



MAPPING THE FAULT LINES

EU MEMBER STATES' ATTITUDES TOWARDS RUSSIA

ABSTRACT

Although EU member states have somewhat converged in their preferred policy approach towards Russia in the past decade, the consensus remains fragile at best. The current EU policy towards Russia – based on the five guiding principles – aims to balance between diverging attitudes among member states, resulting in a policy based on the 'lowest common denominator' between hardliners and softliners. To stimulate a discussion that moves beyond the superficial lines of 'Russia hawks' and 'Russia doves', this article explores five conceptual fault lines in the EU debate on Russia: (I) the diverging conceptualisations of Russia's role on the European continent among EU member states, (II) the level of perceived threat emanating from the Russian Federation, (III) the degree of politicisation of the 'Russia question' in individual EU member states, (IV) a divergence in aspired policy directions, and (V) the diverging preferences for 'Europeanisation' and 'bilateralisation' among member states. By offering a conceptual framework that analyses the EU's 'Russia question' along five dividing lines, the article aims to contribute to a better understanding of the attitudinal divergence among member states vis-à-vis Russia.



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Introduction

Although EU member states have somewhat converged in their preferred policy approach towards Russia since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the consensus has remained fragile at best and a comprehensive foreign policy vis-à-vis Russia is still lacking. The current EU policy towards Russia – rooted in the five guiding principles – aims to balance between diverging attitudes among member states, resulting in a policy based on the ‘lowest common denominator’ between hardliners and softliners (see also Paikin 2021). This paper explores some of the fundamental fault lines in the EU debate on Russia, focusing particularly on the period from February 2014 until September 2021, when this paper was completed. The paper’s aim is to stimulate a discussion that moves beyond the superficial lines of ‘Russia hawks’ and ‘Russia doves’ and to address some of the tacit points of contention among member states. The analysis presented in this paper is based on an extensive

literature review and interviews with anonymous foreign policy experts across EU member states. The interviewees have been selected to reflect an equal geographical distribution across the European Union, representing – among other factors – the wide variation in member states’ historical experiences and economic (inter)dependencies with Russia.

The paper explores five conceptual fault lines in the EU debate on Russia (see figure 1 below): (i) the diverging conceptualisations of Russia’s role on the European continent among EU member states; (ii) the level of perceived threat emanating from the Russian Federation; (iii) the degree of politicisation of the ‘Russia question’ in individual MS; (iv) a divergence in aspired policy directions; and (v) the diverging preferences for ‘Europeanisation’ and ‘bilateralisation’.



Figure 1. The five dividing lines in the EU debate on Russia

Importantly, there is a distinction between topical and conceptual fault lines. Where topical fault lines consist of the ‘everyday’ themes in EU debates on Russia (for example, technical and financial cooperation, Nord Stream 2, sanctions), conceptual fault lines operate on a *deeper level*:

they often remain unsaid and function as the *implicit drivers* behind member states’ positions on topical issues. As outlined above, *this paper sheds light on some of the conceptual fault lines in particular*.¹

¹ For an analysis of salient *topical* fault lines in the EU debate on Russia, see Portela, C., Pospieszna, P., Skrzypczyńska, J., & Walentek, D. (2021). ‘Consensus against all odds: Explaining the persistence of EU sanctions on Russia’. *Journal of European Integration*, 43(6), 683–699. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2020.1803854>; Silva, P. M., & Selden, Z. (2020). ‘Economic

interdependence and economic sanctions: A case study of European Union sanctions on Russia’. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 33(2), 229–251. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2019.1660857>; Szulecki, K. (2017). *Energy Security in Europe: Divergent Perceptions and Policy Challenges*. Springer.

However, the section on diverging preferences for Europeanisation and bilateralisation also demonstrates how analysing a conceptual fault line enables the examination of member states' positions on topical policy issues: in this case, the paper demonstrates that member states' choices for Europeanisation and bilateralisation drive diverging attitudes towards the EU-Russia energy relationship.

Notably, EU policy debates on Russia are multi-layered. The conceptual fault lines explored in this paper are not only driven by more apparent factors, such as geography and proximity to Russia, diverging historical experiences, and economic interests, but also by member states' political calculations unrelated to the Russian Federation. For example, the EU debate on Russia has offered a discursive space for certain member states to raise wider dissatisfaction with a feeling that other EU actors have prioritised national interests over the benefit of the European Union as a whole. This has particularly been the case in discussions on the EU-Russia energy relationship. EU debates on

Russia's role on the European continent

Although EU debates on Russia often tend to revolve around concrete policy trajectories, one of the more conceptual points of contention is related to diverging assessments of Russia's role on the European continent. This fundamental fault line consists of, on the one hand, EU actors that consider Russia to be an *integral part of the European security order* and therefore contend that stability on the European

² While sensitive to the ways in which historical factors have shaped contemporary relations with Russia, the scope of this paper does not allow for an in-depth analysis of all historical nuances that exist in individual member

Russia have moreover functioned as a stage on which member states have raised discontent with a (perceived) lack of intra-EU solidarity. For instance, when the refugee crisis in the European South and the Ukraine crisis in the East coincided, Mediterranean member states were expected to contribute to an EU (and NATO) response in the eastern neighbourhood, whilst feeling they were not receiving the same level of solidarity in a crisis that – in their experience – was equally pertinent (for example, Siddi 2018, 7–8). This paper maps both the apparent and tacit lines of contention in the EU debate on Russia.

Lastly, mapping the fault lines in a nuanced political debate among 27 member states is inevitably reductionist. This paper does not aim to provide a comprehensive overview of all points of contention. Rather, the goal is to reflect on some of the conceptual differences of opinion in EU debates on Russia (between February 2014 and September 2021 in particular) to better understand the attitudinal divergence among member states.²

continent cannot be achieved without Russia as an involved player. While on the other hand, other EU actors assert that the Russian Federation is an *outsider to the European security architecture* and therefore exclude the possibility that Russia could play a 'positive' role in the promotion of European stability (see figure 2 below).

states' relationships with the Russian Federation. Where this paper does explore historical factors, it focuses particularly on the post-war period and the historical legacy of communism.

Where the first camp considers Russia to be a potential partner on the European continent, even when the current relations are troublesome, the second camp tends to thoroughly exclude the possibility of Russia acting as a 'positive' contributor to European security and frames the country as one of the EU's main political adversaries. Political scientist Egbert Jahn

(2020, 120) points to a similar fault line in EU debates and demonstrates that some EU actors 'see Putin's Russia as a key player in the creation of a multipolar international system, [while others] conclude that Russia is taking a fundamental turn towards imperial expansion, to which the West must respond [...].'

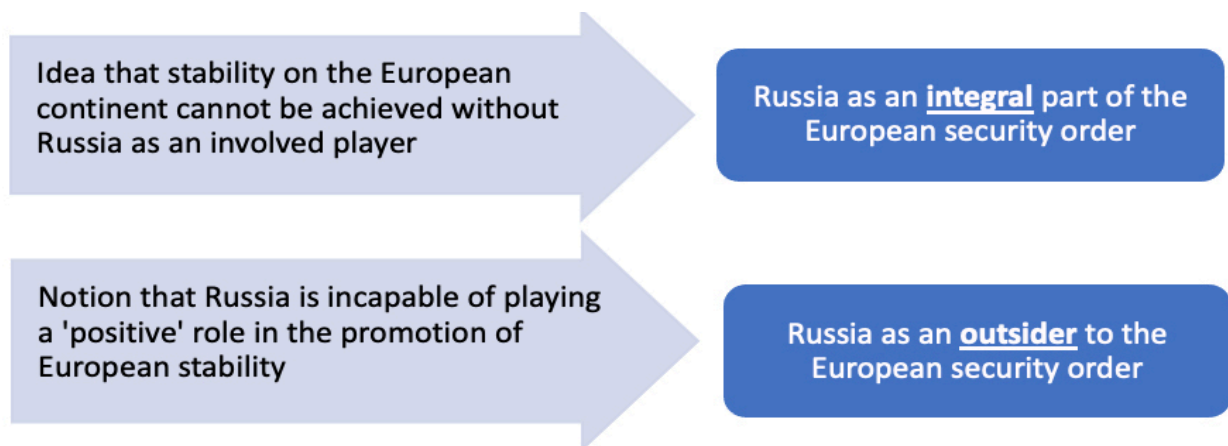


Figure 2. Diverging assessments of Russia's role on the European continent

This conceptual cleavage surrounding Russia's role on the European continent appears to correlate with geographical and historical factors. Member states that share a border with Russia *and* have a historical connection to Russia either as part of the former Soviet Union (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) or as a former member of the Warsaw Pact (Poland) tend to present Russia as an outsider to the European security order.

In the case of Poland, political scientist Monika Sus (2018) writes, the fundamental idea that drives attitudes towards Russia is the belief that 'Moscow aims to revise the post-Cold War order in Europe and undermine security on the continent.' Sus continues that the Polish PiS government envisions Moscow

as being on 'a fundamental collision course with Polish and Western security interests.' This differs significantly from a member state such as Finland. Finnish foreign policy actors, political scientist Kari Möttölä (2017, 11, 13) demonstrates, 'view Russian power politics as challenging the foundation of European security, but stop short of giving up on the order as broken.'

In other words, where Polish foreign policy actors tend to present Russia not only as an outsider to the European security order, but also as an adversarial actor that actively seeks to undermine stability and security on the European continent, a member state such as Finland is critical of Russia's positioning on the European continent but nonetheless considers

it to be an integral part of the European security structure.

Countries that do not share a direct border with the Russian Federation but do share a historical connection with Russia through a common Soviet past, such as the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria, tend to follow the Finnish line as it pertains to conceptualising Russia's role on the European continent.

EU member states that are neither in direct proximity to the Russian Federation nor share a Soviet past with Russia tend to take a more inclusionary stance with regard to Russia's role on the European continent, although they differ significantly in their level of criticism vis-à-vis Russia. Where member states such as France and Italy promote the fundamental belief that Russia forms an integral part of the European security order and tie this belief to policies that – to some degree – acknowledge, and take into account, Russia's grievances towards the West, the Netherlands is more vocal in its normative criticism towards the Russian Federation, particularly since the downing of Malaysia Airlines flight MH17.³ In the case of France, researcher David Cadier (2018, 1353) argues, 'the paradigmatic conviction that guaranteeing Europe's stability required Russia to be firmly anchored to the European security architecture [translated] into concrete policy decisions aimed at ensuring that Moscow's security concerns were somehow taken into account in Euro-Atlantic organizations.'

At the same time, member states that promote a more inclusionary conceptualisation of Russia as an integral part of the European security

order have reflected on, and problematised, this conviction since the annexation of Crimea in 2014. For example, where prior to the Ukrainian conflict German foreign policy makers promoted a Russia-policy based on 'rapprochement through linkage', the annexation of Crimea has constituted a red line for Berlin (van der Togt 2021, 45–46). Wolfgang Zellner (2017) argues that Germany's prior 'expectation of a cooperative relationship [with Russia] in the framework of a shared order has been [...] fundamentally destroyed' since the crisis in Ukraine (see also van der Togt 2021).

Comparatively, in the case of Italy, the annexation of Crimea appears to have had less of an impact on foreign policy attitudes towards Russia. Although Italian foreign policy makers have certainly criticised Russia's actions in Ukraine, the annexation of Crimea has not erased the fundamental conviction shared among the Italian political elite that Russia is, and will always remain, a key player and potential 'positive' actor in the promotion of stability on the European continent (Alcaro 2013, 81; Siddi 2018, 1–2).

Overall, one of the more fundamental dividing lines in EU debates is thus related to Russia's role in the European security order. While member states that share a direct border with Russia and have a Soviet past tend to present Russia as an outsider to the European security order, member states unencumbered by these geographical and historical factors lean towards a more inclusionary understanding of Russia's role on the European continent, albeit to varying degrees.

³ The section on diverging policy preferences further unpacks the impact of the downing of Malaysia Airlines

flight MH17 on Dutch foreign policy attitudes towards the Russian Federation.

Threat assessments among EU member states

Another conceptual fault line in the EU debate on Russia is driven by diverging threat assessments among member states. Threat perceptions differ across EU member states both in terms of the perceived *level* of threat and in terms of

the *nature* of the perceived threat, ranging from 'soft' threat perceptions (for example political interference) to 'hard' threat perceptions (for example kinetic military action) (see figure 3 below).

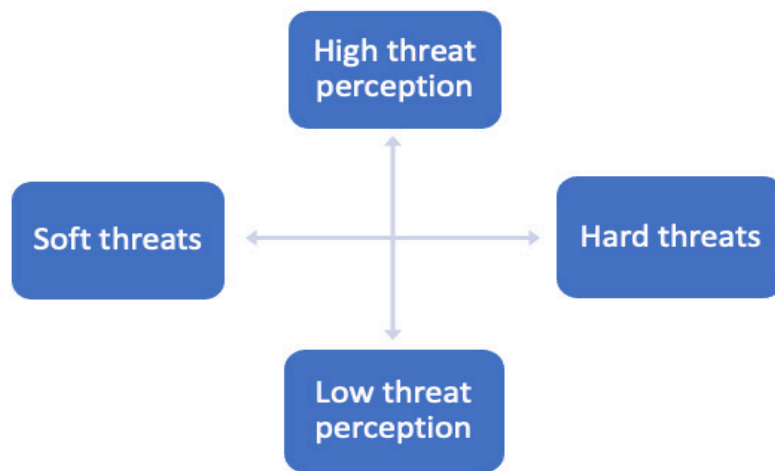


Figure 3. Diverging threat assessments among EU member states

Although one might expect political actors from central and eastern Europe (CEE) to exhibit higher threat perceptions than those from western Europe, Stefano Braghiroli (2015, 69) demonstrates that – at least at the level of the European Parliament – MEPs from CEE exhibit attitudes towards Russia that equal the European Parliament average. Importantly, this is not because threat perceptions among CEE member states are averagely low, but rather because there is high internal variance among eastern member states in their threat assessment of the Russian Federation.

Threat perceptions are highest among the flank countries directly bordering the Russian Federation – Poland, Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia. Policy analyst Kadri Liik (2018)

demonstrates that these countries not only fear a 'soft' threat of political interference, but also a 'hard' threat of *kinetic* military action. In these member states, Russia is perceived as the main threat to their domestic security and NATO is seen as the only guarantee for national survival should there be a confrontation with Moscow (for example, Siddi and Sus 2018; Veebel 2018, 296–98).

In Finland, the annexation of Crimea has similarly increased threat perceptions vis-à-vis Russia, but they seem to have materialised in a different way. Compared to the Baltic states and Poland, a fear of *kinetic* military action has been less of an issue in foreign policy debates in Finland. Instead, the discussion has focused on 'soft' threats surrounding Russia's unpredictable

behaviour from 2014 onwards, especially as this has led to an increase in asylum seekers attempting to cross the Russo-Finnish border (Koch and Vainikka 2019, 807–08). Moreover, Katharina Koch and Vilhelmiina Vainikka (2019, 818–20) demonstrate, ‘both Finland and Russia are investing in efforts to maintain a stable relationship through cross-border interaction and efficient trade relations that result in economic interdependence.’

Political scientist Paula Marcinkowska (2020, 115) explores the strong internal variance in attitudes towards Russia within the Visegrad group, a political alliance between the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, and Poland established in 1991 to provide mutual support for their integration into the European Union. As the complex historical relationship with Russia – to varying degrees – was replaced by political and economic interests, Marcinkowska argues, Poland continued to perceive Russia as a security threat, whereas the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia lowered their threat perceptions, focusing instead on pragmatic cooperation with the Russian Federation.

Among member states in the wider CEE region, Croatia – in turn – demonstrates a relatively high threat perception vis-à-vis Russia. In the case of Croatia, this threat assessment is driven by the country’s location on the border of the European Union. While Zagreb takes part in Euro-Atlantic security structures, many of its neighbours do not. Following László Szerencsés (2021), Zagreb fears that a potential ‘clash of geopolitical interests’ in the Western Balkans might spill over onto Croatian territory.

A telling comparison in central and eastern Europe is between Romania and Bulgaria. While both countries border the Black Sea and thus share similar geostrategic vulnerabilities, they have exhibited vastly different threat perceptions

vis-à-vis Russia following the annexation of Crimea.

Policy analyst Marcin Zaborowski (2021, 2) explains that while Romania clearly responded with an increased sense of insecurity, urging NATO to reinforce its eastern flank, Bulgaria has remained largely indifferent to Russia’s annexation of Crimea – their source of insecurity not being an assertive Russian Federation, but rather issues such as illegal immigration and terrorism (see also Liik 2018).

Bulgaria’s positive attitude towards Russia, political scientist Fabienne Bossuyt (2017, 10–11) explains, is directly tied to the country’s strong economic and energy dependence on Russia. At the same time, writes Bossuyt, ‘Bulgaria is also a reliable western partner and is keen to follow official lines of the EU, even if they go against Russia’s interests.’

Beyond central and eastern Europe, threat perceptions appear to be lowest in Italy, Greece, Cyprus, Germany, and France (also see Russo 2016, 198–204). Unencumbered by geographical proximity, these member states tend to perceive a threat from Russia solely in indirect or ‘soft’ terms. In the case of France, David Cadier (2018, 1362) demonstrates, ‘Russia’s actions in Ukraine have not been regarded by French strategic elites as posing, in themselves, a direct threat to their country’s security interests. However, in the precedents they set and the responses they call for, they are seen as negatively affecting the context in which France is seeking to defend [its security] interests, as well as, indirectly, its capacity to do so.’

Italy displays an even more moderate stance vis-à-vis Russia, explicitly presenting the country as a *partner* (Liik 2018). On the one hand, this is driven by the historically strong relations that have existed between Rome and Moscow. At the

same time, Liik (2018, 32) points to pragmatic considerations, arguing that Italy sees Moscow as a key partner in various conflicts in the Middle East, as well as in the fight against terrorism.

Greece and Cyprus exhibit some of the lowest threat perceptions of Russia among EU member states (Popescu and Leonard 2007). Their assessment of Russia as a non-threat is rooted in three factors: (i) economically, both Greece and Cyprus have benefitted significantly from Russian investment and energy relations with the Russian Federation; (ii) geopolitically, Russia has supported both member states in their conflictual dealings with Turkey; and (iii) culturally, both countries have presented Christian Orthodox commonalities as a strong basis for positive relations with Moscow.

Importantly, on a European level, there is a direct link between the level of perceived threat and support for a Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). Based on a large-scale survey among national MPs of 16 EU member states,

researcher Federico Russo (2016, 198–204) demonstrates that the average national MP who considers Russia to be a ‘non-threat’ has a 39.7 percent probability of strongly supporting the CFSP, whereas national MPs who consider Russia to be a ‘big threat’ demonstrate a 56 percent likelihood.⁴ Thus, the higher threat perceptions of Russia are, the more likely national MPs are to support EU integration in the foreign policy domain.

Overall, threat perceptions are highest among the flank countries directly bordering the Russian Federation. These member states not only fear a ‘soft’ threat of political interference but also a ‘hard’ threat of *kinetic* military action. Among the wider CEE member states, however, there is high internal variance in terms of the perceived level of threat emanating from Russia. Comparatively, threat perceptions are lowest in Italy, Greece, Cyprus, Germany, and France.

Country-level politicisation of the ‘Russia question’

The second fault line consists of the varying ways in which the ‘Russia question’ has been politicised in individual member states, which has impacted member states’ attitudes towards Russia on an EU level. A somewhat crude picture occasionally painted in the literature on EU member states’ attitudes towards Russia differentiates between an ‘old Europe’ consisting of the founding members in the West and a ‘new Europe’ consisting of the post-communist eastern countries joining the EU during the fifth and sixth enlargement. Caterina Carta and Stefano Braghiroli (2011, 261) pose,

for example, that “‘Old Europe’— to varying degrees of intensity – sees in the [...] Russian [post-Soviet] transition the opportunity to spread stability through economic integration, [whereas] “New Europe” considers Russia as a threat to regional security and urges the EU to assume a severe stance.’

This simple East-West cleavage does not do justice to the nuances that exist both *among* and *within* EU member states, however. Particularly among the eastern member states, there is a clear difference between the Baltic states and

⁴ See Russo (2016, 198) for an overview of the 16 member states that are covered in the analysis. Russo relies on data from political elite surveys carried out by the

IntUne Project in 2007 and 2009. The total sample size for the 2007 and 2009 datasets were 1,331 and 1,069, respectively.

Poland, on the one hand, and former Soviet satellite states, such as Bulgaria and Hungary, on the other.

While political elites in the Baltic states and Poland demonstrate more or less uniformly negative attitudes towards Russia, which appear to be strongly history-driven, there is wider variation in attitudes towards Russia in post-communist EU member states such as Bulgaria and Hungary.⁵ Ainius Lašas and David Galbreath (2013) demonstrate that ‘history-related tensions [are] at the core of mutual distrust’ between the Baltic states and Russia. This feeling of mistrust is exacerbated by the presence of substantial Russian-speaking communities in Estonia and Latvia (see also Duvold et al 2020). Although Poland lacks the Soviet remnant of a Russian-speaking community, the country’s foreign policy towards Russia is similarly influenced by a strong sense

of insecurity driven by their experience as a Soviet satellite state.

Where negative attitudes towards Russia are more or less uniformly shared across the political spectrum in the Baltic states and Poland, attitudes towards Russia in Bulgaria and Hungary follow distinct patterns on the left-right political spectrum (see figure 4 below). Sten Berglund and Georgi Karasimeonov (2019) demonstrate that pro-Russian sentiments in Bulgaria are concentrated on the left side of the spectrum, whereas pro-Russian attitudes in Hungary accumulate on the right. According to their analysis, the Socialist Party is the ‘primary carrier of the pro-Russian banner’ in Bulgaria, whereas Hungarians with a pro-Russian orientation come together in right-wing political parties such as Fidesz and Jobbik (Berglund and Karasimeonov 2019, 5, 14).

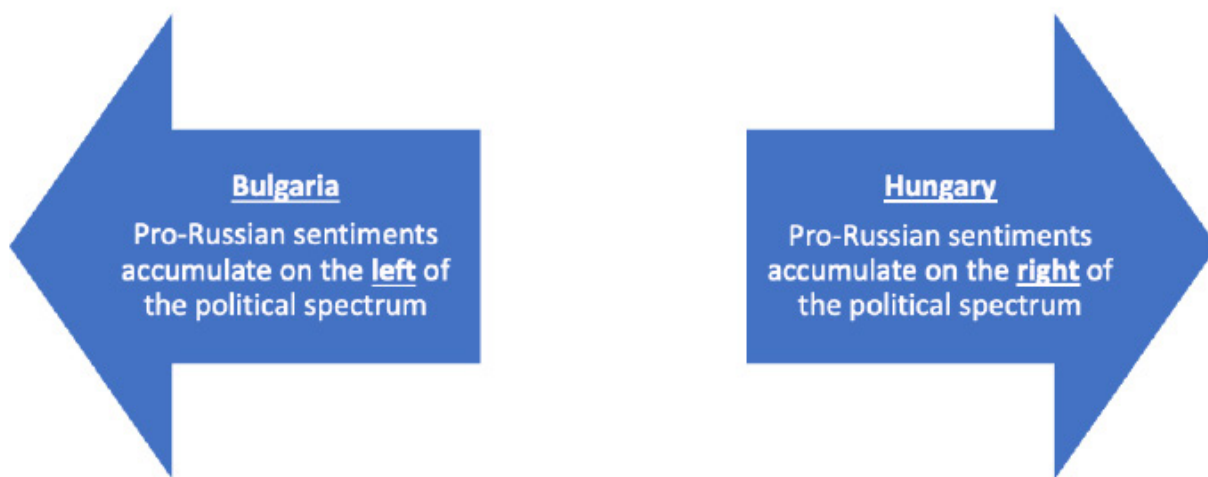


Figure 4. Country-level politicisation of the ‘Russia question’ in Bulgaria and Hungary (see Berglund and Karasimeonov 2019)

⁵ At the same time, the section on diverging policy preferences explores how actors across the political spectrum in Poland are cautiously but increasingly

expressing support for engagement with the Russian Federation.

The Bulgarian Socialist Party's (BSP) pro-Russian stance can be explained by its historical roots. Formerly known as the Bulgarian Communist Party, BSP was the ruling party of the People's Republic of Bulgaria from 1946 until 1989. This historical allegiance to Russia is exacerbated by the fact that Bulgarian society more generally considers itself to be culturally, linguistically and religiously close to the Russian Federation. Even though pro-Russian sentiments are concentrated on the left, attitudes towards Russia are thus largely positive across the political spectrum in Bulgaria. Berglund and Karasimeonov (2019, 2) write that 'the decisive role played by Russia in the liberation of Bulgaria from Ottoman domination in 1878 created a long-lasting myth about the special relations between these two Orthodox and Slavonic countries.'

In the case of Hungary, there is a different mechanism at play. Victor Orbán reached fame in the early 1990s by running on an anti-Soviet platform. He famously gave a speech on Budapest's Heroes' Square in 1989 demanding an end to the Soviet occupation. Over the years, however, Orbán has reinvented himself as a friend of Russia by highlighting conservative commonalities between Hungarian and Russian society. Although financial interests have likely influenced Fidesz's pro-Russian turn, Orbán's positive stance towards Russia is equally tied to his rhetorical attempts to turn Hungary away from its 'western' orientation.

Comparatively, in EU member states unencumbered by a Soviet past, pro-Russian and anti-Russian stances are spread differently across the political spectrum. In general, mainstream political parties – both with a centre-left and centre-right leaning – appear to

be relatively critical of Russia, particularly since the annexation of Crimea in 2014. However, the 'Russia question' is tied to other lines of contestation in domestic political debates. In France, for example, attitudes towards Russia are 'tied to the main point of [political] polarization [...], namely attitudes towards the EU and the European integration project' (Cadier 2018, 1365). While employing a different logic, both the French far-right Europhobic party Front National and the far-left EU-pessimist Parti de Gauche link attitudes towards Russia to their wider position on European and trans-Atlantic integration.

David Cadier (2018, 1364) writes that Marine Le Pen 'has declared herself an admirer of Putin's brand of nationalism and has regularly expressed her support for Moscow's foreign policy agenda, notably in Crimea, [whereas] the far-left leader Jean-Luc Mélenchon has been rather critical [...] of Russia's domestic political regime, but his visceral anti-Americanism and Moscow's anti-mainstream postures have led him often to align himself with its foreign policy narrative.' In both cases, their position vis-à-vis Russia appears to have less to do with the Russian Federation *per se* and more to do with their wish to find an alternative vocal point in France's foreign policy orientation; one that looks beyond the European Union and the North Atlantic alliance.⁶

In the Netherlands, the 'Russia question' is less tied to domestic debates surrounding the country's foreign policy orientation, but political parties nonetheless follow a pattern of pro-Russian vs anti-Russian attitudes similar to those found in France. Generally, Dutch centrist parties both on the left and right express relatively critical views of Russia, whereas pro-

⁶ Notably, Marine Le Pen's Front National has also received funding from the Russian Federation by taking loans from

Russian banks with links to the Kremlin (eg, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-39478066>).

Russian anomalies can be found further to the right of the political spectrum. One such example is the conservative Calvinist Reformed Political Party (SGP), which criticises Russia’s geopolitical positioning on the European continent but nonetheless employs a positive rhetoric vis-à-vis Russia in which it promotes ‘respect for conservative Christian family values’ in the Russian Federation (SGP 2021, 150) – a discourse that is not too far removed from the pro-Russian rhetoric found among Fidesz representatives in Hungary.

Overall, the distinction between ‘Russia doves’ in western Europe and ‘Russia hawks’ in eastern

Europe is thus overly simplified or, at the very least, outdated. The Soviet legacy has led to varying political outcomes in eastern Europe, ranging from more or less uniformly anti-Russian sentiments in Poland and the Baltic states to pro-Russian sentiments on opposite sides of the political spectrum in Bulgaria and Hungary. In western member states, the variation is less extreme: attitudes towards Russia appear to be uniformly critical across the political mainstream, whereas pro-Russian anomalies can be found on both the left and right fringes of the political spectrum.

Diverging policy preferences: pragmatic engagement vs normative exclusion?

Driven by different conceptualisations of Russia’s role on the European continent, varying levels of perceived threat, and differences in the degree of politicisation of the ‘Russia question’ in domestic debates, EU member states propose vastly disparate policy trajectories. The divergence in aspired policy directions among member states constitutes yet another conceptual fault line in EU debates

on Russia (see figure 5 below). The two policy extremes found among member states are an engagement-prone and pragmatic approach on the one hand, and an exclusion-prone and normative approach on the other (Roggeveen 2021). Importantly, this is not a binary choice, as member states – to varying degrees – propose a combination of the two.



Figure 5. The divergence in aspired policy directions

Member states such as Austria, France, Germany, Italy, Greece, and Cyprus are placed on the more pro-engagement end of the spectrum. In the case of Austria, Liik (2018) writes, engagement with Moscow is seen as the best way to resolve tensions with the Russian Federation. Embracing a similar point of view, France and Germany pushed for an EU summit with Russian president Vladimir Putin in June 2021.

For Germany, the post-Cold War goal has always been to de-escalate relations with Moscow through pragmatic engagement and economic interlinking (van der Togt 2021). In the case of France, rapprochement with Russia is not only seen as a way to resolve tensions on the European continent, but also as a tool to solve non-European crises in the Middle East and on the African continent (Jurczynszyn 2019). France's approach of pragmatic engagement is moreover driven by a wish to shift the balance of power in and beyond the European continent. It is tied to France's wider geostrategic objective of counterbalancing a US hegemony in the international domain, as well as preventing a closer Sino-Russian entente (Popescu and Leonard 2007, 31–36; van der Togt 2020).

In the case of Italy, support for a policy of rapprochement is based on a different kind of 'balancing' strategy. According to Riccardo Alcaro (2013, 81), Rome's support for reconciliation is primarily driven by the notion that a continued course of confrontation with Moscow would be detrimental to a stable and secure European continent – one that necessarily includes the Russian Federation. It is thus, Marco Siddi (2018, 3–6) writes, that 'Rome [has been] one of the main advocates of détente in East-West relations both within the EU and NATO.'

The largest group of EU member states consists of intermediary countries that wish to follow a path of pragmatic engagement, while also emphasising a need for pressure. This middle group ranges from member states such as Finland and Sweden that propose a more 'neutral' approach towards the Kremlin to countries such as the Netherlands and Denmark that are still relatively dialogue-prone but more explicitly normative vis-à-vis Moscow.

Finland's strategy towards Russia, Kari Möttölä (2017, 14–15) explains, has been based on 'an active policy of neutrality [which aims to maintain] domestic democratic order, while not provoking Russia as a neighbour.' The emphasis in Finnish foreign policy has thus been on maintaining a positive relationship with the Russian Federation by focusing on technocratic and cross-border cooperation, while avoiding more politicised – and potentially confrontational – topics (Haukkala and Etzold 2013, 136–40). Not unlike Finland, Sweden has similarly opted for a neutrality-based foreign policy, although the country has been somewhat more vocal in its criticism of Russia's antagonistic behaviour in the international domain (Popescu and Leonard 2007, 47). Comparatively, Denmark has opted for an even stronger normative approach towards Russia – not only by voicing its criticism of Russia's positioning in international affairs, but also by participating in the North Atlantic Alliance since 1949 (Haukkala and Etzold 2013, 140–43).

The Netherlands – in turn – has opted for a two-track approach through which it combines pressure on the Russian Federation with dialogue (Klijn 2020; van der Togt 2020). Tom Casier (2013, 121–25) explains the Dutch position vis-à-vis Russia in the following terms: 'the Netherlands has traditionally seen itself as a country with an international responsibility. It favours multilateral cooperation and an

open international economic order, based on free trade [...] However, the Netherlands has [also] played a prominent role in development cooperation and has often been a vocal critic of human rights violations.'

The downing of Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 over eastern Ukraine has reinforced this normative streak in Dutch foreign policy towards the Russian Federation. Tony van der Togt (2020) demonstrates that 'continuing Russian disinformation on MH17 [...] ensures that a return to "business as usual" remains politically unthinkable.' It is thus that Dutch foreign policy makers have given more weight to the promotion of international legal norms vis-à-vis Russia, while continuing to leave the door ajar to engage in dialogue with the Russian Federation.

The group of intermediary countries also encompasses member states such as Spain and Ireland, which traditionally lacked a strong interest in the Russian Federation but have openly condemned Russia's destabilising and antagonistic behaviour in the international domain since 2014. More recently, in the case of Spain, a heightened interest in Russia has also been driven by Josep Borrell's 'mistreatment' during a meeting with Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov in February 2021. A member state such as Malta, on the other hand, which historically enjoyed warm relations with Russia, has similarly taken a harsher stance towards Moscow since the annexation of Crimea.

On the more exclusion-prone and normative end of the spectrum, one can find member states such as Poland and Estonia. Martin Dangerfield (2013, 178–80) writes, for example, that Poland demonstrates a value-driven approach towards Russia, whereas the smaller Visegrad countries such as Hungary exhibit a more pragmatic attitude. At the same time, there has been

growing support in Poland for engagement with its eastern neighbour.

In 2017, for instance, the social-democratic party 'New Left' declared the wish to improve relations with the Russian Federation, arguing that interaction with Moscow should be driven by 'economic interests and cultural exchange' (Siddi and Sus 2018, 77–92). During that same year, the governing right-wing 'Law and Justice' party (PiS) similarly expressed a willingness to re-establish bilateral ties with the Russian Federation. However, given the loaded history between the two countries, as Monika Sus (2018) illustrates, this rhetoric of reconciliation can easily be misunderstood as a betrayal of Polish national interests. It is thus, writes Sus, that PiS 'continues to reiterate that there is no reciprocity and readiness for dialogue on the Russian side and that the key to rapprochement lies in Moscow [...] Hence, the foreign policy stance of the current government seems to be trapped between the declared readiness for cooperation and deep reluctance in practice.'

Additionally, the leading position occupied by Germany and France in the execution of a common EU response to Russia has been a source of frustration for member states such as Poland and Estonia (van der Togt 2020). This frustration is mainly driven by the fact that Germany and France have opted for a course of selective engagement with Russia, which runs counter to the policy trajectory of non-engagement or even exclusion preferred by these more wary member states.

Poland in particular has taken on a role as critic. Driven by a fear of being caught once more in a political gamble between Moscow and Berlin, Warsaw has positioned itself assertively in EU debates on Russia (see also Siddi and Sus 2018, 77–92). This – in turn – has led consensus-oriented member states to view Poland as an

antagonistic and obstructionist actor in EU decision-making processes.

Compared to Poland, the Baltic states have been more sensitive to the risk of being painted as obstructionist actors in EU debates on Russia. Thus, rather than positioning themselves as the 'loudest voice' in favour of an exclusionist EU policy towards Russia, the Baltic countries have pursued a proactive strategy of engagement with states in the eastern neighbourhood.

Ainius Lašas and David Galbreath (2013) explain that 'the Baltic states were able to play the parts of "bastion, beacon and bridge" vis-à-vis the [...] other post-Soviet states.' 'From the Baltic states' perspective', write Lašas and Galbreath, 'they had a unique position to guide other post-Soviet states to the wider political, economic and security communities. The Baltic states saw themselves as being at best a "bridge" and in the worst case a "beacon" or shining example of how to go from post-Soviet state to member state.' The Baltic states have thus opted for a proactive strategy of engagement with smaller post-Soviet countries in the eastern neighbourhood, taking on a role as 'bridge' between the EU and the Eastern

Partnership countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine).

Interestingly, Portugal has also adopted a 'bridge' narrative in its dealings with Russia, albeit based on a vastly different logic from the one found in the Baltic countries. Licínia Simão (2013, 111–13) explains that Lisbon has positioned itself as a 'bridge' between Moscow and Brussels precisely because of the absence of historical ties. The lack of strong pre-existing ties with the Russian Federation has been framed as an advantage by Portuguese actors, as it necessarily implies an *absence* of conflictual relations.

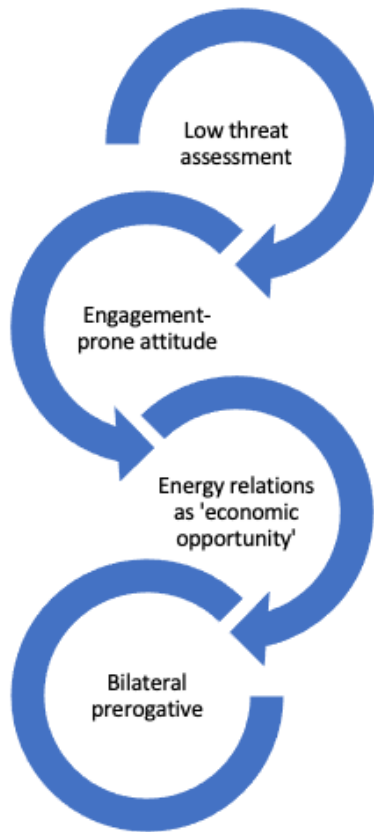
Overall, EU member states have proposed vastly different policy trajectories, which have been based on divergent views on how to maintain stability on the European continent. While some have leaned towards engagement with the Russian Federation, others have opted for an exclusion-prone approach. Altogether, up until September 2021, member states have – cautiously – moved in the direction of pragmatic engagement, even in more wary member states such as Poland. At the same time, the feasibility of this path depends in equal parts on Moscow's posture towards EU member states.

'Bilateralisation' vs 'Europeanisation': the case of EU-Russia energy relations

Another source of contention in EU debates on Russia are the diverging preferences for Europeanisation and bilateralisation among EU actors. Member states are selective in which issues they wish to cover within an EU framework and which topics they prefer to pursue through bilateral interaction with Russia. This conceptual fault line coincides with an important topical point of contention in EU debates on Russia: the EU-Russia energy relationship. Broadly speaking, member states

that exhibit *engagement-prone attitudes* and a *low threat assessment* tend to view energy relations with the Russian Federation as an *economic opportunity*, which is then framed as a *bilateral prerogative*, whereas member states that demonstrate *exclusion-prone attitudes* and a *high threat assessment* are inclined to frame energy relations as a *security issue*, which is generally portrayed as an *EU-level affair* (see figure 6 below).

Bilateralisation paradigm



Europeanisation paradigm

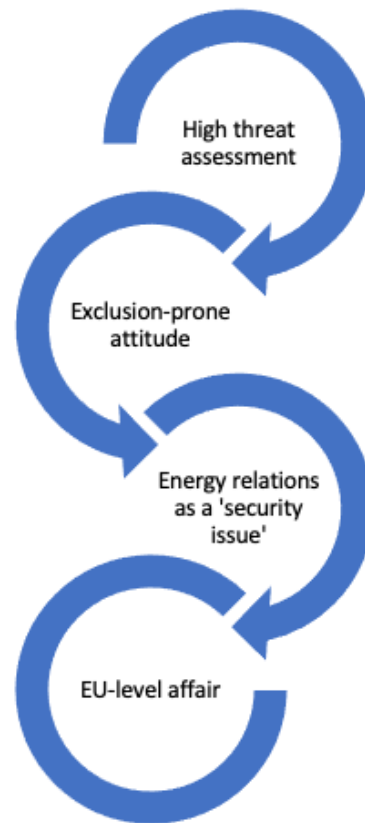


Figure 6. Diverging preferences for 'bilateralisation' and 'Europeanisation'

Tony van der Togt (2021, 57) explains that 'EU decision-making on relations with Russia has always been a complicated matter, as EU member states [...] have been willing to Europeanise only part of the relationship while reserving especially energy relations for *bilateral* (commercial) negotiations, irrespective of the interests of other EU member states [...]'. Russia – in turn – has also preferred to deal with member states bilaterally. Not in the least because it has found it easier to negotiate with individual countries rather than a bloc of 27 nations, all of which exhibit vastly different attitudes and interests vis-à-vis Russia (Marcinkowska 2020, 121; Popescu and Leonard 2007, 54). More than

anything, however, the Kremlin has preferred to negotiate with the EU's most powerful actor, Germany.

Germany, too, has preferred to bilateralise its energy relations with the Russian Federation (van der Togt 2021, 44). While other member states initially accepted Germany's position as a leading actor in EU interactions with Moscow, especially following the annexation of Crimea in 2014, van der Togt (2020, 38) writes, 'Berlin's opposition to fully include energy relations with Russia, including the construction of Nord Stream 2, in a broader European geopolitical approach towards Russia, has damaged its

position as a trusted negotiator on behalf of the EU towards Russia in the eyes of Central European states, like Poland.'

It is clear that the choice between bilateralisation and Europeanisation has been strategically driven. Tom Casier (2013, 125) demonstrates, for example, that member states such as Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg have pushed a pro-integrationist agenda in such areas as human rights and democracy – not in the least to prevent these contentious topics from constituting a roadblock in their bilateral, economic relationship with Russia.

By strategically manoeuvring between bilateralisation and Europeanisation, member states have been able to fulfil their 'international responsibility' of addressing norm violations, while also maintaining a relatively stable economic relationship with the Russian Federation. The annexation of Crimea and – particularly for the Netherlands – the downing of Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 have problematised this strategy; these events have pushed even the most bilaterally oriented member states in the direction of a more united EU approach. At the same time, some member states have nonetheless continued to engage in bilateral interaction with Russia, where this has served their economic interests.

Finland has similarly favoured a positive bilateral relationship with Russia, but for different reasons than the member states discussed above. Tobias Etzold and Hiski Haukkala (2013, 136–140) argue that 'there seems to be a growing disillusionment in Finland with the prospect of a common EU Russia policy, as well as growing concern over Russia's development. As a consequence, Finland is increasingly grasping the need to have a sound bilateral relationship with Russia while at the same time doing its very best to prod along a more

unified and consistent Russia policy on the EU level.' Thus, in the case of Finland, favouring a trajectory of bilateralisation has not been driven by economic interests *per se*, but rather by the wish to prevent any type of escalation in their relationship with Russia.

Member states such as Poland and Romania, which share similar geostrategic vulnerabilities with Finland and exhibit similarly high threat perceptions vis-à-vis Russia, have translated these attitudes into a vastly different approach, favouring a Europeanisation of their relationship with Moscow over the pursuit of bilateral relations (for example, Nitoiu and Moga 2021, 9–12). Marcinkowska (2020, 117) writes, for example, that Poland has actively campaigned for a comprehensive EU policy with the aim of convincing a member state such as Germany to abandon its two-track strategy, particularly as it pertains to bilateral energy relations with Moscow.

Monika Sus (2018, 77–92) explains that Warsaw fears Nord Stream 2 will 'undermine European solidarity and the Energy Union by increasing the dependency of the EU gas market on Russian resources.' Poland contends that Russia will use energy projects such as Nord Stream 2 to manipulate countries bordering the Russian Federation, as has previously been the case in Ukraine. It therefore posits, writes Sus, 'that the mandate to negotiate with Russia should be granted to the European Commission [as] Warsaw counts on the Commission's commitment to the Energy Union and thus on its opposition to the pipeline.' Similar to Poland, Romania's critical stance with regard to energy relations is based on Moscow's track record of using energy prices to manipulate domestic political affairs in Moldova (Bossuyt 2017, 10–11; Nitoiu and Moga 2021, 9–12).

The choice for Europeanisation has not solely been driven by high threat perceptions, however. In the case of Slovenia, Europeanising the 'Russia question' offered a new member state the 'unique opportunity [...] to consolidate its position in the international community' by supporting the EU's normative agenda vis-à-vis Russia during the early years of its membership (Kajnič 2011). This Europeanisation drive in Slovenian foreign policy was short-lived, however. The financial crisis, Ana Bojinović Fenko and Marjan Svetličič (2017) explain, resulted in the de-Europeanisation of Slovenian foreign policy, as Ljubljana gradually started to veer away from the EU's normative framework.

Overall, member states have thus favoured vastly different approaches, either preferring a comprehensive EU policy or strategically oscillating between bilateralisation and Europeanisation in their interaction with Moscow. Although the annexation of Crimea has certainly legitimised a more united EU response, even in the eyes of most bilaterally oriented member states, to this day, the bilateralisation/Europeanisation divide continues to operate as a salient fault line in EU debates on Russia, particularly as it pertains to topical discussions surrounding the EU-Russia energy relationship.

Conclusion and policy recommendations

This paper offered an analysis of five salient conceptual fault lines in the EU debate on Russia. Where the first fault line relates to diverging conceptualisations of Russia's role on the European continent among EU member states, the second fault line concerns the level of perceived threat, which varies significantly among member states, even when some – objectively – share similar geostrategic vulnerabilities vis-à-vis Russia. The third fault line – in turn – relates to the degree of politicisation of the 'Russia question' in individual EU countries and the varying ways in which this has influenced member states' attitudes towards Russia on a European level. The paper then explored a fourth fault line, which builds on the three conceptual points of contention mentioned before and consists of a divergence in aspired policy directions among EU member states. Here, the analysis demonstrated that member states – to varying degrees – propose a combination of two policy extremes: an engagement-prone and pragmatic approach, on the one hand, and an exclusion-prone and normative approach on the other.

Finally, the paper explored a fifth fault line, which consists of the diverging preferences for Europeanisation and bilateralisation among EU member states.

Offering a conceptual framework to better understand member states' positions vis-à-vis Russia along five dividing lines, this paper demonstrated that the ways in which individual member states conceptualise Russia (for example, as an integral part of the European security architecture or an outsider; as a non-threat or a threat) translate into broad policy attitudes (for example, an engagement-prone or exclusion-prone approach; a preference for bilateralisation or Europeanisation). To find a common ground in the EU debate on Russia, the following recommendations can be considered:

1. The EU debate on Russia tends to focus on topical issues (sanctions, energy and so on). However, these topical debates surrounding the EU's Russia agenda often reach stalemate, because the deeper conceptual fault lines that drive member states' attitudes towards the 'Russia question' are overlooked. To overcome this impasse, EU actors must **build awareness of one another's (implicit) assumptions and (re-)engage in a conceptual conversation about Russia's perceived role on the European continent.**
2. Whilst engaging in this conceptual debate, it is necessary to **realise that the conversation goes beyond a narrow discussion of the EU's 'Russia question', since member states' positions in this conversation are evidently driven by broader questions surrounding a balance of power on the European continent.** This intersectionality of policy questions is clearly visible in, for example, France's comparatively sympathetic assessment of Moscow, which appears to be – at least in part – driven by a hope to raise France's relative status in the international domain by creating a more 'balanced' division of power among international actors.
3. EU member states must furthermore **establish a baseline understanding of one another's threat perceptions vis-à-vis the Kremlin.** Only then will the European community be able to **strike the right balance between taking into account (history-driven) insecurities of some member states, while also working out a policy that is rooted in an objective assessment of the vulnerabilities of the European Union as a whole.**
4. This paper demonstrated that while the level of politicisation of the 'Russia question' in individual member states has a direct influence on member states' attitudes towards Russia on a European level, this is rarely a topic of conversation in EU debates. Thus, to move forward the EU debate on Russia, it is necessary to **develop a more nuanced understanding of the intricate ways in which the 'Russia question' has been politicised domestically.**
5. Additionally, it is necessary to **better understand the degree at which individual member states allow normative considerations to influence their interaction with the Russian Federation.** It is thus that member states must raise mutual awareness of one another's preferred policy directions, taking into account the ways in which diverging policy preferences are influenced by fundamental differences in how individual member states – historically, economically, geographically, and otherwise – relate to the Russian Federation.
6. Moreover, **the European Union must come to terms with the irreconcilability of some of the positions taken by its constitutive members.** For instance, the section on diverging policy preferences explained how the leading position fulfilled by Germany and France has – on occasion – caused dissatisfaction among other member states, particularly those in close proximity to Russia and with higher threat perceptions. Poland, for example, has criticised Germany and France's leading position, which – in turn – has led consensus-oriented member states to perceive Warsaw as a potentially antagonistic actor in EU decision-making processes.

7. This paper also demonstrated that member states have been selective in terms of the themes they have wished to cover within an EU framework and those they have wished to pursue through bilateral interaction with Moscow. **Member states should be aware of the problematic disparity that this creates: if individual states offer the EU's 'carrot' by bilaterally pursuing energy relations with the Russian Federation, while leaving more contentious topics to be dealt with by the European Union collectively, any leverage that the EU may have over Moscow is undermined. Conditionality only works if both the 'carrot' and the 'stick' can be used consistently by one and the same actor.**

While the five fault lines explored in this paper certainly do not offer a comprehensive overview of a highly nuanced political debate among member states, focusing the discussion on some of these conceptual points of contention surrounding the EU's 'Russia question' may ultimately contribute to the development of a more effective EU Russia policy. When the strongest consensus among EU member states is that they 'agree to disagree' on the articulation of a common approach towards Russia, the first step in moving the discussion forward is establishing the basis of their disagreement. Only then can member states explore where the potential commonalities lie.

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