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EU-RUSSIA RELATIONS IN TIMES OF WAR: INSTITUTIONAL LEARNING ACROSS THREE CRISES

MA thesis

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ABSTRACT

The following thesis analysed European Union's responses to Russia in regard to the 2008 Russo-Georgian conflict, the 2014 Russo-Ukrainian conflict, and the 2022 Russo-Ukrainian conflict. The study analysed the concept of institutional learning within the European Union as an explanatory factor of its varied responses. A combination of the Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD) and process tracing was used in order to conduct this work and to show how the EU gradually adapted to the geopolitical reality and developed its institutional tools, frameworks, capabilities and resources. The findings show that while the EU initially lacked the capacity and unity to effectively address those crises of 2008 and 2014, it developed and further strengthened the institutional mechanisms, which in turn, permitted a more comprehensive and unified response to Russia during the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The study demonstrated that the European Union 'learned' how to respond to crises due to external shocks and consequently internal, gradual institutional developments. Those external factors are considered to be the 2008 and the 2014 crises of Georgia and Ukraine. The study also highlighted that the presence of institutional learning became especially evident after the 2016 EU Global Strategy (EUGS), which emphasized the need for structural reforms to develop its crisis management capabilities. additionally, the research highlighted that as the EU's "capability-expectations gap" gradually narrowed, it facilitated the alignment of its actions with its declared norms and principles.

Table of Contents

Introduction 6

Chapter 1: Historical context and theoretical framework 8

1.1 The foreign and security policy of the EU 8

1.2 Institutional Learning 11

1.3 Normative Power Europe – Critical Perspective 14

1.4 Background and previous research 17

Chapter 2: Methodology, method and data 24

2.1 Research design and case selection 24

2.2 Operationalization of variables 27

2.3 Data analysis method 29

2.3.1 Most Similar systems Design (MSSD) 29

2.3.2 Process tracing 32

2.4 Limitations 34

Chapter 3: Analysis 35

3.1 The 2008 Russo-Georgian conflict: brief overview 36

3.1.1 The EU's response to the Georgia crisis 38

3.1.2 Institutional tools and mechanisms available in 2008 42

3.2 The 2014 Russo-Ukrainian conflict: brief overview 44

3.2.1 The EU's response to the Ukraine crisis 47

3.2.2 Institutional tools and mechanisms available in 2014 49

3.3 The 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine: brief overview 54

3.3.1 The EU's response to 2022 crisis 56

3.3.2 Institutional tools and mechanisms available in 2022 58

3.4 Discussion: Institutional learning across three crises 63

Conclusion 69

Bibliography 72

Introduction

the relationship between the European Union and Russia has evolved over time, marked by a complex history of both collaboration and episodes of tensions. However, Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine has fundamentally transformed their bilateral relationships. The primary objective of this thesis is to determine the reason behind the EU's different response to similar crises. In similar crises I mean the 2008 Russo-Georgian war, the 2014 Russo-Ukrainian war, and the 2022 Russo-Ukrainian war. This leads the paper to the following research question: *Why does the EU respond differently to Russia's similar behaviour in terms of invading neighbouring countries?*

Considering the current geopolitical challenges and their impact on European security, it is important to understand those factors that influence the responses of the European Union, which, in turn, is interesting for both political and academic community. the following research contributes to the broad discussion on the EU's crisis response mechanisms as well as the role of institutional learning in determining the EU's policy decisions. Overall, the work provides a deeper understanding of the significance of institutional learning in the policy-making process. The thesis will argue that these three crises are similar in nature, where Russia shows similar patterns of behaviour. When I mention Russia's similar behaviours, I mean, on the one hand, Russia's quest for reimperialization and on the other hand, the invasion of its neighbour countries which, in turn, were all condemned by the European Union and referred as a violation of international law (European External Action Service, 2016, p. 33).This study will argue that one possible theoretical explanation is the concept of institutional learning, which refers to the ability of the organization to learn from past experiences or similar events, and to adapt to new circumstances. In order to explain the relevance of institutional learning in this thesis, I identify measurable components, such as changes in the EU's institutional tools and mechanisms to determine whether new instruments were developed to enhance the EU's conflict response capabilities.

The EU's response towards Russia during the 2008 and 2014 crises has often been criticized as uncoordinated and limited, showing a "business as usual approach". For instance, European Council's review of its relations with Russia that was published shortly after the invasion of Georgia, mainly highlighted the importance of economic ties with Russia and stated that their interests often coincided with each other (European Council, 2008, p. 3). It is often argued that

the European Union's approach was perceived as a green light for further aggression (Seibel, 2017, pp. 271-275). On the other hand, while the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine is a relatively new crisis and the literature around it is still emerging, the EU's response has been widely regarded as decisive and collective, reflecting a shift in its foreign policy. When explaining the EU-Russia relationship, several theories are used to understand the specific characteristics, such as power dynamics, economic interdependence, the influence of identities, and many more (Forsberg & Haukkala, 2018, pp. 269-270). However, there is no dominant approach in the analysis. According to Rieker and Blockmans (2021, p. 587), much of the literature on EU crisis response remains limited in scope, as scholars tend to focus on analysing the its institutional frameworks while overlooking the "quality and impact" of its crisis response activities.

The research adopts a qualitative approach, and the research design follows a small-N study. As mentioned before, the analysis is based on three cases: the 2008 Russo-Ukrainian war, the 2014 Russo-Ukrainian war and the 2022 Russo-Ukrainian war. These conflicts share key similarities, one the one hand, Russia's territorial ambitions and violations of international norms and on the other hand, the EU's involvement as the main international actor responding to these crises. The thesis will argue that despite some differences between these crises, they are suitable to analyse how institutional learning within the EU shaped its responses towards Russia during these conflicts. The empirical data includes both primary and secondary sources, such as official reports, policy initiatives, as well as scholarly scholarly literature. The data will be analysed using a combination of Most Similar Systems Design and process tracing methods. MSSD method will help me to identify key similarities and differences between these three crises and with process tracing I will provide a detailed examination of causal mechanisms linking institutional learning to the observed outcomes.

Following the introduction, the thesis will consist of three main chapters: The first chapter provides the historical context and theoretical framework for the thesis. It begins by introducing key concepts such as foreign and security policy, the concept of institutional learning, as well as normative power. The second chapter describes the methodology, method and data. The third chapter will provide a brief overview of these three conflicts, show the EU's responses to Russia and examine the institutional tools and mechanisms that were available to the EU at the time of each conflict.

Chapter 1: Historical context and theoretical framework

As the thesis aims to analyse the reasons behind EU's different responses to similar crises, the following chapter will start introducing general concepts that will be used throughout the research. After that, I will move into presenting relevant theoretical perspectives that will guide the paper to answer the research question: *Why does the EU respond differently to Russia's similar behaviour in terms of invading neighbouring countries?* As responding to crises and in general, developing relations with other countries is part of foreign policy and more specifically, security policy, the paper will start examining the general terms of foreign and security policy and then it will analyse the EU's specific approach to it. The theoretical framework of the paper will draw on the literature regarding the concept of "institutional learning", as it is expected to be the possible explanation of the EU's changing behaviour. Additionally, the chapter will explore the notion of "normative power", popularised by Ian Manners, which describes the EU's ability to promote norms and values through its foreign policy. While this thesis does not aim to evaluate the applicability of this concept to the EU's actions, it is still important to examine as it is an integral part of the EU's foreign policy.

1.1 The foreign and security policy of the EU

In international relations (IR) actors develop relations with each other through foreign policy and respond to crises according to their foreign and security policy. Traditionally, major IR theories analyse foreign policy as something that explains the actor's international behaviour and the decision-making process. European Union, as a foreign policy actor, has its essential elements of strategy/behaviour which, in turn, is explained differently by different theories and authors. Traditionally, the study of foreign policy considered the states to be the primary actors and players in the international arena. Scholars like Morgenthau saw the connection between state behaviour and human nature; therefore, they believed the foreign policy behaviour of every nation was comparable and most of their studies were oriented in determining patterns of those behaviours (Smith, 1986, p. 17). However, the significant emergence of regional and international organizations throughout the 1990s changed the traditional understanding of foreign policy and raised scholarly interest in the nature and impact of non-state actors in international relations (Buthe, 2004, p. 281).

According to Wolfers (1962, p. 150), "security in an objective sense, measures the absence of threats to acquired values, in a subjective sense, the absence of fear that such values will be

attacked". Some develop state-centric approaches according to which a nation's security depends on its ability to avoid compromising its fundamental values to prevent war and to defend those values successfully through victory if war becomes necessary (Lipman, 1943, as cited in Wolfers, 1962). One of the most comprehensive analyses of the concept 'security' is, perhaps, offered by Buzan (1983, p. 7), who argued that the concept was not adequately explored in previous literature as it was often perceived synonymous to 'power'. 'Security of whom?' is a question asked by Buzan which is later answered by examining security across three levels, starting from individual and ending with state and international security. The author offers a "holistic view of security", which means that the concept of security connects individuals, states, and the international system so closely that it should be understood from a holistic perspective. Buzan suggests that instead of defining security in separate ways, we should see it as one big picture and suggests using the term "systemic security" as the main label of analysis: "systemic security carries requisite sense of parts, and the relationship among them, forming an analytical whole" (Buzan, 1983, p. 245).

In order to analyse EU's responses to the conflicts involving countries with which it maintains political and economic ties, first, it is important to analyse the foreign and security policy of the EU in general. Between the late 1990s and around 2014/15, much of the academic discussion regarding the European Union's foreign and security policy was dominated by scholars who claimed that the EU's approach to these matters differed from the traditional understanding of foreign and security policy commonly accepted in the literature of international relations (Rieker & Riddervold, 2022, p. 461). Many authors have taken The European Union Global Strategy (EUGS) 2016 as a main reference point in the examination of contemporary foreign and security priorities of the EU. The strategy documents introduce the concept "principled pragmatism" as a guiding principle in its foreign policy approach. According to A. Juncos (2017, p. 1) a deeper analysis of the framework shows that there are notable contradictions between the organization's pragmatic and principled foreign policy. These contradictions, in turn, reduce the value of "resilience-building" as the new EU approach in the international arena. Some authors argue that resilience has become the 'leitmotif' of the EUGS as it balances the "over-ambitious liberal peace-building and the under-ambitious objective of stability" and is defined as the capacity of states and communities to recover from internal as well as external crises and pursue successful reforms (Wagner & Anholt, 2016, p. 415). Drawing on resilience literature, some argue that discourse on resilience in the European Union Global Strategy aligns well with a pragmatist turn in social sciences and global

governance. However, while adopting principled pragmatism through resilience-building, the new framework emphasizes flexibility, with an attempt to "square the circle" that is seen as complicating things even more in theory and practice (Juncos, 2017, p. 2). The central process emphasized by resilience is "learning" and "robustness", which is in line with governance theories that are defined as learning and experiencing from life and thus, growing and transforming the self. Learning, in turn, becomes significantly relevant in crisis, as crisis can stimulate innovation through learning – resilience can break barriers and let us reveal our full potential (Schmidt, 2015, as cited in Juncos, 2017, p. 5-6).

As it was mentioned above, EU's strategy towards its foreign and security policy, according to the 2016 Global Strategy, is described as principled pragmatism, according to which the EU aims to make decisions based on both principles (values) and practical considerations. The concept has been often criticized as making the organization's "organized hypocrisy" (between what is said and what is actually done) less visible. Rieker and Riddervold (2022, p. 469) argue that there is a systematic pattern in the behaviour of the EU and we can determine whether it will prioritize its values (normatively) or practical goals (strategically) in specific situations. Authors state that while the EU generally aims to act in line with principles, there are situations when it gives more importance on practical considerations, even if it means going against its declared values. It is also claimed that the EUGS realistically reflects what the EU is capable of doing in international relations as it focuses on its immediate neighbourhood rather than setting overly ambitious goals (Dijkstra, 2016, p. 370). Principled pragmatism as a concept has been criticized as containing both liberal and realist perspectives that are mutually exclusive. However, the supporters of the concept say that they do not combine them at the same time, but in different situations. The sense of 'urgency' is introduced in the analysis of Rieker and Riddervold (2022, p. 460), who state that when the situation is urgent, the EU acts according to its interests rather than principles. Urgency, in turn, is connected to policies that the EU adopts in response to crises and significant political events. Crisis is defined as socially constructed perception of threat, "events that are perceived to be relatively unique, urgent, and unexpected" (Cross, 2021, p. 208). However, according to realist/structural perspectives, crises are seen as objective situations, happening independently from human perceptions and reflect the inability of the system to effectively manage these disturbances (Boin et al., 2005 as cited in Cross, 2021, p. 196). There is an argument that there is a paradoxical situation since EU's discourse on resilience became broader and more comprehensive, however, the organization appears to be less involved or committed to addressing resilience-related issues in practice.

One reason, according to some authors, might be the use of the concept of resilience by the EU to hide its inability to act consistently at the international level. Even though the organization continues to portray itself as a normative power and projects a certain image in international relations, it might not reflect the reality of its actions (Joseph & Juncos, 2019).

It has been previously said that there is a systematic pattern according to which the EU prioritizes either norms or interests. If we introduce the sense of 'urgency' to understand its behavioural logic, then we should expect the EU to act the same way in similar situations. For instance, if we say that the EU prioritizes interests when there is a perception of urgency, it should always act in such a way when it faces an urgent, security-related threats. However, when we see different priorities in similar situations, it raises questions about the relevance of this logic. The main question of the paper is also connected to this contradictory pattern of behaviour, as it aims to understand the logic behind the EU's different behaviour in similar situations. According to some authors, one of the main components of the EU foreign policy is a norm-promotion, which be introduced in detail in the following sub-chapter.

1.2 Institutional Learning

As I consider institutional learning to be one of the main explanations in the European Union's changing actions, I will first analyse the concept, and in the third chapter, I will examine if it is possible to connect it with my research. According to the concept of institutional learning, organizations learn from either past experiences or comparable situations of historical events. This learning process allows institutions to evolve based on the lessons they learned over time, often in response to challenges or changing circumstances.

Before analysing the institutional learning within the European Union, it is essential to first define what is considered to be "learning". It was between 1980 and 1990s when learning theories started to gain significant attention. Different theories had different understanding of what learning is and what it is supposed to achieve. In 1992, Bennet and Howlett argued that it was impossible to come up with one broad definition due to the variety of approaches (Grin & Loeber, 2007, p. 201). The effects of learning have been extensively and often analysed in different fields of research. In public policy learning refers to lasting changes in the way of thinking or doing things which results from experiences or new information. It is believed that this type of learning can influence the beliefs of individuals involved in policymaking, with a

potential to achieve significant policy changes in a long-term future. It is also argued that learning is often challenged by cognitive limitations, as individuals tend to ignore or filter the information that contradicts their existing doctrines (Weible & Sabatier, 2007, p. 130). Christiansen and Tangen (2002, p. 69) further elaborate on this argument, stating that learning is "attributed to events that cause changes in cognitive and normative frames", while institutions are defined as organizations, systems, formal and informal norms, procedures, etc. Although the authors analyse institutional learning in the realm of EU enlargement processes, they offer a detailed analysis of the concept.

Institutional learning also refers to constantly evolving policies and processes related to policy-making. It means that decision-making is not static but a dynamic process often affected by past experiences and conflicts referred as the "shadow of the past" (Christiansen & Tangen, 2002, p. 70). Smith (2017, p. 8) mentions the concept of policy-relevant learning which, according to him, is "a type of political change" that differs from other forms of change. It is not only taking lessons from history/past, known as ''analogical reasoning'' or simply adapting to new circumstances. What he calls policy-relevant learning is when the organization engages in policy-relevant learning with the aim of aligning its institutional framework with its stated goals and ambitions. This process (learning-focused activity) requires to learn from past experiences and ensuring institutional structures meet the organization's goals. When past experiences are mentioned as one of the components of institutional learning, there is an emphasis on specific experiences that were considered as failures. These failures, serving as lessons, highlight the importance of change in specific policy techniques, institutional structures, standards of behaviour, etc. On the other hand, it is also argued that while past mistakes encourage learning, over time, institutions tend to develop their own established methods and practices that become deeply embedded or "institutionalized''. This stability can make it difficult to introduce new approaches or make significant changes. The authors mention the concept of "path dependence", which means that once a pattern of behaviour has been adopted, it becomes increasingly difficult to change it. Thus, even if there is a desire to learn and improve, it can sometimes be difficult to move away from these established standards of decision-making (Christiansen & Tangen, 2002, p. 70).

The European Union is putting efforts to improve its institutions and figure out the most effective ways to adapt with security challenges and emergency situations that endanger peace. Thus, the organization has increased its attention towards learning. Smith (2017, pp. 9-10)

states that when it comes to the European Union, he prefers to use the term "experiential institutional learning" as it better reflects changes made through the process of learning. He measures the 'learning' by noticing institutional changes in the "responsibilities, rules, and resources" of the organization and states that these changes are the result of new information, observation, or experience. When the author talks about changes in responsibilities through learning, he means that the EU can change its self-perception on its role or the tasks and decisions taken in its foreign and security policy. By 'rules' it is meant both formal regulations and informal customs/norms that shapes the organization's policy-making process. Resources mean both material and non-material resources, on the one hand budget, technologies, personnel, equipment, etc., and on the other hand creation of new institutions/bodies, sharing knowledge, doctrines, etc.

According to some authors that analyse institutional learning withing the regime of The General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade and World Trade Organization (GATT/WTO), there are only a few economic models that look at institutional learning. Combining these models with methods used in political and social sciences is believed to give us a better understanding on the concept. Learning means gaining knowledge through processing experiences, whether they are one's own or others. "It requires a recursive, never-ending process of recognizing experiences, their relevance and transferability to other situations, inducing new experiences and their processing as well as the possibility to correct former decisions" (Soest & Wink, 2001, pp. 305-308). According to these authors, the process of learning is not only influenced by experiences, but also the order in which these experiences took place. They highlight the importance of individuals and state that organizations can benefit from the collective experiences of their members, as they bring together the learning of various individuals.

Smith analyses institutional learning specifically in terms of the EU's policies regarding civilian conflict prevention. He states that EU policies in this realm are often organized on a case-by-case basis which can mean that learned lessons may not be possible to apply in other situations. However, learning is still possible as much as the organization engages in new tasks and actions. Institutional learning should consist of several stages, first, the organization must regularly assess how its policies are working in specific areas; then it should move on "identifying lessons", which means learning from past experiences and trying new actions according to the new circumstances. Third step is to convert these lessons into "policy-relevant knowledge" and last, to "learn the lessons" i.e., to institutionalise this knowledge that, in turn,

can be in the form of improved methods, ideas, principles and strategic plans (Smith M. E., 2017, p. 8). According to the author, dealing with foreign and security policy is different from developing strategies towards other policy areas as they need to take immediate responses instead of setting plans for future. This means that the lessons learnt in one specific situation may not be applicable in other situations as the decision-makers often change and there may not be long-term procedural changes in the organization's foreign and security policy infrastructure. Thus, 'learning' is not only about individuals gaining knowledge but also institutional adaptation and reform (Smith M. E., 2017, p. 12).

1.3 Normative Power Europe – Critical Perspective

Scholars have used different terms to describe the role of the EU, such as 'normative', 'civilian, 'ethical', or 'humanitarian power'. Even though these concepts differ from each other, they all suggest that the foreign and security policy of the EU differs from national policies of states as much as it emphasizes norm promotion actively and consistently (Rieker & Riddervold, 2022, p. 459). Before the concept of normative power was introduced, in the early 1970s Duchêne developed the notion of 'civilian power Europe' (CPE). He argued that due to the emphasis on non-military principles, Europe lost its interest in military force and prioritized exerting power through peaceful means, that is, civilian methods. It is important to note that Duchêne rejected the idea of European superiority, however, he believed civilian Europe could have a positive influence on global stability. According to the author, even though Europe has a strong military tradition, non-military cooperation was becoming more important and effective. Duchêne argues that there is a shift in power dynamics, where states are more interested in creating a stable and peaceful international system rather than relying on traditional security systems and mentions values like "equality, justice and tolerance and an interest for the poor abroad" (Duchêne, 1972, 1973 as cited in Diez, 2005, pp. 4-5).

Manners' starting point of discussion is the argument of Bull, a leading scholar of 'English School' of international relations. According to Bull (1982, as cited in Manners, 2002, p. 235), "Europe is not an actor in international affairs, and does not seem likely to become one. Bull rejected the idea that the European Union could be categorized as 'civilian power' and according to Manners, he may have been right considering the political environment in the 1980s. However, the author claims that after the developments of 1990s we can re-evaluate our understandings of civilian or military power and thus, consider the EU's role as normative

power (Manners, 2002, p. 236). According to the author, the EU works to establish and advocate for norms and values that go beyond the interests of individual countries and instead, it prioritizes collective global interest. Moreover, the EU has the ability to shape what is 'normal' in international relations and what makes the EU a normative power is the organization's normative basis such as its founding principles (liberty, democracy, respect for human rights, rule of law), fundamental rights (dignity, equality, justice, etc.), stable institutions and tasks and objectives (Manners, 2002, pp. 239-243). The concept of normative power is closely related to the idea of "logic of appropriateness". It presents a perspective that human actions, including policymaking, are guided by rules that indicate which behaviour is appropriate and they are "organized into institutions" (March & Olsen, 2004, p. 3). On the other hand, the "logic of consequences", also known as rational choice theory, contradicts this viewpoint. It suggests that actors make decisions based on fixed preferences and cost-benefit calculations without the influence of norms and rules of behaviour. From this perspective, to understand why some choices are made, we have to look at the expectations that a decision-maker can have. In other words, decision-making depends on what decision-makers want, available resources, and the expected results of their choices. Although not all consequences can be predicted, the decisions are still rational as they are based on certain preferences. In conclusion, while the "logic of appropriateness" suggests that actors follow rules that are seen as natural and legitimate, the "logic of consequences" highlights the importance of individual interests and the preferences of rational actors (March & Olsen, 1998, pp. 950-951).

Orbie (2008, p. 4) starts his analysis on civilian power by reviewing Duchêne's argument. He states that the concept has been criticized for its lack of clarity and excessive flexibility, which means that the supporters of this argument can have different understandings and provide only brief and superficial insights on Europe's potential role in the world. The author also discusses Manners' concept of normative power and states that the European Union is facing a challenge in developing coherent and normative external policies, especially as geopolitical and security concerns become increasingly important. Orbie (2008, p. 20) does not distinguish too much between civilian and normative power, claims that they are closely linked with each other and he tries to combine normative arguments of NPE literature with more empirical, real-world perspective of the CPE approach. On the other hand, he acknowledges that while the organization aims to frame itself as a normative power, promoting certain norms and principles, its aspirations do not always align with the reality. As both concepts of normative and civilian power emphasize on the decreasing importance of military power, the author also shows his

agreement That the use of military means should be limited, it should be a last resort – considered only after all other non-military options have been tried and military actions should be still guided by civilian values, such as democracy and human rights. On the other hand, he argues that non-military power Europe is not necessarily a civilian power Europe and questions whether the EU can act as a real civilian or normative power (Orbie, 2008, pp. 12-14).

There is a realist assumption that rational actors in international relations take norms and principles into account only if they do not clash with more important, strategic and economic interests. However, according to the logic of Normative Power Europe, if the organization continues to uphold its normative image, then we can expect it to act in line with its established norms and principles "also in a changing, less certain environment, and even in the face of crisis" (Rieker & Riddervold, 2022, p. 462). On the other hand, there is a debate on how rationality is connected with norms or whether they are connected at all. Finnemore and Sikkink (1998, p. 888) consider norms to be connected with rational decision-making. they emphasize that rationality cannot exist independently of norms, and vice versa. Traditionally, it has been believed that what exists in reality and what should exist are different and should be analysed separately both in the academic world and in practical policy-making. However, scholars recently think that norms influence and shape the actual behaviour in international relations. In other words, it highlights that what is considered morally or normatively desirable can impact real-world outcomes (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998, p. 916).

In the academic discussion on the role of the European Union, we also come across with the concept of ethical power Europe (EPE). The concept mentions universal ethics that shapes the organization's external role and it consists of being a 'power for good' and a 'peacebuilder' in the world. EPE suggests that there was a transformation in the European Union's role and ambitions, shifting from a fixed understanding of EU's fundamental attributes to a viewpoint that emphasizes its active involvement in international politics (Aggestam, 2008, p. 1). An actor is considered ethical when it pursues its goals in a way that it is not harmful for others, that is, a 'responsible' power. On the other hand, material interests and ethical considerations are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but they are often interconnected. Aggestam presents five reasons why he sees necessary to move from the concepts of civilian and normative power to ethical power Europe. some of his main arguments consists of arguing that while both normative and civilian power concepts see the EU's influence through its identity or characteristics, the EPE is focused on its actions and behaviours. Aggestam also highlights how

previous concepts fail to explain recent developments, such as the launch of European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP), as it includes military aspects as well. According to the author, instead of dividing the EU as a civilian or military power, it is more important to explain the ethical considerations when selecting between military and civilian tools in foreign affairs. He offers a concept that is different from the concepts of civilian and normative concepts as EPE includes both civilian and military power, as well as social and material power (Aggestam, 2008, pp. 2-9). According to H. Dijkstra (2016, p. 370), normative power Europe is "dead", while civilian power Europe is "very much alive". Before this conclusion, there is an argument elaborated according to which, instead of being oriented on spreading its norms and values, the EU now prioritizes the interests of its own citizens. 'Effective multilateralism' is a matter of past and the new objective is to create a global order based on rules, where the security of the organization is more important than anything else.

1.4 Background and previous research

In this chapter of the thesis, I will analyse the existing literature regarding the European Union's responses to Russia's actions against Georgia and Ukraine. I will summarize relevant arguments and conclusions that have already been made about the topic to understand how these crises have been studied and justify my research question. Rather than examining the development of the three conflicts in depth, the focus will be on the European Union's responses to them. Thus, the primary objective of this chapter is to critically analyse previous research on the EU's responses to Russia in times of crisis, to identify existing explanations, patterns and theoretical frameworks, and ultimately to reveal a gap in the literature. Some scholars identify similarities in the nature of the 2008 and 2014 crises, yet few provide a comparative analysis of the European Union's responses to all these three events. I will first review the literature on the 2008 and 2014 crises to see whether scholars also identify similarities in the EU's responses. I will then analyse the literature on the EU's response to the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, examining whether scholars observe a shift in the EU policy and, if so, how they interpret and explain this shift.

Forsberg and Haukkala (2016, pp. 5-7) discussed the research on EU-Russia relations, highlighted gaps in how the topic has been studied and how these gaps should be addressed. There is extensive research on EU-Relations, covering both the overall development of their relationship as well as specific key issues. Researchers had often focused on major events such

as the Russo-Georgian war in 2008 and this kind of research provided timely insights, but tended to emphasize recent events rather than offering a deeper picture. The authors pointed out that there was still a lot for future researchers to study about EU-Russia relations as many important topics on this subject were not fully analysed. They also examine how EU-Russia relations evolved in the context of security policy and highlight specific historical events and conflicts that affected their cooperation, including the Russo-Georgian war and the Russo-Ukrainian war. There are scholarly works that analyse these conflicts from the perspective of Russia, focusing on its interests, goals, policies, and the broader historical and geopolitical context shaping its actions. And there is also a significant literature that examines the conflicts from the European perspective. These analyses explore how the European Union perceives and responds to Russia's actions, highlighting its security concerns and strategic objectives.

Considering my research objective, it is essential to concentrate on the literature that examines these cases from the European perspective which will contribute to address my research question. A large portion of existing literature about the EU's response to Russian aggression focuses primarily on the 2008 Georgia crisis and the 2014 Ukraine crisis. The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine is a relatively new crisis and the literature around it is still emerging. According to Forsberg and Haukkala (2018, pp. 269-270), although different theories, such us power dynamics, economic interdependence, the influence of identities, and many more, have been used to study EU-Russia relations, no single approach dominates the analysis. They argue that the relationship between Russia and the European Union has been structured within a formal, institutional framework for over 20 years. Research on this topic expanded, primarily focusing on either describing the nature of EU-Russia relations or providing policy recommendations for future actions. The authors note that both educational institutions and think tanks played a significant role in developing existing research that offers timely analysis of the shifting dynamics of the EU-Russia relations, especially around important summits or major events like the 2008 Russo-Georgian war or the 2014 Ukraine crisis.

The analysis of EU-Russia relations should begin with an understanding of the EU's European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). Established in 2004, the ENP aimed to foster closer relationships with neighbouring countries by promoting shared values and democratic governance. It is argued that Russia's exclusion from ENP created a 'normative gap' between the EU and Russia, as the EU sought to spread its norms and values; however, Russia's political system was significantly different, limiting the EU's capacity to influence Russia. This difference would

later contribute to rising tensions and deteriorating relations. Moreover, EU's closer ties with former Soviet republics, especially Georgia and Ukraine, were seen by the Kremlin as a threat, as they could potentially limit Russia's influence in the region (Maass, 2017, p. 65). It is also argued that before Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the European Union struggled to form a clear strategic approach towards its eastern neighbours. Initiatives like the EU's Eastern Partnership aimed to foster close ties with countries in the region. However, these initiatives left the eastern neighbours in the state of "liminality", as they were positioned between the influence of the EU and Russia's sphere of interests (German, 2024, p. 268).

According to some authors, the conflict between Georgia and Russia marked a pivotal moment in EU-Russia relations and the key issue was Russia's recognition of two Georgian regions as independent states, which undermined the agreement negotiated by French president Sarkozy and Russian President Medvedev (Seibel, 2017, p. 271). According to the author, the EU should have been alerted when, in 2008, Russia started issuing passports to Crimeans. This was a warning sign, especially given the recent use of this tactic in Georgia, which the EU failed to recognize as a red flag. The same author argues that the lack of response of the EU sent a signal that the organization was not able to stand by its own goals and commitments. As a result, Russia saw the EU's inaction as a green light to continue using military force in regions it considered part of its "sphere of influence". The majority of EU member states were not ready to stop pragmatic partnership with Russia and they even launched the Partnership for Modernization, which aimed to deepen cooperation and foster closer economic ties with Russia. Therefore, when the EU eventually accepted the situation in Georgia after 2008, Russia initiated secret operations to interfere with the EU-Ukraine agreement. The EU's approach towards Russia by that time has been characterized as "business as usual," both the EU and Russia recognized the security dilemma and tried to manage it carefully (Seibel, 2017, pp. 271-275). According to the author, the crisis the EU faced after the annexation of Crimea was similar to the challenges caused by the Russo-Georgian war, but on a larger scale. As of June 2014, during the European Council meeting, Ukraine had declared a unilateral ceasefire, which Russia failed to honour. Although the council had previously decided in march that new sanctions would be imposed if Russia did not respect the ceasefire, no such measures were taken (Seibel, 2017, pp. 277-278). On the other hand, Juncos and Pomorska (2021, p. 559) think that the EU was quite effective in terms of responding to Russia in 2014. The authors discuss the challenges the EU faced in developing a unified response to Russia's actions in Ukraine in 2014, especially in terms of imposing sanctions. They argue that initially, member

states were primarily focused on their individual economic and security interests, which led to low expectations for a strong EU response. It seemed unlikely that the EU would overcome these divisions and take collective action. However, while the Ukraine crisis did not result in a complete policy shift, the EU surprisingly managed to respond collectively. The crisis itself served as a "critical juncture" or turning point, creating opportunities for policy changes that may not otherwise been possible.

According to Romanova (2018, pp. 82-87), when the official, intergovernmental relations were halted in 2008 due to the Russian-Georgian conflict, transgovernmental and transnational dialogues continued to operate. These channels mitigated the impact of the suspension of intergovernmental relations until it was resumed later that year. Transgovernmental and transnational relationships were resilient because some EU officials perceived Russia's actions not entirely as an aggression, but rather as a reaction to events in Georgia. It was after 2014 when the EU started to see Russia as a threat rather than a partner and aimed to reduce its dependence on Russian energy. The EU considered the annexation of Crimea as far more serious than its actions in Georgia as the latter did not involve a direct annexation of a territory. Moreover, in 2014 the EU placed full responsibility on Russia while in 2008, it had seen Georgia as partially responsible for the crisis. Forsberg and Haukkala (2016, pp. 1-4) agree with the claim that the relationship between the EU and Russia was halted in 2014. However, they state that the overall mood in EU-Russia relations had deteriorated long before Ukraine crisis, even though there were also a lot of positive elements in the relationship, trade relations developed, the interaction between civil societies increased, etc. Consequently, they present a debate on whether the EU is not truly independent and mainly follows the decisions of the United States, or if, instead, the EU operates independently and there is no single, unified 'West'.

Much of the existing literature focuses on analyzing causes of the deterioration in EU-Russia relations. Mearsheimer (2014, p. 79) argues that Georgia's and Ukraine's aspirations to join NATO, along with Western support, were perceived by Russia as a threat to its security and strategic interests. This perceived threat, in turn, was the main reason behind Russia's actions in Ukraine in 2014 and previously in Georgia in 2008. According to Mearsheimer, Russia's 2008 invasion of Georgia was a clear indication of Putin's strong commitment to preventing NATO membership for both Georgia and Ukraine. Moreover, the EU's expansion is also seen by Russia as an indirect means of extending NATO influence. The author expresses scepticism

regarding the effectiveness of harsh sanctions in influencing Russia's decision-making process and adds that western European countries are unlikely likely to support imposing harsh sanctions as they could negatively impact the EU's economy. Casier (2016, p. 377). also analyses the reasons behind the conflict between the EU and Russia. He disagrees with the idea that the conflict between the EU and Russia can be explained solely by differing interests or values. He focuses on understanding how these differences emerged and why the tensions happened at that particular time. The author's main argument is that the way the EU and Russia perceived each other's actions was shaped more by the images they formed of each other's intentions, rather than their actual actions. Over time, competition emerged and eventually escalated into conflict, particularly over Ukraine. The author tries to understand how these perceptions on each other became more extreme and how their relationship came to be seen as a "zero-sum game". In theories of international relations, a zero-sum game refers to a situation where the gain of one state automatically results in a corresponding loss for another. This idea is linked to security dilemma, a concept developed within the realist school of thought. According to this theory, when a state takes measures to increase its own security, it can unintentionally decrease the security of other actors, leading them to take countermeasures (Jervis, 1978, p. 169).

In most of the literature, the EU's response to the 2008 crisis is described as ineffective. On the other hand, perspectives on the EU's approach to the 2014 Crimea crisis are more varied, some scholars argue that the response was insufficient, while others consider it effective. However, in the case of the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, there is broad consensus among scholars that the EU demonstrated a collective and firm response. Some authors mention the Russian-Georgian war together with the energy crises in 2006 and 2009 and argue that while these events increased tensions between Russia and the EU, they were more like episodes of "turbulence" in a relationship, rather than causing any significant changes in policy (Juncos & Pomorska, 2021, p. 559). After the 2008 war there was a fresh effort to improve EU-Russia relations. This new phase of cooperation was referred as "partnerships for modernization". Relations between Russia and the West were quickly restored, supported by the U.S. president Barack Obama's 'reset' approach, which aimed a practical cooperation with Russia. This cooperation was soon followed by Russia's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO), celebrated as a positive achievement (Forsberg & Haukkala, 2016, pp. 11-34). Moreover, before and after the 2008 war, the EU chose to overlook various incidents and provocations from Russia. Russia,

in turn, viewed the EU's restrained response positively. Putin expressed satisfaction, stating that the EU acted with "common sense", which made possible to continue dialogue with Europe (Forsberg & Haukkala, 2016, pp. 163-165). In the end, the Georgian conflict brought European countries together temporarily but did not lead to long-term changes in strategy. the EU's response was limited, without a real effort to create a common approach towards Russia (Howorth, 2017, as cited in Juncos & Pomorska, 2021, p. 565).

Despite years of efforts by EU member states to establish a common foreign and security policy, the EU has often been criticized for its ineffective responses, particularly in the context of military crises. There was frequent criticism regarding the gap between the EU's stated objectives and its actual accomplishments. Given this context, the EU's strong and united response to Russia's recent invasion of Ukraine surprised some observers and many described it as "a turning point for the EU"(Maurer, Whitman, & Wright, 2023, p. 219). Scholars believe that Russia's pattern of behaviour did not start with the 2022 invasion. Rather, it started in 2008 when Russia invaded Georgia and continued to act aggressively over the years, including the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the war in the region of Donbas. Consequently, because of this repeated pattern of aggression, the EU adopted a more coordinated and unified approach. The authors focus on shared norms and common values that may have influenced EU's response to Russia. They argue that the EU's foreign policy system evolved over time because the member states developed a shared understanding of a "collective European responsibility to act". This sense of responsibility, as they state, has grown naturally from regular interactions over the last five decades. They argue that the primary reason for the ongoing cooperation is not just the formal policies or frameworks that exist within the EU like the CFSP (Common Foreign and Security Policy) and CSDP (Common Security and Defence Policy). Instead, they believe it is the "collective norm" – a common understanding between EU countries about the importance of coordinated action in foreign policy (Maurer, Whitman, & Wright, 2023, pp. 221-237). Although the authors examine what the EU's united response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine reveals about the current state of EU foreign policy, the reasons behind this policy shift are not fully explained, leaving the issue open for further research. The main argument of the authors is that the EU's strong response to the crisis was made possible by decades of cooperation and coordination in foreign, security, and defence policy. However, they do not explicitly outline what specific changes within the EU allowed such decisive action. Jim Townsend, who served as Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defence for European and NATO policy for 8 years, stated in his recent 2024 interview that the 2008 war between Russia and

Georgia was an early sign of what Russia would later do in Ukraine in 2014 and 2022. He argued that in 2008 the war lasted only five days, but it had lasting effects for the region and the West failed to fully understand the seriousness of the situation and what the appropriate response should be. According to him, Russia continued its actions from 2008 onward, without changing the course. The real change, as he argues, has been in how the West perceives and responds to Russia. The key lesson, specifically, is that the West should not selectively decide when to respond strongly to military aggression (Townsend, 2024, para. 1).

To conclude, Existing literature frequently draws parallels between the 2008 Russian-Georgian war and the 2014 crisis in Ukraine, suggesting that the events that took place in 2014 represent a continuation of Russia's policy from 2008. It is also commonly argued that the EU failed to respond adequately in both instances, lacking appropriate restrictive measures against Russia. This discussion is often followed by explanations for the EU's mild reactions, which may include the desire to maintain its pragmatic relationship with Russia, insufficient resources to act appropriately, economic interests, and many other. However, less attention is given to why the current conflict that started in 2022 between Russia and Ukraine prompted the EU to change its approach. Was this shift the result of a learning from past mistakes? Did the EU grow stronger as an organization with better capabilities to take action? Or have the EU's priorities changed? This thesis aims to contribute to the construction of more nuanced understanding of the key factors influencing EU's policy shift.

Chapter 2: Methodology, method and data

The following chapter will present the research methodology of my thesis. A qualitative approach has been adopted to address my research question and the research design follows a small-N study. The cases examined in this research are the 2008 conflict in Georgia, the 2014 conflict in Ukraine and the ongoing 2022 conflict in Ukraine. The thesis relies on primary and secondary sources, such as the EU official documents,cholarly studies on the EU's responses to these conflicts. Furthermore, limitations and ethical considerations are addressed to provide an accurate and clear analysis of the results.

To conduct valid research, it is essential to ensure its relevance, as emphasized by scholars. However, the term 'relevant' is somewhat vague until we ask a question: "relevant to whom? And in which way?". Research can be socially relevant as well as scientifically/theoretically relevant, where the latter means contributing to the ongoing dialogue in the field. This, in turn, can be achieved through "formulating, testing and improving theory, by generating and improving data, and by describing and explaining observations" (Gschwend & Schimmelfennig, 2007, p. 3) . Given the geopolitical tensions and the impact of these conflicts on European security, understanding factors that influence EU's responses is important for the academic and political community. My research contributes to the academic discussion on the role of institutional learning in shaping the EU's policy responses. This theoretical contribution deepens the understanding of institutional learning, decision-making processes, and EU foreign policy.

2.1 Research design and case selection

In order to conduct this study, I decided to choose a small-N research design and focus on the European Union's responses to Russia in relation to the conflicts of 2008, 2014 and 2022. Small-N research, involves a detailed examination of small number of cases, with 'N' referring to the number of cases being studied. As Hall suggests, studying more than one cases in-depth is effective when sufficient detailed information can be obtained for each case to accurately trace the full causal process (Hall, 2008, pp. 307-309). Small-N research consists of studying a small number of cases in depth, usually using either within-case analysis or cross-case comparisons (George & Bennett, 2005, as cited in Gschwend & Schimmelfennig, 2007, p. 10). Scholars argue that 'causal-process observations', also known as process tracing, is also important to understand causal relationships. With this approach, researchers draw conclusions

by carefully tracing the hypothesized causal processes by either examining a single case in detail or comparing a small number of cases (Gschwend & Schimmelfennig, 2007, p. 11). George and Campbell also argue that small-N research does not necessarily need to be associated with comparative methods. Instead, it can be conducted using an alternative approach known as process tracing, which allows small-N research design to provide strong causal explanations (Hall, 2008, pp. 307-309).

Small-N research aims to improve the reliability of causal conclusions by carefully selecting a small number of cases and looking at the processes that link causes to effects. While this type of research can create very accurate, precise and detailed explanations, the findings may not be generalized to other cases and contexts. As scholars note, "Small-N research prefers depth to breadth, whereas large-N prioritizes breadth" (Gschwend & Schimmelfennig, 2007, p. 11). Furthermore, small-N research often aims to identify 'necessary' and 'sufficient' conditions for a phenomenon to occur.

- Necessary condition: A condition that must be present for an outcome to occur
- Sufficient conditions: A condition that, if present, guarantees the outcome

It is argued that scholars who work on small-N research, mainly focus on identifying deterministic causality, even though they acknowledge that causes may interact in nonlinear ways. However, in real world social and political science, most causal relationships are probabilistic, which means cases are understood as factors that increase the likelihood of an outcome, without guarantying it (Gerring, 2001, as cited in Gschwend & Schimmelfennig, 2007, p. 12). As I mentioned above, Small-N research is often associated with comparative method, which seeks to identify correlations between a few causal variables and outcomes by comparing a small number of cases. The selection of cases typically follows one of these key approaches. Most Similar Systems Designs (MSSD) is an approach that involves selecting cases that are highly similar to each other, except for the outcome and Most Different Systems Design (MDSD) focuses on selecting cases that are significantly different in a lot of aspects but share the same outcome (Hall, 2008, pp. 307-309). The MSSD approach, combined with process tracing, will be examined in depth in the following sub-chapters, where I will discuss the method and data of my study.

As it is broadly argued, the type of causal inference a researcher seeks to explore determines the type of research design. Researchers may focus on understanding how and why something happens by identifying specific causal mechanisms and examining the effects of those mechanisms. Alternatively, the goal might be to explain a specific event or outcome comprehensively, considering all contributing causes and factors. The authors discuss 'factor-centric' and 'outcome-centric' research designs, which are explained below. Research is considered factor-centric when the main aim is to understand the influence of one or a few specific factors (independent variables) on a particular outcome (dependent variable). In this type of research, independent variables are either explanatory or test variables, and the researcher tries to understand their causal effects. Control variables are included in the study to ensure that the results are attributed to the variables being tested, rather than to alternative factors. A typical research question in this type of research can be: *how does X cause Y*? In contrast, research is outcome-centric if the core interest is to explain why a particular result or outcome occurred. Here, the objective is to consider all possible factors that might contribute to the outcome. The researcher considers different variables to understand the outcome comprehensively. A common research question in outcome-centric research can be: *what causes Y,* or *why did Y happen?* (Gschwend & Schimmelfennig, 2007, p. 8). Based on my research question: *Why does the EU respond differently to Russia's similar behaviour in terms of invading neighbouring countries*? - my work will have an outcome-centric research design. the primary objective of my research is to explain the outcome, and even though I predict the possible explanation for the EU's varied responses, I will also consider other potential factors to ensure that no significant contributing variable is overlooked.

Some researchers who do qualitative studies often avoid to start with a theory that would lead their research. Instead of testing a theory, they prioritize to discover it throughout the research (Bryman, 1984, p. 39). Contrary to that, my work offers a theoretical approach that is believed to give some research guidance and expectations. However, I acknowledge that the research can develop in a way that I discover unpredictable outcomes and I find other explanation factors that are different from what is offered in the beginning. Thus, a different or additional theoretical reasoning can be introduced in the end of the research process. This flexibility is not a limitation; rather, it reflects the evolving process of knowledge creation. As Freedman has stated, "progress depends on refuting conventional ideas if they are wrong, developing new ideas that are better and testing the new ideas as well as old ones" (Collier, Brady, & Seawright, 2010, p. 2). The goal of theory-guided research is to use causal theories to explain

why certain phenomena occur, either in a single case or across causally similar cases. In this context, process tracing does not merely describe the events; rather, it examines the theoretical causal mechanisms that connect causes to outcomes, as predicted by the theory that is being tested (Beach, 2017, p. 2).

2.2 Operationalization of variables

Considering my research question, the dependent variable in this study is the EU's response to Russia. The independent variable is expected to be institutional learning, which refers to the factor(s) I believe influenced the European Union's response to Russia. It is important to mention that other factor that could have influenced the outcome is the scale of the conflict, which generally refers to the size, scope or intensity of the conflict. However, I will argue that scale alone is a simple and insufficient explanation, as it may overlook other important factors influencing the EU's decision-making process in times of war. I will argue that the EU's stronger response in 2022 was not solely driven by larger scale of war, but mainly by how the EU's institutional memory, policies, and decision-making frameworks had evolved since the earlier conflicts, thereby reflecting the impact of institutional learning. As I have three cases and I assume that the EU's response towards Russia is determined by certain causes like institutional learning, the goal of my study will be to examine whether this cause actually influenced the outcome in each case. it should be mentioned that institutional learning is not a dichotomous factor; it is not a factor that can be present or absent in a simplistic way. Instead, institutional learning can be seen on an ordinal scale, where the degree of learning evolves over time in response to previous experiences.

According to Miller (2007, p. 85), we need to clarify what we mean by measurement while conducting research. He argues that measurement is the process of assigning a value or number to a concept being studied. As many concepts cannot be directly observed, researchers rely on indicators – observable variables that represent the concept. This process is called operationalization, where an abstract concept is defined in practical, measurable terms. The key difference is that operationalization focuses on creating a method to measure a concept, while measurement is the act of applying that method to produce data. Validity refers to how accurately the measurement reflects the concept being studied, whereas reliability means the consistency or reproducibility of the measurement. If different researchers apply the same method under the same conditions and obtain the same results, the measure can be considered

reliable. George and Bennet (2005, pp. 170-174) mention the term "observable implications", specific measurable patterns or events we would expect to see if the theory is correct. Hence, researchers examine whether these predicted patterns or observations appear in the data. If they do, the theory gains support, if not, the theory may need to be reconsidered.

In order to operationalize institutional learning, it is necessary to identify measurable components or indicators. One such indicator is policy change, which is a change in existing policies or practices. These changes may result from shifts in advocacy, learning, and institutional dynamics. According to Bennet and Howlet (1992, p. 276), policy learning remains difficult to operationalize as there is a different understanding of 'learning' among scholars. The authors argue that a key methodological challenge lies in demonstrating clear evidence that a specific outcome would not have occurred without the presence of 'learning'. However, they claim that learning is connected to policy change and, instead of examining learning per se, it is more effective to focus on policy change as an indicator that learning has taken place (Bennett & Howlett, 1992, p. 290). By linking institutional learning to observable policy changes, the process of operationalization becomes more manageable. In this study, I will analyse whether the EU adopted new policies or revised existing strategies regarding conflict response mechanisms. I will explore whether there was an increased coordination among EU member states – as a crucial element in the decision-making process and I will also examine if there was a development of new collaborative frameworks or institutions with the goal of improving the EU's ability to address crises.

In order to operationalize the dependent variable – the European Union's responses towards Russia- it is essential to clarify what is meant by responses or specifically 'strong' responses. By responses, I refer to the policies, actions or strategies that the EU adopts in reaction to crises or significant political events (Rieker & Riddervold, 2022, p. 460). A 'strong response' refers to a coordinated, united and firm approach, such as the EU's reaction to the 2022 invasion of Ukraine (Juncos & Pomorska, 2021, p. 559). It should be mentioned that the term 'strong response' is derived from the existing literature, where scholars or even high-ranking officials characterize responses as either strong or weak (Townsend, 2024; Maurer et al., 2023; Juncos & Pomorska, 2021; Forsberg & Haukkala, 2016; Romanova, 2018). In general, EU responses can be understood as concrete actions, policies, or strategies taken to address crises. These responses can be analysed through several indicators. Diplomatic measures include official statements, declarations, high-level visits, summits, or mediation efforts, which aims to address

the conflict. Economic measures, such as sanctions, offer valuable insight into the nature of the EU's responses. The type, scope and scale of sanctions (whether broad or targeted) reflects the strength of the EU's reaction. Additionally, while financial assistance or military aid (such as military equipment) provided to affected countries may not be a direct response to Russia, these actions remain significant in the broader context. Such measures aim to strengthen the capabilities of the affected countries while simultaneously weakening Russia's position.

2.3 Data analysis method

There is a standpoint in the academia that a specific research problem leads to specific research technique. As Walker (1985, as cited in Bryman, 1984, p. 47) stated, "certain questions cannot be answered by quantitative methods, while others cannot be answered by qualitative ones". Thus, Considering the nature of the topic, I decided to conduct a qualitative research study. specifically, Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD) and process-tracing, as the combination of these two approaches strengthens the analysis by providing both comparative insights and a detailed examination of causal mechanisms. MSSD will allow me to identify whether institutional learning is a causal factor by comparing similar cases and controlling for other variables. Process tracing, on the other hand, will provide a detailed examination of causal mechanisms linking institutional learning to the observed outcomes. By tracing the sequence of decisions, actions and policy shifts, I will be able to analyse the specific ways in which institutional learning influenced the EU's responses.

2.3.1 Most Similar systems Design (MSSD)

Most Similar Systems Design refers to comparing cases that are as similar as possible in many aspects but differ in their outcome of interest (dependent variable). The goal is to identify which factor or factors (independent variable) differ between the cases and may explain the variation in outcome. Thus, If the researchers find important differences between these similar countries, they can assume that these differences are the key reasons for the variation in the dependent variable. On the other hand, many examples in research demonstrate that when using the MSSD approach, researchers can select cases that are similar in key aspects but still differ in certain ways. For instance, in studies of civic culture, countries are chosen by having democratic political systems even though they differ in their levels of development (Przeworski & Teune, 1970, pp. 32-33). When comparing EU's responses, if I find that the variation in these responses is because of the significant differences between the cases themselves, the

explanation becomes straightforward – the responses varied because the cases were different. However, if the cases share more similarities than differences and the responses still varied, it suggests that another factor influenced this variation. Therefore, in the analysis chapter, I will conduct a nuanced examination of the similarities and differences to identify the reasons behind these varied outcomes.

In MSSD research, the similarities between the systems are treated as 'constants' (these are 'controlled for'). The differences between the systems are treated as key factors that might explain why the outcome varies across the cases (Przeworski & Teune, 1970, p. 33). In my study I argue that the main similarities between these three conflicts are significant enough to allow meaningful comparisons, despite the presence of some differences. Those similarities include the fact that they all involve Russia's territorial ambitions and actions against the free choice of the neighbour countries; in all three cases Russia's actions breach international norms like territorial integrity and sovereignty, resulting in international condemnation; the EU is the key international actor that responds/reacts to these crises, making its actions central to understand how the conflicts were addressed. While the affected countries (Georgia and Ukraine) differ in certain aspects, the EU's foreign policy approach to them has been quite similar. Additionally, the strategic importance of these countries for the EU is also comparable. While the scale of these conflicts is not identical across these cases, there are still significant similarities which align with the logic of MSSD method. At the same time, I acknowledge that the more variables are controlled for, the stronger the analysis will be.

To sum up, controlled comparison means cases are matched on all but one key characteristic. The word "controlled'' comes from the idea that the researcher is keeping most factors constant (under control) across the cases, which allows to focus on the effect of the one variable that differs. Ideally, If the only difference between 2008, 2014 and 2022 conflicts were the degree of institutional learning within the EU, while all other factors, such as scale and geopolitical context remained constant, identifying causal relationships would have been easier. However, in real-world research, there may always be uncontrolled differences between cases that complicate causal inferences. Some scholars are sceptical about the feasibility of meeting the strict requirements needed for effective comparisons. These include finding cases that are perfectly matched except for one variable, which is often very challenging in real-world research. their main argument is that focusing on observable implications (measurable

relationships between variables) is a better method for assessing theories (King et al., 1994, pp. 199-207)

How to make strong causal claims when dealing with a limited number of cases and many potential explanatory variables? This problem is also known as "Too many variables, too few cases" (George & Bennett, 2005, pp. 170-174). In reality, we cannot directly test causation by simply rewriting history and changing only one variable at a time. What would have happened in 2008 if the EU had already learned from past conflicts? or what would have happened in 2022 if Russia's invasion of Ukraine had been smaller in scale? Since we cannot go back in time and alter the history, we have to rely on comparisons between similar cases to make inferences about causality. George and Bennet (2005, pp. 160-164) consider process tracing an "essential supplement to all forms of case comparisons". They argue that process tracing complements comparative methods by providing in-depth tools for studying cases. According to the authors, it is important to combine case comparisons with process tracing to avoid unrealistic conclusions. Relying solely on case comparisons, as they argue, can result in overlooking important details.

One important problem in small-N research and in general comparative methods is "fundamental problem of inference" – the difficulty of isolating a single cause for a given outcome. King, Keohane and Verba (1994, p. 91) suggest addressing this problem by assuming unit homogeneity. It means that if two cases are similar, they will have the same outcome (dependent variable) if the same cause (independent) is applied. In other words, it assumes that the relationship between the cause (independent variable) and the effect (dependent variable) is consistent across cases. But this assumption is often unrealistic because cases can differ in unknown ways that could distort the results. To assume homogeneity in my case, I have to argue that the dependent variable (EU's response) should respond consistently if the same explanatory variable (institutional learning) is present or absent in each case. I have to also argue that any differences in the EU's response over time are not caused by differences in in other external factors, but solely by institutional learning. Some scholars criticize this view and argue that researchers often study cases that are not perfectly similar and still learn valuable things by analyzing how and why they are different and this is done by combining comparative methods with process tracing (George & Bennett, 2005, pp. 170-174).

2.3.2 Process tracing

Process tracing is a research method that identifies the link between an independent variable (or variables) and the dependent variable. This method requires to consider equifinality – the idea that multiple factors may lead to the same outcome and helps researchers identify different possible causes that align with both the evidence and the observed outcome (George & Bennett, 2005, pp. 206-207). Process tracing method is considered to be a reliable method for understanding causal relationships, as it involves looking closely at the details within each case to trace how and why specific outcomes occur. Instead of a broad comparison of few cases, this method consists of carefully examining the sequence of events and decisions within each case (Collier, Brady, & Seawright, 2010, p. 10). One of the main advantages of this approach is its ability to provide a close and thorough examination of the political or social phenomena. Additionally, it can evaluate existing explanations, uncover new hypotheses, and help researchers to understand the specific mechanisms that drive concrete outcomes. Although this method is largely used in within-case analysis, it is also highly effective in small-N research designs (Collier, 2011, p. 824).

To make accurate causal conclusions, it is important to first clearly describe the events in a proper sequence. Additionally, before explaining causal inferences, it is important to consider that process tracing can examine both repeated patterns and one-time events (Collier, 2011, p. 825). Beach (2017, pp. 1-2) presents three main components of process tracing: "theorization about causal mechanisms linking causes and outcomes; the analysis of the observable empirical manifestations of theorized mechanisms; and the complementary use of comparative methods to enable generalizations of findings from single case studies to other causally similar cases". In order to generalize beyond one case, researchers can combine process tracing with cross-case analysis. This means comparing the studied case with other similar cases to see if the same mechanisms are operating. If we find that multiple cases are causally similar to the studied case, we can then generalize the causal conclusions. In other words, we can say that the mechanisms observed in the studied case are likely to be present in those other similar cases as well (Beach, 2017, p. 22). For example, if I argue that the EU's response towards Russia was influenced by a specific cause, such as institutional learning, the objective is to examine whether this factor actually contributed to the outcome in each case.

According to Collier (2011, p. 823), process tracing serves two main purposes: provides detailed analysis of political and social phenomena and examines causal relationships. Process tracing is a method that relies on CPO (causal-process observation) to analyse how and why certain outcomes occur. The author argues that CPOs are the integral part of process tracing and it is unnecessary to use two different terms. Instead, he chooses to refer the entire approach as process tracing. Detailed description is another central component of process tracing. In order to achieve a detailed analysis of causal relationships, each step of the process must be clearly and accurately described. Additionally, examining the sequence of independent, dependent and intervening variables is crucial for understanding how causes lead to outcomes. A careful examination of the order in which these variables interact is an essential part to strengthen causal explanations (Mahoney, 2010, as cited in Collier, 2011, p.823).

Beach (2017, pp. 17-22) identifies three types of process tracing methods: theory-testing, theory-building and explaining-outcome process tracing. The goal of my research is not to shape or design a new theory (inductive method), instead, it builds on existing theoretical frameworks. While the result of my research might contribute to a broader theoretical discussion, the primary focus is not on theory development. In theory-testing process tracing, the aim is to determine if a specific causal mechanism, as hypothesized, operates in a particular case. The researcher presents a theory which includes a detailed explanation of the mechanism, structured as Cause →Mechanism →Outcome. The goal is to test whether the hypothesized mechanism explains the observed outcome and operates as it was theorized. I consider it more optimal to apply the explaining-outcome process tracing to my research. it consists of testing existing theories, or even combining them to adequately explain the outcome. It is a more flexible process where the researcher compares both theory and empirical evidence to develop a clear explanation for the outcome .

to conclude, the cases used in the research are selected according to the logic of the Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD). As I mentioned above, they share several key similarities, with Russia violating international norms in all three cases. The primary difference lies in the EU's response, which serves as the dependent variable. Institutional learning is identified as the independent variable, and I will examine the degree of institutional learning within each case. By applying process tracing, I will analyse the mechanisms through which institutional learning may have influenced the EU's responses, focusing on the specific events and processes

that shaped each reaction. While comparative methods look for similarities or differences between cases, process tracing focuses on understanding the specific reasons or mechanisms within each case that cause those similarities or differences. Combining these approaches is justified in the academia and in provides nuanced perspective on the causal relationship.

2.4 Limitations

There are some limitations that need to be considered to ensure transparency and accurate interpretation of the results. One limitation is related to measurement, referred to as "error term" by Miller (2007, pp. 87-90). This concept highlights that no measurement is perfectly accurate and some level of error can occur in any type of research, whether quantitative or qualitative. The main concern is whether the collected data actually measures what we intend to study. How well a measure reflects the concept that is meant to represent is often based on subjective judgement rather than a clear, objective criteria. Even though the measure may seem plausible, it may not always be accurate or valid. On the other hand, the small-N research design allows me to describe and explain the specific factors that could cause potential errors in the measurements.

Another limitation is related to the selection of data. In addition to using the primary data, I highly rely on secondary sources, which may reflect the bias of the scholars who analyse and interpret the data. To mitigate this, I will use a variety of international sources to provide a more balanced understanding of the EU's responses. Additional challenge is that one of the cases I am examining reflects an ongoing conflict, while the other two do not. since the conflict has not yet ended, it is difficult to fully understand the long-term EU responses. However, the initial responses are clear enough to make meaningful claims.

Chapter 3: Analysis

In this chapter, I will study the European Union's responses to three regional conflicts: the 2008 Russo-Georgian conflict, the 2014 Russo-Ukrainian conflict, and the currently ongoing 2022 Russo-Ukrainian conflict. Although the primary focus of my study is comparing the EU's responses, it is essential to first provide an overview of the conflicts themselves and justify the case selection. I will define the nature of each conflict, identify the similarities and differences between them, and demonstrate the methodological comparability of the cases.

The chapter will follow a detailed, case-by-case structure. In order to trace the evolution of EU responses over time, the cases will be presented in a historical order. In the following sub-chapters, I will first present an overview of each conflict, focusing on its causes, key events and outcomes. Later, the analysis will be dedicated to the examination of the EU's responses to each crisis, including the policies, actions, and strategies adopted in reaction to the events. Finally, I will examine the institutional tools and mechanisms that were available to the EU at the time of each conflict. After a careful examination of each case and the presentation of the observed evidence, I will be able to conduct a more nuanced analysis of the findings. As the primary goal is to investigate whether institutional learning is an explanatory factor for the EU's policy shift, I will focus on observable policy changes, such as the adoption of new frameworks or revisions of existing strategies.

The main goal of these sub-chapters is to answer my research question: *Why does the EU respond differently to Russia's similar behaviour in terms of invading neighbouring countries?* Even though I have a "why" question, which means that I aim to identify what is the explanatory factor behind these varied responses, it is essential to address two supplementary questions. Firstly, I need to confirm that institutional learning is a valid phenomenon in the context of my analysis and show its presence - answering "if" question, in other words, to show "if" the learning has taken place. This will be achieved by identifying observable changes in tools, frameworks, and decision-making processes over time. Secondly, I will examine the "how" question, that is, the mechanisms through which institutional learning influenced the EU's decision-making processes.

3.1 The 2008 Russo-Georgian conflict: brief overview

As examined by Popescu (2009, p. 213), it was in 2004 when Georgia started to fight for the internationalization of peacekeeping missions in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Internationalization, in turn, meant launching a new peacekeeping mission where Russia would not be the only peacekeeper. Georgia advocated for the participation of EU countries under the supervision of global organizations such as the United Nations (UN) or the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). Russia strongly opposed these changes, and the EU, prioritizing its relations with Russia, rejected the offer by stating that it would only engage if all parties, including Russia and the separatist regions, requested such involvement. Popescu states that the absence of any reliable actor contributed to the escalation of the conflict, which "ultimately led to the first full scale, interstate war after Balkans''(Popescu, 2009, p. 214). The period between 2004 and 2008 is referred to as "mutual frustration", where both Russia and the European Union realised that their relationship would be based on mutual interests rather than shared values. In addition to growing tension between Georgia and Russia, one of the most important triggering factors is considered to be the 2008 NATO summit in Bucharest and the declaration that Georgia and Ukraine would eventually become members of the organization (Forsberg & Haukkala, 2016, p. 32). Some authors additionally mention Western support for Kosovo's declaration of independence, after which Russia warned that this would work as a precedent, inspiring other separatist movements in the post-Soviet region (Maass, 2017, p. 138).

Two important incidents occurred in 2007, March 11th and August 6th, when unmarked Russian military aircraft entered Georgian airspace and launched air-to-surface missiles. These incidents, which some view as a "test of the responsiveness of the international community'', were overlooked by the Western institutions, and the European Union avoided to condemn Russia directly (Cornell, Smith, & Starr, 2008, pp. 5-6). Ronald D Asmus, a former United States Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, pointed out that the European Union not only underestimated Russia's warnings but also failed to prepare any plan for the potential escalation. In March 2008, Russia announced its decision to leave the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) sanctions on the separatist regions of Georgia. Thus, it ended the CIS ban on supplying weapons to Abkhazia and South Ossetia and started to send arms to the separatist groups. After the Bucharest Summit, Moscow criticized NATO for crossing the 'red line' and threatening its security perceptions (Asmus, 2010, as cited in Maass, 2017, p.138).

Later in April, he gave orders to strengthen formal relationships between Russian ministries and the authorities in the two contested regions (Fried, 2008). It should be mentioned that even before the Bucharest Summit, when then-President Vladimir Putin gave speech at the 2007 Munich Conference on Security Policy, he demonstrated his dissatisfaction with the geopolitical dynamics that were presented by that time and criticized the EU and NATO for trying to exclude Russia from the global decision-making processes (Putin, 2007).

The tensions between Moscow and Tbilisi escalated dramatically on August 7-8. The Kremlin justified its actions by claiming it was protecting Russian citizens in South Ossetia after the Georgian government launched a military offensive in Tskhinvali, South Ossetia (Maass, 2017, p. 140). Moreover, Russia rejected the characterization of its actions as "Russian military intervention". As it is argued by the Kremlin, the conflict does not represent a war between Russia and Georgia, rather, it was a peacekeeping response (Allison, 2009, p. 174). According to Whitman and Wolff (2010, p. 87), "in August 2008, Georgia and Russia clashed in a five-day war after Georgian troops attempted to assert full control over the breakaway region of South Ossetia". Russia described its actions as a response to Georgia's aggression against South Ossetia. However, there is indirect evidence, including some Russian reports and publications, which shows that Russia was steadily building its military presence in South Ossetia prior to conflict and points a possibility that unauthorized Russian forces were already present in the conflict zone as early as August 7, 2008. In addition, the deputy commander of Russian Airborne Troops admitted in 2009 that his units, which were not part of the official peacekeeping forces, were regularly conducting exercises in South Ossetia (Allison, 2009, p. 176). It is important to highlight the mass distribution of Russian passports to the residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, through which Russia claimed them as its citizens. This process, in turn, began several years before the conflict and significantly accelerated in summer 2008. The fact is that the conflict escalated after months of growing tensions and according to Cornell (2008, p. 307), on the night of August 8, "a column of several hundred Russian tanks rolled through the Roki Tunnel, which connects Russia to Georgia's breakaway province of South Ossetia". After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, this was the first time Russia attacked another country. Although the humanitarian impact of this war was not as severe as other then-known conflicts, it represented one of the most important challenges to Europe.

Maas (2017, p. 142) examines the ceasefire agreement that was reached between the parties. Initially, Finnish Foreign Minister Alexander Stubb and French Foreign Minister Bernard

Kouchner, who acted as high-level envoys of the EU, attempted to draft a ceasefire. Later, French President Nicolas Sarkozy took over the negotiations and 'successfully' ended with a peace plan. The final six-point ceasefire agreement which was reached on August 12, called for an immediate end of hostilities, emphasized the need for unrestricted access to humanitarian aid, required Georgian military forces to withdraw from the conflict zone and Russian forces to return to their pre-war positions. Additionally, the plan outlined the need of implementation of additional measures of security by Russia and the establishment of peace and security by international mediations in two disputed regions. However, it is important to note that the agreement did not specify clear deadlines for the implementation of the above-mentioned objectives (Maass, 2017, p. 143). On August 15, German Chancellor Angela Merkel held a summit with President Putin in Sochi, where they mainly discussed the Russian-Georgian war. Within two weeks, Georgia was visited by the heads of state of Poland, Romania, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania and the foreign ministers of Sweden and the United Kingdom (Popescu, 2009, pp. 214-215). The war itself lasted five days, Russia quickly took control over South Ossetia and started a second front in Abkhazia. In the end, Georgia lost control of Akhalgori Municipality and parts of the Tskhinvali District in South Ossetia, as well as Kodori Valley in Abkhazia. Later, on August 25, Russia took the unilateral decision to recognize South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states, weakening the agreement that had been negotiated by Sarkozy two weeks prior (Seibel, 2017, p. 271). Ultimately, while the war had significant implications on regional security, it did not result in the EU-Russia political crisis (Maass, 2017, p. 137), rather, there was a fresh effort to improve their bilateral relations (Forsberg & Haukkala, 2016, p. 11).

3.1.1 The EU's response to the Georgia crisis

The European Union decided to contribute to the conflict resolution process in Georgia. However, in order to evaluate its role and contribution, it is important to clarify how the EU defines conflict resolution. Although there is no precise definition regarding the concrete policies that the organization should develop when addressing conflict,

> A minimum consensus exists among Commission and Council officials that it involves assisting the parties to a conflict to achieve agreement on a mutually acceptable institutional framework within which they can deal with disputes by political means rather than through recourse and violence (Whitman & Wolff, 2010, p. 88).

A few days after the outbreak of the war, on 13 August 2008, EU foreign ministers, the EU Council Secretariat and the European Commission held a meeting and drafted a plan for stabilizing Georgia. Immediate measures included providing humanitarian aid, sending technical experts, coordinating with the OSCE and UN, strengthening the EU Special Representatives (EUSR) office, and strengthening the EU border support team. The plan proposed broader strategies such as deploying armed EU peacekeepers to separate conflict parties, or establishing a civilian monitoring mission. Due to widespread scepticism among the member states, the civilian monitoring mission was decided. It is argued that "when it came to high-politics issues…EU institutions have kept an extremely low profile politically" (Popescu, 2009, p. 218).

Even though the peace agreement was reached, tensions between Russia and Georgia continued. An emergency meeting was held on September 1 to address EU-Russia relations after Russia's recognition of separatist regions. The conclusion document of the Extraordinary European Council consists of the following eleven points. The document starts by emphasizing concerns regarding the suffering of both sides, acknowledges Russia's disproportionate response and condemns such military actions. Then it mentions principles of "independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity" (Council of the European Union, 2008, p. 2), condemns Russia's recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia recognizes the right of all European states to decide their foreign policy and alliances. The European Council mentioned the importance of the six-point peace agreement; however, it called for the full implementation of the plan and the withdrawal of Russian military forces. This indicated that Russia still had not complied with its obligations requested through the Sarkozy-negotiated peace plan. The Council mentioned 'urgency' to refer to the importance of international talks regarding the modalities of security and stability in the conflicted regions and showed a readiness to support peaceful resolution. In this matter, the EU committed itself to ground involvement and working closely with the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe and the United Nations (Council of the European Union, 2008, p. 3).

Some optimistic plans were also mentioned for Georgia, including the possible visa facilitation and the establishment of a full and comprehensive free trade area as well as regional initiative plans such as the "Black Sea Synergy" and the "Eastern Partnership". Moreover, the appointment of the European Union Special Representative for the crisis in Georgia was also

announced. What is interesting to note is that the Council also addressed the concerns regarding energy security and emphasized the importance of diversification of energy supplies. However, it added that due to their interdependence, working for a strong, cooperative relationship based on mutual respect and trust was important. The document ends with positive, optimistic and forward-looking prospects. The statement "we are convinced that it is in Russia's own interest not to isolate itself from Europe" (Council of the European Union, 2008, p. 5) , emphasizes the EU's belief in the importance of fostering cooperation. The Council promised to keep its values and principles, to "remain vigilant" and to postpone negotiations on the Partnership Agreement until Russia's military withdraws (Council of the European Union, 2008).

The EU's decision not to impose sanctions was positively received in Russia. On September 2, Russian Prime Minister Putin remarked, "Thank God, common sense prevailed. We do not see any extreme conclusions or proposals". President Medvedev further emphasized "Despite certain divisions among the EU states, a reasonable, realistic point of view prevailed because some of the states were calling for some mythical sanctions" (Maass, 2017, pp. 146-147). French Foreign Minister Bernard Koucher proposed to deploy monitors in Georgia, while Polish Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski suggested that international forces would be more effective, the idea supported by Finnish Minister for Foreign Affairs. However, German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier advocated for the EU-led peacekeeping mission and urged for a quick action. The European Union Monitoring Mission (EUMM) was established on 15 September 2008, under the European Security and Defence Policy. With 200 unarmed EU monitors, it marked the EU's fastest-ever deployment by that time. The mission faced some difficulties as monitors were not allowed to enter the separatist areas, and their role was limited to observation. In his speech at the French Institute in October 2008, Sarkozy addressed the tensions between Russia and Georgia; he emphasized the importance of avoiding divisions in Europe expressed his concerns regarding the possible renewed Cold War and urged for a dialogue. The European Union's response revealed significant internal divisions and this were demonstrated by their approach to relations with Russia. For example, while Estonia and Finland thought the war would fundamentally change EU-Russia relations, Germany and France advocated for maintaining diplomatic channels with Moscow, and this became even more obvious when Sarkozy stated, "Let us not launch a Cold War … demonstrate strength… sanctions, counter-sanctions; this does not serve anybody" (Maass, 2017, p. 146).

European Council's review of its relations with Russia was published on November 5, 2008, days before the scheduled EU-Russia Summit. The document highlighted political tensions as well as the importance of economic ties between the EU and Russia. After the introduction part of the document, the review of the relationships starts by mentioning trade and investment, which is referred to as "substantial and growing" (European Council, 2008, p. 1). The document states that the EU strongly supports Russia's accession to the World Trade Organization and hopes for greater cooperation in the energy sector as well as the Common Space on Justice, Freedom, and Security, where the "EU and Russian interests often coincide" (European Council, 2008, p. 3). When the European Council starts addressing concerns about EU-Russia relations, it starts by emphasizing economic and energy-related issues. In the last chapter of the document, named "Next steps", The European Council condemns Russia's recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, expresses concern about Russia's "disproportionate" response and emphasizes the need for a constructive dialogue. In order to address the conflicts in the neighbourhood, The EU demonstrates the need to act in a unified manner through the instruments of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) (European Council, 2008, p. 4).

On 14 November 2008, Nice hosted the EU-Russia Summit, where European Union's leaders welcomed Russian President Dmitry Medvedev. Before the Summit, President of the European Commission, José Manuel Barroso said:

> The conflict in Georgia has emphasized the crucial need for permanent political dialogue between the EU and the Russian Federation, while the global economic crisis has underlined once more the interdependence between the EU and Russian economies. It is our belief that the New Agreement offers the best possibility for the EU to advance its interests while defending its values (European Commission, 2008, p. 1).

Commissioner for Trade Catherine Ashton stressed the importance of the EU-Russia trade relations and the potential for even more significant economic benefits if Russia were to join the World Trade Organization (WTO). Benita Ferrero-Waldner, former European Commissioner for External Relations and European Neighbourhood Policy, highlighted the mutual benefits of close cooperation and stated that the EU's team would approach negotiations with Russia, focusing on the best interests of the European Union. At the same time, she reaffirmed the organization's commitments to its core principles: "The Geneva process must

advance, and the principle of territorial integrity must be upheld'' (European Commission, 2008, p. 1). In conclusion, relations between the EU and Russia were normalized after the Summit. The EU decided not to postpone the negotiations for a new strategic agreement, as Russia had mainly fulfilled its commitments regarding Georgia. However, Russia continued to recognize the breakaway regions and maintained a small military presence in Georgia. Despite this, the negotiations were seen as positive, with the primary focus of the meeting shifting to addressing the global financial crisis rather than the situation in Georgia (Schlamp, 2008, as cited in Forsberg & Haukkala, 2016, pp. 167-168).

The EU's engagement in the conflict resolution process in Georgia remains one of the most debated examples of the EU's role in conflict resolution within its Eastern neighbourhood (Popescu, 2009, pp. 219-220). As Popescu argues, internal divisions, and the fear that EU-Russia cooperation would be affected resulted in a minimal involvement. This was particularly evident after the 2008 war, when the decisions were led mainly by France, without the involvement of the EU High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). Javier Solana, in turn, positively evaluated the EU's role in the Russo-Georgian war. He stated that the EU acted with unity and determination, achieving precise results in the crisis. Even though Poland, the Baltic States and the United Kingdom advocated for stronger responses, recognizing that Russia had not returned to its pre-conflict positions, the overall outcome was seen positively by the EU representatives. However, it should be noted that success was frequently credited to France rather than the EU as a whole (Forsberg & Haukkala, 2016, p. 167). Similarly, Russia perceived Sarkozy's efforts as those of France's president rather than a representative of the EU. This perception, often highlighted in Russian media, was likely influenced by the absence of Javier Solana from the main negotiation processes (Maass, 2017, p. 149). Solana visited Moscow in early September 2008, one month after the outbreak of the Russo-Georgian war, and he travelled to Tbilisi at the end of September, approximately two months after the war (Popescu, 2009, p. 216).

3.1.2 Institutional tools and mechanisms available in 2008

In order to understand the evolution of the European Union's conflict response capabilities, it is essential to examine the institutional tools and mechanisms that were available in 2008. Thus, the primary focus of this sub-chapter is to analyse the resources at the EU's disposal when addressing the 2008 Russo-Georgian crisis. European Union's strategy towards Georgia should be understood in the context of the EU's Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), which was launched in

2004 to strengthen "prosperity, stability, and security" in the neighbourhood. Before this, the EU's relationship with Georgia was based on the 1999 Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA). Whitman and Wolff (2010, pp. 90-91) examine that the PCA briefly mentioned the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, but the ENP Action Plan gave these conflicts higher importance, thus, the EU became more involved in addressing Georgia's separatist regions. As a result, the main tools for implementing EU policies became the European Neighbourhood and Partnership instrument (ENPI) and the Neighbourhood Investment Facility (NIF).

The EU-Georgia Action Plan highlights that the European Neighbourhood Policy offers new partnership perspectives and outlines them. Among these, a key priority is mentioned to be the EU's commitment to help Georgia resolve its internal conflicts "drawing on the instruments at the EU's disposal" expressing openness to increasing its involvement (European Commission, 2006, p. 2). The document provides a list of the EU's priorities regarding Georgia, both within and outside the scope of PCA. Notably, under "Priority Area 6", the EU specifically addresses the issue of separatist regions and explains how it plans to support peaceful resolution of these secessionist conflicts. Some of the specific actions include supporting the settlement of conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia while respecting Georgia's internationally recognised borders; considering further economic assistance and active participation to speed up the demilitarization process and conflict resolution. Additionally, the EU emphasizes two important points: "the need to increase the effectiveness of the negotiating mechanisms" and the importance of including the issue of Georgia's territorial integrity and the resolution of its conflicts in political dialogue with Russia. In addition, the "Priority Area 7" focuses on strengthening EU-Georgia cooperation in foreign and security policy, particularly regarding the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) (European Commission, 2006, p. 10).

European Union Monitoring Mission (EUMM) was a temporary mission established on 15 September 2008 by the Council of the European Union, with a mandate to cover the entire territory of Georgia within its internationally recognized borders. However, as the de facto authorities of Abkhazia and South Ossetia denied their access to the territories under their control and the fact that it has only observational role, raised concerns about the mission's effectiveness. The Deputy Head of Mission acknowledged these limitations, stating that while the EUMM was able to patrol and report, it lacked the authority to take action (Maass, 2017,

pp. 144-145). The official document on the EUMM Georgia, under "Article 3" outlines the specific tasks that the mission aims to achieve: 1) Stabilisation 2) Normalisation 3) Confidence building , and 4) Contributing to informing European policy and future EU engagement (Council of the European Union, 2008, p. 2).

The lack of a unified, comprehensive strategy across EU institutions created an environment where the effectiveness of conflict management often relied heavily on actions and capabilities of individual leaders. Whitman and Wolff (2010, p. 101) discuss the limitations of EU conflict resolution bodies and the limitation of EU conflict resolution tools. They argue, that before the adoption of the Lisbon Treaty, the Union's approach to conflicts was different. The problem was that many institutions were involved conflict management, each theoretically responsible for different aspects, without their roles clearly defined. These included various bodies within the Council, such as the Presidency, the Political and Security Committee, and the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and additionally, several Directorates General and EU delegations on the ground. Although the European Parliament's institutional role in conflict management was limited, individual Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) sometimes played an active role in specific conflicts, particularly those related to human rights issues. In practice, the majority of the EU's conflict management efforts were led by the Council and the Commission. Officials in the Commission considered their role as primarily focused on providing aid, financial support, and technical assistance to foster conditions that would facilitate conflict resolution. They acknowledged that the main political role in conflict management was within the scope of the Council. However, Council representatives did not clearly define what their political role included, especially in relation to specific conflicts.

3.2 The 2014 Russo-Ukrainian conflict: brief overview

Vilnius Eastern Partnership Summit took place on 28-29 November 2013, where the EU discussed the Association Agreements (AA), that would eventually lead to a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) with Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia and Moldova. Russia argued that these agreements should include Russia in the negotiations and its interests should be taken into account. Ukraine's newly elected president Viktor Yanukovych decided to suspend the negotiations for the Association Agreement with the EU and as a reward, Russia offered him a significant discount to natural gas, special loans and other trade benefits (Forsberg & Haukkala, 2016, pp. 35-36). This decision resulted in months of protests, known

as the Euromaidan demonstrations. The protests ultimately led to a change in government and as a response Russia began military actions in February 2014. By March 2014, Russia annexed Crimea, and by April 2014, armed conflict started in the Donbas region of Eastern Ukraine (Kassim & Tholoniat, 2021, p. 302). The downing of a MH17 commercial plane over Eastern Ukraine on July 17, 2014, which resulted in the deaths of all 298 passengers, not only shocked the European public but also EU policymakers. In response, sectoral sanctions were imposed on Russia in summer 2014. Merkel stated that the Ukraine crisis affected everyone and was not merely a regional issue (Juncos & Pomorska, 2021, p. 562). NATO enlargement, that started in the late 1990s, and which was perceived as a significant security concern by Russia, is often connected to Russia's aggressive actions against Georgia and Ukraine (Howorth, 2016, p. 4). Although the AA was not connected to the expansion of NATO, it was clear from Putin's statements that, as most of the European countries are members of both organizations, he saw the EU's growth closely related to NATO (Seibel, 2017, p. 271).

In the beginning of the crisis, the High Representative/Vice-president (HR/VP) and EU member states expressed support for the protesters, advocated for a political dialogue and imposed targeted sanctions. However, as the tensions escalated with the annexation of Crimea, the EU's diplomatic efforts proved insufficient. Maurer (2021, p. 367) argues that While the EEAS and the European Commission worked together to create a comprehensive policy towards Ukraine, their approach was mainly focusing on technical or procedural solutions. These technical responses were not sufficient to give the EU the political influence or authority it needed to deal with Russia. In other words, while the EU developed strategies towards Ukraine, it lacked the political authority to handle the complex political dynamics. As argued by Howorth (2016, p. 8), After the 2008 Georgia crisis, negotiations with Ukraine were managed by the European Commission, led by Štefan Füle, rather than the European External Action Service (EEAS) or European Council. When the Ukraine crisis intensified in 2013-2014, Catherine Ashton, the EU's High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy, became involved without coordinating her actions with the other EU institutions already engaged in the issue. Meanwhile, Füle and the Commission continued their efforts. As a result, confusion and uncertainty emerged regarding decision-making process, with the EU developing three separate initiatives on Ukraine without a clear coordination.

Seibel (2017, p. 272) argues that, in the beginning of the crisis, before the annexation of Crimea, the EU continued its negotiations with Russia despite Russia's increasingly aggressive

behaviour in its neighbourhood. The EU not only ignored the invasion of Georgia, but also overlooked Russia's role in the suspension of Ukraine's Association Agreement with the EU. Additionally, in January 2014 the EU continued to work for a new agreement with Russia. By that time, Putin's domestic policies became more repressive, restricting press, civil society and judicial freedoms. Nevertheless, the EU maintained its pragmatic approach towards Russia and continued to prioritize collaboration. As the author argues, by failing to learn from Russia's actions in Georgia, the EU continued its "Business as usual" strategy. Ikani et al. (2020, as cited in Juncos & Pomorska, 2021, p. 558) highlight several challenges in understanding and responding to international crises such as the difficulty in understanding the case, which can be a result of rapid development of events, misinformation, and credibility issues. In 2014 it was difficult to evaluate the gravity and complexity of the conflict because of Russia's tactics of deception and misinformation. For example, some EU member states struggled to analyse the full extent of Russia's involvement and when the armed individuals without insignia appeared in Crimea, some hesitated to believe they were actually Russians. Such tactics not only complicated fact-finding process but evolved the nature of modern threats. Georgia had to deal with the same problem in convincing Western governments of the seriousness of Russian intentions as Georgia developed a reputation for exaggerating threats as a "crying wolf" (Ikani, Guttmann, & Meyer, 2020, p. 13).

The situation that the EU was facing after Russia's annexation of Crimea was similar to the challenges it faced after Russia's invasion of Georgia, yet on a larger scale. Similar to Georgia, Russia backed and supported separatist militias in the Ukrainian regions of Donetsk and Luhansk and justified its actions by claiming that it was protecting the Russian-speaking population in Ukraine. Russia's actions led to a civil war and Ukraine had to defend itself without a proper equipment or training. The EU initially responded through the Franco-German-Polish "Weimar Triangle". In February 2014, the foreign ministers of France, Poland, and Germany, together with a senior Russian diplomat, facilitated an agreement between then-Ukrainian government and protesters which included restoring the constitutional rights. However, the agreement collapsed almost immediately, as Yanukovych had to leave Ukraine. On 17 April 2014, Russia and Ukraine reached an agreement in Geneva where they committed to avoid violence and agreed to disarm illegal armed groups. However, Russia had no intention of honouring the agreement and continued to support separatist groups to destabilize the region and prevent the presidential elections planned for May 25. Germany and France opposed sanctions and decided to continue the dialogue with Russia (Seibel, 2017, pp. 274-276).

The agreement of Minsk I (or Minsk Protocol) included several key points, including an immediate ceasefire, the establishment of a monitoring mission led by the OSCE to evaluate the situation, the creation of security zones on both sides of the border, the release of hostages and the organization of local elections in Donetsk and Luhansk in accordance with Ukrainian law. By January 2015, the ceasefire completely broke down in Easter Ukraine and it led to intense fighting that culminated in the Battle of Debaltseve. As in the 2008 crisis, when individual EU member states, particularly Germany and France, lead the negotiations rather than the European Union as a whole, a similar scenario occurred during the 2014 crisis (Seibel, 2017, p. 278). In February 2015, Angela Merkel and François Hollande became involved the conflict resolution processes. They held meetings with the leaders of Ukraine and Russia, which resulted in a new version of the Minsk agreement that was originally signed in September 2014 under the leadership of the OSCE. Merkel and Hollande travelled to Minsk on February 11 to sign a revised agreement known as 'Minsk II'. This updated plan included provisions for a ceasefire, the withdrawal of heavy weaponry, and the acknowledgment of borders in the contested regions of Eastern Ukraine. Both Merkel and Hollande strongly opposed American suggestions to send lethal weapons to Ukraine (Howorth, 2016, p. 10).

3.2.1 The EU's response to the Ukraine crisis

There are different opinions among scholars and policy analysts about the European Union's response to the Ukraine crisis in 2014. Some consider it a failure, while others believe that, given the capabilities at that time, it was quite successful. For instance, Trondal et al. emphasize the importance of examining the EU's response to crises beyond the European Council. They argue that the 2014 Ukraine crisis was expected to involve mainly intergovernmental response with limited engagement of the European Commission. However, the Commission managed to not only navigate these crises but also expanded its influence. Thus, the authors argue that the crisis in fact strengthened the Commission's role (Riddervold, Trondal, & Newsome, 2021, p. 234). according to Zimmermann (2021, p. 105), the EU maintained unity during the 2014 Ukraine crisis largely due to Germany's leadership. By prioritizing a strong response over its economic ties with Russia, Germany supported the EU in imposing sanctions, providing economic assistance to Ukraine, and leading ceasefire negotiations (Minsk I and Minsk II). This resulted in sceptical countries like Hungary and Slovakia eventually following the EU's approach.

On the other hand, Crawford (2021, pp. 494-495) argues that even though Germany's leadership facilitated the EU's collective decision on sanctions, as Russia's one of the largest trading partners, it faced significant risks when the European Union decided to impose sanctions in 2014. Initially, Chancellor Angela Merkel took strong position, prioritizing a unified EU response over the potential economic challenges for Germany. However, domestic pressure from business groups led to a more softened approach. As a result, Merkel agreed that existing business contracts with Russia would remain unaffected by the sanctions. In order to accommodate the interests of other EU countries, certain exceptions were made. For instance, natural gas imports were excluded from the sanctions because some EU members were highly dependent on Russian gas. France continued the delivery of two warships it had already sold to Russia, and the operations of ExxonMobil were not interrupted in Russia. These compromises resulted in sanctions that were relatively weak and mostly symbolic.

The annexation of Crimea was a violation of the 1994 Budapest Memorandum. When Ukraine joined the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, Russia, with other members, promised to respect Ukraine's sovereignty and borders. In March 2014, the EU suspended negotiations on the new PCA and the European Council decided to impose gradual sanctions on Russia, depending on whether it cooperated with the EU to achieve a peaceful resolution to the conflict (Seibel, 2017). Juncos and Pomorska (2021, p. 547), argue that imposing sanctions against Russia was a significant achievement considering the difficulty of reaching consensus among EU countries. the authors explain this outcome through the concepts of historical institutionalism: "critical juncture" and "path dependency". They conclude that certain events in 2014, like the annexation of Crimea and the downing of flight MH17, served as critical junctures that transformed the "turbulent" EU-Russia relationship into a crisis. However, the EU's response was not solely determined by these critical events, but also by pre-existing patterns of decision-making that had developed over time. Critical juncture is actually a key term when studying crises. It refers to a significant moment/turning point when a crisis leads to important changes or decisions. Ukraine crisis is compared to critical juncture for the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) specifically, encouraging the EU to start a formal process to reform the ENP as the need for change became urgent (Ikani, 2019, as cited in Ansell, 2021, p. 145). It should also be pointed out that during a critical juncture, initially, there may appear a wide range of possibilities for the future, as it expands possibilities of future scenarios. However, sometimes certain events can develop so quickly that they might limit other options, making specific

outcomes more likely to happen (Mahoney et al., 2016, as cited in Juncos and Pomorska, 2021, p. 555).

Howorth (2016, p. 1) argues that the Ukraine crisis was, to some degree, a result of the EU's poor approach regarding its Eastern neighbours. The EU faced limitations because different member states had conflicting views on how to respond. These differences restricted the ability of the EU, as an organization, to take a unified action. The author argues that it is necessary to differentiate between the power of the member states and the EU itself. Countries like Germany and France had more influence on the conflict than EU officials such as the President of the Council, President of the Commission and High Representative. The author also differentiates "actions, discourse and power" and points out that sanctions, travel restrictions and asset freezes do not necessarily show the exercise of power. Similarly, he argues that speeches and calls for unity do not necessarily mean the creation of effective policies (Howorth, 2016, p. 2). Not all authors have the same opinion regarding this matter, some argue that the President of the European Council and the High Representative played important roles in coordinating a unified EU response. In addition to the diplomatic support, the European Council imposed and later extended sanctions against Russia. Furthermore, in April 2014, the European Commission launched a Support Group to Ukraine to provide resource allocation and help the country with expertise (Kassim & Tholoniat, 2021, p. 303)

Other challenging factors in responding external crises are considered to be the "pre-existing knowledge'' and "policy response capacities''. In terms of capacity, it is argued that it is necessary to determine if there were enough resources and appropriate expertise to gather and analyse high-quality information about a specific threat. The pre-existing knowledge refers to prior experience of senior decision-makers in dealing with similar cases in the past, or their comprehensive understanding of the region to accurately interpret events and make effective decisions. They emphasize that having adequate resources, skilled experts, and efficient intelligence procedures is essential for addressing crises and analysing the nature of threat (Ikani, Guttmann, & Meyer, 2020, p. 13).

3.2.2 Institutional tools and mechanisms available in 2014

The Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) was created by the Maastricht Treaty of 1992. Some important changes were made with the 1997 Amsterdam Treaty, which introduced

the position of High Representative for CFSP. The 2007 Lisbon Treaty made further developments, it removed the old rotating system of the Council's presidency and appointed a permanent President of the European Council with a term of two and a half years (Forsberg & Haukkala, 2016, p. 46). Another important reform was merging the roles of the European Commissioner for external relations, the High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy and the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC). The main aim of this reform was to improve the effectiveness of the EU's foreign policy and to combine the European Commission's financial resources with the political influence of the national governments (Middelaar, 2019, p. 22). The Lisbon Treaty is also responsible for making the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) an integral component of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). It allows the EU to have access to both civilian and military resources and deploy missions outside the EU to strengthen international security, prevent conflict and maintain peace. To ensure that the EU's foreign and security policies align with international law and global standards, the CSDP must follow the principles of the United Nations Charter (Quille, 2008, p. 3).

The Lisbon treaty marked the beginning of the EU's strengthened position as a global actor by providing a more comprehensive legal framework for its external actions. The Treaty entered into force on 1 December 2009 and it is important to analyse the changes in the constitutional and institutional level that it has brought within the European Union. The main goals for the EU foreign policy emphasized in the Lisbon Treaty were "more coherence, more efficiency, and more unity" (Maurer, 2021, p. 358). Although the treaty does not grant the European Union new exclusive powers, it introduces changes in how the EU makes the use of its existing authorities. The Treaty of Lisbon, for the first time, makes a clear definition of the European Union's powers. It categorizes these powers into three types: exclusive, shared, and supportive competences. Exclusive power means that only the EU has the authority to create laws and regulations and the member states implement them. Shared power allows the member states to legislate if the EU has not done yet. Finally, supportive power means the EU's role is to support and strengthen the policies of the member states (Pavy, 2024, pp. 1-2).

The European Union's ability to respond to crises has been significantly influenced by the role of the European Council. The Lisbon Treaty marked a significant shift by transforming the European Council from an informal forum into a formal EU institution with a well-defined role

in the decision-making process. However, the Treaty did not create a separate administrative structure for it. Instead, for both the European Council and its President, administrative duties are carried out by the General Secretariat of the Council of the European Union. As defined by the Treaty, the European Council is responsible to "provide the Union with the necessary impetus for its development and shall define the general political directions and priorities thereof. It shall not exercise legislative functions" (European Union, 2007, p. 17). On the other hand, it is also argued that the Lisbon Treaty's limitation is that it only describes the procedure for crisis management, that the President of the European Council can call a special meeting of the Council when needed. The Treaty itself does not provide a detailed guideline of instructions for the Council, it does not define specific strategies or actions that should be taken when addressing an international crisis (Middelaar, 2019, p. 23). According to Kassim and Tholoniat (2021, p. 300), even though the Lisbon Treaty strengthened the power of the European Council, lack of resources remained as a problem. As the authors argue, the president of the European Council decides what issue should be considered as crisis and whether to discuss it at a normal summit or at the extraordinary meeting. However, the European Council relies heavily on other institutions like the Commission and the Council of the European Union, as they exercise legislative power. As a result, the European Council has faced bureaucratic challenges when addressing crises.

In the field of foreign affairs, key reforms were introduced by the Lisbon Treaty to improve the EU's ability to act decisively. One important reform was strengthening the position of the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and creating the European External Action Service (EEAS) to support this role (European Council, 2024). The establishment of EEAS served the purpose of institutionalizing European foreign policy collaboration and it combined the staff from the European Commission, diplomats from EU member states and officials from relevant departments of the General Secretariat of the Council. This allowed for the better coordination between the national diplomats and EU institutions, which strengthened its external relations (Middelaar, 2019, p. 22). The High Representative, chairing the Foreign Affairs Council and at the same time being the Vice President of the European Commission, ensures deeper connection and collaboration between EU institutions.

Article 13a of the Lisbon treaty explains the role of the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. This includes leading the Foreign Affairs Council, supporting the development of the common foreign and security policy, and engaging in

political discussions with external parties as a representative of the European Union. Then it states that "in fulfilling his mandate, the High Representative shall be assisted by the European External Action Service" (European Union, 2007, p. 27). The High Representative's proposal on the establishment of the EEAS highlights the significance of the EEAS: "It will help strengthen the European Union on the global stage, give it more profile, and enable it to project its interests and values more efficiently" (The High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy , 2010, p. 2) The EEAS started to operate from December 2010, it supports the EU's foreign policies, coordinates the EU's diplomatic activities and strengthens the EU's capacity to act as a unified global diplomatic actor (European Council, 2024). Scholars argue that the EEAS was not only impacted by crises, but the timing of those crises significantly influenced its evolution. The EEAS experienced challenges during its development because of certain crises and these crises worked as incentives to change, but sometimes they triggered continuity. However, it is obvious that the crises had a significant effect on the evolution of the EEAS (Maurer, 2021, p. 358).

In order to analyse the foreign policy decisions of the EU, especially in times of crises, it is also important to mention the Petersberg Tasks, as these tasks define the set of responsibilities and operations that the European Union is authorized to carry out in response to crises. The Petersberg tasks formed an integral component of the European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP), which now is called Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). In the Amsterdam Treaty these tasks initially included "humanitarian and rescue tasks, peacekeeping tasks and tasks of combat forces in crisis management, including peacemaking" (Quille, 2008, p. 5). Later, the European Council extended the scope and added additional tasks: "joint disarmament operations, support for third countries in combating terrorism and security sector reform". In the official document of the Lisbon Treaty, under Article 28B the tasks look like the following:

> Joint disarmament operations, humanitarian and rescue tasks, military advice and assistance tasks, conflict prevention and peace-keeping tasks, tasks of combat forces in crisis management, including peace-making and post-conflict stabilisation. All these tasks may contribute to the fight against terrorism, including by supporting third countries in combating terrorism in their territories (Quille, 2008, p. 5).

Middelaar (2019, pp. 17-18) explains how the EU has dealt with crises after the Treaty of Lisbon and how the importance of responding to crises was addressed by the treaty itself. The

author not only analyses changes at the formal level, but also explains the informal ways of handling crises that emerged after the treaty (“improvising crisis bodies”). He argues that the original European Community was created to establish regulations but not to take direct action. However, the EU has since shifted its governance model of “policy of rules” to “policy of events”. The latter refers to political decisions made in response to specific events, rather than long-term regulatory frameworks. One way to address unexpected crises is by developing new rules and frameworks. However, certain political events, especially in the military domain, are unique and require specific responses that cannot be generalized into regular rules. That said, establishing new institutions or regulatory bodies is insufficient if the methods of exercising power and authority remains the same (Middelaar, 2019, pp. 18-19). The European Union has faced challenges in acting as a unified force in global foreign policy due to differing opinions among its member states, especially in the years shortly after the implementation of the Lisbon Treaty. Moreover, even when the EU has spoken with one voice, it has still been criticised for not meeting its own standards, principles, and expectations of people. Internal challenges have also affected the EU’s foreign policy behaviour and effectiveness. The rise of populism, for example, raised concerns about the EU’s role as a global actor committed to democracy and the rule of law. while the appointment of the High Representative and the creation of EEAS aimed to enhance coordination within the EU’s foreign policy, other factors have occasionally limited its ability to achieve tangible results (Thies, 2019, p. 63).

In 2013, the European Comission introduced a joint communication on the EU’s comprehensive approach to external conflict and crises. The document starts by emphasizing the EU’s increased ambition to make its external actions more consistent, effective, and strategic by utilizing a wide range of tools and resources provided by the Lisbon Treaty. The comprehensive approach refers to addressing crises in a holistic way, covering all stages of conflict development. The document outlines the following steps: “early warning and preparedness; conflict prevention; crisis response and management; early recovery, stabilization, and peace-building (European Commission, 2013, p. 2) The document emphasizes the importance of addressing international crises, as it is crucial for the EU’s global interest. It highlights that the EU possesses a broad range of tools and resources, which include “diplomatic, security, defence, financial, trade, development cooperation and humanitarian aid” (European Commission, 2013, p. 3). The concept of comprehensiveness in the EU’s approach refers to sharing the responsibility among EU member states to safeguard the organization’s interests, promote its values, and prevent or address crises. Moreover, the

document also outlines that responses should be flexible and specific to each unique situation and that there is no pre-designed plan that can be applied universally. However, it also highlights that, in order to create a successful response, first, all relevant actors, such as EU institutions, member states, or other stakeholders - must first share a common understanding of the situation.

> A shared analysis should set out the EU's understanding about the causes of a potential conflict or crisis, identify the key people and groups involved, review the dynamics of the situation and assess the potential risks of action, or non-action (European Commission, 2013, p. 5).

3.3 The 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine: brief overview

The conflict that started in 2014 between Russia and Ukraine continued for years, gradually escalating until it culminated in a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. While writing this thesis, the war is still ongoing and it has caused widespread devastation, entire cities have been destroyed, Russian strikes have targeted residential areas, schools, hospitals, power plants, and cultural sites. Reports have documented severe human rights abuses, including rape, torture, forced displacement and executions (Hall, 2023). On July 2021, President Putin published an article claiming that Russians and Ukrainians were "one people" and stated that Ukraine could achieve real sovereignty through a partnership with Russia (Putin, 2021). At the same time, he started to increase the deployment of Russian troops near Ukraine's border, and by December 2021, tens of thousands of Russian soldiers were stationed in the region (Fitzgerald & Davis, 2024). On December 17, 2021, Russia presented two draft treaties calling NATO to stop its expansion to the east and to withdraw its 2008 promise that Ukraine and Georgia could one day join the alliance. NATO rejected Russia's request for a legally binding promise and called Russia to withdraw its troops from the Ukrainian border (Richter, 2022, p. 1).

On February 24, 2022, Putin announced on Russian state television that Russian forces would conduct a "special military operation" in Ukraine. He justified this decision by stating that "the purpose of this operation is to protect people who, for eight years now, have been facing humiliation and genocide perpetrated by the Kiev regime" (Putin, 2022). In response, Ukrainian President Zelenskyy declared martial law and closed Ukraine's airspace.

Meanwhile, efforts to pass a resolution in the UN Security Council condemning Russia's actions in Ukraine were unsuccessful, as Russia has repeatedly used its veto power to block it. On February 28, Moscow launched rocket attacks on Ukraine's second largest city Kharkiv and began an intensified assault on the capital, Kyiv. At the same time, Ukraine formally applied for its membership of the EU and called Western nations to establish a "no-fly" zone over Ukraine (Walker, 2024, p. 5). The latter was rejected by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, stating that a no-fly zone would escalate the conflict even more (Bayer, 2022). On October 2022, Russian President Putin signed laws to formally annex four Ukrainian regions Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia. According to Mälksoo (2023, pp. 471-475), Russia's invasion of Ukraine is characterized by various elements. It represents an aggressive war with the aim of expanding Russian territory, it is especially interested in re-establishing control over those territories it regards as "historically Russian" and it has demonstrated commitment to its goals. it also reflects Russia's desire to reclaim its status as a great power, and most importantly, it is an imperial war where Russia refuses to recognize Ukraine's right to exist as a sovereign state, clashing with the modern principles of independence and territorial integrity. In other words, the war highlights a direct opposition between Ukraine's quest for autonomy and Russia's imperial ambitions. Kremlin has even adjusted its nuclear doctrine to lower the threshold for using nuclear weapons. The updated policy indicates that Russia no longer requires a nuclear attack to justify a nuclear response, instead, it may consider deploying nuclear weapons if it considers its sovereignty and territorial integrity is threatened (Faulconbridge & Kolodyazhnyy, 2024)

The international community responded swiftly. On March 11, 2022, during the Versailles Summit, the leaders of the EU countries, together with the President of the European Council and the President of the European Commission, discussed the war in Ukraine and its impacts on the EU's sovereignty. The declaration document condemned "Russia's unprovoked and unjustified military aggression against Ukraine", and further emphasized that "Russia, and its accomplice Belarus, bear full responsibility for this war of aggression and those responsible will be held to account for their crimes" (European Council, 2022, p. 1). Additionally, it supported Ukraine's application for EU membership, agreed to reduce the EU's reliance on Russian gas, oil, and coal, and reaffirmed its commitment to provide political, financial, material and humanitarian aid to Ukraine, with the statement "we will not leave them alone" (European Council, 2022, pp. 2-5). Few days later, on March 16, the International Court of

Justice issued an order calling Russia to stop its invasion of Ukraine and early in April, Russia was suspended from human rights Council of the United Nations (Walker, 2024, p. 6).

By November 2023, the situation had largely stabilized on the battle line and Russia was strengthening its positions in the city of Bakhmut, which it captured in May 2023. By November 2024, approximately 18% of Ukrainian territory was under Russian control. In that month, Russian troops made some of their largest territorial gains since the start of the invasion in 2022. Earlier in 2024, Russia launched a major offensive and by February it had captured the city of Avdiivka in Donetsk. By September, Russian forces had made further progress in Donetsk, and while Ukraine had some small successes, such as in northern Kharkiv and Luhansk, Russia's territorial gains continued throughout the year. By the end of 2024, Russia had seized most of the land in Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia (Gargan, Gutiérrez, & Kirk, 2024).

3.3.1 The EU's response to 2022 crisis

On 21 February 2022, Russia passed a bill to officially recognize Ukraine's two breakaway regions, Donetsk and Luhansk ,as independent states. On 22 February, the EU had already implemented the first package of restrictive measures, which included targeted sanctions against members of the Russian State Duma and certain individuals, restrictions on Russia's access to the EU's financial markets, and economic restrictions with Donetsk and Luhansk (Council of the European Union, 2022, pp. 110-112). The next day, European Council held a special summit where they agreed on additional sanctions, which would "impose massive and severe consequences on Russia for its actions" (European Council, 2022, pp. 1-2). On February 25, the EU implemented a second package of sanctions, which included freezing assets of President Putin, Foreign Minister Lavrov, as well as other high-ranking officials. The Council also agreed on additional sanctions that would cover energy, transport, technology, finance and visa policies. The HR/VP Josep Borrell, accused Moscow for starting a war against a sovereign and independent neighbouring country and expressed the commitment of the EU to take strong actions to protect the international law and the rules-based system (Council of the European Union, 2022). On February 27, the President of the European Union Charles Michel addressed to the Ukrainian people. In his speech, the President refers to Russia's invasion of Ukraine as a "brutal, savage war, based on despicable lies", he also emphasized that the attack on Ukraine was also an attack on Europe's freedom and democracy, which created a moral and political obligation for the EU to respond to this crisis. "We stand by you not just with words, but with

concrete and immediate action[…].Guns, ammunition, rockets and fuel are on their way to your troops" (Michel, 2022, para. 4).

In the following months, the EU continued to respond with Further sanctions and military support. In November 2022, the Council launched the EU Military Assistance Mission in support of Ukraine (EUMAM Ukraine) in order to strengthen Ukraine's ability to resist Russian aggression. EUMAM Ukraine was launched in response to Ukraine's request and reflects the EU's commitment to supporting Ukraine's sovereignty, territorial integrity and resilience.The mission aimed to provide training for up to 15.000 Ukrainian soldiers, and the EU approved 16 million euro under the European Peace Facility (EPF) for supplies such as military equipment, ammunition, transportation, maintenance services (Council of the European Union, 2022). In December 2022, the EU announced its decision not to recognize Russian passports issued in in the Georgian territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as well as in the Ukrainian territories of Crimea, Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia. These travel documents will not be accepted as valid for obtaining a visa or crossing external borders (European Parliament, 2022, p. 2)

As the war affected global food security, the EU implemented measures to ensure that its sanctions did not affect food or agricultural products. Moreover, EU member states were permitted to grant access to Russian aircraft for humanitarian purposes and to allow Russian ships to enter EU ports when transporting agricultural goods, such as fertilisers and wheat. These actions were intended to maintain the supply of essential goods and prevent further challenges to global food security (European Council, 2022, p. 3). Russia's use of energy as a tool of war and political pressure created significant challenges for global energy market. Its decision to cut off gas supplies to some EU countries caused a dramatic increase in gas prices. As a response, the European Commission introduced a plan "REPowerEU" to reduce the EU's reliance in Russian fossil fuels. The plan was launched in May 2022 and focuses on the following main goals: saving energy, diversifying energy supplies, and increasing the production of clean energy" (European Commission, 2022, p. 1). As a result of the EU's actions significant progress was achieved. By the end of 2022, gas prices started to stabilize, and by the end of 2023, the price of gas had decreased by nearly nine times compared to August 2022. Additionally, the EU successfully reduced its dependence on Russian gas imports. By 2024, Russian gas accounted for only 18% of the EU's total gas imports, a significant decrease from 45% before the crisis (European Commission, 2024, p. 2)

Since the start of the war, the EU has provided economic, humanitarian, and military assistance, with a total support exceeding 130 billion euro as of December 2024. On 1 March 2024, the EU launched Ukraine Facility initiative in order address Ukraine's urgent needs in recovery, reconstruction, and modernization. This initiative offers up to an additional 50 billion euro to Ukraine for the period of 2024-2027. From the total financial support, the EU has allocated 47,3 billion euro specifically for military assistance, including over 6 billion euros from the European Peace Facility (EPF). The EU has also activated the Temporary Protection Directive to provide urgent and effective assistance to the people fleeing the war in Ukraine (European Commission, 2024, p. 1). In order to prevent Russia from circumventing sanctions, the EU has expanded sanctioning criteria to target those who help Russia avoid sanctions. This includes targeting individuals or entities that assist Russia in hiding assets, falsifying trade details, and facilitating prohibited transactions.

Between February 23, 2022 and December 16, 2024, the European Union adopted a total of 15 packages of sanctions. These sanctions included bans on media outlets, SWIFT ban, import-export restrictions, prohibition of new investments in the Russian energy sector, ban on imports of crude oil and petroleum products, prohibition to buy or import Russian gold, suspension of visa facilitation agreement with Russia, ban on exports of drone engines, ban on investment in the mining sector, and many more (European Union, 2024). After adopting the 15th package of sanctions, it was announced that it was designed to weaken Russia's military capabilities. Moreover, The EU has also sanctioned Belarus, Iran and North Korea for their support for Russia in this war. The EU has sanctioned nearly 2400 Russian individuals and entities, which consist of travel bans and asset freezes. The EU has frozen approximately 24, 9 billion euro of private assets and 210 billion euro of assets from the Central Bank of Russia. Kaja Kallas, who became a HR/VP in December 2024, stated that the15th package of sanctions aims to "weaken Russia's war machine and those who are enabling this war" (Council of the European Union, 2024). She also stressed that Ukraine will ultimately succeed in this war and reaffirmed the EU's commitment to support Ukraine in every possible way.

3.3.2 Institutional tools and mechanisms available in 2022

It is often argued that the 2014 Ukraine crisis made the European Union recognize the need for policy revision, as it acknowledged that its existing tools and strategies were not sufficient to manage such crises (Ikani, 2018, p. 2). Thus, the purpose of the ENP review was to respond

more effectively to crises in the neighbourhood, foster stability, and strengthen the EU's capacity to manage security threats in general. However, while the ambitions of the policy were reformulated, the actual changes in terms of policy objectives, tools, or concrete strategies were minimal. Despite that, as the author argues, the 2014 Ukraine crisis can be considered as a critical juncture for the ENP as it exposed the need for a reform in the neighbourhood policy (Ikani, 2018, p. 8).

The High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini and Commissioner Johannes Hahn delivered a joint speech regarding the European Neighbourhood Policy Review. Mogherini remarked: "We need to review our policy, our way of working, our partnership with the countries of our region […]. In particular because as our region is in flames, both the East and South''. Hahn added:

> There has been a lot of changes in the neighbourhood in recent years. The ENP has not always been able to offer adequate responses to the changing aspirations of our partners. And therefore, the EU's own interests have not been fully served either (European Commission, 2015).

Russia is mentioned three times in the official ENP review document, first to highlight its increasingly assertive foreign policy, which resulted in the violation of Ukraine's sovereignty (European Commission, 2015, p. 2). Second, to suggest that when conditions permit, the EU might consider reframing its energy relationship with Russia (European Commission, 2015, p. 2). Third, it acknowledges the deterioration of EU-Russia relations due to Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and the destabilization of eastern Ukraine. However, it is emphasized that constructive cooperation on regional matters welcomed, if favourable conditions arise (European Commission, 2015, p. 19).

Seven months after the ENP review, in June 2016, the EU's Global Strategy document was presented to the European Council by the High Representative Federica Mogherini. The document provides a special framework for preventing conflicts, responding to crises, promoting peacebuilding and supporting human security. The document outlines: "we live in times of existential crisis, within and beyond the European Union. Our Union is under threat. Our European project, which has brought unprecedented peace, prosperity and democracy, is being questioned'' (European External Action Service, 2016, p. 7). The EUGS also highlights

how Russia's military actions in Ukraine destabilized the entire European Security framework. According to Juncos and Pomorska (2021, p. 560), the gap which once existed between EU member states in their attitudes towards Russia, started to narrow as EUGS showed a stronger, unified stance on recognizing Russia as a security threat to Europe (Juncos & Pomorska, 2021, p. 560). The document refers to the "integrated approach", which represents a more comprehensive understanding of crisis management, overcoming internal challenges, and using all the existing tools and resources. However, the question that has to be asked is whether this acknowledgment of challenges has actually led to improvements.

The document begins with Mogherini's foreword, where she emphasizes the need for a strong and united European Union to address both internal and external crises. She highlightes the EU's significant economic power, strong diplomatic network, and the leadership in the global trade and development cooperation. However, Mogherini also acknowledges that the EU has not yet fully realized its potential, and that citizens and international partners expect it to take responsibility as a global actor, particularly in the areas of security and foreign policy. Mogherini argues that labelling the EU solely as a "civilian power" is outdated and does not reflect the current reality as the EU actively conducts military and civilian missions to ensure security for both Europe and its partners, combining soft and hard power (European External Action Service, 2016, pp. 3-4).

Maurer (2021, p. 369) explains that the 2015 Review of European Neighbourhood Policy document and the 2016 EU Global Strategy marked a significant shift in the European Union's foreign policy priorities. According to the author, stabilizing its neighbours and ensuring security in Europe became the primary focus, moving beyond its previous idealistic goals. For instance, the EUGS 2016 document emphasizes that the European Union's security at home, depends on the peace outside its borders and identifies multilateral cooperation as a central component of its approach (European External Action Service, 2016, pp. 7-8). The document also highlights the importance of making full use of the Lisbon Treaty's potential and investing in security and defense, describing it as an "urgency" (European External Action Service, 2016, pp. 10-11).

"Principled pragmatism will guide our external action in the years ahead" (European External Action Service, 2016, p. 16) reflects the EU's goal to, on the one hand, ensure that its actions are value-driven, and on the other hand, base them on practical considerations. Moreover,

“resilience’’ is the most frequently used word in the official document. The European Union defines resilience as the “ability not only to withstand and cope with challenges but also to undergo transitions, in a sustainable, fair, and democratic manner’’ (European Commission, 2020, p. 2). Wagner and Anholt (2016, p. 415) explain that resilience is linked to the concept of normative power, as the EU’s commitment to its values within its borders increases its credibility and influence on the global stage, thereby strengthening its normative power. The authors also argue that the term resilience was more suitable for the EU’s foreign policy, rather than “stability”. The latter would mean distancing the EU from its normative power, as stability can also apply to dictatorships. Thus, resilience was the optimal choice, as it promotes stability while still aligning with the EU’s core values and normative commitments (Wagner & Anholt, 2016, p. 417).

The relationship with Russia is identified as a significant challenge. It is stated in EUGS that any improvement in these relations depends on Russia’s respect for international norms and principles. It also highlights that peace and stability in Europe are no longer guaranteed, as Russia has been systematically breaching international law – an action that will not be accepted or tolerated by the EU (European External Action Service, 2016, p. 33). The document also supports systemic change to better address internal and external challenges, stating that the EU is committed to an international order that is based on law and that “this commitment translates into an aspiration to transform rather than simply preserve the existing system’’ (European External Action Service, 2016, p. 39). One important acknowledgment in the EU Global Strategy is that soft power alone is no longer sufficient in today’s fragile global environment. A sectoral strategy is seen as necessary to set specific goals, responsibilities, and civil-military ambitions (European External Action Service, 2016, p. 44). Overall, the document focuses on comprehensive security, which includes, investing in intelligence, equipment and research, enhancing technological and digital resources, improving surveillance systems and strengthening military capabilities in the areas of land, air, sea and space.

The “Berlin Plus’’ agreement, signed on March 2003, established the framework for collaboration between NATO and the EU in crisis management. It allows NATO to support EU-led operations when NATO itself is not directly involved and it gives the EU access to NATO resources to prepare military operations. On July 8, 2016, during the NATO summit in Warsaw, the President of the European Council, the President of the European Commission and the NATO Secretary General signed a Joint Declaration, which focused on improving

cooperation between the EU and NATO. In December 2016, the Council issued conclusions to implement the Joint Declaration. The document outlined cooperation in seven key areas: countering hybrid threats, operational cooperation including maritime issues, cyber security and defence, defence capabilities, defence industry and research, coordinated exercises, defence and security capacity-building. It also mentioned the plan to establish a new initiative, The European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats (Hybrid CoE), which was officially launched in 2017 (Council of the European Union, 2016, pp. 5-10). This initiative became particularly important in response to Russia's growing use of hybrid tactics, which consists of weaponizing non-military means and combining them with military means as a form if warfare. In January 2023, the EU and NATO signed a joint declaration in Brussels, they condemned Russia's aggressive actions "in the strongest possible terms" and reaffirmed their support for Ukraine. in June 2024, the Council issued the EU-NATO Progress Report which highlighted the progress achieved between June 2023 and May 2024. In response to Russia's actions, the EU and NATO conducted regular exchanges and cross-briefings, continued consultations on defence matters, coordinated efforts to strengthen cyber capacity, and increased collaboration on crisis management exercises, extending their Plan for implementation of Parallel and Coordinated Exercises (PACE) (Council of the European Union, 2024, pp. 2-3).

Implementation Plan on Security and Defence was presented in November 2016 by the HR/VP Federica Mogherini and aimed to transform the goals of the security and defence of the EUGS into concrete actions and measurable outcomes. These actions focused on three key priorities: responding to external crises, building the capabilities of partner countries, and protecting the EU through external action (Council of the European Union, 2016, p. 3). Addressing these priorities are referred to as the "new level of ambition". The plan focuses on making the EU more active global actor, introducing concrete steps to implement this vision. The plan proposes the revision of the priorities of civilian missions to reflect the changing security environment. It calls for the adjustment of operational structures for civilian and military missions, strengthening intelligence and early warning systems, and optimization of rapid response tools, including the EU Battlegroups. Additionally, it recommends the consideration of more flexible and strong financial support systems that align with the security goals of the EU. It highlights that the CSDP includes both civilian and military missions to manage crises, which focus on strengthening the resilience of partner countries. CSDP initiatives address modern security challenges, such as the improvement of strategic communications to counter hybrid threats and

the main aim is to "enhance CSDP's responsiveness in all phases of the conflict cycle" (Council of the European Union, 2016, p. 9). The Plan also emphasizes the importance of making full use of the EU Treaty through Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), which in turn, should encourage EU member states to make stronger commitments to defence and security through capability development, cooperation on collaborative defence projects, the creation of multinational military teams (Council of the European Union, 2016, p. 29).

European Peace Facility, created on 22 March 2021, is a tool designed to strengthen the EU's ability to address challenges related to international security, prevent conflicts and maintain peace. It is funded by the contributions of member states and was set up with the budget of 5 billion euros for the period 2021-2027 to support military and defence-related actions as part of the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). On 28 February 2022, the EU approved 500 million euros in assistance to strengthen the Ukrainian armed forces under the European Peace Facility. This funding included various supplies and equipment, including lethal weapons, marking the first time the EU provided such support. On 23 March 2023 the EU announced an additional 500 million euros to support the Ukrainian armed forces, doubling to a total of 1 billion euros. On 13 April 2022, the Council announced tripling the initial budget to 1.5 billion euros. The EU continued to provide additional funding to the Ukrainian armed forces, and by 9 February 2023, after the adoption of the seventh tranche, the total funding had reached nearly 12 billion euros. On 20 March 2023, The Council announced a three-track plan to urgently supply Ukraine with artillery ammunition, either from already existing reserves or through collective purchase. On 28 November the Council approved additional funding to support the training the Ukrainian Armed Forces through EUMAM Ukraine and on 18 March 2024, the Council allocated additional 5 billion and created the Ukraine Assistance Fund (UAF), which aims continue providing training and both lethal and non-lethal military equipment (Council of the European Union, 2024).

3.4 Discussion: Institutional learning across three crises

This sub-chapter serves the purpose of discussing research findings. Firstly, I provide an overview of the comparability of these three cases, which establishes a rationale for my case selection. Subsequently, I will analyse the development of institutional learning throughout these conflicts and examine whether it answers my main research question.

It is often argued that the European Union's weak response to Russia's 2008 invasion of Georgia contributed to the subsequent conflicts in Ukraine in 2014 and again 2022 (David & L.D, 2024, p. 668; Wesslau, 2024, para. 24; Townsend, 2024, para.1). While it is not the aim of this thesis to attribute responsibility to the European Union, these claims highlight shared characteristics between these conflicts. From Russia's perspective, both Georgia and Ukraine share significant similarities, as they are considered part of its "sphere of privileged interests" and its "near abroad". The strategic importance of these countries results from their geographical proximity, historical connections, and geopolitical significance, with their Western orientation perceived as a threat to Russia's security. Similarly, Georgia and Ukraine are both of strategic importance to the EU, which has engaged with them through similar frameworks and initiatives. For instance, both countries are part of the EU's Eastern Partnership policy, and the EU simultaneously launched Association Agreement and granted visa liberalisation to them.

In order to justify my case selection and to show the comparability of these cases, it is also necessary to show similarities not just between the countries themselves, but the conflicts as well. Prior to all these conflicts, Russia criticized NATO expansion and did not really differentiate between NATO expansion and building stronger ties with the EU. Moscow's critique of NATO was a precursor for all these conflicts. The invasion of Georgia happened shortly after Bucharest Summit, when NATO membership promise towards Georgia and Ukraine crossed red lines for Russia. The 2014 crisis was preceded by Association Agreement negotiations where Russia saw it as eventually resulting in Ukraine's EU membership, also seen as NATO's indirect means of extending its influence. Moscow criticized the EU for not including Russia in these negotiations and not taking its interests into account. Russia was again, criticizing NATO prior to 2022 invasion of Ukraine, publishing a list of demands, which included rule out its expansion and taking back the promise towards Ukraine that it would eventually join NATO. In all these three crises we see Russia provoking ethnic divisions in both Georgia and Ukraine and its support to separatists. In all these three conflicts we see the building of military presence in the region before the invasion. Mass distribution of Russian passports in the breakaway regions is also similar pattern of behaviour, and then justifying the reason of its involvement to protect Russian citizens or Russian-speaking population from the governments of Georgia and Ukraine. In both Georgia and Ukraine, Russia has recognized their breakaway territories either as independent countries or as part of Russia itself. Moreover, in

all these three conflicts Russia rejected labelling its actions as a war, often calling it "peacekeeping" or "special military" operations and missions.

"The Union's action on the international scene shall be guided by the principles which have inspired its own creation, development and enlargement, and which it seeks to advance in the wider world"- it is stated in Article 21 of Title V of the Treaty on the European Union (TEU), which serves as the main guide for the EU's external actions (European Union, 2008, p. 28). Russia's actions in 2008, 2014 and 2022 shows a breach of international norms and principles. Moreover, Russia has a long-standing history of aggressive behaviour towards its neighbour countries and these conflicts, in turn, show similar patterns of war. When addressing similar crises in nature, at first glance, one can expect similar responses. However, it was only after the recent full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, when countries like Germany, which had previously shown different perspectives, started to recognize Russia as a security threat. As a result, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz delivered his famous "Zeitenwende" speech, calling Russia's invasion of Ukraine a turning point for European security (Meister, 2024, p. 6). The question that we have to ask here is, if these conflicts are so similar, why the turning point did not happen before?

while it is frequently argued in the academic literature that the EU overlooked or underreacted to previous crises in Georgia and Ukraine, it is important to differentiate between the absence of a response and the lack of strong response. The EU was actively involved in conflict resolution processes and its responses, although varying in strength, were present throughout all three crises. Moreover, it is also important to note that these conflicts did not occur simultaneously, nor did the EU always have the same capabilities. Over the years, between these crises, the EU experienced significant institutional developments, which influenced its conflict response capabilities. During the 2008 Russo-Georgian war, the EU's response was constrained by both lack of sufficient tools and lack of prior experience in directly confronting Russia during a conflict.

Colin Hay explains that there are two types of responses to a crisis: "conjunctural" and "structural". A conjunctural intervention focuses on solving problems within the existing system, without changing the system itself. A structural intervention, on the other hand, changes the system itself to adapt to the crisis. This could involve changing key institutions, policies, or the fundamental organizational structures. Crisis, in turn, is understood as "a

moment of decisive intervention in the process of institutional change'' (Hay, 1999, as cited in Ansell, 2021, p.144). Based on this argument, we can see that the EU's responses to the 2008 and 2014 crises, and in particular its response towards Russia, were conjunctural, meaning that the EU was relying on pre-existing tools and mechanisms. However, in the context of the 2022 conflict, we observe a structural response, a change in the system. This change became evident following the publication of 2016 EUGS document, which explicitly stated that the existing system could not be preserved and that systemic change was necessary (European External Action Service, 2016, p. 39). However, it should be noted that the EUGS should not be considered as a turning point itself. I claim that the reasons behind systemic change were external shocks, as further demonstrated by the EUGS, explicitly stating that change was necessary due to growing external threats and crises (European External Action Service, 2016, pp. 7-10).

The Lisbon Treaty can be considered as a foundation for institutional change, although it does not emphasize the need for systemic change due to external threats and crises, the adoption of the Treaty made further important changes possible. The actual process of learning, as I argue, started after the 2014 Ukraine crisis and became evident after the 2016 EU Global Strategy. The link between crisis and institutional change can be better understood by examining two types of conditions: "permissive'' and "productive'' conditions. While a crisis might create the opportunity to change (permissive), conditions that actually push for a particular change (productive) may not always be present. In other words, a crisis can make change possible, but it does not guarantee the presence of the right conditions for specific changes (Soifer, 2012, as cited in Ansell, 2021, p. 145). The 2014 Ukraine crisis created a permissive condition, an opportunity for change within the European Union. However, it also became clear that the EU was not fully prepared to respond effectively. While the Lisbon Treaty introduced special frameworks for strong coordination and action, applying them into practice was a gradual process that required more time. Institutional learning cannot be achieved in a short period of time. The EU needed time to implement the treaty's provisions, align member states and build the capacity to respond appropriately. The Lisbon Treaty clearly defined the roles of institutions involved in conflict management. In comparison to previous lack of defined competences, the treaty categorized the Union's powers as: exclusive, shared and supportive responsibilities. It also formalized the European Council's role and combined the functions of the High Representative for CFSP with that of a Vice-President of the Commission as well as with the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) (Duke, 2008, p. 13). One of the main achievements

of the Lisbon treaty is the creation of EEAS with the aim to institutionalize foreign policy collaboration by combining the staff from different institutions. The effectiveness of EEAS became evident especially after the 2022 Russia's invasion of Ukraine, when it systematically worked with the European Commission to propose further sanctions against Russia.

It should also be pointed out that developing new frameworks, policies and statements about change, alone, does not have much to say about institutional learning. While it is important to have specialized procedures or methods for institutional learning, their true value lies in actively applying those lessons in improving the planning of future actions. In other words, the capacity of learning is not measured by identifying past mistakes, evaluating past outcomes, and proposing what needs to be changed, the capacity of learning means converting these lessons into real action. The joint communication for the EU's comprehensive approach to external conflicts and crises states that one of the key actions is to "take stock of lessons learned, including within the EU institutions, with Member States and external actors, and feed them back into the comprehensive approach cycle starting from early warning and including prevention efforts, training and exercises" (European Commission and HRVP, 2013, p. 9). Thus, in order to prove that learning happened, it is important to show the difference in the outcome.

the European Union demonstrated unity, determination and swift response towards the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. It started to impose sanctions even before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, as a response to Russia's recognition of the non-government-controlled areas of Donetsk and Luhansk. After that, it continued imposing multiple packages of sanctions targeting not only individuals, but also financial, energy, transport and other sectors. This evidence highlights the EU's goal to directly confront and weaken Russia's economic, military, and industrial capabilities, which is also often announced in the official statements and conclusion documents. Moreover, the EU's decision to significantly reduce its reliance on Russian gas and oil, shows a strong commitment to normative rules and principles, in comparison to 2014, when natural gas imports were excluded from sanctions due to the EU's heavy reliance on Russian supplies. The EU showed that it prioritized international norms over economic interests, in comparison to 2008 and 2014 where it constantly highlighted the significance of EU-Russia economic relations.

As for the normative power, although it is evident that the EU previously demonstrated less commitment to normative principles, as the majority of EU countries were not ready to give up their pragmatic, economic, and interest-based relationships with Russia (Seibel, 2017, pp. 271-275), it is not the aim of this thesis to argue the absence or presence of normative power during these three crises. As I mentioned before, institutional learning is more than new initiatives and policies. Similarly, normative power is not only statements about norms and values, normative power is being able to act in line with these principles. However, the ability to show normativity, can also be related to capabilities (Wagner & Anholt, 2016, pp. 415-417).

Rieker and Blockmans refer to the theory of Christopher Hill, who first introduced the concept of the "capability-expectations gap" in 1993. It describes a gap between the EU's ability to act (its resources, capacity, and agreement on common policies) and the expectations that are placed on the EU. The authors argue that in order to fully understand the EU's ability to manage crises, it is important to look at two additional gaps: The "intentions-implementations gap", which refers to a difference between the intentions of the EU when it formulates foreign policy and the implementation of that policy in practice; And the "implementation-reception/perceptions gap", which refers to how the EU is perceived in the countries where the crisis management tools are applied (Rieker & Blockmans, 2021, as cited in Riddervold et al., 2021, p. 549). I argue that European Union's constant emphasis on international norms, principles, and values, and the previously prioritized strategic interests on the other hand, can be related to the above-mentioned "intentions-implementations gap". It is less likely for the organization to conduct normative external policies and act according to the "logic of appropriateness" (March & Olsen, 2004, p. 3) if it does not possess sufficient capacities to bear the consequences, which, in turn, does not necessarily rule out the European Union's goal to promote its values and act according to them. However, this gap has gradually narrowed over the past years, largely due to the EU's responses to various crises, including those in Georgia and Ukraine.

The European Union demonstrated a lack of comprehensive strategy and lack of unity in responding to Russia during the 2008 and 2014 crises. This can be understood through the concept of path-dependence, which suggests that earlier patterns of decisions within an institution create conditions that limit future choices and make changes more difficult to achieve. Streeck and Thelen (2005, p. 6) note that traditionally, the analysis of institutions focused on the idea that institutions are static entities, shaped by past events and resistant to

significant changes. The authors criticize the narrow focus on institutional change as a response to external shocks. They argue that change is not limited to external triggers; it can also occur gradually through internal changes (endogenously) (Streeck & Thelen, 2005, p. 8). I argue that these perspectives are not necessarily contradictory, as external shocks can be the triggering factor for that slow, gradual internal change.

Conclusion

The objective of this thesis was to examine the logic behind the EU's different responses to Russia's similar behaviour in its neighbourhood. The thesis aimed to answer the research question: *Why does the EU respond differently to Russia's similar behaviour in terms of invading neighbouring countries?* In order to do so, this study analysed three similar conflicts in the region, the 2008 Russo-Georgian war, the 2014 Russo-Ukrainian war and the 2022 Russo-Ukrainian war. It is important to note that similar conflicts do not necessarily mean similar in every aspect but in a way that the methodological comparability is justified. As one of the methods used in the thesis is the Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD), the logic was to compare cases that are as similar as possible and mainly differ in their outcome, which in this case is the response of the EU. The key theoretical expectation was that the reason behind the EU's different response can be explained by institutional learning. This study does not consider institutional learning to be a binary concept which can be reduced to being present or absent. Rather, it can be understood as a gradual process, where the extent of learning evolves over time due to previous experiences. The thesis combined the MSSD and process tracing methods in order to strengthen the analysis and findings. These methods together provided a complete framework for answering my research question. The MSSD method was used to highlight the similarities and differences between these conflicts and justify my case selection. Additionally, in order complement my study, process tracing was applied to trace the causal mechanisms in a deep and comprehensive way.

If we look at these conflicts as being similar in nature, we should expect similar responses from the EU. However, when different decisions and priorities are observed, it questions the relevance of this logic. The thesis aimed to explain this contradictory pattern of behaviour by examining changes in EU's capabilities, tools, frameworks, and regulations, which are the elements of institutional learning. However, institutional learning means not only abstract policy developments, but also putting those policies in practice. The first chapter reviewed

general concepts related to foreign and security policy, particularly focusing on the EU's approach and strategies towards crises. It also analysed the concept of institutional learning, which is the main focus of the research and according to which, organizations learn from either past experiences or comparable situations of historical events. Additionally, it analysed the concept of normative power, which is considered to be an integral part of the EU's foreign policy. The thesis does not aim to contribute to the debate on whether the EU represents a normative power or not. However, it acknowledges that the EU's commitment to its principles and values varied over time, especially when pragmatic and economic relationships with Russia were prioritized during the lack of institutional capabilities. This study briefly suggests that the concept of "capability-expectations" gap can provide a potential explanation on why the EU's actions may not always align with its normative values.

The thesis further demonstrated that when dealing with crises, the EU was often characterized by relying on existing tools. However, while the EU's response to the Georgian crisis was limited by both a lack of prior experience and insufficient tools, its approach to Ukraine in 2014 should not necessarily be seen as unsuccessful merely because it applied similar crisis management tools. The thesis demonstrated that institutional learning answers my main research question and provides a valid explanation for the EU's different responses towards similar crises in the neighbourhood. Institutional learning, in turn, is a result of a gradual evolution of the EU's crisis response mechanisms. It also argued external shocks, as well as internal developments, as potential explanations of institutional learning, do not necessarily show contradiction. Moreover, external shocks can be the triggering factors of internal process of change. It should be pointed out that this thesis does not aim to make generalizable conclusions, which means that it does not claim or guarantee that, if other similar conflicts happen in the future, the EU will answer strongly because it has already 'learned'. Rather, it aims to show that in terms of these three crises, the difference in response can be explained by institutional learning, specifically, with the EU's engagement in a policy relevant learning, aligning its institutional frameworks with its stated ambitions and values. additionally, institutional change does not always lead to immediate change. Instead, sometimes there might be a little or no change in the beginning of the process.

The 2009 Lisbon Treaty had an important role in the EU's foreign policy development. Prior to the Treaty, the EU's external role and action were often fragmented, as the roles of different EU institutions were not clearly defined. The Lisbon Treaty established clear responsibilities

within the EU's institutions. One of the main creations of the Lisbon Treaty is the establishment of the EEAS, which is very actively involved in implementing the EU's policies and responses towards the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war. This study argued that, as the institutional learning is a slow and gradual process, its presence became explicitly evident after the publication of the EUGS 2016 document. The document highlighted the need for systemic change in order to become effective in terms of responding crises. It acknowledged that existing frameworks and tools could no longer remain the same and outlined the importance of adapting to new geopolitical realities. These new geopolitical realities involved all types of crises and challenges that the EU could have faced.

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