

# **Was the annexation of Crimea inevitable? An appraisal of Ukraine's strategic interactions with EU and Russia in February-March 2014**

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**Paper Presented at the 2021 ASN World Convention, 5-8 May 2021**

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## **Abstract**

What shapes a country's foreign policy formation in hard times? This paper explores factors, which drove the response of Ukrainian policy makers in their interactions with Russia and European Union during the annexation of Crimea between 21<sup>st</sup> February and 26<sup>th</sup> March 2014. Although scholars tend to put responsibility for the annexation either on Russia's aggression or EU's flawed neighbourhood policy, the article argues that analysis of Ukraine's strategic foreign policy could reveal issues, which facilitated the annexation. This research is influenced by game theory and employs key elements from this literature for its theoretical framework. Thus, the analysis of Ukraine's decision-making process is divided into four parts – information about other actors' preferences, trust in interlocutors, everyone's payoffs and resources of the different actors involved. This paper employs a rigorous qualitative content analysis of 28 interviews and a number of primary government documents. Media reports are used to triangulate the information found in interview and documentary data. The core finding suggests that the uncertain times and unpreparedness of Ukrainian decision-makers obstructed them from a comprehensive analysis of the environment and formation of the country's successful foreign policy strategy, which, consequently, facilitated Russia's annexation of Crimea.

Key words: annexation of Crimea, EU-Ukraine-Russia relations, foreign policy, game theory

## **Introduction**

What shapes a country's foreign policy in times of crisis? And what determines the policy's success? Whilst Realist tradition of IR inclines to a belief that global politics is determined by powerful players, Liberal and Structuralist ones find that international norms and interdependencies are able to regulate this world. Hence, when disagreement among major powers and/or flaws in the implementation of international laws bring about conflicts, weaker states may still be able to navigate their foreign policy towards positive (to them) outcomes. This paper tackles this broader puzzle of foreign policy-making in times of conflict and specifically asks which factors shaped Ukraine's foreign policy formation towards the EU and Russia during the annexation of Crimea (in February-March 2014). Scholars have articulated Russia's decision to annex Crimea as a spontaneous exploitation of a 'favourable' context to act unilaterally in the uncertain time aftermath of the deadly Euromaidan mass mobilization, which - provoked by the fleeing of then President Viktor Yanukovich – left a power vacuum and weak state apparatus. But, could Ukrainian decision-makers have navigated the country's foreign policy to a better for Ukraine outcome by acting (or reacting) to the events that unfolded differently? To answer this question, the paper relies on original data from 28 in-depth elite interviews with Ukrainian, Russian and EU's policy-makers (politicians, analysts, social activists and journalists), official documents (laws, international agreements, transcripts of meetings) and media outlets. The paper uses content analysis of interviews and documents to uncover the strategic decisions at play during the annexation of Crimea. Thus, theoretically the article borrows from game theory perspective and studies the influence of four factors on Ukrainian leaders' foreign policy decision-making: information about others preferences, trust in interlocutors, payoff structure (for all sides involved) and resources available and ready to be employed in this particular interaction. The core finding suggests that uncertainty and unpreparedness (for instance, due to post Euromaidan situation) and/or unwillingness on behalf of Ukrainian decision-makers obstructed them from developing a comprehensive analysis of the environment they were operating under, thus facilitating Russia's unilateralism.

The first part of this paper will provide a very brief overview of the general context of the annexation of Crimea between 21<sup>st</sup> February and 26<sup>th</sup> March 2014. The second will engage with the main scholarly literature that answers the question of what shaped Ukraine's foreign policy

during the events in Crimea and provides a theoretical framework against which interview material is analysed. The third part of the paper outlines briefly the data collection and analytical approach taken. The final part of the paper presents the discussion of my empirical findings. The conclusion summarizes the key arguments and elaborates on alternative courses of action for Ukrainian decision makers given the circumstances they operated under. Therefore, in my further discussion, I reveal peculiarities (and issues) in Ukrainian foreign policy during the annexation of Crimea, applying core elements of rational actors' analysis as suggested by game theory attitude.

## **Context Overview**

When on 21 November 2013 Ukraine's President Yanukovich stopped the preparations for the signature of the Association Agreement and DCFTA with the EU, which was planned during the Eastern Partnership Vilnius Summit on 28-29 November 2013, Euromaidan protests erupted in Kyiv and across all major cities in the country (Onuch 2014, 44). Both the EU and Russia helped moderate and oversee the negotiations and later signing of the agreement on the Settlement of the crisis in Ukraine between Yanukovich regime representatives and opposition leaders on 21<sup>st</sup> February ('The agreement on the Settlement of the crisis in Ukraine' 2014). However, the protesters on Kyiv streets refused to accept the conditions of the agreement<sup>1</sup> and threatened to attack, if Yanukovich did not leave his post as a president (*Korrespondent.net* 2014). The following night, Viktor Yanukovich fled Kyiv and later – Ukraine. Power was seized by the opposition leaders, which a Ukrainian social activist perceived as unconstitutional (Interview № 3. Chudovskiy 2020) and Russian journalists as a coup d'etat (Interview № 19. Unnamed. 2020; Interview № 28. Kolerov 2021), that was also confirmed by Vladimir Putin at his press-conference on 4th March (Putin 2014). On the night of 22<sup>nd</sup>-23<sup>rd</sup> February, Putin discussed the situation in Ukraine with security forces and in the morning, decided to start the operation of annexation (or “return” according to the Russia's viewpoint) of Crimea (Interview № 17. Ponomarev 2020; Kondrashov 2015).

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<sup>1</sup> Among others, the Agreement stated that “Presidential elections will be held as soon as the new Constitution is adopted, but no later than December 2014.” ('The agreement on the Settlement of the crisis in Ukraine' 2014). This was considered as a betrayal by the protesters, while they did not want to tolerate Yanukovich as a president for another year.

If we turn to the situation in Crimea, on 23<sup>rd</sup> February 20-thousand pro-Russian protests in Sevastopol elected Chalyi (a Russian citizen) a new mayor of the city and refused further payment of taxes to Kyiv (*News.Ru.Ua* 2014). On the night of 26<sup>th</sup>-27<sup>th</sup> February, Crimean Parliament was taken over by unmarked armed men, who also put a Russian flag on the building (*Reuters* 2014; *Tyzhden'* 2014b). The next day, deputies of the parliament gathered in the occupied building and voted for a referendum on the status of the peninsula to be held on 25<sup>th</sup> May (*Tyzhden'* 2014a; *Reuters* 2014). Already on 28<sup>th</sup> February, Russian forces took over airfields in Crimea (*Unian* 2014). On 6<sup>th</sup> March, the date of the referendum was changed to 16<sup>th</sup> March and the question's answer included an option of joining Russia (*Ukrain'ska Pravda* 2014). On 11<sup>th</sup> March, the Crimean Parliament declared independence of the Peninsula (State Council of the Republic of Crimea 2014). On 16<sup>th</sup> March, the referendum was held and on 18<sup>th</sup> March Russia included Crimea into its territory (President of Russia 2014). Russia took over most Ukrainian military bases in Crimea during 19<sup>th</sup>-26<sup>th</sup> March (Kofman et al. 2017, 11). Thus, my further discussion mostly touches upon the period between 22<sup>nd</sup> February and 26<sup>th</sup> March 2014.

## **Framing the Analysis I: Ukrainian Foreign Relations in IR Scholarship**

How do scholars from different IR traditions explain the events of Crimean annexation described above? The broad majority of scholarly work on how and why annexation of Crimea happened either blame the West for misunderstanding of Russia's geopolitical interests in Ukraine (Charap and Colton 2017; Mearsheimer 2014; Sakwa 2015a; Tsygankov 2015) or Russia for breaking international law (Averre and Wolczuk 2016; Dragneva-Lewers and Wolczuk 2015; Gehring, Urbanski, and Oberthür 2017). Thus, Ukraine is often seen more as an object in the geopolitical battles between major powers. However, in this article Ukraine is given subjectivity and it is argued that the country's actions could have overturned the situation by avoiding an all-out confrontation with Russia. In doing so it incorporates concepts from game theory – information, trust, payoffs and resources – to explain the strategic decision-making process of Ukrainian leaders in the country's relations with EU and Russia during the annexation of Crimea.

Scholars who analyse the conflict in Ukraine through a realist lens, whereby states are understood to compete for power and spheres of influence, see the conflict as deriving from the

EU's incursion into Russia's traditional 'near abroad' (Mearsheimer 2014) and misunderstanding of Russia's interests, which, in their eyes, pushed Russia to protect its security (Charap and Colton 2017; Kissinger 2014; Mearsheimer 2014; Sakwa 2015b). Such a misunderstanding of key players' preferences is also relevant to my approach as a contributing factor to the conflict. On the other hand, scholars who looked at the conflict from the Liberal perspective, emphasising the nature of free interactions between states, consider Russian annexation of Crimea to be outside of the boundaries of international law (Allison 2014; Averre and Wolczuk 2016), which consequently damaged the security of the European continent (Gehring, Urbanski, and Oberthür 2017; Haukkala 2016). Others argued that Russia was "exploiting areas of uncertainty in international law" to justify its actions in Ukraine (Allison 2014) or studied Russia's self-justification of the 'legality' of this annexation (Dubinsky and Rutland 2019). Some pointed out the underestimation of Russian interests in Ukraine (Dragneva and Wolczuk 2014; Haukkala 2016; Pastore 2014), or the EU's own inconsistencies and lack of clarity of its foreign policy objectives in the 'wider' Eastern Europe (Averre and Wolczuk 2016; Dragneva and Wolczuk 2014a; Dragneva-Lewers and Wolczuk 2015; Haukkala 2016, 2018; Maass 2019). Underscoring these interpretations is the diversity through which key actors of the conflict viewed their own (and each others') preferences and interests. This is also a key element of the discussion that follows in this article.

## **Framing the analysis II: Applying game theoretic concepts**

Whilst building on existing literature, I pledge greater attention to how in different contexts, different actors with various capacities and/or tools at their disposal ultimately make different strategic calculi. To better engage with these discrepancies, I borrow from the toolbox of game theoretic perspectives to explain Ukraine's decision-making in times of crisis. Game theory has been widely applied in understanding of conflicts around the world (Brams 1985; Gates and Humes 1997; Moore 1995; Prosch 2007; Snidal 1985; Snyder 1971). The best known example is the usage of rational choice perspective as one of the explanation of the Cuban missile crisis (G. Allison 1971). Others have also argued for the explanatory power of rational choice and game theory perspectives in understanding of relations between countries in times of conflicts (Bennett 1995; Snidal 1985; Snyder 1971). According to Brams (1985, XI), "games in game theory - whether serious or frivolous - are situations of interdependent decision making in which outcomes depend on the choices all players make". Somewhat surprisingly game theoretic approaches have

not been consistently applied to the study of the conflict in Ukraine (but see Ericson and Zeager 2015). This article aims to fill some of this gap by applying concepts prevalent in game theory approach to analysis of Ukraine's foreign policy-making during the annexation of Crimea.

The key focus of my analysis is not to theorise annexation of Crimea as a 'game', but instead utilise four key game theoretic concepts to analyse the decisions of Ukrainian policy makers: 'information', 'trust', 'payoffs' and 'resources'. Scholars suggest that for making decisions about relations with other states, officials require to have information about the preferences of all actors involved in a given international interaction (Bennett 1995; Khumalo and Baloyi 2018; Michel 2013; Milner 1997; Snidal 1985; Thompson 1995). Additionally, scholars argue that crisis-decisions are mostly made by a small group of leaders, whose interests can differ from the national ones (De Mesquita 2006, 638). For this reason, the examination of the 'leadership factor' forms an important parameter for the analysis of any conflict (Kydd 2000, 352; Morrow 1986, 1133; Nye 2005). Otherwise, lack of understanding of the other state's internal power dynamics may bring miscalculations of its preferences on the international arena (Pahre and Papayoanou 1997; Snyder and Diesing 1977), while states' leaders need "to play simultaneous games at two separate tables" (Bennett 1995, 38). This way, correct information about a country's preferences, its leader's interests and domestic situation determines the success of diplomacy (Fearon 1995; Putnam 1988). Therefore, I examine what was the type and quality of information available to Ukrainian policy-makers regarding the preferences of their interlocutors during the annexation of Crimea.

Otherwise, scholars show that it is not primarily the conflicting preferences, which lead to conflicting behaviour, but most probably uncertainty due to lack of knowledge and mistrust in opponent's real intentions (Devetak, George, and Percy 2017; Fearon 1995, 401; Lieberman 1964, 272; Michel 2013, 884). Otherwise, scholars argue that countries do not reach cooperation due to mistaken estimation of "the other side's motives and intentions" (Fearon 1995, 401–2; Larson 1997, 703) or belief that its 'real' interests may stay hidden even after proper calculations (Müller 2004, 400). However, some scholars view a possibility of the concept of "trust" to include also force (or threats) (Hoffman 2002, 380), which others name "power" (Bachmann 2001, 350) or "fear" (Snyder 1971, 84). Although Larson (1997, 714) sees "good intentions" as part of trust, he admits that force may be a way of establishing commitment in international relations (Larson 1997, 710). Thus, in this research, I define trust as a belief in certain words, strategies, signals of

interlocutors (both positive and negative); prediction that they will behave the way it was anticipated. This brings me to the need to check to what extent was trust towards their EU and Russian interlocutors important in determining the strategy of Ukrainian decision-makers.

Whilst states rationally follow their own chosen goals, the game-theory analysis needs to reveal how states' preferences reflect in their payoffs (Snidal 1985, 40). Different perceptions due to information processing and states' bureaucracies may lead to misperceived payoffs during the decision-making (Bennett 1995, 30–31; Snidal 1985, 42). Snyder (1971, 80) showed how misperceptions of each other's payoffs bring actors to worse outcomes for both. The nature of the game (zero-sum, negative or positive-sum) and type of the game (e. g. chicken or prisoner's dilemma) has also its influence on payoffs distribution. Scholars show that actors may change conflicts from a chicken game to a prisoner's dilemma, when one party promotes its structure of payoffs (e. g. by threats and provocations) (Snyder 1971, 92). Wagner (2000) stresses that wars might develop not out of a mistake, but out of a well-thought deliberate decision with the aim to change payoffs of the game. Therefore, I aim to find out how Ukrainian authorities perceived their (and those of their interlocutors) payoffs.

Lastly, resources, which are available, and readiness to use them may determine countries' power in international relations (Clausewitz, Howard, and Paret 1976; Moravcsik 2010; Snyder 1971). When instead of trust a country uses power, in most cases it needs to secure it with available resources (Bachmann 2001), such as population, GDP and strength of an army (Hart 1976, 289). From the other side, Wagner (2000, 470) pointed out that “while technology determines what is possible, states choose what sorts of wars to fight within those constraints, and an understanding of the relation between fighting and bargaining helps explain those choices”. Scholars highlighted that countries are rarely ready to invest all of economic and military resources in a particular war, thus the outcome might depend not on the absolute comparison of adversaries' resources, but on the extent to which they engage in a war (Clausewitz, Howard, and Paret 1976; Moravcsik 2010; Snyder 1971). Consequently, I wonder what was Ukraine's awareness of its own and others' resources and readiness to use them during the annexation of Crimea.

## **Data Collection and Analytical Approach**

The main empirical source for this article is original data collected by the author via elite in-depth semi-structured interviews with Ukrainian, Russian and EU's policy-makers (politicians, diplomats, analysts and journalists) during the fieldwork in Kyiv and Brussels or via Zoom. Altogether 28 interviews were conducted, which are anonymized using Chatham House rules, if so requested, and are on the record where possible. People from a different political spectrum, with various backgrounds and opinions were chosen. Interview data were triangulated with the analysis of core policy documents (laws, statements of state organs), transcripts of meetings, speeches from all three sides and media reports. The content analysis was used to uncover the influence of information, trust, payoffs and resources on Ukraine's strategic foreign policy-making.

## **Findings/Discussion**

In the following discussion, I look at the four above identified dimensions of policy-making. I first analyse what information Ukrainian decision-makers had about other actors' preferences, then go towards their trust in others' actions. Next, I turn to an analysis of the payoffs' structure (Ukraine's, EU's and Russia's possible ways of action and their preferred options among them). Finally, I turn to an assessment of Ukrainian leaders' perceptions of what recourses were available to all three sides and their readiness to use them in Ukraine. In the conclusion, I analyse the place of these analytical tools in decision-making of Ukrainian authorities and contemplate which actions could be done differently to prevent the annexation of Crimea.

### **Information**

In line with the scholarly debate regarding information about others' preferences, my data analysis clearly demonstrates that such information and its procession was a central dimension in the capacity of actors to take strategic decisions during the annexation of Crimea. In particular, Ukrainian decision-makers might have missed Russia's preference - to keep control over Ukraine and the EU's one - to avoid a war in Ukraine at all costs. Scholars have argued that, after Yanukovich fled Ukraine, the West was celebrating its victory without paying attention to Russia, whose preferred option was the respect for 21<sup>st</sup> February agreement (Charap and Colton 2017, 126). Rutland (2015, 137) argued that Russia saw the break of the 21<sup>st</sup> February agreement as "the point of no return". The confirmations of this are 22<sup>nd</sup> February request of the Foreign Minister of Russia to France, Germany and Poland to put pressure on Ukraine to follow the agreement (Lavrov urged to implement the agreement of February 21 2014) and 7<sup>th</sup> March reiteration of commitment

to the agreement expressed by Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2014). Though Russia preferred this agreement to be respected (and keep Yanukovich Ukraine's president), it was followed by neither the West nor Ukraine. Former Deputy of Russian State Duma argued that Putin perceived this as "a rude scam from the West" (Interview № 17. Ponomarev 2020). In his interview for Russian 'documentary' about Crimea, Putin confirmed, that while he was organising Yanukovich's safe escape from Ukraine, he started to plan the return of Crimea on the night of 22<sup>nd</sup>-23<sup>rd</sup> February (Kondrashov 2015). Thus, although receiving signals from Russia, Ukrainian decision-makers (but also EU's ones) did not take its preference seriously.

Apart from respect for 21<sup>st</sup> February agreement, Russia's core preference was to keep influence on Ukraine's foreign policy. Realist scholars argued about the West's lack of understanding of Russia's preferences: preservation of its influence on post-Soviet space and thus the slowdown of NATO and EU enlargements (Kissinger 2014; Mearsheimer 2014; Sakwa 2015b). Ukrainian policy-makers also reported that Russia wanted to prevent Ukraine from integrating into NATO and EU (Interview № 3. Chudovskiy 2020; Interview № 5. Chubarov. 2020; Interview № 7. Unnamed. 2020) or even to have full control of Ukraine (Interview № 7. Unnamed. 2020; Interview № 9. Shulipa. 2020; Interview № 27. Lubinets 2020). However, according to a Russian expert, Russian leaders were accepting Ukraine's pro-EU direction as long as Ukrainian leaders were publicly supporting good relations with Russia (this could be easily "sold" to Russian citizens) (Interview № 26. Gretskiy 2020). Otherwise, a former member of the State Duma told me that "the way EU-Ukraine Agreement was constructed is seen in Moscow as a threat" (Interview № 17. Ponomarev 2020). An EU official recognised this and said that Russia saw DCFTA as "a geostrategic move", but at the same time that "Russia's position was clearly understood" (Interview № 12. Unnamed. 2020). If Russia's preference was understood, one may be surprised why EU and Ukraine reacted the way they did and did not prevent angering Russia. From one way of thinking, in accordance with one of the European ambassadors to Ukraine Yanukovich was "a bad negotiator" and "he could not simply carry the messages of the European Union to the Kremlin" (Interview № 14. Unnamed 2020). Otherwise, the EU Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy told me that although Russia's preference was clearly understood, EU policy-makers were unable to predict how far Russia was ready to go to achieve its ambition (Interview № 21. Füle 2020). This is in line with scholars' explanation of

wrong estimation of one's commitment to fight for a particular goal (Bennett 1995, 32–24; Fearon 1995, 393–94; Snyder 1971, 99–100). Therefore, while I observe some kind of understanding of Russia's main preferences by Ukrainian and EU policy-makers, there was no full awareness of Russia's commitment to them.

My empirical findings suggest, that Ukrainian decision-makers were receiving information concerning Russia's preferences and actions in Crimea, but there is no confirmation that this was taken into account by them. The former Ukrainian Chief of the General Staff, having information about Russia's movements in Crimea in January 2014, reported it to Yanukovich in January-February 2014 and to the post-Euromaidan decision-makers in the beginning of March (Tikhonova 2015). Moreover, Chief of the State Border Guard Service of Ukraine, confirmed that he was conveying regular updates on the situation in Crimea to the Ukrainian authorities (Interview № 10. Lytvyn. 2020). The same kind of information was conveyed to Kyiv by commanders of military units in Crimea (Interview № 11. Teteruk. 2020). However, no substantial actions were taken. On the other hand, my interviewee, who had access to senior Ukrainian decision-making echelons at that time, told me that state organs were often providing wrong information either on purpose or unintentionally (Interview № 7. Unnamed 2020). In fact, my informants noted that, some crucial state organs, like the Security Service of Ukraine and the Intelligence Office, were incapable to perform their tasks properly because many of their workers either left or were disorientated (Interview № 8. Burakovsky. 2020; Interview № 11. Teteruk. 2020). Moreover, Ukrainian decision-makers pointed out that countries of the EU were not eager to share up-to-date information about theirs and Russia's actions and capacities (Interview № 7. Unnamed 2020; National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine 2014). Thus, Ukrainian decision-makers not only lacked information, but were not in a possession of ability for its proper analysis. This, according to game theoretic assumptions, could be a valid obstacle for decision-making.

On the other hand, my empirical data show that Russia, in terms of its access to information, was well-equipped to carry its operation in Crimea. My informants argued that Russian intelligence had penetrated very well various Ukrainian services, which gave it accurate information about the thinking of Ukrainian policy makers (Interview № 1. Verygina. 2020; Interview № 6. Chyigoz 2020; Interview № 7. Unnamed 2020; Interview № 8. Burakovsky 2020; Interview № 9. Shulipa 2020). This is confirmed by other scholars' research (e.g. McDermott

2015) and was mentioned by senior Ukrainian officials during the meeting of the National Security and Defence Council on 28<sup>th</sup> February 2014 (National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine 2014). Moreover, Chief of Ukraine's Border Guard Service confirmed that in February-March 2014 the Russian Federation was monitoring the situation at Ukraine's border and was increasing its forces near its whole perimeter (Interview № 10. Lytvyn 2020). Therefore, I can deduce that Russia was examining the situation in Ukraine carefully, which, as predicted by game theoretic perspective, gave the country certain kind of supremacy during the crisis in Crimea.

Looking at Ukraine's own preferences, post-Euromaidan decision-makers in Ukraine settled pro-EU course of the country, but did not take into account preferences of EU and Russia in this respect. The new leaders viewed Euromaidan as a direct way to the EU, leaving Russia behind (Interview № 7. Unnamed 2020; Interview № 22. Semenchenko 2020). However, the EU preferred to cooperate with Ukraine and to preserve some kind of stability in the country (Interview № 2. Unnamed 2020; Interview № 12. Unnamed 2020; Interview № 21. Füle 2020; Council of the European Union 2014), but this preference was far less relevant for the EU (this is discussed in more detail below) than it was perceived in Ukraine. EU analyst and EU officials confirmed that the EU wanted to sign the Association Agreement with Ukraine, thus to have a stable partnership with the country (Interview № 2. Unnamed 2020; Interview № 12. Unnamed 2020; Interview № 13. Freudenstein 2020), but according to EU correspondent, the EU could not offer anything more (Interview № 20. Jozwiak 2020). Speaking of Russia, my findings show that the 21 February agreement was crucial for Russia and not following it was, if not a reason, then probably a pretext for Russian military actions in Ukraine. Though, Russia's core preference was to have influence on Ukraine's politics, which it made clear, but which was not taken seriously by either Ukraine or the EU. Judging Ukraine's analysis of information, an advisor to a senior decision-maker in Ukraine of that time pointed out that "in order not to take wrong decisions, often a decision was not to take any decisions at all" (Interview № 7. Unnamed 2020). Therefore, it can be argued that the new post-Euromaidan politicians inspired by revolutionary hopes were not prepared for such a difficult international chess game. Thus, for the whole picture analysis of other dimensions of the game theory decision-making is required.

## **Trust**

Apart from having information about others' preferences, the game theoretic assumptions require decision-makers to assess whether other actors' signals and strategies could be trusted. My empirical data suggest an important discovery - Ukrainian leaders did not trust Russia's threats, but trusted the EU's willingness to 'save' Ukraine. My interviewees (both analysts and decision-makers) stated that Ukrainian decision-makers had information about Russia's unusual and aggressive actions in Crimea in the end of 2013 and the beginning of 2014, but they could not believe that Russia would dare to annex Crimea (Interview № 3. Chudovskiy 2020; Interview № 5. Chubarov 2020; Interview № 7. Unnamed 2020; Interview № 8. Burakovsky 2020). Moreover, the commander of a volunteer battalion explained that in Crimea, Ukrainian soldiers could not shoot into Russians due to a "brotherhood nation" perception (Interview № 11. Teteruk 2020). On the other hand, my informants mentioned Ukraine's substantial trust in signatories of Budapest Memorandum – UK, US and Russia – readiness to guarantee territorial integrity of Ukraine (Interview № 1. Verygina 2020; Interview № 4. Ogrysko 2020; Interview № 7. Unnamed 2020; Interview № 8. Burakovsky 2020; Interview № 10. Lytvyn 2020). However, similar distrust in Russia's threats existed also among European politicians. The EU Ambassador to Russia pointed out, that although having warnings regarding possible Russian aggressive actions in Crimea from intelligence, researchers and interactions with Russians, the EU's leaders' common sense was: "No, that is impossible" (Interview № 23. Ušackas 2020). Thus, it appears from the above that Ukrainian policy-makers had high trust in Russia's respect for Ukraine's territorial integrity, which was coming both from a historical brotherhood myth and Russia's guarantees under the international agreements. Consequently, the existence of such previous beliefs might have influenced rational analysis and planning during the events in Crimea.

Whilst we know that Ukrainian policy-makers had too much trust in Russia, it is worth considering the nature of trust in EU-Ukraine relations. My data clearly shows that, Ukrainians had high hopes for EU's actions against Russian aggression (Interview № 3. Chudovskiy 2020; Interview № 5. Chubarov 2020; Interview № 6. Chyigoz 2020; Interview № 27. Lubinets 2020), which could be partially explained by people's misunderstanding of all EU's procedures in this respect (Interview № 5. Chubarov 2020; Interview № 12. Unnamed 2020; Interview № 20. Jozwiak 2020). Otherwise, a Ukrainian volunteer and a politician thinks that Ukrainian authorities were misleading the population by promising EU's support (Interview № 22. Semenchenko 2020).

On the other hand, EU's trust in Ukraine can be seen from different sides. Both EU analyst and a Ukrainian official supposed that EU was in some way distrusting Ukrainian decision-makers (their words and actions) (Interview № 7. Unnamed 2020; Interview № 13. Freudenstein. 2020). However, the EU officials acknowledged certain trust in words of their Ukrainian counterparts, although having doubts about their ability to deal with all the problems the country had (Interview № 2. Unnamed 2020; Interview № 12. Unnamed 2020; Interview № 25. Kowal 2020). In spite of this, the EU did not break all ties with Russia, searching for "a way to deal with Russia in these circumstances" (Interview № 12. Unnamed 2020) and thus having "a policy based on necessity" and not on trust (Interview № 20. Jozwiak 2020). Therefore, it could be that EU and Ukraine had different perceptions of their trust in each other. Ukrainian side perceived that EU had to support Ukraine more, whilst EU, although condemning Russia, did not enter open confrontations with it.

Now turning to Russia, we would expect it trusting certain policies of Ukraine (with such a good access to its inside information) and EU, but my findings clearly show that not only Putin rejected dealing with new Ukrainian decision-makers, but he also 'lived in his own world'. My Russian interviewees pointed out that Russian decision-makers did not trust the new leaders in Kyiv exactly because they broke the 21<sup>st</sup> February agreement with Yanukovich (Interview № 19. Unnamed. 2020; Interview № 16. Kozlovsky 2020). Moreover, this also diminished trust in European leaders' words, who were present during the signature (Interview № 17. Ponomarev 2020; Interview № 19. Unnamed 2020). My Russian respondents described Putin this way: "Putin lives in principle in a conspiracy world" (Interview № 17. Ponomarev 2020), "Putin thinks in 19<sup>th</sup> century categories" and "he adapts the world picture to his system of values" (Interview № 18. Dobrokhotov 2020). From yet another point of view, all of them highlighted that in Putin's view both Ukraine and EU were highly dependent on US in their policy-making (Interview № 16 Kozlovsky 2020; Interview № 17. Ponomarev 2020; Interview № 18. Dobrokhotov 2020; Interview № 19. Unnamed 2020). Moreover, with no trust in multinational organisations and EU in particular (Interview № 2. Unnamed 2020; Interview № 20. Jozwiak 2020; Interview № 28. Kolerov 2021), Putin preferred to discuss the situation in Ukraine with individual EU member-states or with the US (was perceived the main decision-maker) (Interview № 16 Kozlovsky 2020; Interview № 18 Dobrokhotov 2020). Thus, it turned out, that the discrepancy between Putin's own perceptions of the situation and opinions of other actors (Ukraine, EU and US) diminished Russia's

trust in all of them. Thus, it could be that lack of trust obstructed reaching agreement with Russia, as game theoretic scholars would predict (Axelrod 1985; Kydd 2000; Lieberman 1964).

The empirical findings of this research confirm scholarly arguments that in uncertain environment actors may use bluffing and threats (Bennett 1995, 20–21) to change opponents' perceptions and thus actions (Fearon 1995). Policy-makers both from EU and Ukraine confirm that during the Crimean annexation, Russia used bluffing strategies effectively (Interview № 2. Unnamed 2020; Interview № 6. Chyigoz 2020; Interview № 11. Teteruk 2020; Interview № 13. Freudenstein 2020), for example in denying its military presence in Crimea, which was popularly called "ih tam niet" (they are not there) (Interview № 4. Ogrysko 2020; Interview № 9. Shulipa 2020; Interview № 23. Ušackas 2020). The EU official recognized that such Russia's twisted actions made it harder for EU to react (Interview № 12. Unnamed 2020). Consequently, they also diminished the Union's trust towards Russia (Interview № 20. Jozwiak 2020; Interview № 21. Füle 2020; Interview № 23. Ušackas 2020). On the other hand, Ukraine's former Foreign Minister stressed that „Blackmail is one of the elements of Russian foreign policy and fear of this blackmail did not allow our Ukrainian leadership in 2014 to make very tough decisions to resist the aggression” (Interview № 4. Ogrysko 2020). Even more interesting are words of the former ambassador of one of the Baltic states to Ukraine that acting President Turchynov was ready to fly to Crimea when the dangerous situation was developing, but in a phone call from Russia he was threatened that if he did so, his plane would be shoot down, which made him avoiding that trip (Interview № 14. Unnamed. 2020). The Russia's threat (via telephone) to start a full-scale war against Ukraine was also confirmed by Turchynov on 28<sup>th</sup> February 2014 (National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine 2014). Thus, Russia managed to mislead both Ukraine and the EU, which could have also contributed to its success in Crimea.

It should be noted, that trust may take different forms in a prisoner's dilemma and a game of chicken: whilst for better outcome actors in a prisoner's dilemma need to trust cooperative intentions of their interlocutors, in a game of chicken an actor cooperates, if it trusts its opponents to defect (Bennett 1995, 24; Snyder 1971, 82–87). On the one hand, Ukrainian policy-makers might have seen a prisoner's dilemma game and thus trusted Russia not to annex Crimea. Otherwise, the case of Crimea may be viewed as a chicken game, where certain Ukrainian policy-makers trusted Russia's readiness to start a war for Crimea and thus no military effort was taken

in fear of an all-out conflict. The same might have been true for the EU – its policy-makers were afraid to provoke Russia and urged Ukrainian colleagues to do the same. On the other hand, it might also be that, like in Snyder's (1971, 91-92) example of the World War I, the parties viewed different games. If Ukraine and the EU thought that everybody was in a prisoner's dilemma and sought cooperation, Russia might actually have been in a chicken game, thus noticing Ukraine's and EU's weakness, it decided to annex Crimea (to get a better payoff following the rules of a chicken game). All in all, trust of Ukrainian decision-makers in their interlocutors' intentions was not always based on realistic estimations: the EU's intentions to help Ukraine were trusted, but Russia's threats mostly were not. On the other hand, further analysis on payoffs and resources will provide a better view on the whole decision-making process.

### **Payoffs**

Were Ukrainian leaders able to rightly comprehend the payoffs structure for Ukraine, EU and Russia in February-March 2014? The analysed data suggest that Ukrainian decision-makers' concentration on the country's preferred payoffs – closer ties with the EU and preservation of Crimea – obstructed their study of the core payoffs of Russia (Putin's aim to win domestic popularity and to prevent Ukraine's integration with the EU) and of the EU (to avoid a war over Crimea). After Euromaidan, Ukrainian decision-makers were advocating for faster integration with the EU (Interview № 5. Chubarov 2020; Interview № 7. Unnamed 2020; Interview № 24. Soboliev 2020). However, Russian correspondents and a Ukrainian official observed a certain division of Ukrainians (for instance, regarding foreign policy priorities) after Euromaidan (Interview № 10. Lytvyn 2020; Interview № 19. Unnamed 2020; Interview № 28. Kolerov 2021). When the occupation of part of Ukraine's territory became tangible, the country's most desirable payoff was to save its territorial integrity (Interview № 1. Verygina 2020; Interview № 2. Unnamed 2020; Interview № 4. Ogrysko 2020; Interview № 8. Burakovsky 2020; Interview № 21. Füle 2020). Therefore, though many Ukrainians had a clear desire for Ukraine's integration with the EU (as proved by Euromaidan), it was not a unanimous support and also such a possibility was never officially offered by the EU. Scholars have noticed that preferences of countries are not definitely based on objective reality due to, for example, perceptions of policy-makers (Snidal 1985, 42). Thus, perceptions of Ukrainian policy-makers regarding the country's payoffs were not based on realistic estimations. Below, it is shown how they viewed the ones of Russia.

Ukrainian decision-makers' experienced substantial difficulties in estimation of Russia's payoffs of this period. As previously mentioned, some interviewees assumed that the interest of Russia was to avoid further enlargement of NATO and EU, so it blocked Ukraine from coming closer to these organisations (Interview № 3. Chudovskiy 2020; Interview № 7. Unnamed 2020). One of the leaders of Crimean Tatars stated that Russia wanted to settle the score with EU and US (Interview № 6. Chyigoz 2020). In the newspaper "Krym. Realii", Russian analysts argued about Russia's (both Putin's and the society's) offense to the West (Medvedev 2015). The chairman of the Mejlis of the Crimean Tatar People and MP originally saw Russia's actions in Crimea aiming at making ultimatum to Kyiv regarding EU's integration, but later he understood that the actual goal was the annexation of Crimea (Interview № 5. Chubarov 2020). During the National Security and Defence Council of Ukraine meeting on 28<sup>th</sup> February 2014, the acting President of Ukraine stated that it appeared from various sources that Russia was really considering the possibility to annex Crimea (National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine 2014). Though, the Head of the Security Service of Ukraine said that Russia was waiting for Ukraine's actions so that to use them as a pretext for starting a full-scale war against Ukraine (National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine 2014). Therefore, I can observe that different political actors in Ukraine had diverse views on what was Russia's preferred payoff, which prevented them from a formation of a workable and consistent foreign policy in this respect<sup>2</sup>.

Apart of stopping Ukraine from integration with EU and NATO, there could be another reason for Russia's annexation of Crimea – domestic goals of President Putin. Russian and EU's analysts and politicians confirmed that Putin decided to annex Crimea with the aim to increase his popularity at home, which was decreasing after the protests in 2011-2012 (Interview № 9. Shulipa 2020; Interview № 13. Freudenstein 2020; Interview № 17. Ponomarev 2020; Interview № 26. Gretskiy 2020). Due to this, a former Baltic Ambassador in Ukraine assumed that Russia would annex Crimea even with the President Yanukovych in office (Interview № 14. Unnamed 2020). Scholars pointed out, that countries' leaders may use wars for staying in power, thus the analysis of their interests are important in strategic decision-making (De Mesquita 2006, 638; Kydd 2000,

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<sup>2</sup> During the mentioned meeting of National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine, the acting President Turchynov proposed introduction of a martial law, so that to protect Crimea, whilst other participants did not support this, fearing an all-out war with Russia, in which Ukraine would (according to them) be defeated (National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine 2014).

352; Nye 2005). It was visible that Russia's payoffs were concentrated on payoffs of the country's president, which was confirmed by a former deputy of Russian State Duma and an EU leading analyst (Interview № 13. Freudenstein 2020; Interview № 17. Ponomarev 2020). Therefore, for successful decision-making in relations with Russia it was relevant to analyse personal preferences of President Putin. However, my Ukrainian informants did not mention such kind of analysis.

Whilst Ukrainians thought the EU would protect Ukraine from Russia, EU's preferred payoff was to avoid a war at any cost. Many Ukrainian policy-makers perceived EU's obligation and interest in supporting Ukraine, whilst Euromaidan protests won under EU flags (Interview № 7. Unnamed 2020; Interview № 14. Unnamed 2020) and the international laws were broken in Crimea (Interview № 4. Ogrysko 2020; Interview № 5. Chubarov 2020). The EU official confirmed that EU understood Ukraine's preference for stronger world reaction, which could possibly change Russia's behaviour<sup>3</sup> (Interview № 12. Unnamed 2020). Consequently, limited EU's reaction might have influenced Russia's further actions:

Putin played very distinctly, you know, such a scheme, when he took one step, looked around, studied the situation, the reaction that took place for that step. It was not threatening for Putin, and he went on to the second, third step. (Interview № 5. Chubarov 2020).

Ukrainian decision-makers, who were in regular contact with the EU's officials, confirmed that their main request to Ukraine was not to take actions to protect Crimea, to avoid the bloodshed and to let the EU to deal with the situation (Interview № 4. Ogrysko 2020; Interview № 5. Chubarov 2020; Interview № 7. Unnamed 2020; Interview № 11. Teteruk 2020). This inaction of Ukrainian decision-makers made some to think that Crimea was surrounded by the ones in power (Interview № 3. Chudovskiy 2020; Interview № 4. Ogrysko 2020; Interview № 5. Chubarov 2020). Interestingly, but according to EU officials, EU did not see itself as a party of the conflict, but rather a partner in its mediation and a supporter for Ukraine (Interview № 2. Unnamed. EU official 2020; Interview № 12. Unnamed 2020; Interview № 21. Füle 2020). Additionally, an EU official confirmed that they wanted to preserve relations with both Ukraine and Russian and to avoid a war near the EU's borders (Interview № 12. Unnamed 2020). This shows a quite clear misperception

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<sup>3</sup> One of the Baltic ambassadors to Ukraine stated that the main goal of the Baltic countries was to avoid any country in the world recognizing Crimea to be part of Russia, so that Russia had the occupation, but not a legally recognized annexation (Interview № 14. Unnamed 2020).

of Ukrainian policy-makers, many of whom viewed the EU's obligation to restore legal justice over Crimea. Therefore, Ukrainian decision-makers over concentrated on Ukraine's desire to integrate with the EU and to keep an integral country and did not analyse both Russia's preferred payoffs (to stop Ukraine from integration with EU and to burst Putin's popularity at home) and the ones of EU (to have modest cooperation with Ukraine and to avoid a war). Further it will become clear, that these payoffs were confirmed by readiness of different actors to employ resources for their achievement.

### **Resources**

My empirical data confirm the game theoretic assumptions about the necessity to analyse resources (and readiness to use them) in decision-making process. Though, I have discovered lack of full awareness of self and others' resources of Ukrainian decision-makers during the annexation of Crimea. On 28<sup>th</sup> February 2014, Minister of Defence of Ukraine explained that in Crimea there was a maximum of 1.5-2 thousand Ukrainian soldiers and 20 thousand Russian ones (was increasing by Russia), thus Ukraine would not be able to protect itself against Russia in a full-scale war (National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine 2014). In accordance with the previous agreement the whole Russian Black Sea Fleet was stationing in Crimea (Ukraine, Russian Federation 1997), which was seen as a threat by Chief of Ukrainian Border Guard Service (Interview № 10. Lytvyn 2020). Whilst many interviewees pointed out into the importance of an army in this conflict (Interview № 1. Verygina 2020; Interview № 4. Ogrysko 2020; Interview № 6. Chyigoz 2020), others confessed that during the discussed events Ukrainian Army was almost absent (Interview № 8. Burakovsky 2020; Interview № 12. Unnamed 2020). Moreover, acts of betrayal and transition of Ukrainian Army, Security Services and politicians to Russia in Crimea were reported (Interview № 5. Chubarov 2020; Interview № 8. Burakovsky 2020; Interview № 23. Ušackas 2020; National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine 2014), which to some extent could be explained by lack of clear orders from Kyiv (Interview № 10. Lytvyn 2020; Interview № 19. Unnamed 2020). With poor stance of the Army, Ukraine could possibly rely on volunteers, who on later stages supported Ukrainian Army in Donbas (Interview № 5. Chubarov 2020; Interview № 7. Unnamed 2020; Interview № 13. Freudenstein 2020). My informants pointed out into the power of Ukrainian civil society after Euromaidan (Interview № 4. Ogrysko 2020; Interview № 5. Chubarov 2020; Interview № 13. Freudenstein 2020) and some even assumed that its better organisation could have prevented the annexation of Crimea (Interview № 9. Shulipa

2020). However, during the events in Crimea leaders in Kyiv did not think of a possibility to involve the volunteers. Additionally, some policy-makers mentioned, that Ukrainian decision-makers did not have enough “political will” to resist Russia, which was seen by some as a core factor to facilitate the annexation (Interview № 4. Ogrysko 2020; Interview № 5. Chubarov 2020; Interview № 22. Semenchenko 2020). Therefore, weak military resources and lack of political will of high officials might have contributed to the annexation of Crimea. The estimation of Russia’s and EU’s resources is discussed below.

There is no agreement among my interviewees about the adequacy of Russia’s resources to achieve its aims in Ukraine. Both scholars and decision-makers confirm that if Russia did “hold all the cards ... Ukraine would have collapsed by summer 2014” (Sherr 2017, 31) or even “by March 2014” (Interview № 7. Unnamed 2020). From another perspective, Russia achieved easily its goal regarding Crimea. According to the EU official, “If Ukrainian military was strong, would it prevent the annexation of Crimea? No! Military means of Russia are so much stronger. Russia is stronger than Ukraine and many EU countries.” (Interview № 2. Unnamed. 2020). However, according to yet another political expert, Russia only had bigger political will to combine its recourses for reaching its aims in Ukraine, whilst “Ukraine did not have such will, desire and ability” to unite against Russia (Interview № 9. Shulipa 2020). Some of my interviewees said that Ukrainian decision-makers understood the extent to which Russia was ready to apply its resources in Ukraine (Interview № 2. Unnamed 2020; Interview № 8. Burakovsky 2020; Interview № 26. Gretskiy 2020), others doubt the existence of full understanding (Interview № 3. Chudovskiy 2020; Interview № 9. Shulipa 2020; Interview № 14. Unnamed 2020; Interview № 28. Kolerov 2021). Thus, Russia might have had more military and decisiveness resources comparing to Ukrainian ones and this alignment was not fully grasped by Ukrainian leaders.

Moreover, another resource - the will of Crimean population - happened to help Russia as well. Scholars (Wood et al. 2015) and politicians (Interview № 6. Chyigoz 2020; Interview № 10. Lytvyn 2020) emphasized preliminary presence of Russia in Crimea, which was visible via its information policy, cultural, youth, but also political organisations. Crimean Tatar politicians pointed out that Ukrainian authorities did not pay proper attention to separatism issues in Crimea during all 23 years of independence (Interview № 5. Chubarov 2020; Interview № 6. Chyigoz 2020). In February-March 2014, Ukrainian decision-makers were aware of this situation and knew

that the population was pro-Russian (Interview № 10. Lytvyn 2020; National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine 2014). For instance, in February 2014, 41% of Crimeans wanted Ukraine to unite with Russia, with the average number in Ukraine being 12% (Kyiv International Institute of Sociology 2014). Russian film “Crimea. Way back home” argued that militia in Sevastopol started to form in October 2013 and on 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2014 Crimeans gathered on Lenin square<sup>4</sup> and consolidated to fight against the new power in Kyiv (Kondrashov 2015). An independent foreign journalist, who was following the studied events, pointed out that if there was a legitimate referendum in Crimea, it was probable that the majority would vote for joining Russia anyway (Interview № 15. Unnamed 2020). Therefore, years of flawed Ukrainian policy and Russian strategic actions on the peninsula culminated in substantial support of Crimeans for integration with Russia.

Apart from pro-Russian attitude of Crimeans, the new leaders in Kyiv might have deteriorated the situation further. Euromaidan movement was originally pro-EU, which was barely supported in Crimea, that both had Russian majority and Russian-controlled media and organisations. The victory of Euromaidan and ouster of President Yanukovich was portrayed in Crimean media as a coup d'etat, organised by far-right Ukrainians with active support from the West (Kondrashov 2015). Former Prosecutor General of Crimea, Natalia Poklonskaya, pointed out that the voice of Crimeans was completely ignored by the new leaders (Gordon 2020). After seizing power, the new leaders did not make a substantial effort to unite Ukraine, but were advocating for the cancellation of the language law, which allowed the usage of Russian as a regional language in Crimea<sup>5</sup>. This was seen by many as a fatal mistake, which helped Russia (Interview № 3. Chudovskiy 2020; Interview № 26. Gretskiy 2020; Interview № 27. Lubinets 2020). The above mentioned Russian ‘documentary’ film argued that Crimeans were scared that they would be forbidden to use the Russian language (Kondrashov 2015). Therefore, such alienation of Crimean population from the rest of Ukraine was strengthened by some steps of the

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<sup>4</sup> According to Ukrainian sources, there were 20 thousand people at this demonstration (*News.Ru.Ua* 2014). According to a Russian correspondent, there were 100 thousand people, so 1/5 of Sevastopol population (Interview № 19. Unnamed 2020).

<sup>5</sup> Only on 18<sup>th</sup> March (after the referendum on 16<sup>th</sup> March), Prime Minister of Ukraine recorded an appeal to Ukrainians, where he promised not to cancel the language law, to begin decentralization and to preserve good relations with Russia (Yatseniuk 2014).

new Ukrainian leaders and activation of Russia's actions in Crimea during and after the Euromaidan. Altogether these contributed to Russia's success in the annexation of the peninsula.

Somehow understanding poor stance of Ukraine's resources, Ukrainian politicians viewed European Union as the land of the last resort. On 28<sup>th</sup> February, senior Ukrainian officials decided to pursue the EU's help (National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine 2014), but the EU could not do more (Interview № 5. Chubarov 2020; Interview № 7. Unnamed 2020). On the other hand, some respondents assumed that such reliance on EU's support could be a fair justification of inaction of Ukrainian authorities in this situation (Interview № 22. Semenchenko 2020; Interview № 25. Kowal 2020). Moreover, my interviewees (policy-makers) emphasized that Ukraine could have used its diplomatic resource better, for example to use Budapest Memorandum as a platform of international solution of the conflict, when the first 'green men' appeared in Crimea (Interview № 1. Verygina 2020; Interview № 4. Ogrysko 2020; Interview № 7. Unnamed 2020). According to EU official, in the beginning the EU was trying to apply its "usual toolbox" and only some time later it developed new mechanisms (Interview № 12. Unnamed 2020). Moreover, a former EU Commissioner suggested that EU was strong in „good weather”, but its approach was limited „when it comes to the bad weather and the time of crisis” (Interview № 21. Füle 2020). Therefore, it might be that EU as “an atypical international organisation” (Interview № 12. Unnamed 2020) did not have mechanisms to use its resources to solve the crisis in Crimea. As confirmed by both EU (Interview № 12. Unnamed 2020; Interview № 14. Unnamed 2020) and Ukrainian decision-makers (Interview № 5. Chubarov 2020; Interview № 7. Unnamed 2020; Interview № 22. Semenchenko 2020), in the beginning Ukraine lacked awareness of the EU's ability to use its resources in Ukraine.

From yet another perspective, time as a resource plays important role in international relations and it was crucial during the events in Crimea between 22<sup>nd</sup> February and 26<sup>th</sup> March 2014. In Ukraine, the new post-Euromaidan decision-makers required time to take the rule, which was influencing their ability for quick reaction to the threats (Interview № 7. Unnamed 2020; Interview № 8. Burakovsky 2020; Interview № 10. Lytvyn 2020). Chief of Ukrainian Border Guard Services confirmed, that “with time lag and such a rapid change of circumstances, it was very difficult to make comprehensive and correct decisions” (Interview № 10. Lytvyn 2020). On the other hand, Ukrainian politicians pointed out into “prolonged in time and sometimes not timely

EU decisions” (Interview № 11. Teteruk 2020). This was recognized by an EU official: “it took us a while before we actually fully understood and started to react” (Interview № 12. Unnamed 2020). From its side, having only one decision-maker in Kremlin, Russia was able to make quick and efficient decisions (Interview № 13. Freudenstein 2020; Interview № 17. Ponomarev 2020; Interview № 20. Jozwiak 2020). This way, both Ukraine and EU were not ready to quickly react to spontaneous and fast Russia’s actions in Crimea. Therefore, my analysis suggests that Ukrainian decision-makers’ poor operation with country’s own resources, but also not always correct assessment of EU’s and Russia’s resources added the last bit to their failure to prevent Russia’s annexation of Crimea.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has applied innovative four-dimensions game theoretic decision-making model to analysis of Ukraine’s foreign policy in relations with Russia and EU during the annexation of Crimea. In accordance with game theoretic literature, countries are required to have information about preferences of other actors, to analyse to what extent strategies of their opponents can be trusted, and to assess payoffs’ structure and resources of everybody involved into a certain international interaction. My core findings suggest that Ukrainian policy-makers misjudged preferences of their foreign interlocutors, misunderstood the appropriateness of trust in their strategies and failed to fully grasp the payoffs’ structure for all three sides – the EU, Ukraine and Russia. This was deteriorated by Ukraine’s inability to make use of self and assess others’ resources. Thus, during the rapidly developing events of the annexation, Ukraine failed to construct a robust strategy to meet its objectives, which helped Russia to join the Crimean Peninsula.

My empirical data have shown that Ukrainian decision-makers were not able to judge effectively on the EU’s and Russia’s preferences. The Euromaidan revolution brought new people to power in Ukraine and they needed time for developing their understanding and competences (also for collection and analysis of information). Moreover, Ukrainian state organs had many Russian agents, who could not be trusted. This also made it easier for Russia to have better information about Ukraine’s internal affairs. On the other hand, I showed that Russia wanted to stop EU-Ukraine integration, which although understood in Kyiv and Brussels, was not taken seriously enough. After the Euromaidan, Russia had a preference for the agreement of 21<sup>st</sup>

February 2014 to be respected, but this was completely missed by Ukraine and the EU. The EU preferred to have a stable partner in Ukraine, but did not see a possibility of full integration, which was imagined by authorities in Kyiv. Such misunderstanding of others' preferences is significant, because it obstructed Ukrainian decision-makers from building a realistic foreign policy able to strive for Ukraine's own preferences.

The analysis of trust in EU-Ukraine-Russia relations revealed further peculiarities. Firstly, even with the presence of information about movements of Russian military in Crimea and near Ukraine's borders, it was hard for Ukrainian policy-makers to take Russia-Ukraine war as a serious likelihood. Secondly, Ukrainian politicians had high hopes for the EU's ability and willingness to save Crimea from Russia. The trust in Budapest memorandum was also high in Ukraine. However, even the EU was over trusting Russia's obligations under international law. Thirdly, Russia effectively used threats and bluffing, which deceived Ukraine and the EU, at the same time diminishing further trust in Russia. From its side, Putin had low trust in the EU and Ukraine after the failure of 21<sup>st</sup> February agreement and 'lived' in his own perceptions of the situation. This article argues that the inadequacy of Ukrainian leaders' trust in their foreign interlocutors is a core misjudgement during the studied events. Ultimately, Ukrainian leaders did not trust in Russia's threats to annex Crimea, but trusted that the EU would support Ukraine against Russia, which altogether deteriorated their analysis of the situation.

The estimation of all actors' payoffs by Ukrainian policy-makers during this period was overshadowed by Ukraine's desire to integrate with the EU (and to be less dependent on Russia) and later to preserve Ukraine's territorial integrity. Not only EU could not offer such a close relationship for Ukraine, but also there were opponents of this also inside Ukraine (for instance, in Crimea). In their desire to preserve Crimea, Ukrainian decision-makers did not look at Russia's payoffs, which were to stop Ukraine from closer ties with the EU, but also Putin's way of sustaining support of his population via 'uniting' Crimea with Russia. The EU's payoffs for the preservation of the international rule of law was overestimated, whilst the EU's actual preferred payoff was to avoid the outbreak of an open war in Ukraine. The EU promised to solve the situation in Crimea, but viewed itself rather as a mediator, but not a party to the conflict. This highlights further issues in Ukraine's foreign policy.

The study of EU's, Russia's and Ukraine's resources and their readiness to employ them added further clarification to the situation. As confirmed by both independent observers and actual decision-makers, Ukraine lacked the needed resources to protect Crimea from Russia with military means. Russia's military groupings on the peninsula were incomparably larger than the ones of Ukraine. Moreover, the new authorities in Kyiv did not reach the minds of ordinary Crimeans, who were already Russian-oriented. Russia was ready to invest much of its vast resources into this operation. The EU, to Ukraine's disappointment, was not prepared (either intentionally or due to the nature of its foreign policy) to use its resources in Ukraine. Moreover, whilst the EU and Ukraine were slow in their discussions, a sole authoritarian leader in the Kremlin rapidly managed 'to unite' Crimea with the Russian Federation. Ukrainian decision-makers could possibly try to mobilise the newly developed civil society, but did not take this into account. Additionally, the new leaders' unpreparedness (and/or unwillingness) to fully take the responsibility in ruling the country in these stormy times added the last bit for Russia's success in gaining Crimea.

The discussed issues prevented Ukrainian decision-makers from performing a proper foreign policy-analysis with realistic awareness of self and opponents' strategies, which is core in any country's success in its foreign relations. A better understanding of other actors' preferences, payoffs, resources and anticipating trust in their actions better, could have prevented the creation of a perfect chance for Russia to annex Crimea. For instance, the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement could have been consulted with Russia so as to avoid angering Ukraine's biggest neighbour and to appease supporters of Ukraine-Russia ties inside Ukraine. From its side, the EU could have developed closer integration with Russia and not to leave it behind (Interview № 21. Füle 2020). Euromaidan revolution had some anti-Russian statements, but the new leaders could possibly try to save Crimea through direct talks with Putin, avoiding further public anti-Russian declarations and reaching ordinary Crimeans in search of compromise. These counterfactual assumptions would need to be checked by further research. The studied case has revealed that due to its geostrategic position, turbulent past and moderate (military, economic and political) resources, Ukraine should not either break ties with some of its neighbours or trust too much that others will 'save' it in difficult times. Like any other country in such circumstances, Ukraine requires a more thoughtful and wise strategy in its foreign policy.

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### **Interviews**

Interview № 1. Verygina, Iryna. 2020. Governor of Luhansk region in May 2014 - September 2014, Kyiv, 18 February 2020.

Interview № 2. Unnamed. 2020. EU official, Kyiv, 18 February 2020.

Interview № 3. Chudovskiy, Ihor. 2020. Lawyer and civil activist from Luhansk, Kyiv, 27 February 2020.

Interview № 4. Ogrysko, Volodymyr. 2020. Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine in 2007-2009, Director of Centre for Russian Studies, Kyiv, 28 February 2020.

Interview № 5. Chubarov, Refat. 2020. Chairman of the Mejlis of the Crimean Tatar People from 2013, former MP and leader of Crimean Tatars in the world, Kyiv, 02 March 2020.

Interview № 6. Chyigoz, Ahtem. 2020. Deputy Head of the Mejlis of the Crimean Tatar People, present MP, former political prisoner in Crimea, Kyiv, 02 March 2020.

Interview № 7. Unnamed. 2020. Advisor to one of the highest decision-makers in Ukraine in 2014-2019, Kyiv, 03 March 2020.

Interview № 8. Burakovskiy, Igor. 2020. Head of Board, Institute for Economic Research and Policy Consulting, 05 March 2020, Kyiv.

Interview № 9. Shulipa, Yuriy. 2020. Director of the Institute of Russian aggression research, Russian social activist, Kyiv, 05 March 2020.

Interview № 10. Lytvyn, Mykola. 2020. Chief of the State Border Guard Service of Ukraine since 2003 to 2014, Kyiv, 06 March 2020.

Interview № 11. Teteruk, Andrii. 2020. Commander of the Myrotvorets volunteer battalion, Member of Ukrainian Parliament in 2014-2019, 06 March 2020, Kyiv.

Interview № 12. Unnamed. 2020. EU official, Brussels, 10 March 2020.

Interview № 13. Freudenstein, Roland. 2020. Policy Director, Martens Centre, Brussels, 12 March 2020.

Interview № 14. Unnamed. 2020. Ambassador of one of the Baltic states to Ukraine in 2012-2016, Skype, 20.03.2020.

- Interview № 15. Unnamed. 2020. Independent foreign journalist in Ukraine, Skype, 01 April 2020.
- Interview № 16 Kozlovsky, Oleg. 2020. Researcher at Amnesty International Eastern Europe & Central Asia in Moscow, social activist, 01.05.2020, Zoom.
- Interview № 17. Ponomarev, Ilya. 2020. Russian politician and businessman, former member of the State Duma of Russia, 05 May 2020, Zoom.
- Interview № 18. Dobrokhotoy, Roman. 2020. Moscow-based journalist and civil activist, editor-in-chief of investigative online newspaper the Insider, 08.05.2020, Zoom.
- Interview № 19. Unnamed. 2020. Official Russian journalist, Zoom, 27 May 2020.
- Interview № 20. Jozwiak, Rikard. 2020. Brussels correspondent for Radio Free Europe, 18.08.2020, Zoom.
- Interview № 21. Füle, Štefan. 2020. The European Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy in 2010-2014, Zoom, 10.09.2020.
- Interview № 22. Semenchenko, Semen. 2020. Founder of Donbass voluntary battalion, MP in 2014-2019, 29.09.2020, Zoom.
- Interview № 23. Ušackas, 23. Vygaudas. 2020. Former Lithuanian diplomat and politician, Minister of Foreign Affairs in 2008-2010, the European Union's Ambassador to Russia in 2013-2017, 2.10.2020, Zoom.
- Interview № 24. Soboliev, Yehor. 2020. Journalist, MP in 2014-2019, 16.10.2020, Zoom.
- Interview № 25. Kowal, Paweł. 2020. Polish politician, former MEP (Head of EU Delegation to Ukraine), current MP, 02.11.2020, Zoom.
- Interview № 26. Gretskiy, Igor. 2020. Russian analyst and scholar, Associate Professor of the Department of International Relations in the Post-Soviet Space at St. Petersburg State University, 16.12.2020, Zoom.
- Interview № 27. Lubinets, Dmytro. 2020. Dmytro Lubinets, Ukrainian MP since 2014, 29.12.2020, Zoom.
- Interview № 28. Kolerov, Modest. 2021. Chief redactor of Russian information agencies Rux and Regnum, 27.01.2021, Zoom.