

The Cherished Outcast: Italian Foreign Policy Change Toward Russia in the Cases of Georgia (2008), Crimea (2014), and Ukraine (2022)

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Abstract

Italy used to have a conciliatory approach towards Russia when dealing with international crises, but this outlook changed with the outbreak of the conflict in Ukraine. This study aims to explain this puzzle by examining Italy's foreign policy change in response to three Russian conflicts in the post-Soviet space: Georgia (2008), Crimea (2014), and Ukraine (2022). In particular, this study analyzes changes in Italy's approach to sanctioning Russia both in terms of substantial and symbolic differences. To explain these changes, the study focuses on three main factors at the international level: Italy's position as a middle power in the international system, the level of economic interdependence between Italy and Russia, and the conflict intensity. By investigating these factors within three case studies, the empirical analysis suggests that Italy's position as a middle power was the main factor defining Italy's substantial approach to Russia, which was in line with the common EU response to the three Russian conflicts. However, Italy's middle-power position also gave the country room to maneuver its symbolic approaches to Russia, which shifted from a soft approach to a rather hard one throughout the three conflicts. Empirical results indicate that this symbolic shift was mostly caused by a decrease in Italy's economic interdependence with Russia and the heightened intensity of the conflict in Ukraine.

1. Introduction

Over the last two decades, Russia has been involved in several military conflicts in the post-Soviet space that have posed significant challenges to EU security. Despite this, up until the last conflict in Ukraine, Italy succeeded in developing good relations with Russia, maintaining reasonable economic and political ties. The Federation Council of Russia even defined Russian–Italian relations as “the best among the worst” in 2019 (Federation Council 2019). However, with the last ongoing Russian “special military operation” in Ukraine, the relationship between Italy and Russia has deteriorated significantly, striking a shift in Italy's foreign policy posture towards Russia. This study seeks to explain such a shift, focusing specifically on Italy's substantial and,

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above all, symbolic commitment to the imposition of sanctions on Russia over three different conflicts: Georgia (2008), Crimea (2014), and Ukraine (2022).

Several studies have analyzed the unique relationship between Italy and Russia and its evolution over time (Carbone 2009, Natalizia and Morini 2020, Siddi 2019; Coticchia & Davidson, 2019); however, none of them has fully explained Italy's foreign policy towards Russia from the lens of integrating both substantial and symbolic changes. Although substantial changes remain the central focus of any foreign policy analysis, we argue that symbolic changes are equally important, as they are capable of grasping subtle changes in a country's foreign policy that remain unobservable within substantial changes.

Integrating symbolic changes into the analysis is essential to reveal new plausible arguments to explain Italy's foreign policy shifts towards Russia. Indeed, Italy's foreign policy decisions were in line with the EU's decision to impose sanctions on Russia for sovereign violations in Georgia (2008), Crimea (2014), and Ukraine (2022). While Italy's decision relative to the EU stance remained substantially unchanged, its symbolic approach to sanctions on Russia changed noticeably over the three instances, highlighting the importance of discourses in the analysis.

Different factors may explain changes in Italy's substantial and symbolic approaches to imposing sanctions on Russia. These factors can be generally located at the international, domestic, and individual levels (Garrison, 2003). In this study, we focus primarily on factors located at the international level. In doing so, we do not discredit other levels of analysis but rather, we narrow our research to the international level of analysis for two main theoretical reasons. First, multilevel FPA analyses start by identifying what international preconditions and systemic constraints shape foreign policy decisions (Peterson, 2006). Second, international security concerns as well as conflicts are specific research problems in which international factors tend to exert significant influence on the decision-making process of small and middle powers' foreign policies (Elman, 1995). In light of this, we aim to contribute to explaining Italy's substantial and symbolic foreign policy towards Russia as a result of three international factors: power, economic interdependence, and war intensity.

2. Foreign Policy Change through Substantial and Symbolic Lenses

A foreign policy is a "set of actions or rules governing the actions of an independent political authority deployed in the international environment" (Morin and Paquin 2018, 3). Thus, they are commonly directed "toward entities outside the policymakers' political jurisdictions" (Hermann 1990, 5). These foreign policy decisions can be officially declared through speeches or "non-verbalised" means (Haesebrouck and Joly 2021). As Holsti (2016) argues, foreign policy changes can also occur without the adoption of an official program.

There are different ways to distinguish foreign policy change, either qualitatively or quantitatively (Haesebrouck and Joly 2021). From a qualitative point of view, Hermann conceives of four typologies of change, ranging from the total reorientation of a country's foreign policy position to a slight change in its foreign attitude (Hermann, 1990). This

study focuses on adjustment changes, the smallest observable foreign policy change, by looking into the commitment of countries to adopt a foreign policy decision.

Adjustment changes can be analyzed both substantially and symbolically. Substantial changes mainly focus on tangible policy actions, such as the arrangement of a bilateral agreement or adherence to a new international organization. In this case, the set of tangible policy actions carried out in response to Russia's military actions is represented mainly by the packages of sanctions imposed on Russia, which can include arms embargos, asset freezes as well as trade and diplomatic restrictions. For example, the EU implemented all of these sanctions in the case of Crimea and Donbas, except for arms and diplomatic sanctions (Giumelli et al., 2020). These targeted sanctions should be understood as "coercive, constraining and signalling devices in foreign policy" rather than the mere output of a sanctioning mechanism (Giumelli 2013:37). Substantial policy changes vary between soft and hard approaches. The soft approach refers to a policy decision resulting in no sanctions, whereas the hard approach applies to a policy decision establishing sanctions (Carbone, 2009, Garrison 2003).

By contrast, symbolic change refers to the discursive and rhetorical approaches adopted by Italian politicians and policymakers regarding the imposition of sanctions on Russia (Adler-Nissen 2014; Brighi, 2013). This type of approach draws on government statements and political declarations that reflect Italy's symbolic approach to Russia. Symbolic changes can also vary between soft and hard approaches. A soft approach consists of a discourse according to which Italy invites its fellow European countries to refrain from sanctions, thereby possibly maintaining good economic relations with Russia. On the contrary, a hard approach envisages a discourse based on which Italy proactively promotes the imposition of sanctions within the European block, inevitably undermining its political and economic relations with Russia. While substantial approaches are evaluated based on tangible policies, symbolic changes are examined against political arguments (see methodology). By analysing foreign policy through both symbolic and substantial lenses, we thus attempt to provide an additional perspective on Italy's foreign policy change, by highlighting the importance of symbolic changes, mostly in the form of discursive approaches, which are downplayed in foreign policy analyses (Kaarbo, 2015).

2.1. Italy's three concentric circles in relation to Russia

Since the beginning of the Cold War, Italy's foreign policy has been based on three concentric circles: Atlantism, Europeanism, and the Mediterranean (Felsen 2018). Atlantism refers to Italy's continuous commitment to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and its key allies, especially the United States (US). Europeanism instead relates to Italy's attachment to the EU as an EU founder and a major European economy. Finally, the Mediterranean circle applies to Italy's geostrategic position in the Mediterranean and its willingness to play a prominent role in the region when it comes to conflicts and crises, such as the ongoing crises of migration from North Africa (Coticchia & Vignoli, 2021).

In all three circles, Italy has also dealt with Russia, balancing its actions between its national economic interests and the international constraints exercised within NATO and the EU (Coticchia&Davidson, 2019). In the Atlantic circle, before the current conflict in Ukraine, Italy attempted to act as a mediator between Russia and NATO (Natalizia and

Morini 2020). In fact, Italy used to see Russia as a pillar of European security architecture, promoting engagement rather than confrontation with Russia (Arbatova 2011).

In the same vein, in the Mediterranean circle, before the current conflict in Ukraine, Italy perceived Russia as an important player because of its mediation in the Libyan crisis and involvement in the fight against ISIS (Siddi 2019). In light of this, Italy's foreign policy decisions toward Russia have been constantly affected by finding a balance between its interests, above all economic interests, and the international constraints exercised by NATO and the EU on which Italy's foreign policy is ultimately based (Cotichia&Davidson, 2019).

It is worth adding two aspects to such a framework. First, Italy had also engaged in independent economic cooperation with the Soviet Union during the Cold War, pioneering a special relationship between Western Europe and the Soviet Union in the energy sector. This cooperation continued even after the end of the Cold War, with Russia becoming Italy's primary gas provider and one of Italy's key energy partners until 2021. This partnership was significant not just for the economic benefits it brought, but also for the security implications it had at the time (Bianchi&Raimondi, 2022).

Second, Italy and the U.S. can have different approaches to Russian foreign policy. According to Natalizia and Morini (2020), Italy's approach is influenced by changes in the international system while Boller and Werle (2016) suggest that these shifts are driven by norms. The U.S. prioritizes the norms of general international law over democracy promotion (Boller and Werle, 2016) which resulted in a stronger response against Russia in the Georgian and Crimean cases. This approach possibly explains the differences in the U.S.'s responses in 2008 and 2014, but it can arguably also explain the more assertive actions taken by the U.S., such as providing military support in response to the 2022 conflict.

2.2. Explaining Italy's Foreign Policy Change: Analytical Framework and Operationalization

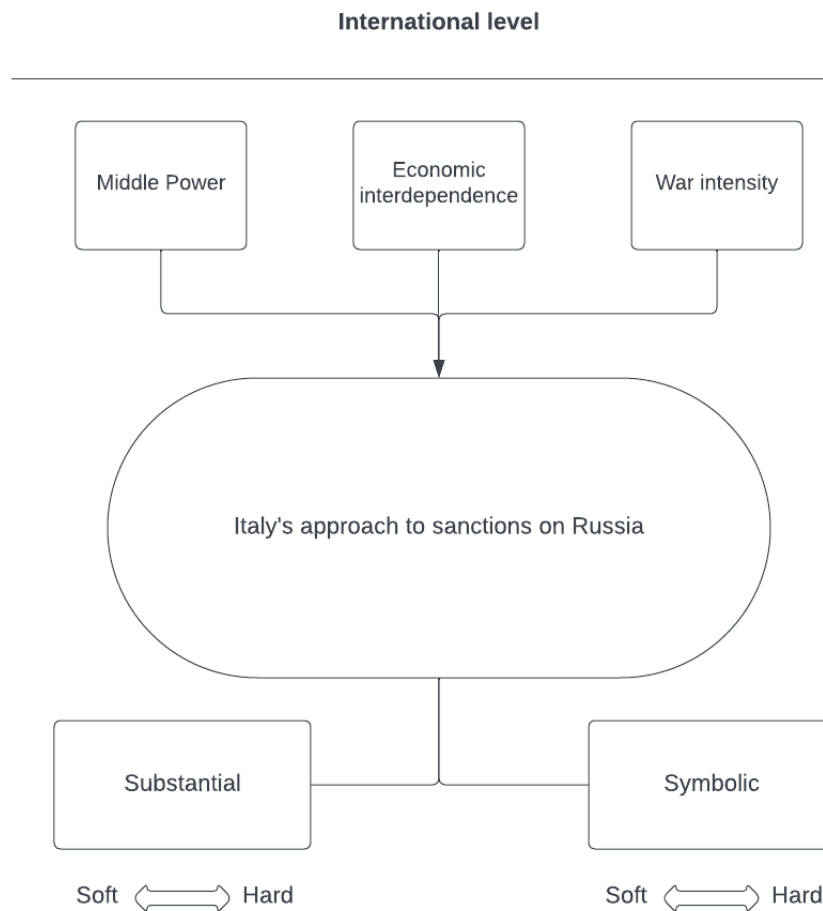
When examining the three conflicts under scrutiny, Italy's relationship with Russia has deteriorated from a symbolic perspective. While Italy's decision to impose sanctions on Russia has not changed substantially relative to the EU stance, its symbolic approach has changed noticeably from a conciliatory approach to an uncompromising one, namely from a soft approach to a hard one. This shift can be explained by a wide set of plausible explanatory factors located at three different levels: international, domestic, and individual (Isernia&Longo, 2017).

At the individual level, leaders and their personal relationships can significantly influence foreign policy choices (Yang, 2010). For instance, Berlusconi and Putin had a close personal connection, contributing to Italy's soft approach to Russia in the Georgian case (Arbatova, 2011). Renzi also tried to maintain a conciliatory relationship with Putin in the case of Crimea in 2014, while Draghi adopted a more confrontational stance in 2022, advocating for tougher EU measures against Russia (Politico, 2022). Leaders can play a pivotal role in shaping a country's international position, acting as positive or negative multipliers within the international system (Giacomello et al, 2009). However, the international system's material constraints make leaders and their personal ties intervening variables rather than independent ones.

At the domestic level, the political composition of the government and the role of major political parties are factors that can also impact foreign policy changes (Walsh, 2016). Indeed, Italy's relationship with Russia might have also been influenced by the composition of the governing coalition at the time of the conflicts. For instance, up until the last conflict in Ukraine, Forza Italia and the Five Star Movement used to openly criticize the EU's sanctions on Russia. Similarly, the coalition government formed by the Five Star Movement and Lega in 2018 expressed a more pro-Russian stance (Siddi, 2019). By contrast, in 2022 a broad coalition led by Draghi united against Russia, limiting the pro-Russian agenda of some Italian parties (Amante, 2022).

Although domestic and individual political affairs can contribute to the analysis of foreign policy changes, we prioritize the international level, given the great constraints it exercises on the other levels of analysis, which can eventually be analyzed in future research (Peterson 2006). This analytical decision aligns with the assumption that the international level is the primary factor in explaining countries' behavior in the international system (Waltz 2000). Drawing on this literature, this study develops an analytical framework combining three international factors (Figure 1): Italy's power dimension in the international system, its economic interdependence with Russia, and the intensity of the war in the three case studies under analysis.

Figure 1. Italy's Approach to Sanctions on Russia



Source: own elaboration.

Size and power have been key in determining one country's international behavior. Scholars generally describe Italy as a middle-power country (Bosworth, 1992; Romero, 2016; Santoro, 1991). Cooper, Higgot, and Nossal (1993) define the middle power concept in normative, geographic, and positional terms. The positional definition refers to the state's position in the international hierarchy based on its material capacities. The geographic definition instead relates to the state's location between the great powers, both geographically and ideologically. The normative definition focuses on the ability of states to act in the international system through "honest broker" practices, without, however, being able to exercise hegemonic influence (Robertson 2017). Furthermore, as a middle power, Italy has limited natural and military resources and "can only achieve its foreign policy goals by expanding its influence in international organizations and through bilateral relations with larger powers" (Siddi 2019, 124). While this positioning forces Italy to manoeuvre its national interest among the great powers, it still leaves Italy with some room for autonomy in foreign policy decisions. For this reason, *we expect that Italy's symbolic approach to imposing sanctions on Russia is shaped by its middle power dimension.* (E1)

Focusing on the international level, Cooper (1972) suggests that the level of economic interdependence between two states shapes how they interact with each other by mutually affecting their respective foreign policy positions. Along these lines, the liberal peace theory argues that economic interdependence can make two countries' behaviour more peaceful and cooperative (O'Neil et al., 1996). This is particularly the case when leaders expect large benefits from trade in the long term (Copeland, 1996). According to this literature, *we expect that Italy's symbolic approach to sanctions on Russia is affected by the level of economic interdependence between Russia and Italy compared to the EU-27 average.* (E2)

To assess the impact of economic relations between Italy and Russia on Rome's FP decisions, we estimated economic interdependence following the approach used by Barbieri (1996). Thus, interdependence is the product of the salience of trade and symmetry. Dyadic salience represents the extent to which each country depends on trade with its partner. Dyadic salience is always between 0 and 1. In contrast, the symmetry of dyadic trade represents how much one country's trade weight is greater than the other's. The higher the score, the stronger the dependence between the countries. "Salience, symmetry, and interdependence have a range of values between zero and one, with mean values of 0.03, 0.9, and 0.03 respectively" (Barbieri 1996).

However, the economic interdependence between Italy and Russia does not tell us much about why the former's symbolic approach to Moscow differed from the rest of the EU or NATO countries. Therefore, Italy's historical trend of economic interdependence needs to be compared with the trend of other EU or NATO countries. Selecting only one state would have been complicated and reductive. Thus, we opted to compare Italy with the EU-27 average interdependence with Russia.

Power dimension and economic interdependence cannot be considered the only international factor that explains foreign policy changes (Franks 1980, 73-77). International events greatly impacting the international system, such as the current pandemic or wars, can also drive foreign policy changes (Hermann 1990). As Natalizia and Morini (2020) argue, a period of instability in the international system caused by various

factors can affect changes in foreign policy. As they further argue, countries' foreign policy changes can be triggered by structural changes at the international level that are historically caused by wars. Not all wars are the same: their scale affects the international system differently. The intensity of war can be a good proxy to consider the scale of a conflict. Comparing the intensity of the three case studies, *we expect that the intensity of war shapes Italy's symbolic approach to imposing sanctions on Russia.* (E3)

To operationalize the war intensity factor, we use the Uppsala index, which defines war as “a state-based conflict or dyad which reaches at least 1000 battle-related deaths in a specific calendar year” (*UCDP definitions 2023*). Two levels of war intensity can be identified: minor and major. Minor wars involve at least 25 but fewer than 1000 battle-related deaths in one calendar year; by contrast, a major war has at least 1000 battle-related deaths in one calendar year (*UCDP definitions 2023*).

3. Methodology and Research Design

This study uses a case-oriented approach to evaluate our analytical framework against three distinctive Russian conflicts. The first case was the 2008 Russian–Georgian conflict, which led to the self-proclamation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent republics. On that occasion, Italy was part of the Western coalition that condemned Russia for its “disproportionate” actions against Georgia and opposed the recognition of separatist republics (Alcaro 2013). However, Prime Minister Berlusconi stood against any sanctions and supported the prompt resumption of Russian–EU–NATO dialogue (Siddi 2019). In the second case, the Crimea Peninsula was incorporated into Russia through military assistance in 2014. Italy officially joined the EU and NATO in condemning Russian actions against Ukraine and the non-recognition of the Crimea referendum results. During this time, the EU swiftly implemented sanctions on Russia. Italy supported the EU stance, raising serious economic concerns about the effect of sanctions on its economy (Natalizia and Morini 2020). The third case coincides with the Russian “special military operation in Ukraine” in 2022, in response to which Italy adopted a tougher position on Russia. Prime Minister Mario Draghi strongly condemned Russia’s “unjustifiable attack on Ukraine” (The Local 2022), approving the imposition of severe economic and financial sanctions on Russia with unprecedented cohesion in the legislative bodies. Additionally, the Italian parliament approved the delivery of weapons and ammunition to Ukraine, marking a significant change in Italy’s foreign policy (Alekseenkova 2022).

The discussed cases were selected based on their similarities in the context of European security. First, these episodes involved the explicit use of Russian military force. In the Georgian case, Russia conducted an operation called “Operation to Coerce Georgia to Peace” (Alisson 2008). In 2014, Russia also acknowledged deploying troops in Crimea (Prentice, 2014). This deployment consisted of masked Russian forces seeking control of the Crimean Peninsula and supporting Aksyonov’s appointment as Crimea’s new leader. In 2022, Russia entered Ukrainian territory under the guise of a “special military operation”, claiming the need to “defend Russian-speaking people” and “denazify Ukraine” (The Hindu, 2022).

In addition to the three main conflicts analyzed, other conflicts have occurred in the post-Soviet space in the last few decades. One of these conflicts was the conflict in Donbas that started in the spring of 2014, escalated until February 2015, and continued

throughout the period until the beginning of the “special military operation” in February 2022. This conflict had a negative impact on Russia’s relations with the West, leading to more sanctions against Russia. In 2015, the Minsk agreements helped to temporarily ease the tension, resulting in the EU adjusting its sanctions. Although the Donbas conflict had international implications, it was considered primarily an intrastate matter (UCDP 2023). The research conducted in this study focused primarily on explicit Russian military engagement in the post-Soviet region.

Second, the three cases examined led to *de facto* changes in the definition of borders between states. Third, Russia violated the territory of sovereign states in all cases. Russia used the pretext of defending the Russian-speaking population from targeted discrimination and violence to justify their actions. In the Georgian war, Russia claimed to protect the Abkhaz and Ossetian people. These groups recognize Russian as a state language in their respective constitutions (Parliament of South Ossetia 2019, President of Abkhazia 2014). Russia also claimed that they wanted to prevent further Russian casualties like those that occurred during the Georgian shelling of Tskhinvali on 7-8 August (Reuters 2008). Similarly, in the last conflict in Ukraine, Russia continuously accused Kyiv of discriminating against the Russian population in the East. These allegations were particularly loud in Putin’s speech on 24 February 2022. Last, Russia’s military actions directly impacted European security in the post-Soviet space, which fits within the Italian-European concentric circle of foreign policy.

Italy’s evolving stance on Russia sanctions and their international drivers is evaluated using primary sources such as speeches, international reports, and surveys, along with secondary sources such as policy papers and academic articles. Qualitative data from global databases are also considered. This study uses sources in two ways: substantial changes are evaluated by checking Italy’s sanctions on Russia listed on the European Council website, while symbolic changes are assessed through declarations made by Italian politicians on sanctions during specific conflicts. An example of such a declaration is Mario Draghi’s statement on the conflict in Ukraine on February 24 from Palazzo Chigi. This governmental declaration reflects Italy’s symbolic approach to the conflict.

The middle power concept is evaluated based on the existing literature on Italy’s foreign policy regarding Russia. Many studies highlight Italy’s unique relationship with Russia due to its economic interests and international pressure (Natalizia and Morini 2020; Siddi 2019). Economic and energy interdependence is measured by analyzing trade data between Italy and Russia during the conflicts, which were sourced from the World Bank and the Italian Ministry of Ecological Transition. Conflict intensity is gauged using reports and indexes from organizations like the UN, OSCE, and Uppsala Data Program, chosen for their neutrality and reliability.

4. Empirical analysis

4.1. Italy as a middle power in relation to Russia

By considering both lenses, we observed that while Italy’s foreign policy has been substantially in line with the EU position over the imposition of sanctions on Russia, its symbolical approach has changed over the three conflicts from a soft to a hard approach. More precisely, in 2008 Italy demonstrated a soft symbolic approach to Russian

sanctions. In the same vein, in 2014 Italy reluctantly joined the EU and NATO stances regarding sanctions. In contrast, in 2022, by welcoming sanctions and becoming one of the main suppliers of weapons to Ukraine, Italy sided with the line established by the Euro-Atlantic allies, both symbolically and substantially. Table 1 summarizes Italy and the EU approaches to the three cases of Russian policy in the Post-Soviet space.

Table 1. Summary of Italy and EU reactions in the three case studies (substantial and symbolic policy position)

Conflict	EU's position	Italy's position
2008	Disproportionate use of force, support for peaceful resolution of the conflict, EU fact-finding report (soft-soft)	Opposition to sanction's regime, support for peaceful resolution of the conflict (soft-soft)
2014	Condemnation of Russia, imposition of sanctions (hard-hard)	Initial support for sanctions, then a critique and quest to remove (hard-soft)
2022	Strong condemnation of Russia, military support for Ukraine, harsh sanctions (hard-hard)	Fully joined the EU position and all packages of sanctions (hard-hard)

Source: own elaboration.

Italy is often seen as a middle power that aims to balance relations with major powers while safeguarding its interests (Santoro, 1991; Siddi 2019). Italy is a key player in the making of the EU's global policies as an EU founder and the third-largest economy. However, this position has been disputed more recently. Romero (2016) contends that Italy's middle-power status has shrunk in recent decades, attributing this to political instability and economic struggles.

Subsequent events, including Italy's limited role in the late 2010s Libyan crisis (Santini, 2020) and the recent decision to withdraw from the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) under Western pressure, may further point to Italy's reduced autonomy in the Western alliance and its diminishing middle power role (Park & Karthikeyan, 2023). The rise of emerging regional powers and the relative decline of the Western bloc have further challenged Italy's middle-power status. Despite this, Italy has managed to maintain a certain degree of influence and autonomy, especially in relation to the Mediterranean region and Russia. In these areas, Italy has demonstrated relative autonomy compared to the Western/European block. For instance, Italy played a significant role in addressing the Mediterranean migration crisis and in fostering economic ties with Russia (Siddi, 2019). Italy maintained strong economic and industrial relations with Russia, even as some Eastern European countries opposed Russia (Siddi, 2019). While Italy's overall foreign policy autonomy may have decreased, it can be argued that it has retained its middle power status in specific policy domains and relationships.

Italy's relationship with Russia has undergone significant changes over time. While Russia was once an important political and economic partner for Italy, its confrontational stance with the West has now led to it being seen within the EU as a rival country, which

has impacted Italy's bilateral ties (EC 2022). Italy's foreign policy used to involve a delicate balance between adhering to EU constraints and pursuing its own economic interests. This dynamic can be observed in the three case studies.

During the 2008 Georgian conflict, Italy, under the leadership of Berlusconi, played a mediating role. The country took a cautious approach towards Russia's involvement in Georgia, supporting European and NATO condemnations, and participating in OSCE missions to oversee post-war agreements (Italy's House of Representatives 2008). However, along with Germany and France, Berlusconi's government advocated for a more lenient solution compared to the stance of the US and some central and eastern European countries in response to the Russian–Georgian conflict (Ferrari 2008). Later, Italy opposed sanctions, strongly supporting the resumption of the Russia–NATO relationship (Arbatova 2011).

This soft reaction to the military conflict was in line with the general EU response and contradicted the US stance that favored the imposition of sanctions. Referring to Russia's military interventions in Georgia, the Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Fratini, said that “we [Italy] cannot create an anti-Russia coalition in Europe, and on this point, we are close to Putin's position” (Bennhold 2008). Overall, the Georgian case had a minor impact on Italian–Russian relations, with Italy aligning with the EU's stance. This approach did not significantly influence Italy's relationship with the US since President Obama was pursuing a policy of “reset” with Russia.

In summary, Italy reaffirmed Russia's strategic partnership in European security and its commitment to diplomatic conflict resolution at the symbolic level. Italy backed German and French mediation efforts. On the substantial level, Italy did not recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia's independence. Nevertheless, Italy's prominent role contributed to the resumption of a Russian–NATO dialogue.

In the Crimean case, Italy supported *prima facie*, a hard reaction in the West led by Germany and the United States. Renzi accused Russia of committing an “unacceptable violation” (Rame 2014). However, as soon as the Minsk-2 agreements were signed, Italy used this opportunity to reconsider this approach. As with Georgia, Italy supported the general line of its EU partners. It implemented Western sanctions but criticized them and tried to reinstate good working relations with Russia rapidly. Renzi was the only G7 leader to visit the St. Petersburg Economic Forum after Crimea (Dunaev 2018).

Furthermore, since Italy was not fully part of the Normandy format, which is the group of states (Germany, France, Russia and Ukraine) that came together in 2014 to solve the Donbas crisis, it could not directly participate in the Ukrainian crisis settlement. Nonetheless, Italy tried to play a bridging role between Russia and the West. In October 2014, Renzi hosted a working breakfast with Putin, Poroshenko, and European leaders (President of Russia 2014). In March 2015, after Crimea, Renzi was the first European leader hosted in Russia. Renzi used friendly rhetoric, mentioning that Russia, Ukraine, and the EU had made progress toward the conflict resolution (Minsk-2 agreements) and highlighting that “Italy is ready to provide all possible support within the structures of the European Union, including, perhaps, its experience, if we talk about the decentralization of Ukraine” (President of Russia 2015).

Italy used the Minsk-2 agreements as a pretext to change the rhetoric and rebuild economic ties with Russia. Similarly, the EU agreed that the sanction regime against

Russia should be conditioned by the implementation of these agreements. The Minsk-2 agreements were an occasion to soften the approach toward Russia and avoid breaking ties with an important partner.

At the substantial level, Italy upheld Euro-Atlantic solidarity by maintaining sanctions against Russia. Italy prioritized its Euro-Atlantic alignment over economic and security ties with Russia. The strategic decision was to align with the EU's stance and safeguard "strategic relations" with Russia. The main strategic choice was to follow the EU general line and use the degree of liberty in foreign policy to maintain "strategic relations" with Russia.

Thus, Italy pursued the EU sanctions regime against Russia despite its rhetorical complaints. Simultaneously, Italy used opportunities, such as the Minsk-2 agreement, to demonstrate that Russia was disposed to continue beneficial relations. Italy, as a middle power, tried to play a "bridge role" again. This translated into a reluctant implementation of sanctions on the substantial level, and the continuation of Italy's friendly rhetoric with Russia at the symbolic level.

In the wake of 21 February 2022 with the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict by Russia's recognition of the Lugansk People's Republic (LPR) and Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) as independent states, the Italian government sided with countries that demanded a stricter response to Moscow's actions. In 2022, the government led by Draghi took a clear stance by condemning Moscow's intervention of Ukraine on February 24 and supporting a rapid and effective response, unlike the two previous crises in Georgia and Crimea. In fact, in 2008 and 2014, Italy simultaneously tried to mitigate the escalation of tensions between the United States, the Baltic, and former Warsaw pact states, and to preserve its own economic interests. In 2022, the Italian government was one of the most assertive in imposing sanctions against Moscow and sending military and humanitarian support to Kyiv.

Italy strongly supported Western responses to the conflict in Ukraine, aligning closely with EU leaders, particularly of Germany, and France (Alekseenkova 2022). Prime Minister Draghi condemned Russia's actions, calling for a withdrawal, and the restoration of internationally recognized borders (Balmer and Fonte 2022). The Italian *Guardia di Finanza* seized assets of Russian individuals subject to personal sanctions (De Vito and Landoni 2022). In contrast to previous cases, Italy closely sided with the US in advocating for sanctions. Moreover, unlike the Crimea case, the Italian Prime Minister first visited Kyiv, not Russia. Draghi visited the Ukrainian capital to participate in a meeting with Zelensky, together with German and French leaders (Sauer 2022). Draghi showed support for Ukraine's application for European Union membership: "We are at a turning point in our history. The Ukrainian people defend the values of democracy and freedom that underpin the European project, our project. We cannot wait. We cannot delay this process" (Balmforth 2022).

Given the intensity of the conflict and its impact on European security, Italy had less room to maneuver in relation to the general EU line. However, Italy tried to maintain its "bridge" role by proposing a peace plan to mitigate the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. This plan included the neutral status of Ukraine and its accession to the EU, autonomy for Donetsk, Lugansk, and Crimea, and a treaty on European security following the Russian

troops' withdrawal from Ukraine in exchange for sanctions relief. This plan was rejected by Russian and Ukrainian authorities (Mikhelidze and Alcaro 2022).

In any case, this plan had little chance of success. It contains proposals that cannot be tolerated by both parties. This fact is evident when Russia authorized the 'referenda' in four regions (Kherson, Zaporizhian, Donetsk, and Lugansk) resulting in the formal incorporation of these regions into Russia, and Ukraine officially applied for NATO membership. Draghi assured Zelensky that Italy was not going to recognize either the referenda or the annexation of Ukrainian territories (Government of Italy 2022). Italy's peace plan failed to achieve any of its intended objectives, suggesting the ineffectiveness of Italian autonomous foreign policy maneuvers on a substantial level.

Hence, Italy's substantial policies were in line with the EU's and NATO's responses to Russia's actions. Italy's complete alignment with the EU and NATO confirmed its priority in promoting the EU/NATO agenda. Italy's foreign policy is strictly linked to the EU, given the set of values and norms shared and the delegation of sovereign competencies to the EU in the field of trade and monetary policies. Italy is also highly dependent on NATO because it is its primary security provider. Considering this, Italy responded to Russia just like other EU powers. However, from a middle-power perspective, Italy also attempted to symbolically preserve working relations with Russia, considering it an important economic and political partner. For this reason, Italy symbolically tended to avoid problematic approaches to Russia as much as possible. Table 2 summarizes Italy's changes towards Russia both substantially and symbolically.

Table 2. Summary of changes in the position of Italy towards Russia

Cases	Symbolic policy position	Substantial policy position
Georgia 2008	Verbal opposition to sanctions, Russia as a strategic partner (soft)	No sanctions implemented, facilitation of renewal Russian-NATO dialogue (soft)
Crimea 2014	Condemnation of annexation of Crimea, reluctant implementation to sanctions, Russia as a strategic partner (soft)	Italy joined all the EU sanctions (hard)
Ukraine 2022	Strong condemnation of Russian actions, solidarity with Ukraine, no more "business as usual" (hard)	Italy joined all the packages of sanctions, active participation in implementation of personal sanctions, military aid to Ukraine (hard)

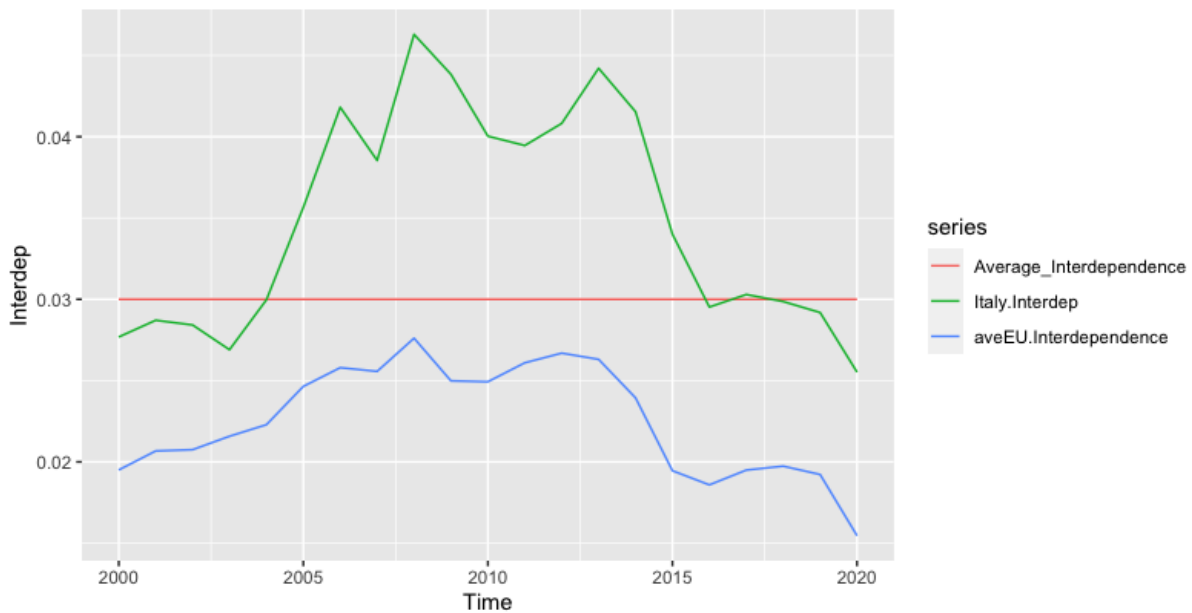
Source: own elaboration.

4.2. Economic and energy (inter)dependence

Italy's middle power dimension is not the only factor contributing to the changes in its foreign policy positions toward Moscow; economic interdependence between the states could also explain Italy's hard or soft approaches to imposing sanctions on Russia. In the case of Italy and Russia's economic interdependence, Italy's economic interdependence with Russia changed according to a similar trend that takes into account the

EU-27 average (EU average). In both cases (Italy and the EU average), the economic and financial crisis and the Crimea case corresponded to a decrease in economic interdependence with Moscow. However, the main difference between Italy and an EU average is that the former is consistently above the mean value (Figure 2), as calculated by Katherine Barbieri of 0.03 (1996), indicating a high level of economic interdependence between Rome and Moscow. The trend of Italy-Russia economic interdependence shows a decrease in economic interdependence after 2008. Still, it was mainly due to the reduced trade between the countries induced by the financial and economic crisis of 2007/2008 (figure 2). Furthermore, the decrease in interdependence was not consistent and remained above the mean values of interdependence. After some years of renewed growth, in 2013, the trend in the economic interdependence between Italy and Russia started to decline steeply, to stabilize, below the mean values, only after 2016. In particular, after the EU sanctions following the Crimea case, economic interdependence declined further. During the coronavirus pandemic, dyadic trade levels decreased along with economic interdependence. More up-to-date data support the recent trend of economic interdependence between Italy and Russia.

Figure 2. Economic interdependence between Italy and Russia and between the EU-27 average and Russia



Source: elaboration of World Bank Data (2022).

The impact of Russia’s export blockades on the Italian economy was limited. The sanctions implemented thus far were expected to damage Italian exports to Russia by almost 9 percent of the total, which represents 1.5 percent of all Italian exports (Centro Studi Confindustria 2022). Confindustria showed a preoccupation with some specific Italian products, such as machinery and luxury goods (Centro Studi Confindustria 2022). To bypass Western sanctions and fulfill Russia’s need for critical technological components in the defense industry, the Russian government has allowed the creation of parallel markets for specific brands and goods since spring 2022. These markets focus on

strategic technology and luxury items, constituting 4% of total imports in 2022 (Reuters 2023). Italy's exports to Russia will now have to go through intermediaries, making parallel markets more crucial for Russia's economic stability than for Italy's.

Historical trends show that Italian exports to Russia decreased between 2008 and 2014. However, while total Italian exports drastically decreased after 2008 because of the effects of the economic and financial crisis, in 2015 they were on the rise (World Bank 2021). This decrease in Russian imports of Italian goods and services is consistent with the decline of the Russian economy following international sanctions and the devaluation of the ruble in 2014–2015. In both 2008 and 2014, Italy's exports decreased, and Rome's position was an open condemnation of the European and Euro-Atlantic stance of imposing heavy sanctions on Russia. However, we observed the opposite trend before the 2022 Russian–Ukrainian conflict. Italy–Russia economic relations suffered heavily from the COVID-19 disruption, and in 2021, Italy's exports to Russia were still not at pre-COVID levels.

However, economic relations between Rome and Moscow are constituted by a significant energy component, which is strategic for Italian national interests. Indeed, to better understand Rome's FP decisions, it is appropriate to distinguish between the effects of Italian economic interests on exports and those on Italy's energy security. For the former, we can hypothesize that in the context of already deteriorated exports to Russia, Italy may have developed a reduced interest in fighting for its economic revenues coming from exports to Russia. In addition, Italy alone is highly dependent on imports of Russian energy products and does not have sufficient bargaining power. Combining an economic interdependence much above the EU average and above Barbieri's mean value (1996), a logical explanation of Rome's foreign policy behavior can be found. Economic interdependence and energy security together might very well explain why Italy decided to abide by the EU and NATO positions while engaging Russia in more friendly ways through symbolic FP activities.

It has been argued, in fact, that Italian foreign policy towards Russia has always been affected by Italy's dependence on Russian oil and gas imports (Carbone 2008). Many analysts have suggested that the reluctance of some European countries to implement harsh sanctions on the Russian energy sector is due to their overdependence on Russian gas and oil (Rosato 2016).

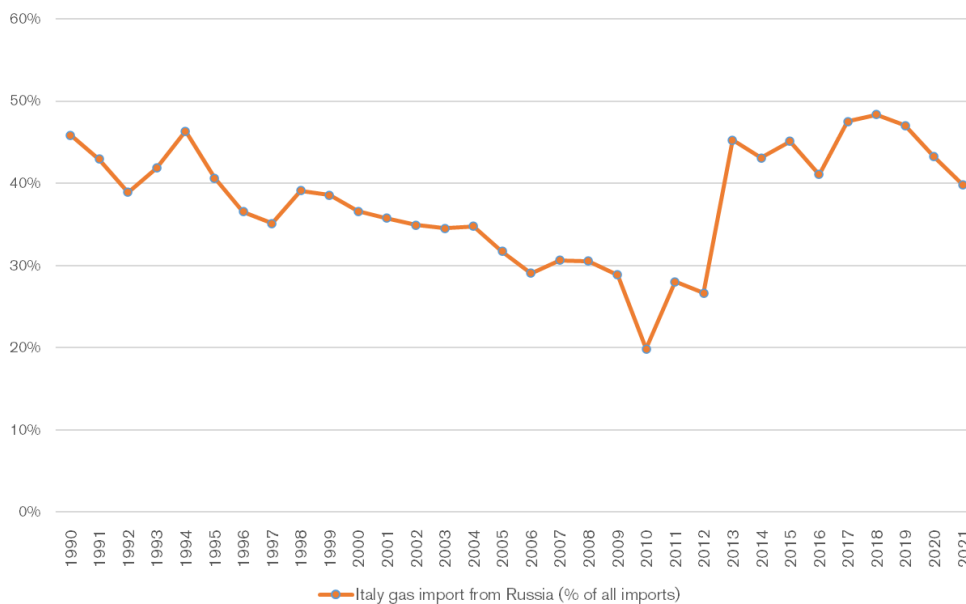
Italy is a European country that is highly dependent on Russian hydrocarbons (figure 3). Russia was among the top five providers of Italian energy hydrocarbons. Moreover, Italy's energy mix relies heavily on oil, gas, and coal, which together constitute over 70% of Italy's energy consumption (International Energy Agency 2021). However, the share of oil in the energy produced by gas nearly doubled at the beginning of this century. Over the last 20 years, the share of gas in the Italian energy mix has increased. Currently, natural gas is the main energy source in Italy (International Energy Agency 2021). The coal trend, instead, remained stable until 2014, when it started to decrease rapidly, and Italy moved from producing approximately 10% of its energy from coal (International Energy Agency 2021). Therefore, even though Moscow is still in the top five countries from which Italy imports its oil, it accounts only for 10%–15% of the country's oil demand. Simultaneously, with Italy increasing the proportion of gas by 14% from 25% to 39% of its energy mix, the import and consumption of Russian natural gas increased steadily after 2009, and after

2012 it stabilized. These statistics show why the argument of Italian dependency on Russian fossil fuels was often used to explain Rome’s soft approach to imposing sanctions on Russia during the 2008 Georgian and 2014 Crimean crises. At the beginning of February 2022, 40% of Italy’s gas imports came from Russia (Figure 3). This pushed the Italian government to find alternatives rapidly. In the summer of 2022, Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi reported that Italy, less than six months from the start of the conflict, reduced its dependence on Russian gas to 25% (Segreti 2022).

Italy was one of the first NATO member states to sign a deal with the Soviet Union to supply energy (Siddi 2017). After the end of the Cold War, the ENI strengthened its position in Russia by building a solid partnership with two main Russian state companies, Gazprom and Rosneft (Siddi 2019). However, after the 2014 Crimean crisis, ENI projects with Russian companies suffered a drawback, although they did not stall completely. In 2017, ENI signed a new memorandum of understanding with Gazprom to confirm its interest in increasing “gas supplies from Russia to European countries, including Italy, as well as the modernization of the Russia–Italy gas supply agreements” (ENI 2017).

However, solely focusing on Italian energy dependency may be misleading. Italian imports of Russian gas, oil, and coal represent 10% of Russia’s gas imports to the EU. Russia’s exports to Italy comprise over 50% of its energy products or derivatives, with Italy being one of Russia’s ten largest trading partners (OECD 2021). Thus, the economic relations between Rome and Moscow in the energy sector are mutually dependent. Nevertheless, this dependency changes if we expand our analysis to balance the trade of goods and services, where Italy’s exports are more diversified (OECD 2021). Russian energy exports to Italy have represented, on average, 3%–5% of Moscow’s exports, while Italian exports to Russia represent only 1%–2% of Italy’s exports in goods and services. Moreover, the overall effect western sanctions have on Moscow’s energy sector is considered to harm the Russian economy more than that of Europe (Council of the EU 2023).

Figure 3. Percentage of Italy’s gas imports from Russia, 1990–2020



Source: Ministero della Transizione Ecologica, 2022.

From the data, it emerges that both economic interdependence and energy played a role in explaining the shift of the Italian symbolic approach to Russia. Notably, Italy has always maintained a higher level of economic interdependence with Russia than its European counterparts. During the conflicts that arose in Ukraine in 2008 and 2014, Italy adopted a more lenient stance towards Russia, primarily due to its economic and energy interests. However, in 2022, when the conflict resurfaced, the level of interdependence between Italy and Russia significantly dwindled. Additionally, Italy's gas imports from Russia had been on a decline during the COVID-19 pandemic years, prompting the Italian Prime Minister, Mario Draghi, to diversify the country's energy supply sources and adopt a more aggressive stance towards Russia's actions.

This marked a significant departure from Italy's previous position, as the country no longer viewed sanctions on Russia as detrimental to its economy. Instead, the government regarded its previous strong energy dependence on Russia as unacceptable and placed the blame on the previous administration's efforts to cultivate close economic ties with Russia over the years (La Repubblica 2022). While Italy's response was consistent with that of other European nations, the country's symbolic shift towards a more negative view of its energy dependence on Russia was significant.

4.3. Conflict intensity

The intensity of conflict might provide an additional argument for explaining Italy's foreign policy changes towards Russia. Indeed, all three cases experienced direct military interventions by Russian troops in a sovereign state, producing different intensities of conflict. In the Georgian case, during a five-day conflict, Russia reported approximately 163–170 military losses, including Russian military staff and Abkhazian and South Ossetian troops (Lavrov 2010, 130–135). Georgia reported 180 losses on its side (Ministry of Defense of Georgia 2010). First, the intensity of the conflict was low and the duration was short. This conflict falls within the armed conflict definition of UCDP. Second, this conflict was an opportunity for the Italian government to improve the Italian position. Amid the conflict between Georgia and Russia, Berlusconi worked to avoid further escalations of the conflict and a possible return to a Cold War logic. To do so, he tried to persuade other European countries, particularly Germany and France, to avoid imposing sanctions on Russia, positioning himself as a friend (Arbatova 2011). Third, the EU dealt with an internal case of Kosovo recognition. Several European nations, notably Spain, Slovakia, Cyprus, Greece, and Romania, did not recognize Kosovo's independence. This division on self-determination rights hindered EU consensus and raised legitimacy questions for other minority groups like Abkhaz and Ossetians. Russia also opposed the recognition of Kosovo, but it was proactively used in the quest for new territories more recently. Overall, it seems that the conflict did not have any significant impact on the relationships between Russia and the US. The Obama administration implemented a "reset" policy with Russia to improve relations damaged by the Russian-Georgian war, which did not escalate to a point where it caused any major damage to their diplomatic ties. Similarly, Italy seemed to view the conflict as a chance to avoid any potential fallout with Russia, given the relatively low intensity of the situation. In sum, it appears that the conflict was ultimately contained and did not result in any major systemic changes.

The Crimean case also had low intensity and cannot even be formally categorized as armed conflict. There is no confirmed evidence of any military loss from either Russia or Ukraine because of this military operation. However, Putin confirmed the presence of Russian troops, following his explanation of ensuring the safety of the Russian people (Prentice, 2014). Differently from Crimea, the Donbas conflict rapidly escalated to “high intensity”, resulting in over 1000 annual fatalities in 2014 and 2015 (OHCHR 2022). Most sanctions on Russia were a response to this escalation (European Council 2023). After the Minsk agreements, which deescalated the conflict, Italy and some EU states resumed business relations with Russia (OHCHR, 2022). This development is additional proof of how the intensity of conflicts can impact various aspects, such as the severity of sanctions. For example, the “low-intensity” situation in Crimea resulted in milder sanctions, while the “high-intensity” events in Donbas prompted stricter measures.

The last conflict in Ukraine was a significant turning point that changed the general assumption about the relationship between Russia and European security. In 2014 Russia violated Ukraine’s sovereignty by taking control of Crimea. However, due to the absence of a full-scale, interstate military conflict, some European countries such as Italy were able to maintain their relations with Russia. By contrast, in the 2022 interstate conflict between Russia and Ukraine, which has seen a much higher intensity of conflict and a greater security threat, Italy’s stance towards Russia changed. The intensity and number of losses in this conflict far exceeded the two previous cases. According to official reports, Russia has suffered 6,000 losses, while Ukraine has recognized approximately 9,000 deaths (Matthews 2022). This conflict caused a high number of civilian casualties, an influx of refugees to Europe (7.4 million), and a significant number of internally displaced people (Matthews 2022). The conflict also affected the energy and food markets, causing great instability. The implications of such an intense conflict and the threat posed to European security left Italy with no choice but to support hard sanctions and use hard rhetoric to condemn Russian actions, which resulted in a hard symbolic approach towards Russia. This also highlights the importance of international factors in explaining Italy’s changing approach towards Russia, as suggested by Natalizia and Morini (2020).

5. Conclusions

The empirical analysis suggests that Italy’s diminished power and autonomy explain Italy’s consistent alignment with its European Union and NATO partners over the substantial decision to adopt sanctions on Russia or not. As Romero (2016) argues, Italy’s power has slightly diminished over the past decade; despite this, it still maintains a middle-power role in some areas as demonstrated in the three case studies. Indeed, our findings indicate Rome’s autonomy in pursuing symbolic foreign policy towards Russia, providing support to the first expectation (E1).

As observed, Italy’s foreign policy adopted a softer symbolic approach than the EU’s general position in the cases of Georgia and Crimea. However, this changed with the outbreak of the 2022 conflict in Ukraine when Italy shifted to a harder approach to sanctions on Russia. The empirical analyses suggest that this shift is related to a decrease in Italy’s economic interdependence with Russia to the levels of the EU average, confirming the second expectation (E2).

At the same time, the empirical analysis also suggests that the intensity of the conflict can explain Italy's tougher symbolic approach to Russia. The higher intensity of conflict in Ukraine threatened Italy's security and liberal democratic values on a whole new level compared to Russia's interventions in Georgia and Crimea. As a result of a much larger scale of violence, Rome reacted differently by symbolically siding with the hardliners favoring sanctions on Russia. This reaction substantiates the third expectation.

In conclusion, our research question, which proposes that variation in economic interdependence and conflict intensity provide valid arguments to explain changes in Italy's symbolic approach toward sanctioning Russia, leads us to some methodological considerations and future research directions. First, we argue that examining symbolic changes in Italian Foreign Policy may allow for a better study of the interaction between international factors and Italian foreign policy choices. Separating the symbolic aspects of foreign policy from the substantive ones allows for a more attentive view of symbolic positions, often constrained by a country's geopolitical and power dimensions. Second, we propose that this analytical framework should be empirically tested on other dyads that include Italy to determine whether economic interdependence and war intensity are good explanatory factors for Italian foreign policy in general. This would help determine whether symbolic changes are observed after changes in economic interdependence or conflict intensity involving the second party. Finally, we believe that it would be interesting to investigate the role of domestic and individual factors in relation to symbolic policies. In our previous discussion, we briefly touched upon the various factors that can influence foreign policy, such as individual diplomacy or parliamentary composition. For instance, Italy's soft approach towards Russia during the Georgian case can be attributed to Berlusconi's personal relationship with Putin, despite the fact that Putin was not President at that time (he served as Prime Minister). Additionally, Italy's hesitant acceptance of sanctions against Russia in 2014 could be due to the domestic pressure from Confindustria and Italian business stakeholders. While our study mainly focused on the impact of international factors on the Italian approach to Russian assertive policy, analyzing the role of domestic and individual factors would provide a more complete understanding of the political issue.

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