

# Do Donor Motives Matter? Investigating Perceptions of Foreign Aid in the Conflict in Donbas

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How do the perceived motives of donor states shape recipient attitudes toward foreign aid in a conflict zone? This research note evaluates the impact of two frames that characterize the motives of foreign powers involved in a civil conflict in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine. These frames portray foreign actors as providing aid either to alleviate suffering during conflict (*humanitarian frame*) or to increase their power and influence in the recipient country (*political influence frame*). We demonstrate how framing impacts attitudes toward foreign assistance from the European Union and the Russian government among potential aid recipients in the Donbas. The results show that frames impact support for foreign aid from the European Union but have no effect on views of Russian aid. Counter to conventional expectations, aid provided for geopolitical, strategic reasons may be viewed as a positive, stabilizing force—even more than foreign aid provided for humanitarian reasons.

In “A Political Theory of Foreign Aid,” Hans Morgenthau writes: “A policy of foreign aid is no different from diplomatic or military policy or propaganda. They are all weapons in the political armory of the nation” (Morgenthau 1962, 309). This perspective is consistent with a view of foreign aid as one of many instruments foreign powers use to influence policy in other states. An alternative perspective rejects the interpretation that donor states are driven by power and influence, suggesting that they are motivated by a desire to alleviate suffering. Considerable scholarly debate remains over which perspective best characterizes the motives of donor states (Lumsdaine 1993; Heinrich 2013; Ellison 2016; Findley 2018). This debate is consequential because cross-national analyses show that aid provided for political influence can have detrimental impacts on economic growth and—when aid is provided during civil conflict—on conflict outcomes (Alesina and Dollar 2000; Bearce and Tirone 2010; Girod 2012). Existing work largely draws inferences about the motives of donor states based on their patterns of aid allocation. However, we know much less about how aid recipients perceive the motives of foreign actors. How do recipients view efforts by foreign powers to provide aid to conflict zones? Does framing the motives of donor countries make foreign involvement more or less acceptable to the public?

This research note explores these questions through a survey experiment about attitudes toward foreign aid in the

Donbas region of eastern Ukraine.<sup>1</sup> The current conflict in eastern Ukraine evolved as a Russian-backed separatist insurgency. Separatists proclaimed occupied territory in the Donbas would be known as the republics of Donetsk and Luhansk (hereafter, DNR and LNR). Since that time, the Donbas region has attracted both direct and indirect forms of foreign involvement—including substantial amounts of foreign aid—from the Russian government and the European Union (EU). As low-level fighting between separatist forces and the Ukrainian military persisted, the international community became wary of an evolving humanitarian crisis (Oliphant 2017).

To understand how recipient attitudes toward foreign aid are shaped by their perceptions of donor motives, we design a framing experiment. We embed the experiment in a public opinion survey conducted throughout the Donbas in both areas occupied by separatists and areas remaining under control of the Ukrainian government. We first identify two frames used to describe the motives of foreign powers providing aid to a conflict zone: a humanitarian frame and a political influence frame. A *humanitarian frame* characterizes foreign entities as benevolent, impartial third parties who provide aid to alleviate the suffering of a recipient population. In contrast, a *political influence frame* characterizes foreign entities as seeking power and political influence in the recipient country. We focus on these two frames because they are regularly employed by political actors and media organizations assessing the involvement of foreign powers. Our experiment examines how these frames affect attitudes toward foreign aid given to the Donbas by two actors, the EU

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<sup>1</sup>Ukraine is divided into 24 administrative units, known as oblasts. Donetsk and Luhansk, two eastern oblasts bordering Russia, make up the Donbas region or Donbas, for short. Parts of both oblasts are currently controlled by Russian-backed separatists.

and the Russian government, relative to a control condition in which no frame is provided.

Our analysis demonstrates that motives of foreign powers can influence perceptions of foreign aid, but these effects are conditional on respondents' attitudes toward donor states. Our findings are two-fold. Our first finding is that framing impacts support for foreign aid from the EU but does not impact support for Russian aid. Our second finding is that, contrary to conventional expectations, the political influence frame has a stronger positive impact on attitudes toward aid than the humanitarian frame. Favorability toward EU aid among those who receive the political influence frame is consistently higher than among those who receive the humanitarian frame, suggesting many respondents endorse the expansion of the EU's power and influence in eastern Ukraine. This effect is strongest among respondents who are favorable toward Europe *ex ante*. In contrast, the contentious relationship between Ukraine and Russia makes Ukrainians' attitudes toward Russia less malleable, irrespective of how the provision of aid is framed.

We view this note as part of a growing scholarly literature that uses public opinion research to question existing assumptions about the provision of foreign aid. For example, drawing on micro-level survey data from Afghanistan, [Böhnke and Zürcher \(2013\)](#) challenge the notion that foreign aid in conflict zones wins "hearts and minds" of civilians. In a survey experiment in Bangladesh, [Dietrich, Mahmud, and Winters \(2018\)](#) show that highlighting US sponsorship of a development program improves public attitudes toward the local government in Bangladesh rather than undermining its legitimacy. A series of survey experiments using public and elite samples in Uganda provide new insights into how recipients perceive aid donors. The findings show that recipient publics believe that foreign aid is not easily prone to elite capture ([Findley, Harris, Milner and Nielson 2017](#)) and that the public generally prefers development projects funded by foreign governments rather than the state ([Findley, Milner and Nielson 2017](#)). The results further illustrate that there is little difference in how recipients evaluate multilateral versus bilateral donors ([Milner, Nielson and Findley 2016](#)).

The contribution of this research note is to draw on public opinion research in recipient countries to complicate claims that aid provided for geopolitical reasons is inherently perceived as negative. In some circumstances, political influence can be viewed as a positive or stabilizing force. This research supports calls for "much greater attention to the politics of aid allocation specifically in the context of wars and peace processes" ([Findley 2018](#), 361). We believe that doing so necessitates a thorough understanding of the attitudes of citizens in recipient countries. Cross-national analyses of foreign aid and civil conflict may be unable to adequately capture the array of foreign powers involved in a given conflict, their strategic objectives, and the impact those objectives have on conflict outcomes.

### Foreign Involvement in the Conflict in Eastern Ukraine

The current conflict in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine involves two prominent foreign actors: Russia and the EU. Among external actors, Russia has had the most obvious—and most significant—influence on the conflict. Journalists, open-source researchers, and international monitoring missions have documented the Russian government's covert military support for Ukrainian separatists, and the Kremlin has publicly hinted at its role in fueling the

conflict ([Walker 2015](#)). In recent years, the EU has also significantly increased its involvement in Ukraine as the country looks toward joining European institutions. This section provides an overview of the conflict in eastern Ukraine with a focus on the involvement of foreign powers.

Tensions cultivated during decades of Imperial and Soviet rule between a relatively pro-European western and central Ukraine and a relatively pro-Russian eastern Ukraine escalated in late 2013. In November 2013, Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich declined to sign the Association Agreement with the EU, which would have set Ukraine on a European trajectory. Instead, Yanukovich reopened negotiations with Russia about joining the Eurasian Customs Union and accepted a \$15 billion aid package from Moscow. These actions led to mass protests that sparked the "EuroMaidan Revolution," which culminated in February 2014, when Yanukovich fled the country. In response, counter protests (termed "anti-Maidan" protests), often financed by Yanukovich and his allies, took place in the southern and eastern regions of Ukraine. They continued after Yanukovich's ouster, including in Crimea, where Russian forces staged a covert military operation and annexed the peninsula.

During this period, anti-Maidan movements in the regions of Luhansk and Donetsk, fueled by Russian weapons, arms, and military advisors, escalated into a separatist insurgency. By late spring, separatist militias proclaimed the establishment of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (DNR and LNR, respectively) in parts of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. With Russian assistance, these republics took on some of the characteristics of autonomous states. The fighting crescendoed in August 2014, leading to a ceasefire agreement as part of the Minsk Protocol in September. However, within a few months, the ceasefire collapsed. Another deadly escalation at Debaltsevo in Donetsk led to the signing of the Minsk II Protocol, which was drafted with input from France and Germany in February 2015. Although Minsk II remains the governing ceasefire agreement, the situation remains somewhat stalemated as fighting continues to erupt periodically ([Wittke 2019](#)).

While many third parties have been involved in the conflict in Ukraine, we focus on attitudes toward the two most prominent foreign actors: the EU and the Russian government. The Russian government has financially and militarily supported the separatists in the Donbas region since the earliest days of the war, making Ukraine's turn to the West all but inevitable. Despite the Kremlin's denials, journalists, researchers, and international monitoring missions have proven Russia's involvement in fueling the war beyond a shadow of a doubt. As Russian President Vladimir Putin admitted, Russian military advisors have contributed to the separatists' war effort ([Walker 2015](#)).

With respect to European involvement in Ukraine, since the EuroMaidan Revolution, Kyiv has pursued a Western-facing foreign policy. An association agreement between Ukraine and the EU came into force on September 1, 2017, to strengthen economic ties. Europe has viewed Ukraine as "the literal and figurative battleground for what it means to be 'European'" and has thus provided crucial financing for the Ukrainian government and large sums of aid since the EuroMaidan Revolution ([Groza et al. 2017](#)). Although the EU has not offered any direct military aid to Ukraine, individual member states have offered lethal and nonlethal forms of military assistance. European states have also imposed an array of sanctions on Russia for its annexation of Crimea and its role in fueling the conflict in Luhansk and Donetsk ([EU Newsroom 2017](#)).

### Donor Motives and Foreign Aid Outcomes

A central way that foreign powers have been involved in the separatist conflict in eastern Ukraine is through the provision of foreign aid to Donbas. Existing scholarship explores why states provide foreign aid, and what impacts those motives have on aid effectiveness. Arguments about the motives of foreign powers fall into one of two camps—that aid is provided “selflessly” or “selfishly” (Heinrich 2013).<sup>2</sup> Some researchers believe that states provide aid to conflict zones for humanitarian, nonstrategic reasons. In *Moral Vision in International Politics*, Lumsdaine (1993) argues the provision of aid for economic development is rooted in “humanitarian and egalitarian principles of the donor countries” (30). He demonstrates that public attitudes in donor countries and patterns of foreign aid flows are consistent with humanitarian motivations. Similarly, Hattori (2003) points out that foreign aid is a “moral practice”; donor states make ethical claims that aid can “embody the ideal of humanitarianism” (230). Lancaster (2007) argues that the provision of aid has evolved into an international norm where wealthy states are expected to provide development assistance and humanitarian relief.

Others claim that states provide foreign aid for strategic reasons in order to influence policy in the recipient country. Early research on foreign aid suggested that major powers use aid to develop or maintain political influence abroad. Hans Morgenthau (1962) famously wrote: “Much of what goes by the name of foreign aid today is in the nature of bribes” (302). Dudley and Montmarquette (1976) describe how traditionally, bilateral foreign aid flows were thought to be motivated by geopolitical competition and colonial ties. Alesina and Dollar (2000) provide evidence that patterns of foreign aid flows are “dictated by political and strategic considerations” (33). Many argue that in contemporary politics, rising foreign powers like China and Saudi Arabia use development aid to gain leverage in recipient states vis-à-vis Western donors (Woods 2008). Recent research demonstrates that such strategic and political factors may be similarly important in the allocation of foreign aid in conflict zones (Ellison 2016; Findley 2018).

This debate is consequential because the motives of donors can matter for where foreign aid is allocated, the mechanism by which it is delivered (Dietrich 2013), and the ultimate consequences of that aid. For instance, Girod (2012) looks at the impact of aid on observed public health outcomes in conflict zones, conditional on the strategic importance of recipient states. She finds that foreign aid is only effective after civil conflicts when donors provide it for non-strategic reasons. Cross-national studies of development aid reach similar conclusions. Alesina and Dollar (2000) claim that aid may not be especially effective precisely because donors allocate assistance to further their own geopolitical interests. Similarly, Bearce and Tirone (2010) show that foreign aid leads to positive economic outcomes when the political benefits of aid provision for the donor state are small.

Scholars have made great advances in developing ways to operationalize and measure the relative influence of donor motives on aid outcomes based on observed patterns of foreign assistance. A natural next step in this literature is to explore how recipients perceive the actions of donors, and how such perceptions shape attitudes toward foreign aid. There is little concrete evidence of whether the motives of donors matter to aid recipients and, if so, whether they ex-

pect aid provided for political versus humanitarian reasons will generate different outcomes. While novel public opinion research explores attitudes of donor citizens (Prather 2015, 2020; Baker 2015; Hurst, Tidwell and Hawkins 2017; Heinrich, Kobayashi and Long 2018; Dietrich, Hyde and Winters 2019), there is substantially less literature on attitudes of recipient citizens. In a review of public opinion and foreign aid, Milner and Tingley (2013) write, “There is very little research on attitudes toward aid in recipient countries and only limited work on public opinion toward aid in donor countries” (390).

Yet understanding the attitudes of aid recipients is often critical to evaluating the relative effectiveness of aid programs. Public opinion around aid programs shapes both perceptions and realities of their political impact. With respect to foreign aid and civil conflict, public opinion also may have a considerable impact on outcomes. For example, US counterinsurgency doctrine uses foreign aid projects in order to win the support of civilians in conflict zones. Empirical evidence, however, provides reasons to be skeptical of this strategy. Böhnke and Zürcher (2013), for instance, find that US development aid in Afghan communities did not improve the reputation of foreign actors among recipients. Instead, it increased perceptions of instability.

Perceptions of donor motives can also affect how domestic actors perceive the legitimacy of their government. Governments receiving substantial aid from foreign powers with non-altruistic motives may be perceived as “puppets” of the donor. Domestic opposition leaders or rebel groups may invoke this information in order to rally the public against the state. As a corollary, governments receiving aid from reputable foreign actors may be perceived by their publics as more legitimate. Dietrich, Mahmud, and Winters (2018) show, for instance, that providing information about the foreign sponsorship of development projects increases confidence in local government, likely because the public rewards local governments for securing the development projects. Overall, understanding how recipient publics view foreign aid is important both as an end in and of itself and as a means to assess aid effectiveness.

### Two Frames of Foreign Aid

How do aid recipients perceive the motives of donors and the aid they provide? This study explores how potential aid recipients in eastern Ukraine perceive two foreign actors—the EU and the Russian government—and their efforts to provide humanitarian aid to the region. This section identifies two frames invoked by domestic and international actors to discuss the motives of third parties offering financial assistance during a conflict. We theorize about the ways in which these frames shape how respondents evaluate the acceptability of foreign aid in conflict zones.

*Frames* invoke “particular definitions and interpretations of political issues” (Shah, Watts, Domke and Fan 2002, 343). Large literatures in psychology and sociology analyze the role of framing in shaping public opinion.<sup>3</sup> Framing effects occur “when (often small) changes in the presentation of an issue or event produce (sometimes large) changes of opinion” (Chong and Druckman 2007, 104). The frames discussed in this research note refer to “frames in communication” or “media frames” (Chong 2000), which are used by highly visible actors—including political officials, advocacy networks, and media outlets—to shape the attitudes of or-

<sup>2</sup>In Breuning’s (1995) typology, a similar distinction is made between an aid donor conceiving of their role as a “good neighbor” or a “power broker.”

<sup>3</sup>See Chong and Druckman (2007) for an overview of framing theory.

dinary citizens. Frames shape attitudes by affecting the relative importance that individuals attach to different considerations when evaluating a topic of interest (Druckman 2001). For example, news reports about the 1999 Kosovo crisis that were framed to emphasize an unfolding humanitarian crisis increased support for American intervention in the conflict (Berinsky and Kinder 2006).

We identify two frames used to characterize why states provide foreign aid during conflict: a humanitarian frame and a political influence frame. First, a *humanitarian frame* suggests that states provide foreign aid during civil wars for noble reasons. This frame encourages respondents to think about how foreign aid benefits recipients by improving their health or safety. Second, a *political influence frame* suggests that states provide aid during conflict in order to gain influence in the recipient country's politics. This frame encourages respondents to think about how foreign aid increases the political influence of foreign actors over aid recipients. These two frames are neither mutually exclusive nor exhaustive of the many policy frames employed in both the allocation and receipt of foreign assistance. However, we argue that these frames are highly salient in eastern Ukraine and many other cases in which third parties provide nonmilitary assistance to conflict zones. In Ukraine, these frames have been used strategically by political actors and media organizations to characterize the motives of foreign powers involved in the crisis.

Humanitarian frames tend to be used by both the EU and the Russian government when these actors characterize their own foreign aid policies. Statements made by the European Commission emphasize their humanitarian objectives in eastern Ukraine by explaining that their "relief aid targets those most in need" (European Commission 2017a). The EU has been the largest single donor of aid to Ukraine, providing more than 700 million euros annually since 2014. Over the past decade, the Russian government has also repeatedly attempted to highlight its humanitarian objectives. While figures for Russian assistance to the Donbas region are less reliable, the Russian Ministry of Emergency Situations reports "having sent dozens of convoys with more than 77,000 tonnes of humanitarian aid into the contested territories" (Fischer 2019, 29).

In contrast, political influence frames tend to be used by political actors or media organizations critical of foreign involvement in eastern Ukraine. The intention is to paint a foreign power in a negative light by implying that their foreign assistance is motivated by a desire to expand political power. This frame is often invoked within the context of larger strategic narratives about foreign involvement in Ukraine: a "pro-Russian, anti-Western" narrative from Moscow and "pro-Western, anti-Russian" narrative from Kyiv (Szostek 2017). Western and Ukrainian media outlets highlight Russia's broader foreign aid program as closely connected to strategic interests. The European Parliamentary Research Service describes Russian aid as "appear[ing] to serve geopolitical rather than humanitarian objectives" (Russell 2016). In Ukraine, Russian aid to the separatist republics has been met with heightened concern given well-documented Russian interference in the region. Although the Kremlin has provided humanitarian aid to Donbas, humanitarian convoys have also been suspected of disguising the ingress of military materiel (BBC News 2014). Likewise, Russian media outlets frame European countries as providing foreign aid more generally for strategic rather than humanitarian objectives. For example, a recent article in *RT*, a media organization funded by the Russian government, states that although the EU goes to "great lengths to

tout its humanitarian work," its patterns of aid allocation imply more self-interested motivations, as less than 10 percent of its aid goes to the poorest countries (RT 2019).

How do humanitarian and political influence frames shape attitudes toward foreign aid? We discuss three possible logics rooted in framing theory. First, a null hypothesis states that neither frame will influence respondent attitudes toward aid allocation. This is likely to be the case when respondents have relatively fixed attitudes toward the donor state or the provision of foreign aid. As Chong and Druckman (2007) summarize, "strong predispositions reduce framing effects by increasing one's resistance to disconfirming information" (111). If a respondent is deeply suspicious of a particular foreign actor, framing their motives as humanitarian is unlikely to influence their attitudes toward foreign aid from that actor. Thus, null results in a framing experiment can indicate that respondents' prior beliefs about the topic are relatively fixed.

**H0 (Null Hypothesis):** *Neither frame will impact support for aid from foreign powers.*

The remaining hypotheses come from simple applications of framing theory. Brewer (2001) distinguishes between two models of how respondents process information from frames: as "passive receivers" or "thoughtful receivers." Our second set of hypotheses considers respondents as passive receivers of information from frames. In this interpretation, frames cause respondents to focus on a particular subset of considerations when evaluating foreign aid provision to the Donbas and revise their beliefs accordingly. As previously discussed, humanitarian frames tend to be strategically used by entities that represent or are favorable toward a given foreign actor, highlighting selfless intentions of foreign powers that provide foreign aid. Political influence frames tend to be used by entities that are unfavorable or adversarial toward a given foreign actor, highlighting self-interested intentions of foreign powers. Therefore, if respondents process information according to the passive receiver thesis, exposure to a humanitarian frame should increase favorability toward foreign aid provision. In contrast, exposure to a political influence frame should reduce support for the same activity.

**H1a (Framing Hypothesis 1):** *Humanitarian frames increase support for aid from foreign powers.*

**H1b (Framing Hypothesis 2):** *Political influence frames reduce support for aid from foreign powers.*

A third alternative is that respondents process information according to the "thoughtful receiver" thesis (Brewer 2001). In this conception, individuals receive information from a frame, but its impact on their attitudes is conditional on prior beliefs about the foreign power. One implication of this logic is that political influence frames will not be universally perceived as negative. In fact, if Ukrainians believe they have shared interests with a particular foreign power, they are likely to support politically motivated foreign involvement. If citizens believe a foreign power will not only provide humanitarian aid but also influence political outcomes, they may expect such involvement to result in beneficial reforms or increased stability in the conflict zone. This logic suggests that a political influence frame should have an even stronger positive effect on attitudes toward foreign aid than a humanitarian frame among respondents who are favorable toward the foreign power.

To clarify, we do not always anticipate that people will support a foreign power's involvement in their country, even

if they are favorable toward that foreign power. However, in this context, it is plausible that this dynamic is occurring precisely because the conflict was fueled by internal divisions over attitudes toward Europe and Russia. The incident that triggered the EuroMaidan Revolution—former Ukrainian President Yanukovich’s failure to enter the EU Association Agreement—reflected broader tensions between pro-European and pro-Russian attitudes. As previously detailed, the EU and the Russian government have remained intimately involved in the conflict since its onset. In this divided context where foreign powers are heavily intervening in support of their respective sides, one may expect these sides to favor further political influence from the powers that support them.

**H2 (Influencing Hypothesis):** *Political influence frames increase support for foreign aid among those who are favorable toward the foreign power providing it.*

### Data and research design

To test our hypotheses, we embedded a framing experiment in a public opinion survey fielded in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine.<sup>4</sup> While existing research on public opinion and foreign aid is limited, scholars believe that domestic publics in recipient countries have “consistent and informative attitudes toward aid” (Milner and Tingley 2013, 397). For the purposes of our research, survey experiments are useful to understand how these frames influence attitudes of aid recipients.

#### Sampling Strategy

The survey was conducted in two Ukrainian administrative districts (“oblasts”) called Donetsk and Luhansk, which collectively make up the Donbas region. The sample for our survey was stratified into two regions: (1) the portion of Donbas that remains controlled by the Ukrainian government ( $n = 810$ ) and (2) the portion of Donbas under separatist control currently known as the Luhansk and Donetsk People’s Republics ( $n = 627$ ).<sup>5</sup> Our sampling strategy took into account a respondent’s sex, age, settlement type (i.e., whether they live in an urban or rural area), oblast (Donetsk or Luhansk), and whether or not they were located in separatist-controlled territories.

Since current, detailed demographic data for eastern Ukraine—and especially areas currently occupied by separatists—is unavailable, we relied on two sources. The first source was official Ukrainian state statistics. The last national census in Ukraine was conducted in 2001, but the state statistical service updates these figures annually using official birth and death rates. This means that migration remains unaccounted for, so we only use these data to provide an approximation of the sex–age distribution within each of Ukraine’s oblasts. Second, for more reliable data on settlement type within each oblast, we use data from the Central Election Commission (CEC) from the most recent all-Ukrainian election. While the CEC data are more updated and reliable, they do not contain detailed information about sex and age distributions within each oblast, so

<sup>4</sup>This survey was reviewed by the Institutional Review Board at Stanford University (Protocol No. 39037).

<sup>5</sup>We aimed for roughly equal numbers of respondents among the Ukrainian-controlled and separatist regions, but concluded the survey with fewer respondents in the LNR–DNR given the frequent power outages associated with the ongoing conflict in spring of 2017, which limited access to phone and Internet (RFE/RL 2017).

we use them to only determine the distribution of different settlement types within each oblast.

We partnered with a Ukrainian survey firm, the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, in spring of 2017, to conduct brief computer-assisted telephone interviews (CATIs) that were followed by a longer online survey fielded to Ukrainian adults 18–65. To conduct the CATIs, we used random digit dialing with geographic area codes (which correspond to Ukraine’s different oblasts) weighted by population. After collecting demographic information, respondents were asked if they would take an online survey in exchange for a small monetary reward. The survey was available in both Ukrainian and Russian and could be taken via mobile device or computer. Payment was transmitted to respondents via SMS text message upon completion of the survey.

Respondents were recruited to meet quotas based on age, gender, and geographic location. While our sample met these quotas, there are other natural biases within this sample given that access to mobile phone is a prerequisite for receiving compensation. Specifically, respondents in our sample are slightly more educated and wealthier than the average resident in these regions. As such, this analysis should not be interpreted as fully representative of the population of Donbas. Our analyses report sample average treatment effects, both with and without demographic controls.

#### Experimental Design

Survey respondents were first asked about how favorable they felt toward (1) the EU and (2) the Russian government. Respondents were then assigned to either a control group or one of two treatment groups that framed the foreign actors providing aid as motivated by either humanitarian concerns or the desire to seek political influence.<sup>6</sup> The treatments were worded as follows:

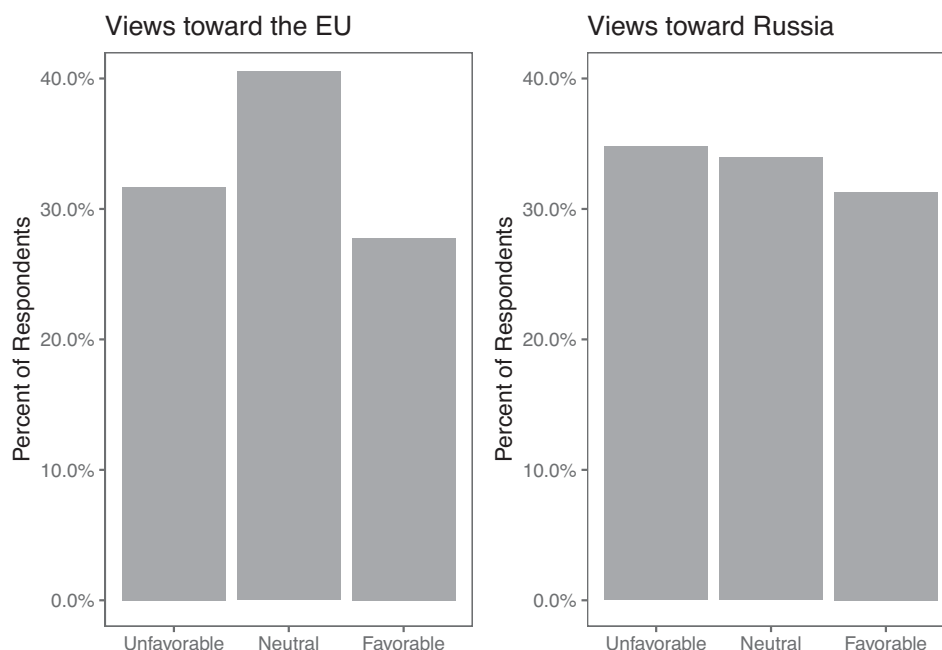
- (1) **Control Group:** [NULL]
- (2) **Humanitarian Frame:** *Some people say that countries are sending foreign aid (such as money, food, and medicine) to other countries because they are concerned about the health and safety of people in conflict zones.*
- (3) **Political Influence Frame:** *Some people say that countries send foreign aid (such as money, food, and medicine) to other countries because they want to gain power and influence over their politics.*

Respondents were next asked how acceptable it was for (1) the EU and (2) the Russian government to provide foreign aid to the territories known as the Luhansk and Donetsk People’s Republics. For each actor, respondents selected one of five answer options on a Likert scale: *Always Unacceptable* / *Usually Unacceptable* / *Neutral* / *Usually Acceptable* / *Always Acceptable*. These options were recoded on a 0 to 4 scale, with 0 indicating “Always Unacceptable” and 4 indicating “Always Acceptable.” The treatment and both outcome questions were displayed together on the same screen.<sup>7</sup>

### Results

Before analyzing the results of the experiment, we present some descriptive results. Figure 1 demonstrates the views of Ukrainians toward the EU and Russia in the Donbas

<sup>6</sup>Following standard practice in questionnaire design, we use the phrase “some people say” to avoid the introduction of an additional source cue, such



**Figure 1.** Favorability toward the EU and Russia. The figure shows the percent of respondents who indicated that they have unfavorable, neutral, or favorable views toward the EU and Russia by answering the question: “Do you have a favorable or unfavorable view of [the European Union/Russia]?”.

region, which is a moderator question asked of respondents prior to the experiment. The figure shows that attitudes toward these actors are mixed. There are roughly similar percentages of the sample who are favorable and unfavorable toward both actors, although a higher percentage of the sample reports feeling neutral toward the EU (40 percent) than toward Russia (30 percent). Figure 2 shows the distribution of the outcome variable, which measures attitudes toward aid to the Donbas from the EU and Russia. This outcome is asked post-treatment. The results demonstrate that respondents are more favorable toward EU and Russian aid than they are toward the foreign actors, with slightly more favorability toward Russian aid.

To test our hypotheses, we use the following model specification:

$$y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 T_i + X_i^T \gamma + \epsilon_i. \quad (1)$$

In this model,  $y_i$  is individual  $i$ 's attitude toward aid from either the Russian government or the EU.  $T_i$  indicates the treatment condition for the respondent. Respondents are randomized into one of three treatment conditions: control group, humanitarian frame, or political influence frame.  $X_i$  is a vector of controls that includes the respondent's age, education, income, ethnicity, language, religion, gender, region, and job category.  $\beta_0$  represents the control group's average support for the outcome, and  $\beta_1$  represents the treatment effect.<sup>8</sup>

Table 1 shows results from ordinary least-squares (OLS) regression models that regress attitudes toward aid from the EU or Russia on dichotomous indicators for whether the respondent received the humanitarian frame or the political

influence frame.<sup>9</sup> Respondents in the control group are the reference category; therefore, the constant represents average attitudes toward aid within the control group. Our theoretical discussion offered three sets of hypotheses. The *Null Hypothesis* (H0) anticipated no treatment effects for either frame. The *Framing Hypotheses* (H1a, H1b) expected that the humanitarian frame would increase support for foreign aid, but that the political influence frame would reduce support. Finally, the *Influencing Hypothesis* (H2) anticipated positive treatment effects for the political influence frame, especially among those who were already favorable of the foreign actor.

In table 1, we see that the coefficient on the humanitarian frame, while positive, is not statistically significant at the 0.05 level. Across all models, the humanitarian frame does not seem to increase support for EU or Russian aid. The coefficients on the political influence frame are not consistently negative as the *Framing Hypothesis* (H1b) would anticipate. In fact, in models 1 and 2, the coefficient on the political influence treatment is positive and statistically significant. Substantively, the political influence frame increases support for EU aid by over 0.3 points on a 5-point scale, which represents up to 0.3 standard deviations. The magnitude of this effect is somewhat surprising for a simple framing experiment.

Table 2 shows that these patterns hold even within the separatist territories (i.e., among potential foreign aid recipients living in the conflict zone outside of government control).<sup>10</sup> Table 2 replicates the analysis on the subset of our sample currently living in the occupied territories of Donetsk and Luhansk. While the magnitude of the treatment effect is dampened relative to the full sample, the

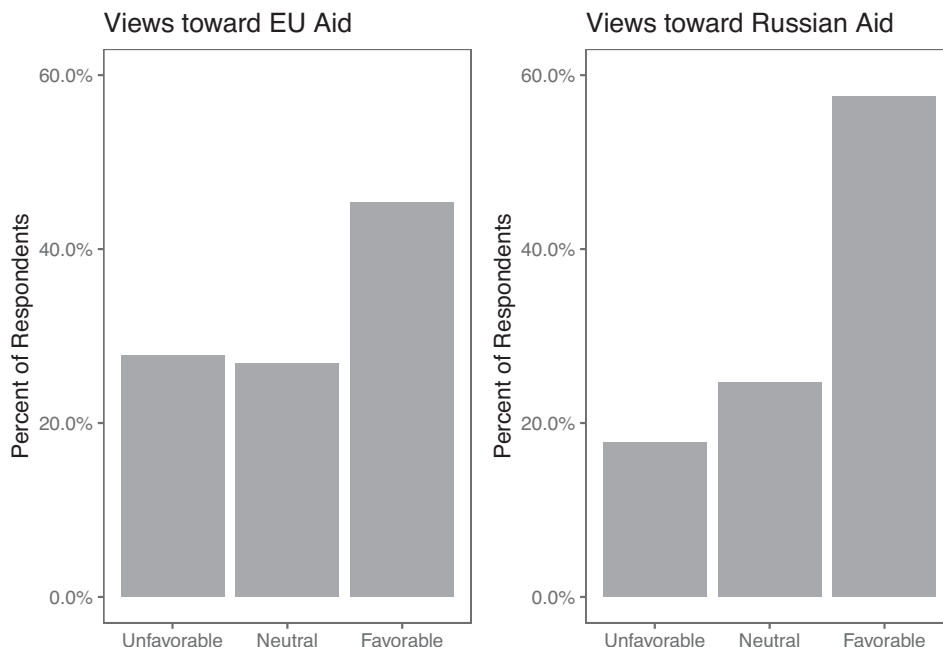
as a news report or a political actor. The equivalent phrases in Ukrainian and Russian translate roughly to “there is an opinion.”

<sup>7</sup>The online appendix contains a copy of the survey questionnaire.

<sup>8</sup>We include balance tables in the online appendix.

<sup>9</sup>These results are consistent when using an ordinal logit model (see the online appendix). For ease of interpretability, the results from OLS models are presented here.

<sup>10</sup>The results also hold in the Donbas region outside of the separatist territories (see the online appendix).



**Figure 2.** Favorability toward EU aid and Russian aid. The outcome was asked post-treatment and the figure shows the percent of respondents who indicated that they support or oppose aid by the EU or Russia to the separatist republics by answering the question: “In your opinion, how acceptable is it for [the European Union/Russia] to provide aid to the territories currently known as the Luhansk and Donetsk People’s Republics?”.

**Table 1.** Treatment effects on attitudes toward aid

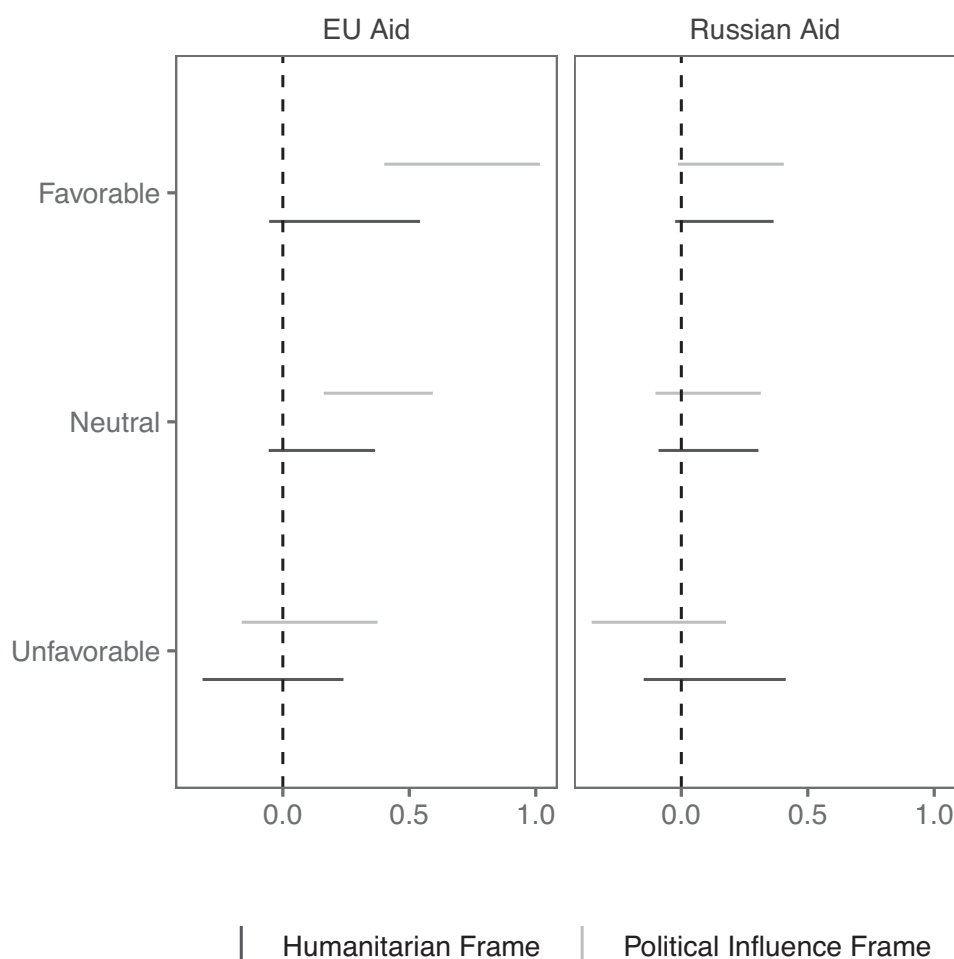
	<i>Dependent variable:</i>			
	<i>Support for EU aid</i>		<i>Support for Russian aid</i>	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Political influence frame	0.34*** (0.08)	0.37*** (0.08)	0.03 (0.08)	0.07 (0.07)
Humanitarian frame	0.12 (0.08)	0.12 (0.08)	0.11 (0.08)	0.13* (0.07)
Constant	2.09*** (0.05)	1.74*** (0.21)	2.53*** (0.05)	1.39*** (0.20)
Controls	No	Yes	No	Yes
R <sup>2</sup>	0.01	0.11	0.00	0.29
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.01	0.09	0.00	0.28
Num. obs.	1436	1370	1434	1369

\*\*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*  $p < .05$ ; \*  $p < .1$ .

**Table 2.** Treatment effects on attitudes toward aid among those residing in the separatist republics

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>			
	<i>Support for EU aid</i>		<i>Support for Russian aid</i>	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Political influence frame	0.22* (0.12)	0.27** (0.12)	0.10 (0.11)	0.15 (0.10)
Humanitarian frame	0.12 (0.11)	0.10 (0.12)	0.12 (0.10)	0.15* (0.09)
Constant	2.32*** (0.08)	1.63*** (0.37)	2.86*** (0.07)	1.81*** (0.35)
Controls	No	Yes	No	Yes
R <sup>2</sup>	0.01	0.04	0.00	0.27
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.00	0.01	-0.00	0.25
Number of observations	626	575	624	574

\*\*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*  $p < .05$ ; \*  $p < .1$ .



**Figure 3.** Coefficient plot showing the effect of the framing treatments (political influence framing and humanitarian framing) on attitudes toward foreign aid from Russia and the EU. The figure shows the effect by favorability toward each foreign actor.

political influence frame still exerts a positive, statistically significant effect on attitudes toward foreign aid provided by the EU.<sup>11</sup> Overall, these results are much more consistent with the *Influencing Hypothesis* (H2) than the *Framing Hypotheses* (H1a, H1b). The effect of the political influence frame on support for EU aid is larger than the effect of the humanitarian frame both in the pooled results and within each region.

### Discussion

These findings merit further discussion. Figure 3 replicates the analysis on a subset of respondents who are favorable, neutral, and unfavorable, respectively, toward the EU (panel 1) and the Russian government (panel 2) to see what is driving the treatment effects.<sup>12</sup> The first panel of the coefficient plot shows that the positive effect of the political influence frame on attitudes toward EU aid is driven by respondents who are favorable toward the EU ex ante. Among this subset, the political influence frame increases support for EU aid by 0.65 points on a 5-point scale, representing over 0.5 standard deviations. The political influence frame also has a positive effect on attitudes toward foreign aid among re-

spondents who are neutral toward the EU. However, this effect size is smaller in magnitude relative to respondents who are favorable toward the EU. Neither frame appears to impact attitudes of respondents who are unfavorable toward the EU.

These results are consistent with the *Influencing Hypothesis* (H2). Respondents who are already favorable toward the EU increase their support for European aid when told that donors provide aid to expand their political power in a recipient state. The effect of the political influence frame for this subsample is even larger than that of the humanitarian frame, indicating that it is unlikely that respondents are simply rejecting the frame. In an online appendix, we show that this effect is even stronger among the subset of respondents who feel both favorable toward the EU and unfavorable toward the Russian government. Once again, this emphasizes the underlying logic of the *Influencing Hypothesis* (H2): respondents partial to a foreign power are more favorable toward aid accompanied by expanded political influence of their preferred donor.

In the second panel of figure 3, we see that support for Russian aid remains largely unchanged by both frames. Why are attitudes toward Russian aid relatively fixed in eastern Ukraine? The literature on framing effects tells us that strong prior beliefs increase “one’s resistance to disconfirming information” from frames (Chong and Druckman 2007,

<sup>11</sup>The  $p$ -value for the first model in table 2 is 0.052.

<sup>12</sup>The corresponding regressions are in the online appendix.



111). It is likely in this political context that Ukrainians' attitudes toward the Russian government and its involvement in eastern Ukraine are much less malleable than their attitudes toward the EU, given the long and complicated relationship between Russia and eastern Ukraine. Older generations of Ukrainians were born, raised, and educated in the Soviet Union, and many now have family members in Russia. Ukrainians' views of Russia have hardened since the EuroMaidan Revolution and Russian interventions in Crimea and eastern Ukraine. During the conflict, Ukrainians living in west and central Ukraine generally grew skeptical of Russia following the annexation of Crimea and its support for the insurgents. Meanwhile, those in the separatist republics have become integrated into Russia's political structure and have been barraged with anti-Ukrainian and pro-Russian media. This direct experience with Russian institutions has likely entrenched residents' views of Russia (Sasse 2017).

A second, and perhaps more puzzling, question is: On average, why do Ukrainians who are favorable toward the EU prefer European aid under the political influence frame to European aid under the humanitarian frame? While our experimental findings cannot speak directly to this question, we believe this is likely driven by domestic political considerations. Despite semi-regular flare-ups along the front line, the war in Donbas looks increasingly deadlocked, and large numbers of Donbas residents have left the region. With the occupied territories unlikely to return to Ukrainian control soon and little immediate incentive for Russia or Ukraine to revitalize the depopulated border towns and cities, pro-European Ukrainians are likely to prefer European influence in the region when it aligns with their own political preferences. This is potentially due to the fact that EU involvement in Ukraine has been largely economic in nature since the annexation of Crimea. Foreign assistance from the EU has come in the form of greater integration into EU markets through the Association Agreement, in addition to grants and loans to help Kyiv service external debt and implement economic reforms (Association Agreement 2014; European Commission 2017b). Recent public opinion polling suggests that Ukrainians believe EU aid has already generated economic benefits for the country (Ecorys 2017). Thus, people with favorable views toward the EU are likely to see foreign aid from Brussels—even if it is provided for geopolitical reasons—as aligning with their personal interests.

### Conclusion

Do donors' motives impact perceptions of foreign aid in a conflict zone? This research note identifies two common frames used to describe the motives of donors as providing aid for either selfless, humanitarian reasons (a humanitarian frame) or self-interested, geopolitical reasons (a political influence frame). After embedding these frames in a survey experiment in Ukraine, we demonstrate that framing can substantively impact ordinary citizens' evaluations of foreign aid, but this effect is conditional on pre-existing attitudes toward the donor.

Our analyses reveal mixed but intriguing results. First, we show that the political influence frames increase support for foreign aid from the EU, but attitudes toward aid from the Russian government are relatively fixed. We believe this indicates that Ukrainians' perceptions of the EU are more malleable than their attitudes toward Russia, which have hardened following Russia's annexation of Crimea. Second, we demonstrate that when donors are perceived to be providing foreign aid in order to gain political influence in a recipient country, these actions are not uniformly perceived

as negative. With respect to attitudes toward EU aid, political influence frames exerted stronger positive treatment effects than humanitarian frames. This finding is somewhat inconsistent with assumptions in the foreign aid literature and rhetoric more widely employed by development organizations that aid provided for geopolitical or strategic reasons is inherently negative. A further interesting implication is that an adversary's efforts to frame another foreign power's motives as self-interested could actually backfire.

To understand what was driving these effects, we analyzed our results conditional on pre-existing attitudes toward the EU and the Russian government. We found that the treatment effects were largely driven by Ukrainians who were already favorable toward the donor. Specifically, when presented with a political influence frame, respondents who are favorable toward a foreign country will support its attempts to gain additional power and influence over the political situation in Ukraine. We see this effect among those favorable to the EU, suggesting that this population would prefer Western powers to exert greater influence over the Donbas region. Ultimately, in a rapidly growing foreign aid literature, these findings emphasize a need for careful attention to the attitudes of aid recipients.

### Supplementary Information

Supplementary information is available at the *International Studies Quarterly* data archive.

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