al., 2018). Thus, here we introduce a competing hypothesis as we can also assume, that if the EU is considered partial, its mediation is expected to be effective (H3b).

The choice of mediation strategies – the ways in which mediators go about achieving their objectives – is frequently linked to effectiveness (Bercovitch and Houston, 1996; Bergmann and Niemann, 2015; Wallensteen and Svensson, 2014). Touval and Zartman (1985) identify three main strategies: communication-facilitation; formulation; and manipulation, going from a more passive to an increasingly active or interventionist approach (cf. Bergmann and Niemann, 2015).2 Findings relating strategy to effectiveness are contradictory. A series of studies indicate that less interventionist strategies have greater utility (Wallensteen and Svensson, 2014: 319), but other scholars associate mediation success with the ability to exert pressure, and contend that powerful mediators tend to be more effective than less powerful (Bercovitch and Houston, 1996: 29–30; Greig and Diehl, 2016: 118–121; Richmond, 1998). Wallensteen and Svensson (2014: 319–320) suggest that a combination of manipulative and formulation strategies is most likely to be successful. The results are thus inconclusive and suggest that the effectiveness of various strategies may be contingent upon the mediation context and the stage of the conflict. Again, we have two competing hypotheses: If the EU primarily employs manipulative strategies, its mediation is expected to be effective (H4a); if the EU primarily employs less interventionist strategies, its mediation is expected to be effective (H4b).

Context: EU mediation in the Russia–Ukraine conflict

The Russia–Ukraine conflict, ongoing since 2013, challenges the image of the EU as an effective external relations actor. This grave conflict is marked by humanitarian, social, economic and political crises. It has borne more than 10,000 human casualties (UN, 2016) and caused a massive displacement of civilians from the war-torn regions. It has
exerted a devastating impact on the Ukrainian economy. It has come with re-tailoring of sovereign borders in Europe as well as escalation of hostile interactions and tensions between the EU and Russia. Significantly, ‘it is important to recognize that the conflict in Ukraine was fundamentally about the EU’ (Davis Cross and Karolewski, 2017b: 4), with the EU being linked to Ukraine in all critical junctures of this conflict.

Relevant literature has been dissecting the events in Ukraine following the Revolution of Dignity, and specifically dealing with the Russia–Ukraine conflict that has been ongoing since the annexation of Crimea by Russia in February–March 2014 (see a Special Issue of the *Journal of Common Market Studies* (Davis Cross and Karolewski (2017a)); as well as works by Kuzio (2015a, 2015b, 2017); Natorski (2016, 2018; Natorski and Pomorska, 2017); Wolczuk (2016)). Kuzio (2017: 194) argued that the EU’s policies pre-Maidan were ‘constrained by its failure to appreciate that Russia no longer viewed the EU and NATO as different actors and that Russia was opposed to both of their enlargements into its “zone of privileged interests”’ (Kuzio citing Wawrzonek, 2014). Predictably, the annexation has caused a major shift in the EU’s foreign policy. Exercising its ‘hard’ economic power, the EU (with all Member States on board) introduced the first tranche of sanctions against the Russian Federation in April 2014. The EU’s sanctions – financial and economic, as well as travel bans – became more extensive and heavier after July 2014 when the MH17 flight carrying almost 300 people (many EU citizens) was downed over eastern Ukraine. Despite some Member States resisting this common foreign policy response (cf. Orenstein and Kelemen, 2017), all Member States continue to remain the signatories to the sanctions, prolonging them several times. In addition, utilizing its diplomatic power and political clout, the EU cancelled a number of high-level diplomatic meetings with Russia. The EU was also behind the suspension of Russia’s entry to the OECD and the International Energy Agency. In a different exercise of its diplomatic power, the EU, through its Member States, has engaged Russia and Ukraine in mediation talks. With three earlier formats failing, the fourth, and current format (‘Minsk II’) includes Ukraine, Russia, Germany and France. The EU also was a broker of two deals between Russia and Ukraine to provide Ukraine with Russian gas. In brief, the EU has used a range of mediation strategies, including traditional mediation activities, often led by Germany and France, elements of coercive diplomacy and the EU acting within the ENP.

In its relations towards Ukraine, the weaker side in the conflict, the EU provides financial and structural assistance. Setting the relations within the conditionality framework, the EU links this assistance to Ukraine’s reforming itself according to a set of norms, rules and standards defined by the EU. Among the issue-areas prioritized by the EU are rule of law and good governance. Importantly, political and economic reforms within Ukraine facilitated by the EU do not warrant Ukraine’s eventual accession to the Union. Yet, encouraging Ukraine’s progress in reforms, in October 2017, the EU signed the Association Agreement with Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) with Ukraine. And several months prior to that, in June 2017, the EU activated a no-visa entry into Schengen for Ukrainian citizens, after long negotiations with Ukraine. In March 2018, commenting on the benefits of the Association Agreements and a wider EU–Ukraine partnership, High Representative (HR)/Vice-President Federica Mogherini stressed that the EU is ‘there to support you step by step and we will continue to be at
your side in the most consistent way we can. The European Union is Ukraine’s partner and strongest supporter in striving to build a stable, prosperous democracy and economy’ (European External Action Service (EEAS), 2018).

Among the ‘objective’ outcomes of the EU’s and EU Member States negotiating and mediating activities as of 2018 is the ongoing sanctions regime against Russia. Yet, despite these economic measures, the conflict remains ongoing and continues to claim lives of military personnel on both sides as well as civilians in the affected regions. Reports indicate increased hostilities in May–June 2018, that ‘worsened the immediate and long-term human rights protection of people living in the affected areas’ (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), 2018). The status of the two regions that claim their independent status remains grey. In October 2017, the Ukrainian parliament passed the bill on ‘creating special conditions for peaceful settlement’ in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. The law has confirmed Ukraine’s commitment to the ‘non-violent restoration of its sovereignty over the seized eastern territories under the United Nations statute and international law’ (Ponomarenko, 2017). According to Ponomarenko (2017), the 2017 law was informed by the Minsk agreement requirements, yet it did not use the Minsk peace accord as its legal basis. Among the latest developments in the region, Russia has activated its military build-up in the basin of the Azov Sea (Rettman, 2018). This is seen by many commentators as a new threat to Ukraine’s southern borders. Russia continues to detain Ukrainian citizens in Russia despite an outcry of the international human rights community (Amnesty International, 2018).

While the EU’s role and mediation activities in the critical junctures of the Russia–Ukraine conflict are acknowledged by scholars of international relations, the question remains open: how effective was and is the EU at each junction and in each exercise of its power? While studies of ‘reality’ may offer some informed answers, we find it more fruitful to deal with perceptions of this reality.

**Methodology and material**

Our research design involves a systematic comparative study of two datasets: (a) opinions expressed by EU practitioners who are engaged in the policy formulation and execution of EU–Ukraine relations (data collected in the course of 12 face-to-face semi-structured key-informant interviews in Brussels with representatives of European Commission, EEAS and European Parliament; and (b) opinions expressed by policy-, decision- and opinion-makers from Ukraine (leaders of political, business, civil society, media and cultural sectors, 50 face-to-face semi-structured interviews). Both groups were interviewed between December 2016 and July 2017 within the framework of the international project ‘Crisis, Conflict and Critical Diplomacy: EU Perceptions in Ukraine, and Israel and Palestine’ by pre-trained researchers. The questionnaires for both groups were designed to ensure the identification of ‘mirror’ perceptions and subsequent comparative analysis of the self- versus external perspectives on an identical set of issues. Interviews traced views on the EU as a partner for Ukraine, an actor/mediator in the Russia–Ukraine conflict, and an actor reacting to a changing international context and EU multiple crises. According to the strict conditions of the interviews, guided by the
Human Ethics regulations, names and official affiliation of the interviewees cannot be disclosed. The interviews produced rich nuanced narratives. To diminish the risk of selection bias, the authors have consciously endeavoured to extract the most representative views from the material. Our decision to include extensive quotes illustrating the most representative views further reduces the risk of misrepresenting respondents’ views. When minority viewpoints are presented, this is noted in the text.

Ukrainian perceptions of EU mediation effectiveness

Ukrainian respondents tended to describe the EU’s effectiveness in the conflict as limited. In general, respondents acknowledged the EU’s ‘pressure on Russia, its economic and financial support [to Ukraine], and its influence on the Ukrainian political elite’ – and this constituted an impact in the eyes of Ukrainian elites. When positive, perceptions were typically connected to the recognition of the role of Member States – Germany and France in the first place (with Germany seen as a leader able to achieve outcomes while feeling personal responsibility for Ukraine), but also Poland, the UK, the Baltic and Scandinavian countries. The latter group was seen as effective ‘lobbyists’ for Ukraine in the EU. Notably, Ukrainian elites did not make a sharp distinction between EU and Member State activities. Germany and France were often explicitly or implicitly considered to represent the EU as a whole.

The EU – and/or Germany and France – were often credited for bringing Russia to the negotiation table. According to one interviewee: ‘Speaking in simple words, Merkel and Hollande just took Poroshenko and Putin by the scruff and made them sit at the same table to start negotiations’. The EU’s involvement constrained Russia and ‘minimized its aggression and military intervention’. It ‘stopped the hottest phase of the conflict’ and has functioned as a counter-weight to Russian influence. Many respondents compared the EU’s role with a situation without the Union as a mediator. In the words of one typical interviewee, ‘well, nobody knows what would happen if this mediation did not exist. Perhaps there would be Russian tanks here in Kiev by now, we do not know’. Such a ‘better-than-nothing’ attitude is typical of several respondents.

The most common reaction was thus an ambivalent view. The EU was considered somewhat effective, with opinions divided between those who saw the EU’s effectiveness in a more negative than positive light and vice versa, with the ‘glass half empty’ visions being somewhat more frequent. These featured an image of the EU as being tired of the conflict and wanting an end to it, looking for a cease fire rather than a long-time solution – ‘but these negotiations, they are not very helpful for us. I have an impression that they want to end this conflict, so that it did not exist, to freeze it’ – not realizing that such a solution is not seen as effective in the eyes of the Ukrainian respondents. The EU’s alleged limited understanding of Ukraine and reasons behind the dramatic events in the East were also cited: ‘One should understand the role of Russia in this conflict, as well as the economic, social, and cultural specific particulars of the region. Without such understanding it is just impossible to achieve durable peace here’. Finally, comments also profiled purely critical and negative views on the EU’s effectiveness as a mediator. The main reason behind this perception is the fact that the conflict is not over and that violence continues: ‘Frankly speaking, I don’t see any effect. The situation has remained
the same for a long time... It doesn’t change at all.’ The lack of mediator effectiveness was also connected to the opinion that Russia is an exceptionally hard actor to negotiate with. It was described as a negotiation partner that does not really want to resolve the conflict. It is an actor who is not seen by Ukrainian respondents to abide by European norms (obviously in contrast to Ukraine).

Turning to the factors, derived from the mediation literature, that may impact effectiveness, interviewees often refer to divisions and internal conflicts within the EU, leading to incoherence and a lack of strong and consistent policies. In the words of one respondent, ‘we should understand that Europe is diverse. It is not homogeneous, and it is economically dependent on Russia.’ While some states are pictured as lobbyists for Ukraine (Germany, Poland, the Baltic and Scandinavian states), others are seen as being more supportive of Russia (‘Putin has a club of friends’), or as not interested in the conflict at all (primarily southern European members). This division was seen by one politician to be ‘hindering decision making’ in the EU and lead to passivity with regards to the conflict. Furthermore, there is, it is claimed, a ‘strong movement’ in some Member States that want to withdraw sanctions from Russia, because of economic interests there. Coherence, in terms of unity within the EU, is in our material clearly associated with effectiveness, as witnessed by the following remark: the EU ‘can be a powerful source... it happens when they manage to honestly convince all the EU Member States, when there is no disunity between the major EU shareholders’. Incoherence is also associated with the EU’s position as an actor with interest in both Ukraine and Russia.

It is clear that they [the EU] would rather not lose anything with Russia, and to somehow save face with Ukraine... This is quite a difficult choice... between values and interests. Of course, there is more interest in Russia, there are more values in Ukraine... it seems to me that the EU keeps this line of value priorities, but also trying not to lose the benefit. This is a kind of an attempt to sit on two chairs.

Such a policy often results in ineffective compromises, when trying to please both parties.

In general, EU economic self-interests in Russia are in our material linked to a perceived lack of credibility, as well as to a far too weak policy stance towards Russia. Neither the EU’s reputation as conflict manager, nor general trust in the EU as an actor are mentioned by our interviewees as factors influencing the credibility of the EU. Respondents noted that the EU and its Member States have their own interests at heart, and with this, effectiveness is jeopardized. One interviewee claimed (only) a ‘fifty-fifty’ degree of effectiveness, ‘because of the trade with the aggressor. Because they [the EU] are interested in the aggressor and they have dealings with him. Because economy rules politics’, or, in a less radical formulation from another respondent, ‘the pressure on Russia was weaker just because the relationship with Russia was fairly extensive, built up in all respects, including not only economic’. Bilateral economic interests are thus claimed to ‘limit the abilities of the EU’.

Most interviewees, however, see the EU as an ‘interested actor’ in favour of Ukraine: ‘But the positive thing about Holland and Merkel is that they are not impartial mediators. They clearly took the side of values of international law, and in this sense, they are
very much inconvenient for Putin’. Impartiality is not extensively linked to effectiveness by the Ukraine respondents (see Elgström et al., 2018). If anything, respondents – referring to relational partiality – consider it a problem that the EU is ‘not partial enough’. If the EU had been more consistent in its actions, and put more pressure on Russia, it would have been morally appropriate and better results could have been achieved. In the words of one respondent, ‘if they [the EU] see Ukraine as part of the European family, they should have stood up for family… and not in a long-term perspective, but made some concrete actions’ while another one stated that ‘It is obvious that the West could do a lot more… economic sanctions could be more serious… these could be serious sanctions for Russia’.

In terms of outcome partiality, Ukrainian respondents acknowledge that the EU is favouring their own nation by its actions. While there is ‘a dialogue between the EU and Ukraine and, let’s say, there is no imposing of any action on Ukraine… there is no such thing that the EU orders Ukraine to finish the crisis on any terms’, the EU has imposed sanctions against Russia and these are claimed to have had at least some negative consequences for the Russian economy.

The EU is in the Ukrainian material almost consistently considered an economic great power, but not a military power. A fair number of respondents also have the image of the EU as a norm-setting power, notably in eastern Europe and conditional on a promise of potential membership. Considering the relationship between different strategies and policy instruments and perceived effectiveness, it therefore comes as no surprise that economic sanctions are almost uniformly deemed to be the instrument that the EU should prioritize in the conflict. Diplomatic means, crucial elements of a facilitation strategy, helped to get Russia to the negotiation table and are therefore seen in a positive light, but are not considered powerful enough to pressure Russia to any major concessions, as reflected in the following statement: ‘there is no essentially crucial influence, except the sanctions…’ and ‘if they come to you with an axe, take an axe, do not persuade them or something’. The sanctions imposed on Russia are positively valued, and believed to have had some limited effect, but most respondents believe that they are not forceful enough, as they have not changed Russian policies. Thus, they are only perceived as partly effective. The EU sanctions policy ‘must be strengthened, because it [a stronger policy] only really works with the Russian Federation’. Hence, interventionist manipulation strategies are clearly preferred, rather than an approach stressing facilitation and communication.

References to formulation strategies are mainly found in the context of the Normandy and Minsk negotiation processes. While these are evaluated positively in the sense that they are deemed to have stopped conflict escalation and restrained Russian aggression, they are also heavily criticized as they have frozen the conflict and tend to preserve a status quo that Ukrainian interviewees dislike.

EU perceptions of EU mediation effectiveness

Ambivalent views on the EU’s effectiveness were frequent within the EU sample, as in the case of Ukraine. However, the ‘glass half full’ perspective seemed to be in the lead. In their positive reflections, EU respondents saw that the situation may have been worse without the EU and its key Member States. Europe was recognized to propose different formats for negotiations, later accepted by the parties. EU Member States – Germany and
France – were seen to use their influence to bring conflicting sides to the negotiating table. However, EU respondents did not reflect on the role of some states seen in Ukraine as ‘lobbyists’ for Ukraine. In contrast, EU respondents were more reflective of the role of the EU versus EU Member States than Ukrainian counterparts: if the EU Member States are successful mediators, is it because of the EU or of these Member States? Importantly though, an image of a coherent EU response marked this sample – the sanctions against Russia, observed by all members, were the obvious example. Divisions between EU Member States on their positions towards Ukraine vis-a-vis Russia prominently noted by the Ukrainian respondents did not feature in EU material.

EU respondents saw effectiveness of the European side to be higher in the beginning of the process. Even though the progress is seen as slow, some progress is recognized to be better than nothing. In the eyes of the EU practitioners, the EU has managed to alleviate the severity of the conflict, and this is an achievement in itself. In this light, frozen conflict and containing of military escalation are seen from a positive standpoint. This stands in contrast to Ukrainian respondents that perceived a frozen conflict as only a temporary solution, limited in effectiveness and not addressing the problem long term.

Perceptions shared by EU practitioners dealing with Ukraine indicated that they do not see the EU, but the EU Member States Germany and France (Germany more so) as leading mediating actors: ‘Germany and France in the lead and the EU is kind of just monitoring the situation’. This indicates a risk of potential incoherence. France and Germany were seen to ‘have managed quite successfully to contain the conflict. They were very important in helping to contain the conflict; especially Germany’. The special role of Germany noticed by the European respondents echoed the views from Ukraine. In contrast to Ukrainian respondents, Poland, Baltic and Scandinavian states were not mentioned by Brussels practitioners as contributors to mediation.

The focus on only two countries as representing the whole Union was considered slightly problematic. Some respondents shared a concern that changing political leadership in one EU Member State might lead to the change in mediation strategies. Germany and France were also mentioned not to share information enough. These reflections led one of the interviewed to conclude, ‘And for that reason, the European Union is better, because it is a Union… it would be much better if the European Union played stronger role’. But there is also a recognition, that the EU may have ‘missed a chance’ to enter this mediation process as a Union.

As in the views from Ukraine, the EU is in the EU material typically perceived as an economic great power, but not as a great power in terms of security. It is also seen as a normative power (and specifically, ‘the protection of human rights… the EU is playing an important role in setting the standards’). The soft power of the EU was noted too – it ‘has a lot of power of attraction’ and this ‘includes people-to-people contacts, cultural aspects’. Most EU interviewees thus saw the EU as a credible actor.

Another shared opinion is that the EU as a power is of lesser ‘greatness’ than the USA or China. Nevertheless, as one respondent sums up, ‘It [the EU] is not the greatest power, but it is still definitely a power that everybody in the world has to take into account’. Importantly, respondents linked the concept of a ‘great power’ to the requirement ‘to be very effective’.
I am not sure that the European Union is that effective beyond the EU. We obviously have been more effective in the past in drawing in the countries of the East through our soft power. But the EU’s soft power I am afraid is on the wane and in today’s atmosphere of Realpolitik, the instruments that the EU has at its disposal are much less effective.

In terms of (im)partiality, perceptions of outcome partiality were among the most visible in the case of EU internal perceptions. Sanctions directed against Russia (and thus deliberately favouring Ukraine) were mentioned the most (and in this paralleling the views from Ukraine). Making an important distinction, the EU was described in this context as a ‘fair player, not a neutral player, but we cannot be neutral’. Some saw that the EU is favouring Ukraine more: ‘Obviously, we stand on Ukraine’s side… imposition of sanctions on the Russian Federation had influence on Russia’s position vis-à-vis us’. Moreover, respondents underlined that the two Member States who are the key players in the negotiation formats also supported the sanctions. For some, it meant that ‘being on one side… is not really mediating, because your interest in the other side… it probably makes a negative effect when Russia sees that the EU is not really impartial’.

However, and importantly, the responses from Brussels revealed more complexity to this perception. While on the surface Ukraine might be seen to be favoured by the EU, the interviewees also believed that a strongly biased approach would not be accepted by Russia.

I suppose you can say that the EU was perceived as being more favourable to Ukraine than Russia. Yet, if we had been entirely one-sided, I suppose the Russians wouldn’t have listened. In the end, the Kremlin did sit down with the EU and a working solution or arrangement was found.

Reflecting on sanctions in the context of outcome partiality, some practitioners observed that in their view, a conflict between Ukraine and Russia is ‘almost impossible to be resolved, because I am not sure that any of the two countries wants it to be resolved’. The conclusion is rather pessimistic then, ‘whatever you do, no matter how many sanctions you impose – it is not working’.

In relational terms, some noted that the EU, Ukraine and Russia are ‘on the same continent’ and share a ‘certain historical experience’. Thus, the EU can relate to them. Currently, the EU was mentioned to be ‘working with Ukraine on various issues’ (a sentiment echoed by HR Mogherini in her 2018 remarks: ‘our common work on the reform path for Ukraine and the Ukrainians’ (EEAS, 2018)), and the EU was seen to be ‘also working more and more with Russia’.

In terms of communication/facilitation strategies, respondents identified as one ‘crucial’ role of the EU ‘having this process set up, bringing the two to talk to each other and to put commitments in place’ – a perspective recognized also by the interviewed Ukrainian elites. Interviewed EU practitioners also noted that EU role in the mediation process is about ‘Pure diplomacy. That’s it. We do not have any other means. We do not have military forces’. One respondent stressed the role of the EU in general as a messenger (something also noted by the Ukrainian side): ‘The European Union delivers messages to both, Ukraine and Russia, we are aware about their positions and we are
looking for compromise’. Potentially building on these perceptions, a new step in communication was announced by HR Morgherini in March 2018: the launch of a new joint initiative – ‘a communication campaign called “Moving Forward Together”, to inform Ukrainians about all the opportunities and benefits of the EU-Ukraine cooperation in all different fields’ (EEAS, 2018).

**Formulation** strategy reflections were focused on the Minsk II process, paralleling views from Ukraine. These are described as a ‘four-party format with some indirect role for the EU’. Respondents shared a critical view that the Minsk process is ‘leading us nowhere’, yet this view was less typical than in reflections from Ukraine. Reflections on **formulation** strategies in general were less visible than in the Ukrainian sample.

**Manipulation**, a more frequent reference in the EU sample, stressed the EU’s sanctions on Russia and financial aid to Ukraine, with the latter being slightly more prominent in the EU than in the Ukrainian case:

> financial support, next to the support of the OSCE, SMM [Special Monitoring Mission] is almost completely funded by us, 70% of the personnel of the SMM is from EU Member States.
> We have quickly made massive resources available for Ukraine.

Official statements resonate with these perceptions: ‘Two weeks ago we announced another €24 million in humanitarian aid for people affected by the conflict in eastern Ukraine and this brings our humanitarian aid to a total of almost €700 million since 2014’ (EEAS, 2018).

### Comparing EU and Ukrainian perceptions of EU effectiveness: a discussion

EU and Ukrainian actors perceived the **effectiveness** of the EU in the Russia–Ukraine conflict differently, but in an overall more positive tone than expected. The rather similar, positive evaluation of EU effectiveness is somewhat surprising, given that you often would expect the originator of policies to be more positive than the targets of these policies. However, the Ukrainian cohort featured ambivalent views that leaned more towards the negative end of the evaluation continuum, than the EU sample. How do we explain this finding?

The first explanation is attributed to the perceived **coherence** of the EU, which we assumed to be one factor which explains the perceived effectiveness. Indeed, a major difference between the samples was the difference of the perceived coherence between the EU and Member States and within the EU. Both internal and external views singled out EU Member States as the most effective actors in current mediation. But whereas EU respondents stressed the positive performance of the two most active Member States, Germany and France – perceiving them as agents on behalf of the Union – as well as a coherent response of all Member States through sanctions, Ukrainian actors predominantly perceived a division between Member States and noted the limitations of the EU itself as a negotiator. Several Ukrainian respondents observed the existence of more pro-Russian factions in EU countries.
The factor of *credibility* brought up a very interesting insight. We had assumed that the perception of the availability of resources will make a difference in the evaluation of a mediator in respect to its credibility and thus, to its effectiveness. The analysis showed that it is less the availability of resources than the prioritization of aims which makes the EU a credible actor. For Ukrainian respondents, the EU’s relations with Russia in economic terms (coming with interests and stakes) were seen to be negatively affecting the effectiveness of the EU. Relations with Ukraine were also commented – those were seen to be built on the value-laden platform that attracted significant investments from the EU. The EU was thus in Ukraine seen to be facing a choice between interests and values. As most Ukrainian respondents perceive the EU acting first according to its economic interest (trade with Russia) and only second being concerned about its values (bringing democratic values to Ukraine), it is perceived as a non-credible actor and thus, effectiveness is seen as less high. Our EU respondents do not perceive any ‘ranking’ of the EU’s aims.

In terms of *(im)partiality*, the most striking difference between internal and external views emerged when reflecting on *relational* partiality. The Ukrainian actors, which perceived a priority on the economic interests of the EU, also see a limited ability of the EU as a mediator because of their strong economic relation with Russia. They argued that the EU should support its potential ally much more strongly, and be tougher against the aggressor, Russia. This perception was, however, not shared by a part of the Ukrainian respondents, nor by EU interviewees. On the contrary, most EU, as well as some Ukrainian, respondents admit partiality towards the Ukraine, which was related to a more effective mediation.

*Processual* partiality did not attract reflections by the respondents in Brussels, and only minimalistic perceptions of this type of partiality were observed in Ukraine. Sanctions were mentioned by both Ukrainian and EU respondents as a rather obvious example of *outcome* partiality, where the EU is deliberately favouring Ukraine. The most interesting discovery concerning outcome partiality was, however, the totally contrasting perceptions of the achievable solution to the conflict. The EU perceived a frozen conflict as a desirable outcome whereas Ukrainian elites perceived it as only a short-term, limited and unattractive solution. This finding emphasizes the fact that it depends on the disputant, which causal relationship we can assume between relational impartiality and effectiveness.

We observed several main resonances between internal and external view on the range of strategies. The EU’s role as a mediator was questioned vis-a-vis the role of the two EU Member States. In Ukraine, however, the cognitive ‘blend’ between the EU and Germany/France was more typical (‘they are all Europeans’), blurring the distinction between EU and Member State mediation. In the EU sample, the demarcation was sharper. Moreover, the EU sample voiced more of critical reflections on the fact that there are only two member states involved in the mediation. The EU respondents did not see the role of Poland, Baltic and Scandinavian states as contributors to the mediation process – and this was different in Ukraine.

In terms of *facilitation/communication*, the critical role of the EU in setting up the negotiations and involving Russia was recognized on both sides. Significantly, the role of the EU as a ‘messenger’ regularly linking the two sides was also mentioned by respondents on both sides. In terms of *formulation* strategies, respondents focused on the
two formats – Minsk and Normandy. But while limitations of the Minsk format were recognized by both internal and external stakeholders, the perceptions by the latter featured critical reflections of higher intensity. Finally, in terms of manipulation, two strategies were typically enlisted – the EU’s sanctions against Russia and financial support to Ukraine. Sanctions, as a strategy, drew more reflections in the Ukrainian sample than in the EU sample, while financial aid got more attention in the EU case than in the Ukrainian case. Unsurprisingly, Ukrainian elites were more critical of the sanctions policy, wanting more forceful initiatives, than their EU counterparts. The expectation that interventionist strategies are linked to perceptions of a more effective mediator is confirmed by the Ukrainian material.

Conclusions

Adding to a growing body of literature on the EU as a conflict mediator, this analysis offered a novel perspective. It compared the EU’s self-images of its mediation effectiveness vis-a-vis external images of EU mediation effectiveness (held by a weak conflict party, Ukraine in this case). Comparison between self- and external images is deemed to be analytically fruitful and useful for practitioners as ‘images and perceptions… provide the basic framework within which the conduct of international relations and conflict resolution takes place’ (Movahedi, 1985; emphasis added). Yet, perceptions remain overlooked in ‘ensuring a greater or lesser degree of regional and international stability’ (Dannreuther, 1997). Moreover, there is a lack of research that compares self- and external images of the EU in a systematic way (for one exception, see Knodt et al., 2017), and of the EU’s effectiveness as a mediator in particular. Our analysis addressed these gaps.

Considering the ‘objective’ outcomes of the mediations efforts that have taken place since 2013, the results are meagre. Agreements have been concluded, notably Minsk II, and temporary cease-fires have been arranged, but fighting continues and the fate of the contested regions in eastern Ukraine remains undecided. From a Ukraine perspective, this obviously represents a failure, and the EU – and all other mediators - are perceived as ineffective in this sense. The EU’s more limited ambitions are reflected in its self-image as an at least partially effective conflict manager.

Referring to our four determinants of mediation effectiveness, derived from the mediation literature, we could draw interesting theoretical and empirical conclusions: first, we could empirically show that the low effectiveness perceived by parts of the Ukrainian respondents is linked to the perception of the EU’s incoherence among its Member States. On the contrary, the EU perceived itself as acting in unity and more effectively, even when only two Member States where acting on behalf of the EU. Thus, perceived incoherence can explain perceived ineffectiveness, lending credence to Hypothesis 1. Even if this insight is not novel or surprising, it still strengthens theoretical and practical insights about the importance of internal unity in foreign affairs.

Second, the findings on credibility are important especially for conceptual reasons. Our analysis showed that more than the yet claimed importance of resources, the perceived prioritization of aims (interests vs values) plays an important role for the credibility of an actor. While Hypothesis 2 is not given support, the relationship between
perceived priorities and effectiveness, and whether it is contextually determined, should be further studied.

Third, (im)partiality as a characteristic of the EU is discussed rather sparsely by our respondents. It is often taken for granted that the EU is a part to the conflict and this is claimed to bring with it advantages and disadvantages in terms of mediation effectiveness. While Ukrainian elites would have liked to have a more engaged EU, partial to their interests, EU interviewees rarely analyse its effectiveness in terms of being more-or-less pro-Ukrainian or pro-Russian. This pattern, which does not give support to either Hypothesis H3a or H3b, reinforces the today widespread view in mediation research that (im)partiality is not a factor that is linked to effectiveness in any straightforward way. The partiality of a mediator does not diminish its effectiveness when key parties do not perceive mediator impartiality as crucial. This is an important theoretical insight. Our results also suggest that relational bias is the central aspect of partiality. Processual and outcome partiality seem to follow basic relational characteristics, in the eyes of external observers. If this theoretical finding is universally valid or contextually bound is worth following up in future research.

Finally, the strong emphasis on interventionist manipulation strategies by both samples reflects the standpoint taken by many mediation scholars, supporting Hypothesis 4a. Still, the concomitant emphasis also on facilitation and communication – primarily in the EU material, but also found in the responses from Ukrainian elites – is consistent with Hypothesis 4b and with the views of those researchers that advocate a mix of available strategies, combining the best characteristics of each of them.

Our case – with an internal picture of unity, but an external perception of divisions – signals that externally perceived incoherence and lack of unity is a possibility that needs to be taken into account by EU diplomats and decision-makers, not least when formulating the EU’s communication policies and public diplomacy. Finally, it sends a warning that a short-term approach to peace-building, with a wish for a quick solution to the conflict, may endanger the effectiveness of EU diplomacy as conflict parties may feel that their long-term interests are not considered.

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**Notes**

1. We are aware that some of our explanatory factors are potentially overlapping.
2. In *communication-facilitation*, the mediator may make arrangements for interaction between the parties and serve as a channel of communication. *Formulation* strategies can involve establishing procedures/protocol, structuring agenda, highlighting common interests and suggesting text formulations. *Manipulation* may include making substantive proposals, filtering information, suggesting concessions and even using coercive measures or providing positive incentives (Bergmann and Niemann, 2015: 962).
3. It is important to mention that Ukraine’s potential for NATO membership continues to impact on Russian behaviour in the region.
4. The Geneva Format: Ukraine, Russia, the EU and the US negotiating within the framework of G8 and G20 summits in April 2014; the Normandy Format: Ukraine, Russia, Germany and France, without US involvement (Germany and France participated as single players, but also as the voices of the EU); Minsk Protocol (Minsk I): Ukraine, Russia and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)

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