

## Passing the Buck or Dividing the Work?

### The UK's Approach to the Ukraine Crisis

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**Abstract.** *The United Kingdom has not been a very active player in the post-Soviet space since at least the mid-1990s. Yet, the “Revolution of Dignity”, the annexation of Crimea and the war in the Donbas had a profound impact on British foreign policy debates and public opinion. This article tries to systematically assess what impact the crisis had on Ukraine’s image in the UK and on London’s foreign policy towards the conflict. It argues that despite the UK’s absence in more high-profile formats for conflict resolution, London had been instrumental in the EU’s wider approach to the crisis. Instead of “passing the buck” to others, the more homogeneous position of both UK elites and public on the conflict and its main actors helped to install and uphold a tough sanctions regime against the Russians and assure considerable material support for Ukraine. Yet Brexit, reflecting an apparent more general rift between elites and the public in the UK, might not only become a challenge for the UK’s so far considerably Europeanized foreign policy, but also for its supportive position on Ukraine.*

**Keywords:** *Ukraine, Russia, UK, Brexit, Crimea, annexation, crisis, war.*

## Introduction

*“We should define what our national interest is in this instance and I think it is that Britain benefits from there being a world where countries obey the rules and where there is a rules-based global system. We are an international country - a country that relies on the world’s markets being open, and on countries obeying norms and standards of behavior. We know what price is paid if we turn a blind eye when such things happen: we build up much bigger problems for the future” (David Cameron, House of Commons 2014)*

This paper is designed to analyze the United Kingdom’s Ukraine policy and to ask what effect the events since late 2013, the Euromaidan, the annexation of Crimea and the War in the Donbas had both on Ukraine’s image in the UK and on foreign policy-making towards Kyiv and Moscow. Finally, the UK’s policies are to be assessed in the wider framework of the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy in general and Brussel’s approach to the crisis in Ukraine in particular. What kind of player is the UK inside CFSP and did the crisis in Europe’s East draw London closer into EU foreign policy-thinking and decision-making?

I argue here that the UK’s approach to the crisis in Ukraine has initially been a very reluctant one as in the majority of EU countries, reflecting not only the low priority and knowledge about Ukraine among the UK’s elite and public, but also the subordinate position of Europe’s East in London’s foreign policy in general. In light of the annexation of Crimea British policy-makers were then more eager than most of their European colleagues to call things by their name, criticize Russia strongly and

support the political results of the Ukrainian “Revolution of Dignity”. With the conflict extending to the Donbas London also decided to lend Kyiv considerable economic and humanitarian support, culminating in the sending of military advisory personnel. However, it seems that on the more political dimension, such as in conflict resolution via the “Minsk Agreements”, the UK restrained itself and led Germany and France take the lead.

So has the UK, as one of the “big three” players inside the EU largely “passed the buck” to Germany and France in regulating the Ukraine crisis? Is there something to the argument that the significance of Russian capital for London has an effect on Ukraine-policy? And is its alleged withdrawn position a reflection of wider debates such as around Brexit and a new pragmatism in the UK’s foreign policy?

The paper starts with an assessment of the state of the art in British foreign policy in general. The second part intends to analyze the image of Ukraine and the perception of the crisis among the British elites and the public since 2013. In the third and main part London’s policy towards the post-Soviet region and Ukraine is assessed. Here, I first examine if and how Ukraine figured in British foreign policy discourses before 2013. Based on that, it is asked whether the events of 2014 led to a re-examination of earlier policies and what the UK has specifically done since then in terms of political and material investment in Ukraine. The main part finishes with a discussion of the central question why the UK did not take part in the “Normandy format” and if that reflects some kind of drawn back position, lack of interest or even anti-EU sentiments. The article concludes with a chapter on the UK’s role vis-à-vis CFSP and the likely consequences Brexit will have for London’s foreign policies and Ukraine in particular.

## **A Note on British Foreign Policy and its Prolonged Crisis**

If one thing is certain about British conduct in international affairs and the UK's self-perception as an international actor, it is a sustained inherent vision of greatness and a role not only as a major part, but autonomous architect of world order on par with the great powers of the twentieth century. The most vivid and lasting verbalization of this view has been Winston Churchill's famous 1948 "three great circles" theory, in which Britain is placed like a hub between its former Empire, the English-speaking world and Europe, able of "joining them all together" and securing a "safe and happy future for humanity" (Davis 2013). Notwithstanding the changing international and domestic environment since the late 1940s – Britain's post-WWII decline in relative power terms, the effects of decolonization diminishing the significance of the Commonwealth, and not least the shrinking cohesion of the island countries itself during recent decades – the majority of Prime Ministers have held on to this paradigmatic view (eds Daddow & Gaskarth 2011, p. 232).

The British self-perception in combination with an ever more complex post-9/11 world order, the effects of globalization and major foreign policy decisions themselves have brought Britain into a delicate international position. First and most obvious is that the perceived "great power" status does not match the actual capacities of the United Kingdom. While a new - and in many ways post-European international order does in no way lend the assumed major position to the UK, its military resources were overstretched in Afghanistan and Iraq. Second, Britain's quest to act as a "bridge" between the US and Europe, the two remaining "circles", was unsuccessful. London was hardly able to influence US foreign policy under both George W. Bush and Barack Obama and be more than a junior, not to speak of a "special partner" (Ibid., p. 225). In the European "circle" the

British position inside the EU suffered from its lack of commitment to the European project, which esp. since the creation of the Eurozone turned the UK itself into something of an outsider to European politics and its underlying coalitions (Wallace, 2005). Third, British foreign policy, with its tendency to over-ambitiousness, policy failures such as the war in Iraq, and its (at best) ambivalent course towards Brussels has contributed to a profound crisis of elite trust and legitimacy in British politics, co-preparing the ground for the 2016 Brexit referendum.

Under such general circumstances much caution seems to be justified in regard to an analysis of the UK's response to the conflict in Ukraine. In contrast to the states of Central Eastern Europe, the Post-Soviet region has never been a priority for London after the Cold War (see the discussion below). Moreover, with the poor record of London's policy of "liberal interventionism" in recent years and a foreign policy debate favoring more pragmatism and commercial thinking, the mood to engage oneself in new theatres – especially for the sake of democracy – must also have been especially low. Above all, the UK's governing conservative elites' highly critical attitude towards the EU and its role as a true foreign policy actor can hardly be dismissed as factors influencing British thinking and policy-making in the Ukraine conflict. For many EU critics in the UK, the EU's role especially in the early phase of the conflict should have served as an ideal pretext to slash out on the EU extending too far in every regard and thereby even jeopardizing peace on the continent.

### **The Image of Ukraine in the UK and the 2014 Debate**

As in many EU countries Ukraine does not figure much and is not regularly covered in the UK press – even in a 2015 survey UK respondents were hardly able to name key associations with Ukraine other than Kyiv (5%),

Eurovision (5%) and the national football team (4%). Most respondents tellingly named War (33%) and Russia (33%) as their major associations (Institute of World Policy 2015). While it is fair to say that the public attitude has been one of neglect and ignorance especially before 2013, UK political elites also hardly had Ukraine on their minds before the events of the “Orange Revolution” in 2004 – with the notable exception of the debate around the removal of nuclear weapons from Ukraine during the mid-90s. In this chapter, we will ask for the reasons behind that observation and look if there is nevertheless a sort of a dynamic since the “Euromaidan” in late 2013.

### *The “Russia Prism”*

One of the main phenomena named by many interviewees when it came to Ukraine’s image in the UK is the strong tendency of elites and public alike to look at it through a “Russia prism”. As in many other EU countries this seems due to a serious lack of knowledge about the country and structures or experts covering Ukraine as their major subject. Most Eastern Europe-related academic institutes and think tanks concentrate on Russia and, according to an interviewee based in one, largely reinforced the “myth of a somewhat legitimate Russian sphere of influence in its ‘near abroad’” during the crisis (Wolczuk, 2015). Even more critical is the situation among media and journalists: few of those who covered or commented on the events since late 2013 had any regional knowledge nor language capabilities, whereas a strong “Russia-” and “Russian media-filter” was ensured by the fact that reporting on Ukrainian events was taken over by Moscow-based correspondents and that Russia experts were easily treated as Ukraine experts (Ackles, 2015). Russian propaganda contributed to the “Russia prism”, which officials said is a “challenge” also in the UK. “Russia Today UK” has been launched in October 2014 (with somewhat self-inflated audience numbers), but even traditional quality press

sometimes seems to be open to Russian influence – one example being the weekly “Rossiskaya Gazeta”, a supplement of the “Daily Telegraph”. The “Independent” and the “Evening Standard” belong to a Russian oligarch Alexander Lebedev (Spence 2015). Furthermore, the BBC came under criticism at the outset of the crisis when more critical reporting was nearly absent with the conflict portrayed in a “Russia says this, Ukraine says that” manner.

*Pro-Ukrainian Centre, Pro-Russian Fringe Politics?*

A second trend the UK has in common with other major EU countries is the way in which the events in Ukraine since late 2013, but especially since the annexation of Crimea, were interpreted quite differently by the political center on the one hand and both left-wing and right-wing forces on the other. Whereas the Cameron government, the Liberal Democrats and major parts of the Labour Party saw the Maidan as a “classical case of revolution for freedom” and supported Ukraine against its internal and external foes, left- and right wing-forces were consistently expressing themselves in a pro-Russian and anti-Western direction. However, differences in degree matter and a closer look at the arguments is thus justified.

For example, it is interesting to analyze the extended House of Commons debate on Ukraine on March 10, 2014, when the Russian-supported referendum plans on Crimea were in full swing. It is obvious that the referendum is deemed illegal by a wide trans-partisan majority of the House and that the PM’s plaid for the EU’s “three phase-approach” is not only widely supported, but that tougher rhetoric against Moscow and more concrete actions and proposals for eventual sanctions against Russia are demanded from the Prime Minister by the opposition and many of his own party’s MP’s:

“(…) I welcome the European Council’s decision to look at further measures, although the agreed language is weaker than we would have wished. I welcome what the Prime Minister said about asset freezes and travel bans” (Edward Miliband (L), House of Commons 2014).

“(…) does the Prime Minister not think it might be more reassuring for the British public if he were completely to rule out any sharing of military and technical information with the Russians for the foreseeable future?” (Steve MacCabe (L), House of Commons 2014).

Another interesting facet of the debate is the strong support especially the Prime Minister lends to the Ukrainian or the Maidan’s cause on the one hand and the strong anti-Russian undertone of many MP’s on the other:

“(…) we decided to send a political message of support to the Ukrainian Government and people. The interim Ukrainian President spoke at the European Council with great power and force. The Ukrainian people want the freedom to be able to choose their own future and strengthen their ties with Europe, and they want a future free from the awful corruption that they have endured for far too long.”

“We must stand up to aggression, uphold international law and support the Ukrainian Government and the Ukrainian people, who want the freedom to choose their own future. That is right for Ukraine, right for Europe, right for Britain” (both David Cameron, House of Commons 2014).

“Will he tell the Russian officials who were involved in the



murder of Sergei Magnitsky and in the corruption he unveiled that they are not welcome in this country?” (Chris Bryant (L), House of Commons 2014).

“Is the right hon. Gentleman (the PM, t.a.) not concerned that the measures he has committed to, or set out as possibilities, may prove insufficient to disrupt that pattern? Will we not look back with great regret if this emboldens Russia to continue on this path, potentially to the door of NATO members themselves?” (John Woodcock (L), House of Commons 2014).

Finally, the debate also shows that the Ukraine crisis was immediately influenced by the larger debate on Britain’s role in the EU and its role in European foreign policy. Whereas the Prime Minister felt obliged to convince deputies about a joint European approach to the crisis and the government’s leading role in formulating an EU approach, opposition deputies used the topic to attack David Cameron on his more general EU-sceptic course, indicating the possibility of a considerable fall out in light of the Ukraine crisis.

“As with other measures, it is best if possible to take these decisions in concert with our European allies” (David Cameron, House of Commons 2014).

“We recognize the constraints on the Prime Minister in seeking to reach EU-wide agreement. However, I urge him, particularly as we approach the referendum in Crimea, to apply maximum influence on our allies, so that maximum pressure can be applied on the Russian Government. Hesitancy or weakness in the EU’s response will send precisely the wrong message” (Edward Miliband (L), House of Commons 2014).

“At the critical moment a few weeks ago, and during the street

protests in Kiev, the Foreign Ministers of Germany, France and Poland represented the European Union. Why was Britain absent from that group? Was it a deliberate choice of the UK Government, or was it a reflection of our threat to leave the European Union in three years' time?" (Pat McFadden (L), House Commons 2014).

"I welcome the fact that the Prime Minister has come to the House to make a statement on the European Council, something he has not done quite as assiduously as I think he should have done in the past" (Gisela Stuart (L), House of Commons 2014).

On the fringes of the political spectrum, rather than genuine pro-Russian leanings, a general distrust of "US-led" Western policies and NATO (left) as well as a strong anti-EU (including its "expansionism towards the East") attitude (UKIP) provided the background here. Nigel Farage, the leader of the right-wing and anti-EU UKIP party said in March 2014 (after the annexation) that the "imperialist, expansionist" EU "had blood on its hands" (BBC, March 22, 2014) because of its support for the revolution, and was also cited to "admire Putin" (Graham 2014). It is however interesting to see how Farage, obviously in light of an ever broader public consensus on the matter during 2014 (in early 2015 57% of polled UKIP supporters supported the sanctions regime) (YouGov 2015) and UKIP voters' own bigger sympathies for the Ukrainian cause (48% with new Ukrainian vs. 9% with Russian government) (YouGov 2014), adjusted his position somewhat over time, spoke more favorably about the Maidan, and at least ceased to openly support Russian actions:

"This (the EU and UK position) has encouraged brave young men and women in western Ukraine to rebel to the point of toppling a legitimate president and led to the utterly

predictable debacle whereby Vladimir Putin has annexed part of the country and now casts a long shadow over hopes of genuine democracy in the rest of it.“

“I do not support what Putin has done – of course I don’t. But the approach of David Cameron, William Hague, Nick Clegg and other EU leaders has been disastrous. If you poke the Russian bear with a stick he will respond. And if you have neither the means nor the political will to face him down that is very obviously not a good idea” (UKIP Official Website 2014).

Though the British left seems to be more pluralist on the issue (see the above Labour MP comments), the election of Jeremy Corbyn – who also repeatedly stated NATO and EU had pushed Ukraine into the conflict (Jeremy Corbyn Official Website 2014) - as party leader seems to have given anti-Western and Ukraine-critical voices more exposure too. However, despite being accused of becoming a likely future “useful idiot” (Porter 2015) for Putin’s policies by some commentators, Corbyn has never openly taken a pro-Russian position, whilst his views on the Ukraine crisis rather reflect his commitment to the anti-war movement and his outspoken critique of both US foreign policy and NATO:

“Does he not think that there would be a better chance of reaching some kind of agreement with Russia if there was a clearer statement that NATO does not intend to expand into Ukraine, and that in return Russia should withdraw from its border regions, so that we do not build up to two huge armed forces meeting in central Europe yet again?” (Jeremy Corbyn, House of Commons 2015).

Rather, what seems to have happened with the British left during the Ukraine crisis is a split into a solid center-left rejecting Russian aggression

and supporting sanctions, and a much smaller radical part, pointing at right wing radicals on the Maidan and the role of NATO “expansionism” (Croucher 2015). A proponent of the latter position is the former Labour MP George Galloway, who parted ways with the party after the Iraq War, and repeatedly spoke on “Russia Today” taking a clear pro-Russian position on the conflict:

“Russia has every right, indeed obligation, to act in defense of its compatriots, its citizens, its economic and military assets (...), which it has on the territory of Ukraine” (Russia Today America 2014).

Those views are however marginal. On the contrary, there is much more evidence that parts of the left have undergone some transition during the crisis, making it more aware of Ukrainian matters as such and also changing positions on Russia. The creation of the “Labour Friends of Ukraine Group” was directly linked by its founder to the democratic nature of Ukraine’s revolution and Russian aggressionism (Milne 2015). A good example for an evolution of leftist foreign policy orientations due to the crisis is the Welsh Labour MP Paul Flynn, a long-time critic of NATO and UK interventionism:

“I have been a longtime critic of NATO excesses. But I also recognise its key role against Putin’s and the Middle East forces of barbarism. I will not say ‘no’ or ‘yes’. Can I get a badge that reads, ‘Maybe to NATO?’” (Mansfield 2014).

### *Public Opinion: Whither the West?*

The formation of elite positions on international issues and foreign policy does not happen in a vacuum and is to a high degree dependent on public opinion. The more ambiguous public views on an international matter are the more room of maneuver elites have, the clearer the opinion

the more bound they are. It is also obvious that what we are calling the “Ukraine crisis” took on a much bigger significance over time when steadily developing from a domestic event into an international conflict after the annexation in Crimea and the obvious involvement of Russian troops (“voluntarily” or not) in the Donbas. Thus, the topic also dominated the international headlines in the UK during 2014 and triggered a significant public debate.

What became apparent here very soon was that the British in their majority (50% vs. 33%) (YouGov 2014) interpreted the conflict as something “that should concern Britain and the Western alliance” and that the overall sympathies of UK citizens early on (as of March 2014) clearly lay with the Ukrainians (53% vs. 3% for Russians) (Ibid.). In contrast to fellow Europeans UK citizens were least convinced that what is going on in the Donbass is a civil war (Institute of World Policy 2015). The dynamics of public views on Russia are also interesting to observe: Till spring 2015 the image of Vladimir Putin and Russia in the UK dropped significantly (18% favorable of Russia, in comparison to 47% in 2007, 14% with confidence in Putin, in comparison to 37% in 2007) (Stokes 2015), with those numbers strikingly in line with the rationally critical of Russia Poles and even lower than in the US and Canada. Additionally, the British were much more eager than Germans or Italians to put the blame for “violence in Ukraine” on Russians and separatists (57%) than on the Ukrainian government (7%) (Simmons, Stokes & Poushter 2015). As for UK partisan views, it has to be highlighted that there is a consensus across voters of all parties that the sympathies in the conflict lie with the Ukrainians (YouGov 2014). The three major parties’ numbers (Conservatives, Labour, LibDems) are also more or less comparable in their assessment of how to react to the crisis. Only past Labour voters are slightly more inclined to stay out of the conflict altogether (with 28% vs. 21% of Conservatives and Liberals)

(AngusReidGlobal 2014), and only among potential UKIP voters has there been a majority (48% vs. 40%) (YouGov 2014) for treating this crisis as a matter between Ukraine and Russia only. The most striking finding here is that although an absolute majority of voters across the big three UK parties is satisfied with the government's response to the crisis, a significantly bigger proportion of voters of each party would prefer a tougher approach against Russia (between 34 and 37%) (AngusReidGlobal 2014).

Notwithstanding the lack of surveys and data for a dynamic assessment of public opinion on the crisis a relatively clear picture emerges. The annexation of Crimea and the later obvious support of Donbass separatism had a devastating effect on the image of Russia and its president in the UK; that support for Ukrainians was very high in relative terms; and that there was a cross-partisan consensus on the nature of the conflict as well as on the form of its regulation. In comparison to other European publics the British seem to have refuted Monaghan's argument that the country tends to take a middle position between Russian sympathizers (Germany, Italy) and critics (Poles, Swedes) among EU states (Monaghan 2005). In fact, it was much closer to the more radical Poles and firmly in line (although slightly less so on preferred policies, see above) with US and Canadian positions.

## **The Dynamics of London's Ukraine Policies**

### *Ukraine in British Foreign Policy till 2013*

During the 1990s Ukraine clearly had not been a priority in British foreign policy, not even among the countries in the Post-Soviet Region. The most pressing questions for London after the Cold War were the management of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the connected question of Ukraine's suddenly inherited nuclear weapons arsenal (Alexandrova 1996). As soon

as the latter question was regulated however, the focus changed to the political and economic development of the Russian Federation itself, while the space “in between” Russia and the Central and Eastern European states – soon destined for inclusion into Western political institutions – was neglected. In fact, the today (in)famous Budapest Memorandum of 1994 remained at least until 2008 the only international effort at the management of this increasingly obvious “grey zone” in Europe’s security architecture. Tellingly, the Memorandum foresaw only consolations in case of its violation by one of the parties. Yet, that lack of geopolitical foresight seems awkward only from today’s point of view since a self-occupied Russia and Ukraine at least until the early 2000s enjoyed rather friendly (or “brotherly”) relations.

The first rifts in the relationship between these two biggest successor states of the Soviet Union occurred in 2004, when the so called “Orange Revolution” managed to overturn the fraudulent election of Putin-supported Viktor Yanukovich for Ukrainian president. The then reactions of UK elites and public were however not too much enthusiastic, portraying rather a sense of distance, as a 2004 citation from Timothy Gatten Ash and a 2014 retrospective by James Sherr demonstrate:

“Why won't all these bloody, semi-barbarian, east Europeans leave us alone, to go on living happily ever after in our right, tight, little west European (or merely British) paradise?” (Gatten Ash 2004).

“The very blunt answer is that Ukraine has not been a priority for No.10 and until recently it is not certain that it has even been on their radar. (...) Instead, Britain’s priorities have been the global financial crisis and the limited overseas military commitments that we have” (Sherr quoted in Freeman 2014).

More important in strategic terms were however the consecutive gas crises between both countries between 2005 and 2009, creating temporary gas shortages esp. in Central Eastern European states but also questioning EU energy security as such. From that time on London had Ukraine “on the screen” but opted for a cautious approach nevertheless. The UK, a supporter of ENP and Eastern Partnership (eds Magone, Laffan & Schweiger 2016, p. 62), never went beyond the EU’s limited design for the region. In fact, it seems that the usual British approach to EU politics, preferring enlargement (widening) over more political integration (deepening) did (despite some rhetoric) not apply to Ukraine or any post-Soviet country. The reasons for that might be twofold: the disillusion with the development of the region after 1991, manifesting itself in hardly concealed authoritarian projects and high levels of corruption, and geopolitical cautiousness stemming from Russian forces’ presence in Crimea and Moscow’s rejection of further NATO expansion in its “near abroad”. Accordingly, when Ukraine’s and Georgia’s NATO membership bids were about to become real prospects at NATO’s Bucharest summit in early 2008, then PM Gordon Brown distanced itself from US policy and rejected “Membership Actions Plans” for both countries together with Germany and France (Brown 2008). Even the Georgian-Russian war in August the same year was taken by Brown as a confirmation of his earlier policies, obviously hinting at existing territorial conflicts making both Georgia and Ukraine unfit for NATO membership.

#### *The 2014/2015 Review and London’s Reaction*

When deadly violence broke out on the Maidan in late February 2014 events in Ukraine finally took center stage also in Western media. It soon became clear after the overthrow of the regime and the ousting of Viktor Yanukovich as president that the conflict would not remain a domestic affair. The annexation of Crimea and the subsequent destabilization of



Eastern Ukraine by Russian and pro-Russian forces during the spring largely took Western and also UK politicians by surprise. Obviously, events in Kyiv served as a template for a wider regional strategy on behalf of Moscow, which successfully speculated on unprepared and slowly reacting Western states and institutions. As for the later British debate on the reasons of the conflict and related foreign policy reactions several observations can be made based on a report by the House of Lords' European Committee (House of Lords 2015).

First of all, the report was highly critical about the EU's (and therefore also the UK's) obvious lack of inside knowledge about Ukrainian and regional politics as such. That can – with the benefit of hindsight – taken as a confirmation for the above-mentioned neglect the UK and other major EU member states paid to the states in the critical geopolitical “greyzone” between the EU and Russia especially after the EU's Eastern Enlargement in 2004 and 2007. Neither the last-minute refusal of Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich to sign the long prepared Association Agreement with the EU at the Vilnius Summit nor the furious reaction to that by the Ukrainian people, and – most of all – Moscow's reaction to both the EU's offer and the revolution in Kyiv were in anyway foreseen.

“An element of ‘sleep-walking’ was evident in the run-up to the crisis in Ukraine, and important analytical mistakes were made by the EU. (...) The EU and Member States lacked good intelligence-gathering capacity on the ground. The lack of an integrated and coordinated foreign policy was also evident” (Ibid.).

“Collectively, the EU overestimated the intention of the Ukrainian leadership to sign an Association Agreement, appeared unaware of the public mood in Ukraine and, above all,

underestimated the depth of Russian hostility towards the Association Agreement. While each of these factors was understood separately, Member States, the European External Action Service and the Commission did not connect the dots” (Ibid.).

Second, the report confronts Brussels – with the contribution of London to that not explicitly mentioned here – with major shortcomings in its foreign policy, which according to the authors have both structural and strategic grounds. While the ENP seems to lack a proper definition of and agreement on interests towards the region overall, its concentration on economic rationals and instruments is seen to lead to a neglect of the (geo-)political perspective. The report sees the major strategic fauxpas however in the EU’s policy towards countries of the region which are aspiring to EU membership. Precisely the lack of clarity on this question combined with the ENP’s “more for more”-approach is said here to have led to false assumptions in those states and – less pronounced but surely implicitly meant – to Russia’s mistrust and strong unilateral reaction:

“There is an unresolved tension between the offer of membership on the table to Eastern Partnership countries and the political will of member states to follow through (...). This creates unrealistic expectations and complicates Russia’s relationship both with these countries and with the EU. Member states must clarify whether EU membership is on offer” (Ibid.).

“It is clear that Russian concerns about the impact of EU trade agreements, while having an economic basis, were also politically driven, while in seeking to address Russian concerns the Commission was putting forward free-market liberal economic arguments. Both sides were to some extent talking

past each other. The absence of Member States' political oversight during this process is glaring" (Ibid.).

Next to those critical aspects it is however telling that the report does not deny that in the face of Russia's aggressive policies, not only a strong sanctions-approach coordinated with the US, but also a unified and better coordinated EU approach is necessary from the authors' position. In contrast to assessments that criticized especially British policy towards the conflict for trying to "diminish the actorness of the EU" by deliberately taking a withdrawn position, here the Commission is not only specifically mentioned as an effective rule-enforcer vis-à-vis the Russians, the reports' authors moreover call upon the EU member states to get more engaged in a common as well as bilateral format:

"The European Commission has played a strong and effective role in holding Russia to its international commitments in the World Trade Organization" (Ibid.).

"The very fact of the European Council exercising its decision-making processes and strategic thinking on Russia will, by demonstrating the engagement of Member States, send an important message to the Russian government. To maintain political oversight, we recommend that the UK Government should ensure that a discussion on Russia is regularly placed on the agenda of the European Council" (Ibid.).

"Europe is at the centre of the crisis in Ukraine and relations with Russia. The handling of future relations is a key test for European diplomacy and foreign policy, yet hitherto divisions between Member States have been the most important factor hampering development of a strategic EU policy on Russia. In the long term, only a dual approach, with Member States acting

together as well as using their bilateral connections in the service of EU policy, will be effective. The first step must be to maintain solidarity on current policy and to continue to seek a common approach in the response to the crisis. There is a real danger that once the crisis ebbs away Member States will continue to prioritize their economic relations above their shared strategic interests” (Ibid.).

How does the British reaction to the conflict look like, is there – following the above mentioned public trends and the reassessment of London’s Ukraine- and Russia-policy – a substantial amount of foreign policy change discernible? And, how does the British response to the conflict in Ukraine relate to the wider debate about the UK’s place in the world?

First of all, it seems that we have to distinguish clearly between the response of London to events inside Ukraine on the one hand, and towards the conflict and i.e. Russia on the other. As far as the domestic Ukrainian arena and e.g. Britain’s support for a successful transformation of Ukraine into a resilient democratic and corruption free state is concerned, the “National Security Strategy and Strategic Defense and Security Review” of 2015 sets high goals:

“We support a diplomatic resolution of the crisis in Ukraine and will continue to work to uphold Ukraine’s sovereignty, assist its people and build resilience. We have provided humanitarian aid, and we will continue to support Ukraine with advice and assistance on fighting corruption, defence reform and training their Armed Forces. We will also continue to support the EU Assistance Mission which the UK was instrumental in launching, as part of a wider package of support from the EU” (United Kingdom Government 2015).

Subsequently, London's investment in humanitarian, economic and defense assistance has been considerable: Already since 2014 the UK has developed into the 2<sup>nd</sup> largest bilateral donor in humanitarian assistance for Ukraine with an amount of 16,4 Mln. pounds reaching Ukraine via various agencies such as the WHO and UNHCR, while 10 mln. pounds are given as economic assistance to Kyiv from 2014-2016 via the UK's Department for International Development. Ukraine is also a key priority in a UK-sponsored, 20 Mln. pounds-heavy "good governance fund" for five countries of the Post-Soviet region. Even more significantly, London – following a lifting of an arms embargo against Kyiv by the EU in 2014 – has repeatedly delivered a substantial amount of non-lethal aid to Ukraine worth nearly 1 mln. pound only in 2014, while it has send to date 75 military training personnel to various locations in Ukraine focusing on medical and ground threat awareness (mines). In 2014 and 2015 Kyiv has furthermore been a main beneficiary of the UK government's "Conflict Pool", receiving far over 1 mln. pounds for various activities (UK Embassy Kyiv 2015). Adding to this, the UK also agreed at the NATO Summit in Wales that it would lead a "Trust Fund"-initiative for Ukraine with at least another 400.000 € of UK assistance (Mills 2015). Although military assistance to Ukraine is not entirely new and does not foresee to include any combat troops, the UK defence secretary Michael Fallon was more than outspoken about the reasons for the UK's increased support in 2015:

“As part of the wider government effort to support Ukraine and ensure a robust response to Russia's aggression (...)” (quoted in Ibid.).

Official (an un-quotable) sources pointed in interviews to the fact that more money from London could be offered if only the bureaucracy-hampered asorption capacity of the country would be higher. All these steps have also been accompanied by structural changes inside the Foreign and

Commonwealth Office, reflecting the increased awareness of British foreign policy makers towards Eastern Europe in general and Ukrainian affairs specifically. The growing role of communication and anti-propaganda measures in light of Russian actions has been esp. reflected: Whereas the former desk officer in London has been replaced by a full team concentrating on strategic communications, embassy staff in Kyiv has been increased, including a regional conflict advisor and more political personnel. On a more individual level, the increased importance of the issue has led to a more high profile nominations, including the new British ambassador in Kyiv, Judith Gough (from Sept. 2015), having been director for the East European and Central Asia region inside the FCO before, and by the change of the former Director Intelligence and National Security, Laurie Bristow, to the position of British envoy to Moscow in 2015.

*The Conflict: Has Britain Passed the Buck?*

However, these obvious changes stand in sharp contradiction to the debate about the British non-participation in the more high profile attempts and formats of EU member states aiming at a regulation of the conflict in Ukraine's East. The debate centers especially around the later void agreement between then Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovych and the Ukrainian opposition on 20<sup>th</sup> February 2014 in Kyiv, which was facilitated by German, French, Polish and Russian representatives, and the so called "Normandy Format." The semi-official format, a contact group including Germany, France, Russia and Ukraine, operational since June 2014 on heads of states- and foreign minister level, became instrumental in the Minsk II accords of February 2015. From the very beginning, the absence of London both in Kyiv and later in the format has been taken as confirmation by critics for a lack of engagement and interest in Ukraine and East European Affairs on behalf of Britain at best, and for a signs of an ever

more anti-EU-trend in British foreign policy or even pro-Russian leanings at worst:

“Institutionally, the Ukraine crisis was tackled with the aid of mediation by three EU foreign ministers, from France, Germany and Poland, co-signing the agreement that preceded the end of the Yanukovich regime. This was a new ‘big three’ in action on behalf of the EU. Why was the UK not there, since in the past it would automatically have been invited in these informal self-selection process to be part of the leading action? Answer: some combination of Poland’s successful diplomatic activism by foreign minister Radoslav Sikorsky, and the UK having vacated its seat through persistently wanting to minimize the ‘actorness’ of the EU” (Emerson 2014).

“The UK is a major NATO member, it is a major EU member, it is a member of the UN Security Council, and it is unfortunate that the weight that the British prime minister could bring to efforts to resolve this crisis appears to be absent” (Shireff quoted in Wesel 2015).

These accusations are not without grounds. As we have seen above, the UK has not played a very active role in Eastern Europe since the end of the Cold War, while its new foreign policy priorities such as border protection, the fight against terrorism and a more general anti-interventionist, commercialist-pragmatic trend do hardly speak for more engagement in the Post-Soviet space. Additionally, it became obvious from the UK debate following the annexation of Crimea that the EU’s role was indeed seen very critical also by many mainstream MP’s, esp. regarding the ENP’s alleged arousing of “unrealistic expectations” and its overtly economic focus. A call for more bilateralism and more traditional foreign policy could hardly be overheard in London. Finally, there have even been

voices explaining British absenteeism with the reliance of the City, London's financial center, on Russian oligarch's money and the pressure of their networks in the UK (Judah 2014). In sum, it seems, that critical voices were accusing the UK policy towards the conflict in Ukraine of something like a "buck-passing strategy" (Mearsheimer 2001, p. 157/158), where London deliberately remains on the sidelines while letting other states confront Russian aggression and do the "hard work" of investing their leaders' political capital in conflict resolution. The motives for such a policy-choice could either be moderate and be based on a lack of true interest and threat perception, or more radical, such as the hope for negative consequences of an unresolved and lingering crisis for the European project (see Emersons quote above).

I argue here instead that there are good reasons to believe that the British choice for non-participation not only had little to do with its foreign policy priorities and underlying trends, but that it was substituted by other significant tasks and roles taken over by the UK, and even well thought through on a more tactical level. The first plea one has to raise here is the UK's firm stance and leading role in the management of a tough sanctions regime against the Russians (and some Ukrainians), which to date stand in considerable contradiction to the ambivalent position of some other EU member states, e.g. Italy. The UK government has not only very clearly stated that it sees itself at the center of the sanctions regime and related coalitions together with the US, but that, other than e.g. in Germany or France, "sanctions governance" as such is an effective, institutionalized and ultimately publicly supported pillar of its foreign policy towards rule-breaking actors such as Russia.

"What Britain has done is led the charge in Europe for very strong and tough and consistent sanctions against Russia. I think Britain has helped to hold together a coalition of



countries including of course the Baltic states and Poland but also everyone in the EU. That has put through surprisingly tough sanctions against Russia and done that in a way that has been co-ordinated with the US” (Cameron quoted in Watt 2015).

“International economic sanctions have proved their effectiveness as part of wider efforts to uphold agreements and laws, and inflict a cost on those who breach them. Sanctions, including those coordinated through the EU, helped bring Iran to the negotiating table and are an essential element of our response to Russia’s actions in Ukraine. To improve the UK’s implementation and enforcement of financial sanctions, we are establishing an Office of Financial Sanctions Implementation and introducing legislation to increase penalties for financial sanctions evasion. We will review sanctions governance to ensure the best coordination of policy, implementation and enforcement” (United Kingdom Government 2015, p. 61).

Second, while it is of course tempting to argue that the UK’s inclusion in high profile measures of conflict resolution would help to exert more pressure on the Ukrainian and especially Russian side, one also has to consider the very different relationship actors such as Germany and France have with Moscow. Especially in contrast to the close „special relationship“ between Berlin and the Kremlin, founded on the depth of their historical connection and the strength of economic ties, the UK is not a well suited or natural interlocutor vis-à-vis the Russians. Albeit David Cameron had tried for a reset of the relationship since 2010, the yet worst period in the Post-Cold War era between both countries from app. 2006 to 2009 (see the Litvinienko- and Magnitsky-cases, espionage affairs, and Moscow’s pressure on the British Council) is still looming large. London and Moscow, it is

argued, notwithstanding a common interest in improved economic ties, are enjoying „almost no state-to-state relationship“ and are very low on each others list of priorities (Monaghan 2013). In general, the atmosphere between both countries has been marked by distrust and Cold War attitudes even before the events of 2014 (Ibid. 2014). This background, and the clear direction of public opinion, has allowed UK leaders to take one of the most uncompromising stances towards the Russians among EU states at the height of the conflict:

“Two-thirds of the public and opinion-formers think that Russia is a threat to the security of the EU, and one in five in both groups regard Russia as a ‘very big’ threat. Out of a list of 16 European countries, Russia is regarded the most unfavorably, with 56% of respondents recording that they feel ‘especially unfavorable’ towards it, a 26-point jump since the previous survey” (Raines 2015).

“Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea and destabilising activities in Ukraine directly challenge European security and the rules-based international order. We are working in NATO, the EU and the UN to ensure Russia is held accountable to its actions” (United Kingdom Government, 2015).

Thirdly, it has been stated above that a popular thesis regarding the UK’s allegedly soft approach to Russian aggression and absenteeism from the Normandy Format is connected to the interest of British business, esp. bankers, law firms and property agents, in Russian oligarchs’ capital. The subsequent influence of the latter in the UK, esp. in the City of London, has become in its more radical variant known as “Londongrad,” where Britain is ready to betray Ukraine and its Western allies for protecting “the City of London’s hold on dirty Russian money” (Judah, 2014). It is true that the UK, due to its liberal regulations for money circulation and buying property, for

decades but especially since 2010 has become a major point of attraction for “dark money,” though not only from Russia (Aris, 2015). After the murder of the famous Russian ex-politician Boris Nemtsov some commentators even went so far to demand a so called “Nemtsov Act” (modeled on the US-imposed “Magnitsky Act”), adopting tighter regulations to restrict Russian corruption from infiltrating the UK and thereby further hurt the economic circle around the Russian President (Armitage, 2015).

However, while the presence of Russian oligarchs and their financial interests in the UK is considerable and “commercialization” one of the key words in current debates on British foreign conduct, one needs to take a wider look in order to substantiate the claim that the UK’s Russia-policy is a victim of economic interests. In 2012, Russian Foreign Direct Investments (FDI) in the UK had been as low as 2% of an overall 406,3 bln. \$. Though an additional 12% fell on the British Virgin Islands, Russian FDI in the Netherlands or Cyprus is still higher (Central Bank of Russia 2012). As much of this money seems to flow back to Russia as FDI, these „tax optimization purposes“ together with the overall rather low significance of the Russian share in FDI to the UK seem rather to make the Russian side more sensitive for any relationship disruptions. Additionally, Russian firms in the UK stood for just 5,8% of market capitalization and the 34 Russian companies listed at the London Stock Exchange account for just 1,5% of the total number (House of Lords 2015). That picture is complemented by a modest trade partnership. Whereas overall trade had been on the rise before 2014, Russia in 2013 was still only the 14th biggest market for UK exports and the 16th biggest for imports (BBC 2014). The only area where London and Moscow seem to have a special economic relationship is in British FDI into Russia, which rose steadily since the early 2000s, especially in the oil and

gas sectors.<sup>1</sup> Even here however restraint seems to be appropriate: it is hardly forgotten how the significant BP investment in Russian TNK came under pressure in 2008, when the Russian side „wanted to change the terms of BP’s involvement in the Russian oil sector“ (Gvosdev & Marsh, 2014, p. 272). Taking also into account that the UK is relatively insensitive to Russian energy imports (Chyong & Tcherneva, 2015), it can hardly be argued that Russia is more than an economic partner among many others for the UK. Rather, there is a stark contrast to other EU member states, for example to Germany and the Central Eastern European States, where the primacy of politics over economics seems much more difficult to hold up in regard to Russia.

To sum up: In the absence of a certain degree of mutual trust and considering that the low interconnectedness between both countries does not provide London with much leverage over Moscow, the added value of including the UK officially in instruments such as the Normandy Format does indeed look questionable. One could even argue that such a prominent UK role could easily raise opposition from the Russian side and spoil the format. Interviews with un-quotable sources confirm that the UK leadership was very aware of this fact and therefore saw its role rather in exerting direct pressure on the Russian leadership, managing the sanctions regime and acting as a coordinator between the US and the rest of the EU. Furthermore, there are no indications that the UK leadership in any way tried to undermine a common EU position on the conflict. Rather, London saw the Minsk process from the beginning as the „only game in town“ and was openly supportive of it. Thus, both the UK’s difficult relationship with Moscow and the its true role since the outbreak of the conflict speak against the “buck passing thesis.”

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<sup>1</sup> So far also Western sanctions did not have a serious effect on BP or Shell investments to Russia (Katakey 2016/ TASS 2015).

## **The Ukraine Crisis, the UK's Role Vis-à-Vis CFSP, and Brexit**

It is a known fact that cooperation between EU member states on foreign policy matters has been driven by outside events and crises much more than by any general consensus on the matter. This is especially true for UK policy makers, whose engagement in EU foreign policy and defense cooperation has always been „slow and ambivalent“, but who nevertheless with time came to accept the fact that working more closely with European partners is a geopolitical necessity (Aktipis & Oliver, 2011, p. 75). Especially in light of the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s Britain adjusted its former very restrictive position on more European defense cooperation, culminating in the St. Malo declaration of 1998. Could the Ukraine crisis have a comparable effect on the British role inside the CFSP? How was the CFSP seen inside the UK during the crisis? Did Russian aggression lead to a more positive British attitude towards a common foreign policy? And finally, what effect will the surprising decision of the British people for Brexit, eventually also meaning the formal withdrawal of the UK from CFSP, have on European foreign and defense cooperation, and on the UK's and the EU's policy towards Ukraine?

The British perception of the evolution of CFSP has always been affected by the following core interests: First, London always insisted on a strong preference for an inter-governmental approach towards CFSP, which should preserve its autonomy and reflect its special status as a permanent UNSC member. Second, any involvement in European foreign and defense cooperation could only go so far as to not challenge the strong transatlantic vector in UK foreign policy and at best be compatible with it. Finally, if no reasonable alternative to European cooperation exists, the UK should at least try to exert leadership in proposing policies, in order not run the risk of being portrayed as just a follower to German or French

initiatives. For example, the British focus on ESDP and related initiatives like the above mentioned St Malo declaration have ensured that the UK uses its relative advantage in military capabilities in order to lead on the EU level.

Considering those limitations, it cannot surprise that the UK was never content with being just a „downloader“ of EU policies in the realm of foreign and security policy. Yet, during the first decade of 21<sup>st</sup> century the most significant line of conflict in British EU policy seems not to be any longer between London and Brussels, but between UK policy makers and the British public. On the one hand, the degree of Europeanization especially among the foreign policy elite has grown considerably in recent years (Ibid., p.90), and is reflected in current debates about the future of British foreign conduct:

“Despite the UK’s many attributes as an international hub, it will not be successful acting alone as a flexible intermediary in an increasingly competitive world; to try to do so would yield ever-diminishing returns. Given the growing international competition for power and wealth and the relative decline in the UK’s resources, the government should think of Britain as located at the centre of a series of concentric circles, with the EU constituting the first or “inner circle” of its international influence” (Niblett 2015).

“Only by working through the EU will the UK have a chance to influence the shape of international deals on combating climate change or protecting digital privacy and an open internet. Acting alone, its voice would be diminished in each of these policy areas” (Ibid.).

On the other hand, public opinion other than in Scotland has

remained very critical of the EU with Brexit as the final confirmation. This attitude also relates to CFSP. When asked in 2012 about their opinion regarding EU involvement in foreign and defense policy, 43% of British respondents wanted their government to exclusively handle foreign policy issues (against 20% of Germans and 28% of Danes), while autonomy in defense policy was preferred by 69% (YouGov 2012).

Coming to British policy inside the CFSP framework during the Ukraine crisis an interesting picture emerges, which does not confirm to often heard claims or critiques in many ways. First, the role of the UK government in the creation and upholding of a tough sanctions regime against the Russians is admitted by many experts throughout (Schreck, 2016). It is mentioned that the tough line of David Cameron and especially foreign minister Philipp Hammond (Antidze, 2016) have helped convince other EU member states about the necessity of „robust“ sanctions, „which would have been weaker without the UK’s prime minister“ (House of Commons 2016, p. 17). Second, as the EU-related policy review discussion above confirms, UK policy makers have been and are very aware of the necessity of joint action in the face of Russian aggression, the divisions between EU member states regarding policy on Russia, and finally Britain’s subsequent special role on the EU level. It is telling that especially during the earlier phases of the crisis members of the opposition even used it to criticize the Prime Minister for its until then ambivalent approach to EU and CFSP. Third, both the above outlined sending of military advisory personnel as well as the pronounced role the UK took inside NATO in regard to Ukraine policy confirm the statement of UK officials that one is aware that only a certain division of work or „burden-sharing“ between EU members will help find an effective response to the crisis. Therefore, by avoiding to call the UK an uploader to CFSP during the Ukraine crisis - though partly justified by its imminent role in the sanctions regime - the

crisis and related debates inside the UK might have led to a better understanding of both the necessity and functioning of CFSP on London's behalf.

In light of that the June 2016 decision of the British people for Brexit must have sent shock waves, especially through the mainstream of the UK's foreign policy elite. If one takes Theresa May's statement that "Brexit means Brexit" (Independent 2016) serious, this will of course have consequences for Britain's foreign policy and European foreign policy in general. However, if one looks beyond the initial post-Brexit hysteria, foreign policy is for sure one of the areas where London's leaving the Union will have the least serious consequences. For sure, coordination and finding of agreed „EU plus UK“ positions will take additional efforts and time. There also might arise – especially in case Brexit negotiations will take the form of a prolonged and difficult divorce marred by populism – a new rift between a now more autonomous UK and a smaller, even more German-Franco dominated EU. That rift would weaken the West as an actor in world politics and invite exploitation by foreign powers. EU foreign policy, beyond the considerable loss of geopolitical potential, would lose a very experienced, pragmatically minded member-state and decisive link esp. to the US but also to other world regions. Yet, as we have seen above, for UK decision-makers CFSP has been an inter-governmental platform, a kind of additional layer next to bilateral and other multilateral fora. Notwithstanding the symbolic damage, a new working mechanism for finding common positions should be easy to find, especially in light of the many overlapping or even identical interests. Moreover, it is not set in stone that Brexit will automatically mean a weaker West. After all, more autonomy means more responsibility for the UK, which will have to invest much more in its foreign conduct in the future to achieve its strategic goals and avoid belittling itself. That will include an investment into alternative



multilateral fora and rebuilding ties with countries and regions London so far is working with mainly in concert with its EU partners.

That brings us to Ukraine, where Brexit was taken by many as a confirmation of a crumbling West ever more exposed to an assertive Russian policy aimed at regaining hegemony in Eastern Europe by successfully deepening rifts among the West's main power centers. And yes, Brexit, while at least two years away as a final reality, has the potential to cut out a major proponent of the EU's sanctions-regime against Moscow and strengthen the position of more pro-Russian forces inside the EU. Yet, following the reasoning above, there is also another scenario: UK officials have already announced that Brexit will lead to an even bigger profile and engagement of London inside NATO, an institution still taken more serious by Russians than the EU in security matters. Moreover, a more autonomous UK might even turn out to be a bigger burden for the Russian aim to weaken Western sanctions, especially if London couples even more closely with the more conservative US position on the matter. Finally, on a highly speculative note, the UK – contrary to the recent past – might even enhance its engagement in the post-Soviet world as such and, freed from the structural ties to more Russian-friendly EU states, develop into a major supporter of Ukraine's territorial integrity and Western aspirations.

## **Conclusion**

The overall aim of this article had been to evaluate how British foreign policy was reacting to the crisis in Ukraine and if the image of Ukraine in the UK as well as London's general policy towards the region changed during the course of the "Revolution of Dignity," the Russian annexation of Crimea and the War in the Donbas. I argue here that 1) despite a comparable lack of knowledge about Ukraine and the until then low

priority of the post-Soviet world in London's foreign policy, the elite and public debate on the Ukraine crisis in the UK has been much more homogeneous than in many EU countries, more resembling a Western or Anglo-American discourse, and thus helped to shape the West's overall and the EU's largely pro-Ukrainian policy; 2) while UK economic, humanitarian and even military support to Ukraine is considerable, the most striking result of the Ukraine crisis for the UK's foreign policy is its more realistic and unambiguous image of Russia and Russian foreign policy, which also sets it apart from many EU countries; 3) despite a strong economic relationship with Russia and an increased tendency to commercialize foreign policy in general, the UK has been a front-runner in demanding and implementing economic and financial sanctions against the Russians, reflecting a much looser connection between the national interest and economic prerogatives than, for example, in Germany and other EU member states; and finally 4) that rather than having "passed the buck" to others, the UK's policy towards the Ukraine crisis so far reflected an increased conviction among British policy-makers that more, not less, cooperation in a CFSP-framework is necessary and that "burden sharing" is the best approach. The UK's non-inclusion in the "Normandy Format" is thus due to its much different relationship with Russia compared to Germany and France and an EU-wide agreement that the UK's role should be more pronounced indirect pressure on Moscow, support for Ukraine and the insurance of a coordinated approach with the US. In light of the latter, the result of the June 2016 Brexit referendum has been as serious blow for London's foreign policy elite, which will face the tough task now of satisfying Britain's strategic interests without the structural support of EU institutions and established common foreign policy frameworks. For Ukraine, Brexit also could be a major turning point as the more Russia-friendly camp inside the EU will grow stronger from now on. Yet, Brexit

does not change the UK's interests and a more autonomous and necessarily more assertive UK foreign policy, combined with more awareness for NATO and regions neglected so far, might even turn out to benefit Ukraine's cause.

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