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# When Do Sanctions Work? The Cases against the Soviet Union and Russia

The purpose of imposing economic sanctions is to respond to a violation of international law or a deviation from the rules adopted by the international system. According to theories of public choice, interest groups influence political decision-making in order to derive benefits from the political process. Targeted sanctions (smart sanctions) focusing on policy makers are supposed to increase the costs to policy makers and reduce the damage that country level embargoes would inflict on the general public. However, targeted sanctions do not always achieve their expected policy outcomes, which raises questions about the design and effectiveness of targeted sanctions. The aim of this paper is to examine the factors that make targeted sanctions more effective. The study analyses data from the Global Sanctions Database (GSDB) and pays particular attention to sanctions imposed by members of the international community, including the European Union, against the Soviet Union and Russia. The conclusions drawn from the literature and the historical examples suggest that sanctions against Russia have only, at best, slowed down its actions. The main factors causing this are: lack of a strong opposition, the relative value of economic loss versus perceived or real political values, and the economic and political interests of third parties.

## Introduction

The role of economic power as a diplomatic tool and as part of soft power has been known since ancient times. Throughout history, many countries have introduced several measures as a way to fill the gap between ineffective diplomatic declarations and military intervention. Most unilateral sanctions have been introduced by the USA, making it the largest sender country.<sup>1</sup> However, the power of the USA and of its unilateral sanctions seems to be strongly decreasing – sanction resistance has been developing as countries are doing their best to circumvent U.S. and Western sanctions, particularly the financial ones.<sup>2</sup>

The sanctions against Russia introduced in 2022 by the international community are very comprehensive and public opinion in the West has been led to hope that the measures will eventually lead to the end of Russia's military intervention. The following article will focus on sanctions, with a special focus on the measures introduced against the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation. After introducing the main concepts of the sanction literature, this chapter will present the debate on the effectiveness and success of sanctions as viewed by policymakers and by academics. Next, it will closely examine cases of sanctions being introduced against the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation.

<sup>1</sup> JENTLESON 2021: 12.

<sup>2</sup> DEMARAIS 2022.

While past events do not necessarily determine how the current situation will play out, analysing such historical examples can teach important lessons on how and when sanctions against Russia might be more effective and successful.

The literature of sanctions often refers to the *target country*, even if the measures introduced in recent decades did not affect entire countries but instead the political regime of a given country, a given organisation or a group operating within a given country. Today, most of the sanctions single out specific persons, businesses and other organisations within the target countries. Terrorist groups (such as ISIS, al-Qaeda), criminal organisations and drug rings are also singled out for sanctions within some countries.

Countries not directly sending or enduring sanctions are called third parties and they play a crucial role in the international arena. Jentleson identifies four categories of third parties: those which are economically motivated to trade with the target country; rivals of the sending country (which are thus politically motivated to cooperate with the destination country); neighbouring states with unclear borders; and non-state actors who profit from sanction violations.<sup>3</sup> Third parties are most likely to cooperate with the sending state if the sanctions predominantly serve their own interests, otherwise they are more likely to become allies of the target country. Third parties' economic interests might be minimal, such as avoiding the trade loss associated with joining the sanctions. In other cases, more complex factors can come into play, such as breaking into markets abandoned by the sending country. Aside from commercial pursuits there might be political reasons why certain countries do not wish to participate in multilateral sanction regimes. A third party's political interest might be a perceived defender role from a geopolitical point of view (the role of the Soviets in the case of Castro's Cuba, against American sanctions).<sup>4</sup> Similarly, it could be a rivalry with the sender state that might encourage a third party to reject multilateral sanctions.

It is important to distinguish between the concepts of economic sanctions and trade wars. It is generally agreed that the main goal of economic sanctions is to force the target country's government into changing its political behaviour, or at least, to modify or limit it. To achieve its goal, sender countries try to reduce the economic well-being of a target country by suppressing international trade. In contrast, a trade war occurs when a state threatens to inflict economic damage or imposes measures to force the target country to accept trade terms more favourable to the coercive state.<sup>5</sup> The following study focuses on economic measures that have a political goal aimed at another state.

Economic sanctions have been used frequently throughout history, but they only became a common tool of international relations in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They started to be used regularly by the League of Nations, and later by the United Nations (UN). In the beginning, the UN played a key role in the development of country-based sanctions, which were designed to force a country to meet a political objective by restricting its trade and

<sup>3</sup> JENTLESON 2021: 13.

<sup>4</sup> JENTLESON 2021: 16.

<sup>5</sup> PAPE 1997: 93–94.

business relations. Such countries included Cuba, Iran, Libya, North Korea, Syria and Vietnam. Comprehensive sanctions were introduced against these states which sought to prevent all trade relations. Taking into account the rather limited success of such sanctions and the subsequent humanitarian disasters they caused, at the suggestion of Kofi Annan, the UN introduced targeted sanctions in the 1990s.<sup>6</sup> Targeted sanctions, or “smart sanctions” aim to impose extremely high costs only on certain groups – individuals, businesses, non-state actors, other organisations – while limiting collateral damage to the civilian population. Thus, the sanctions imposed do not cause humanitarian disasters and are considered more ethical. The idea is that the costs of these sanctions may induce the target group to abandon their activities or pressure the regime to change its policy.

Like targeted sanctions, sectoral sanctions aim to protect the civilian population from the harmful effects of sanctions. These measures target important parts of the economy, and includes arms embargoes, or energy sanctions, such as an oil-producing export embargo (e.g. boycotting Iranian oil). Different types of targeted and sectoral sanctions can be distinguished. One of the most frequently used tools is trade sanctions, i.e. embargoes of exports to target countries and boycotts of imports. This is followed by financial sanctions, which involve financial transactions and/or investment in the destination country being restricted or prohibited, and assets in the sending country’s financial system being frozen. Foreign aid (economic or military) is limited or eliminated and the travel of individuals from the destination country to the sending state(s) is restricted or prohibited. Finally, the sanctions introduced in the field of sports and culture are of more symbolic value. In these cases, athletes and artists from the target country are banned from international championships and competitions.

Discussing the goals of sanctions, several authors have emphasised that the aim of sanctions is not merely a *change in the behaviour* of the target country. Barber believes that sanctions have three ambitions.<sup>7</sup> While the primary objective is to change the behaviour of the target country, the secondary objective is to increase the *internal popularity* of the sending state. A third objective is to strengthen the norms of behaviour accepted in the international system. In other words, sanctions have a significant symbolic value, and in addition to foreign policy successes, imposing sanctions can bring internal political benefits. This echoes Lindsay’s opinion, who lists five different reasons why states apply sanctions. In addition to changing the policy of the target country, he identifies the goals of removing the regime, deterring other actors from similar behaviour, and sending domestic and international signals.<sup>8</sup>

Richard Friman divided sanctions into three different types based on their goals. According to him, one purpose of sanctions may be to force or change a certain behaviour. The second type of sanctions are those whose goal is to limit certain prohibited activities. In this case, the sending countries wish to limit access to basic resources, such as funds, weapons, or other critical items. According to the logic of the measure, the increased

<sup>6</sup> ANNAN 1997.

<sup>7</sup> BARBER 1979: 367–384.

<sup>8</sup> LINDSAY 1986: 153–173.

costs due to the sanctions will force a change in the strategy of the target state. Finally, according to the author, the third group of sanctions includes symbolic actions that aim to strengthen international standards.

Applying the above criteria, Friman analysed 62 multilateral sanctions introduced by the UN over a period of 22 years. The research shows that in the examined cases, targeted sanctions were more effective in *signalling or limiting* than in forcing an actual change in behaviour. Change of behaviour happened in only about 10% of the cases. In contrast, sanctions effectively limited the behaviour almost three times more often, in 28% of the cases. In 27% of the cases, they effectively sent signals to the target audience.<sup>9</sup> The UN agrees with these findings in general, but at the same time it still considers its own measures to be *overall successful*.<sup>10</sup> In other words, the UN's most successful measures are effective only in 28% of the cases. Given this humble success rate, the question arises as to how *effective* the various sanctions are in general and, if so, what their success depends on.

### **Success of sanctions according to policy makers and scholars**

There seems to be a consensus in the literature regarding the low rate of success of sanctions. At the same time, governments, international organisations, and experts have different interpretations of the *purpose of sanctions*, and thus different assessments of the effectiveness of these measures. The first part of this subsection presents the viewpoint of governments and international organisations, while the second half of the section reviews the most significant academic literature on this topic.

The United States has imposed the most unilateral sanctions, so its institutional knowledge and experience is worth considering. In a 2019 report, the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) mentions that the effectiveness of sanctions is mostly assessed in economic terms, more specifically in terms of the slowdown of the target country's economy. However, the report states that the Office does not assess the extent to which the measures contribute to the achievement of broader U.S. foreign policy goals, *since sanctions are often a single element of a broader strategy*, making it extremely difficult to assess the effectiveness of the instrument.<sup>11</sup>

The report also states that most measures are effective when they are supported by an international organisation, such as the UN, and when the targeted countries have been dependent on the United States, for example through close trade or military ties. In other words, if a target country experiences an economic slowdown, the sanctions are considered effective, *even if the target country has not changed its behaviour at all* or the U.S. has not achieved its foreign policy objectives. The economic slowdown is more

<sup>9</sup> FRIMAN 2015.

<sup>10</sup> United Nations 2022.

<sup>11</sup> United States Government Accountability Office 2019: 12.

pronounced if the sanctions become multilateral and if the target country is economically or militarily dependent.

The UN's evaluation of the effectiveness of sanctions is even more vague. They point out that there is no consensus regarding the success of such a measure even when an actor changes its actions. Using the example of the Balkans war, they point out that the sanctions imposed were unlikely to have contributed to the conclusion of the Dayton Peace Agreement, since it was in fact the *military action* that produced the result. Moreover, they consider that in this case sanctions were neither necessary nor sufficient to stop the war.<sup>12</sup> The authors cite a thorough empirical study of a total of 100 different cases, which found that only 14 applications of sanctions were successful. In the vast majority of the few successful cases, the target country's state system was based on a multi-party system, while the unsuccessful cases were recorded in countries with authoritarian regimes.<sup>13</sup> Since most UN sanctions are directed against authoritarian regimes, the authors themselves do not expect much from the measures in terms of effectiveness.

An evaluation by the United Nations University's Public Policy Research Institute seeks to analyse the legitimacy and effectiveness of UN action. The authors point out that the flawed mechanisms around sanctions listing have been eliminated: the names of individuals mistakenly listed on UN sanctioned lists can now be corrected or removed. However, the report does not address what can be considered a successful sanction, or what metrics can be used to measure its effectiveness. In other words, the paper considers that sanctions are effective since only those persons, organisations or entities that have been prosecuted are actually placed on the list.<sup>14</sup>

Similarly, the European Union does not identify what it considers to be successful sanctions. Most recently, it has stated merely that sanctions against Russia during 2022 are "working".<sup>15</sup> At the time of writing this article, the EU had adopted a number of sanction packages targeting nearly 1,200 individuals and 100 entities in Russia, as well as a significant number of sectors of the Russian economy.<sup>16</sup> The EU adopted the sanctions in close cooperation with the G7 members and is supported by several international partners. The High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security states that the effectiveness of the measures is enhanced by the fact that more than 40 other countries, including traditionally neutral countries, have adopted the same measures, or introduced similar ones against Russia. He stresses the role of broad international cooperation in ensuring their effectiveness. Borell points out that the sanctions have made it extremely difficult for Russia to access advanced technology products. However, Russia imports more than 45% of these from the United States, 21% from China and barely under 11% from the EU. Borell expects that in the medium term, Russia's industry will start to decline because of the sectoral and financial sanctions, and that its economy will slow

<sup>12</sup> MACK-KHAN 2000: 282.

<sup>13</sup> NOSSAL 1999: 129–149.

<sup>14</sup> COCKAYNE et al. 2018: 18–19.

<sup>15</sup> BORELL 2022.

<sup>16</sup> Council of the European Union 2023.

down as a result – but only in the medium term. He acknowledges that President Putin’s considerations are not economic but based on political voluntarism. That is, the High Representative does not expect the economic impact of sanctions to lead to a change of behaviour on the part of the policy makers.

Instead, he hopes that the economic slowdown and technological dependence will make the regime unsustainable. According to the High Representative “Europe must show strategic patience”. While realising that the economic impact of sanctions will not change the Russian leader’s behaviour, he considers the violation of the international rules-based world order to be unacceptable. In other words, the leaders of the EU do not consider sanctions a useful tool to force a change in the behaviour of the target country, or at least to influence it significantly. It is much more a signal to draw the attention of the target country to international standards.

Summing up, the sanctions imposed by the U.S., the UN and the EU policymakers are most effective when their primary aim *is not to change the behaviour* of the target country. In almost a third of the cases, they succeed when the measures are aimed at slowing down the economy or restricting a behaviour. The proportion is similar, but slightly better, for *raising awareness of international standards*, i.e. – sending a signal to the target country or to third parties. When changing the behaviour of the target countries, the issuing countries themselves are less confident about the results of sanctions. As we have seen, there is no clearly identifiable criteria for the *success of sanctions*. A “success” from a political point of view can be defined as a case where the target country changes its behaviour *to some degree* to be more in line with the political expectations communicated by the sender. Obviously, there are significant differences on the minimal level of degree of changing the behaviour which makes the concept of “political success” highly debatable.

The literature attempts to define the concept of successful sanctions. Van Bergeijk does not distinguish between political and economic goals, instead he refers in the first case to success, and in the second to effectiveness.<sup>17</sup> Cortright and Lopez differentiate the political and the economic successes.<sup>18</sup> Chantal de Jonge Oudraat lists economic and political aspects of the effectiveness of sanctions.<sup>19</sup> Unfortunately, these differences are not clear in all studies, which makes it difficult to compare the results of the various studies.

Several empirical studies consider that economic sanctions are not effective.<sup>20</sup> However, most experts agree that the effectiveness of sanctions (whether political success or economic effectiveness) is difficult to assess as they are often part of other foreign policy instruments. Additionally, other states’ actions make the effectiveness of a given sanction difficult to measure. Moreover, external effects, such as economic shocks can trigger positive or negative impacts, making it even more difficult to assess the usefulness of the measure. For example, Csicsmann’s study on EU sanctions examines their effect on

<sup>17</sup> VAN BERGEIJK 1994: 23.

<sup>18</sup> CORTRIGHT–LOPEZ 2000: 3.

<sup>19</sup> DE JONGE OUDRAAT 2010: 105–128.

<sup>20</sup> See HUFBAUER et al. 1990; HUFBAUER–OEGG 2007; PAPE 1997: 90–136; ALLEN 2005: 117–138; WHANG et al. 2013: 65–81; GRAUVOGEL – VON SOEST 2014: 635–653.

Russia following the annexation of Crimea in 2014. He stresses that Russia's economic slowdown was caused by the fall in world oil prices and not necessarily by the sanctions imposed by the EU.<sup>21</sup>

Economic analysts often measure the loss of income caused by sectoral sanctions or the slowdown in GDP growth rates. Based on these, conclusions regarding the success or effectiveness of a sanction are drawn. However, these measures do not consider the wider political context. This approach was described by Galtung in 1967 as the theory of naïve economic warfare. The naïve theory states that the sender hopes that trade sanctions will impose costs on the target country at a rate that will inevitably cause political destabilisation.<sup>22</sup> Galtung draws attention to the fact that sanctions do not always have this effect and indeed they can sometimes even reinforce political integration, so that the desired political destabilisation may never occur.<sup>23</sup> An empirical study on the case of the suspension of gas supplies between Russia and Ukraine in 2006 found similar results. In the hope of destabilising the Western-oriented government, Russia cut off the gas supplies to Ukraine. The Russian measure actually led to a significant increase in the popularity of anti-Russian political forces among the Ukrainian population.<sup>24</sup>

Galtung's naïve theory is nuanced by Doxey's analysis of the sanctions imposed on South Africa and Rhodesia.<sup>25</sup> Doxey conducts a cost-benefit analysis from the point of view of the elites in the target countries. She concludes that the sanctions caused less harm than the losses that would have been incurred if the elites had given up their way of life and changed their behaviour to meet the demands of the sender countries. Looking at a historical case, the study points out that there are cases where enduring the effects of sanctions is less damaging to political elites than changing the sanctioned behaviour.

One of the most comprehensive studies of the economic effectiveness of sanctions was carried out by Hufbauer and his colleagues. In their analysis, they use economic measures such as the declining value of exports and imports of the target country, the ratio of income lost to GDP and GDP per capita. The results of their study show that just 35% of economic sanctions are effective.<sup>26</sup> In other words, the social mechanism put forward as the naïve theory by Galtung works in only a few cases.

Researchers clarifying the naïve theory have considered variables that may play a role in political disintegration. Kaempfer and Lowenberg point out that economic sanctions lead to fragmentation when the target country has a multi-party system, and the opposition is able to facilitate a political change.<sup>27</sup> Marinov's research shows that in some cases, sanctions increase the chances that political leaders will lose power – but that this is more likely in democratic regimes. In a very thorough and precise analysis, he considers the target country's political system, institutional structure and wealth per

<sup>21</sup> CSICSMANN 2021: 84.

<sup>22</sup> GALTUNG 1967: 378–416.

<sup>23</sup> GALTUNG 1967: 389.

<sup>24</sup> SEITZ-ZAZZARO 2020: 817–843.

<sup>25</sup> DOXEY 1972: 527–550.

<sup>26</sup> HUFBAUER et al. 1990.

<sup>27</sup> KAEMPFER-LOWENBERG 1999: 37–58.

capita. He does not, however, take into account the role of third parties that may have an interest in supporting the regime of the target country.<sup>28</sup> All these are in line with the scepticism of the UN analysts who are unconvinced by the effectiveness of such measures when applied against authoritarian regimes.

Moreover, the political destabilisation caused by sanctions can pose serious risks, which is relatively rarely discussed in the literature. Csicsmann considers the measures against Iran to have been effective, since the country's oil exports have fallen significantly. In addition, the author notes that averting the emergence of weak, collapsed or failed states also counts as part of the success. Since economic sanctions have not led to the collapse of the political leadership in Iran, resulting in a rogue state, the measure can be regarded as successful.<sup>29</sup>

Portela examines unilaterally imposed sanctions by the European Union in terms of their attainment of policy objectives and sets five criteria for their evaluation: the economic decline of the target country, the stability of the regime, the coherence of sanctions policies, the support of the international community for the EU's targeted policies, and the extent to which EU sanctions have contributed to the known outcome.<sup>30</sup> Her qualitative research provides rich detail on each case, examining the same variables. The study concludes that the most effective EU sanctions are the suspension of aid to African, Caribbean and Pacific states, along with the restrictive measures taken under the Common Foreign and Security Policy against certain third states that are strategically vulnerable or not protected by a great power. Lastly, she classifies as successful the sanctions against states *interested in the economic benefits of cooperation with the EU and the associated increase in their international prestige*. In other words, Portela's study suggests that economic sanctions are effective when they are imposed by a stronger state with which the target state has a certain dependency.

Giumelli analyses sanctions as a foreign policy tool of the EU. He argues that sanctions can be effective not only if they change the behaviour of the target country, but also if they *modify it or limit it in some way*. The book points out that analysts have mostly sought to examine the impact of sanctions through *case studies*, but that it is extremely difficult to assess it in isolation from other foreign policy instruments as well as the wider global context. It stresses the importance of conducting a comprehensive study that examines the most significant trends. The book lists the sanctions imposed by the EU but does not examine all cases and it does not provide a clear answer as to whether these sanctions were effective or successful. In fact, the author is not really concerned by this problem – the central theme of the book is the EU's *global action*, and it focuses on how and when the EU has used this coercive tool. Not surprisingly, he concludes that sanctions are *an effective foreign policy tool of the EU, mainly because they have enabled the EU to act as a global actor*.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>28</sup> MARINOV 2005: 564–576.

<sup>29</sup> CSICSMANN 2021: 80.

<sup>30</sup> PORTELA 2012.

<sup>31</sup> GIUMELLI 2016.



In conclusion, the definition of the objectives of sanctions varies widely, making it a challenging task to assess their success and effectiveness. Examining a large number of cases, we find that in less than a third of instances has the target country changed its behaviour. A slightly higher success rate is found when the measure was aimed *at limiting a behaviour* and somewhat more success when the objective was only *signalling*. Several studies agree that multilateral measures are the most successful, or when the target country is economically or militarily subordinate to the issuing state. Equally important is that the target country has a multi-party system and a strong opposition capable of governing. In the rest of the cases, sanctions can only be effective in a sporadic manner.

### Sanctions against the Soviet Union and Russia

The application of sectoral and targeted sanctions has increased dramatically in recent decades, while their effectiveness has remained highly controversial. This may suggest that policymakers might introduce sanctions for domestic policy purposes and to signal breaches against international order rather than with the explicit aim of changing the behaviour of the target country. This seems particularly true in case of sanctions against the Soviet Union and later Russia. Unsurprisingly, the topic came to the attention of researchers after 2014, when a number of studies were published on the effectiveness of sanctions against Russia.

Viktor Szép's study from 2015 examines the efficacy of EU sanctions against Russia. The author argues that even though the sanctions did not change Russia's foreign policy decisions on Ukraine, they deterred further aggression. In addition, the EU has achieved another important success – it has gained international recognition, as Member States have acted in unity in response to this issue.<sup>32</sup> The author is cautious in that he does not evaluate the effectiveness of sanctions per se, but in the light of NATO's steadily reinforced military capacity in the Eastern European region. Today, in the light of Russia's recent aggression, the extent to which the EU's action deterred Russia from further aggression is questionable.

Similarly, Simond de Galbert's book assesses the events one year after the de facto annexation of Crimea and the imposition of international sanctions. The author estimates that the combination of world oil prices, flawed local economic policies and sanctions may have caused an almost 3% drop in the value of Russia's gross domestic product between 2014 and 2015. He notes that despite the economic slowdown, the Russian President's popularity has not declined. He goes on to estimate the value of lost exports from European states, which he puts at a loss of \$30 billion in a year, significantly more than the amount the United States loses from lost Russian exports.<sup>33</sup> This is confirmed by a report from the U.S. Congressional Research Service, which, while not quantifying the losses to U.S. firms from international sanctions or Russian retaliatory sanctions,

<sup>32</sup> SZÉP 2015: 191–203.

<sup>33</sup> DE GALBERT 2015.

repeatedly stresses that Russia is not a key trading partner for the U.S. and that lost markets will be relatively easy to replace.<sup>34</sup>

Crozet and Hintz analyse Russian and European trade losses over a slightly longer period of time, with a more abundant data set and complex quantification. Their results show that the Russian Federation's losses reached USD 53 billion, or 7.4% of total exports estimated from 2014 until the end of 2015. However, Western countries hit by Russian retaliatory sanctions also suffered losses of USD 42 billion, which equals 0.3% of their total exports. It is interesting that most of the losses were from products that were not directly targeted by Russian sanctions and that Russian consumer preferences did not change. Rather, the change was caused by an increase in the risks associated with international transactions with Russia.<sup>35</sup>

The more time passes after a sanction is imposed, the more accurately its economic and political impact can be assessed. Thus, Kirkham's analysis of the impact of sanctions on Russia and Iran, published in 2022, focuses on the Russian and Iranian institutional and economic systems.<sup>36</sup> The study found that the sanctions had hit the target countries and caused major economic problems and trade disruption, but were politically ineffective in mobilising the population for regime change. Moreover, despite some short-term economic difficulties, the impact of the sanctions has been paradoxical: the target countries have managed to adapt to external pressures, develop internal self-defence mechanisms, mobilise domestic resources and restructure the distribution of income and wealth. The two target countries became more self-sufficient, less democratic and adopted a more aggressive stance towards the West. If the Minsk agreements are interpreted as a political success of the West, at the time of writing this article – the winter of 2022 – there is no question that at best it is only a temporary success. After half a year of armed conflict, Russia has de facto annexed the Ukrainian regions of Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhya and Kherson, using extremely strong anti-Western slogans.<sup>37</sup> It seems that Kirkham's estimations are correct: Russia has emerged from the struggles caused by the 2014 sanctions with a stronger domestic political position. It is questionable whether the sanctions of 2022 will cause enough economic damage to destabilise the Russian political regime.

To answer this question, it is worth examining the sanctions imposed on Russia and its predecessor, the Soviet Union and assessing their effectiveness. The dissolution of the Soviet Union brought new institutional structures and political actors, although the political culture of the Russian Federation did not change significantly. Therefore, it is adequate to analyse the cases against both the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation.

I will analyse the list of previous sanctions mentioned in the Global Sanctions Database (GSDB). The GSDB (2021) covers 1,101 publicly traceable multilateral and bilateral sanctions cases from 1950 to 2019.<sup>38</sup> The database classifies sanctions according to

<sup>34</sup> NELSON 2015.

<sup>35</sup> CROZET–HINZ 2020: 97–146.

<sup>36</sup> KIRKHAM 2022.

<sup>37</sup> Reuters 2022.

<sup>38</sup> KIRIKAKHA et al. 2021: 62–106.

three important dimensions. First, by the type(s) of sanction(s) considered (commercial, financial, travel, etc.), second, by the communicated primary policy objective(s) of the sanction(s). These are divided into separate categories (e.g. policy change, war prevention, human rights, etc.). Thirdly, the sanctions are categorised based on the degree of perceived success of each identified sanction, ranging from unsuccessful to total success.<sup>39</sup> The GSDB is publicly available and open for consultation.

The database contains a total of 21 sanctions against the Soviet Union and Russia between 1962 and 2014. These were imposed in nine different years – in reaction to various events, several of which were condemned collectively by the international community. Accordingly, in 1991, four different sanctions were imposed on Russia by the United States, the United Kingdom, Japan and the European Economic Community separately. Similarly, for 2014, the database counts ten cases of sanctions imposed by different countries. Since those sanctions are still in force, and have not prevented Russia from starting a new war against Ukraine, they are not the subject of this analysis.

Taking into account Giumelli's observation that the effectiveness of sanctions cannot be assessed completely in a single case study, I will examine *all sanctions* against the Soviet Union and Russia listed in the database. The relevant contents of the database are summarised in Table 1. The data marked in the GSDB reflect the problems documented in the literature: the success of each sanction is assessed as successful or not *on its own*, without taking into account other foreign policy instruments, international actors, collateral damage and the role of third parties – simply depending on whether the conflict which triggered the sanction was resolved or not.

Based on these, the sanctions imposed by Lithuania in 1990 cannot be considered successful. Firstly, on 18 April 1990 an economic sanction was imposed in response to Gorbachev's order to prevent Lithuania's attempts to gain independence. The Russian Government stopped the supply of oil and other raw materials to Lithuania, on which Lithuania was totally dependent. The economic sanctions immediately had a severe impact, but the Lithuanians insisted on their independence. Due to the shortage of raw materials, Lithuanian factories and plants shut down, preventing many of the materials the Russians needed from getting back to Moscow. For example, the Lithuanians used to supply petrol to the Kaliningrad region and parts of Belarus, made black boxes for aircraft and petrol pumps for car factories throughout the former Soviet Union. Moscow's targeted economic sanctions made the production of these products impossible and left the Soviets without supplies.<sup>40</sup> In other words, the database (probably erroneously) recorded the collateral damage of economic sanctions imposed by Moscow as sanctions imposed by Lithuania. In April 1990, the international environment was still very cautious, so negotiations were encouraged between the Russian and Lithuanian parties, who eventually reached an agreement. In this case it was not Lithuanian "sanctions" that forced the target country to change its behaviour.

<sup>39</sup> FELBERMAYR et al. 2020.

<sup>40</sup> PLATŪKYTĖ 2020.

Similarly, the sanctions imposed by Georgia are considered by the database to have been “successful”. The military offense against Georgia has indeed ended and Georgia did suspend its previously imposed sanctions in 2011. However, it is unquestionable *that it was not Georgia’s sanctions* which changed Russia’s foreign policy strategy.

*Table 1: Sanctions contained in Global Sanctions Database against the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation*

Sender	Start	End	Commercial	Comment	Communicated primary goal	Outcome
NATO	1962	1966	Yes	0	prevent war	unsuccessful
USA	1978	1987	Yes	0	other, human rights	<i>total success</i> , unsuccessful
USA	1980	1981	Yes	other	policy change	unsuccessful
USA, EEC	1981	1983	Yes	traveling	policy change	<i>total success</i>
					territorial conflict, policy change	
Lithuania	1990	1990	Yes	0	change	<i>total success</i> , unsuccessful
EEC	1991	1991	No	financial	policy change	unsuccessful
Japan	1991	1991	No	financial	policy change	unsuccessful
UK	1991	1991	No	financial	policy change	unsuccessful
USA	1991	1991	No	financial	democracy	<i>total success</i>
Ukraine	1993	1996	Yes	military	policy change	negotiated settlement
Georgia	2008	2011	No	other	end war	<i>total success</i>

*Source: Compiled by the author based on Global Sanctions Database*

The 1962 NATO trade ban is an interesting case. During the Cold War, in the 1950s, the Soviet Union discovered oil reserves in the Ural–Volga region. The new oil reserves increased the amount of oil exported by the Soviet Union, especially to Western European countries. Soviet production rose from 5.2% to 26.4%, and the oil was exported to Western European countries. The prices offered by the Soviet Union were significantly lower than the international market price. In 1957 a barrel of Soviet oil was selling for \$2.06 on the international market while, in contrast, Middle Eastern oil cost \$2.79 and Venezuelan oil cost \$2.92. Moreover, the Soviets further reduced prices to Western European countries, selling oil for as little as \$1 a barrel. To transport the oil, the Soviets created a massive pipeline system project, which caused serious concern in the United States. The U.S. feared that the Soviets would use the oil to weaken the West, more precisely its economy and military. To transport the oil and build the pipeline system, the Soviets needed large quantities of steel pipes of a large diameter as well as a variety of other equipment, which they had to import from the West. To prevent the project, in 1961 the U.S. delegation proposed to NATO a comprehensive embargo on large-diameter pipes. The U.S. succeeded in getting NATO member states to regard the construction of the steel pipe system as a matter of national security, and NATO imposed an export ban on steel pipes in 1962. Considering its own economic interests, Germany rejected an embargo on *steel gas pipes* of the same size and continued to supply them to the Soviets. After a year’s delay, the Soviets were able to build the Druzhba pipeline, through which they transported oil for decades.

Relatively little information is available about the sanctions imposed by the U.S. on the Soviet Union in 1978 and lasting until 1987. According to the RAND Corporation, the U.S. imposed a ban on the export of equipment used in oil and gas drilling, which was not lifted until January 1987. The decision to end the sanctions was justified on the grounds that *similar equipment had become widely available on international markets* and the sanction was no longer having an impact.<sup>41</sup> In other words, third parties were unwilling to cooperate for their economic and political interests, so the U.S. sanctions were at best short-lived.

The U.S. sanctions imposed in 1980, although unsuccessful, are worth detailing. The Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979 and in response the U.S. imposed a series of sanctions. Under the leadership of then President Jimmy Carter, the U.S. boycotted the Soviet Union's participation in the 1980 Olympics and introduced a ban on grain exports. The grain embargo severely damaged U.S. producers, for whom the Soviet Union was still a very important export market. Using this tension, presidential candidate Reagan campaigned on the idea of lifting the embargo, which he did after winning the elections.

In the meantime, the Soviet Union had seized the opportunity to import grain more cheaply from South America, particularly from Argentina, and to explore the agricultural potential of Ukraine. The loss of the Soviet market forced the U.S. to substantially increase its exports to Spain, Italy, Colombia and Japan, which had previously bought grain mainly from Argentina. The *world grain market was thus reorganised* and remained so for decades after the embargo was lifted.<sup>42</sup> In other words, the primary objective of the sanctions imposed for attacking Afghanistan – to stop the aggression – was not achieved. In the short term, U.S. producers suffered heavy losses and it is assumed that Jimmy Carter lost his presidency because of it. However, in the long term, the U.S. gained new markets, defining its leadership for decades.

It is not surprising that the “successful” sanctions imposed by the U.S. in 1981 are linked again to the new energy export planned by the Soviets, more specifically the Yamal gas pipeline.<sup>43</sup> The Soviets presented their plans for this pipeline shortly after the invasion of Afghanistan, with the aim of exporting cheap Soviet gas to Western Europe. The European negotiators were Ruhrgas and Gaz de France, with whom negotiations began in 1980. The Reagan Administration was concerned about the Soviets' renewed progress, fearing that their European allies would become militarily and economically vulnerable due to their dependence on Soviet energy supplies.<sup>44</sup> The pretext for the imposition of sanctions was Poland's declaration of martial law in 1981 and the Soviet involvement in supporting it. In 1981, the U.S. banned the sale of U.S. technology to the Soviets for the construction of the pipeline, and several Western European countries initially acceded to its request.<sup>45</sup> Later, however, Western European countries considered that the Soviets'

<sup>41</sup> BECKER 1987: 12.

<sup>42</sup> MATLOCK 1981.

<sup>43</sup> PERLOW 1983: 253.

<sup>44</sup> VICARI 2016.

<sup>45</sup> The EUR-Lex website provides the official and most comprehensive access to EU legal documents. In 1981, 130 documents were created (including questions and comments) that are related in some way to the

dependence on Western technology was extremely heavy, thus the Soviets would not be able to take advantage of their position. Consequently, they did not comply with President Reagan's request and decided to protect their own economic interests. In 1982, the U.S. President himself ended the sanctions, as it had achieved its goal of *signalling the international community's* concern about the developments in Poland. Similarly to the Druzhba pipeline, the Yamal gas pipeline was built after a few years' delay. If it is accepted that the sanctions' goal was to signal such concern, this measure can indeed be considered a success.

The GSDB contains information on several financial sanctions imposed on the then Soviet Union in 1991. The senders were the European Economic Community, the United States of America, the United Kingdom and Japan. These were intended to restrain or punish the Soviet regime for its efforts to act against its member states' attempts to win independence. Of these measures, only the American one is recorded by the database as a success – the impact of U.S. foreign policy and of this particular sanction on the collapse of the Soviet Union is important, but it cannot be singled out.

Finally, the success of sanctions imposed by Ukraine in 1993 is again debatable. The database records a ban on arms exports, but the event was the adoption of the multilateral political declaration contained in the Budapest Memorandum. This guaranteed the territorial integrity and political independence of Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan. The OSCE declaration was signed by Russia, the U.S. and the U.K., and later endorsed by China and France. In return for these guarantees, between 1994 and 1996 Ukraine dismantled the world's third largest nuclear arsenal, which it had inherited from the Soviet Union after its dissolution. This case hardly seems to count as a clear 'success' of the sanctions.

In sum, of all sanctions in the database marked as 'successful' against the Soviets or Russians, *not even one* has been able to stop the ambitions of the target country, at best, it has been *slowed down*. The measures were much more effective in terms of their secondary objective, which was *to protect the interests of the sending country or to signal violations of international norms*. Finally, it appears that the U.S. has systematically used sanctions as a tool to carve out a niche market for itself in the medium to long term and thus to strengthen its economic and political ties.

All this suggests that sectoral sanctions were not able to change Russia's behaviour once in the past decades. The latest EU sanctions were introduced in the hope that the costs borne by Russian interest groups would be too high to maintain the current regime. This optimistic assumption is contradicted by a few facts: first, President Putin's popularity has not changed significantly in recent months. According to the Levada Centre, a non-Moscow-based think tank, 72% of the population supported President Putin's actions in September 2022. This ratio is down from the 83% measured in March and August 2022. It is likely that the decline was caused by the introduction of partial mobilisation, which could have led up to 100,000 conscripts leaving Russia in a few

Soviet embargo of technology or other types. Of these, nine legal acts were created (see European Union 1981).

weeks.<sup>46</sup> At the same time, taking into account the period before the war against Ukraine, it can be seen that in January 2022 only 69% supported the president, and in August 2021 the president's popularity was even lower, at 64%.<sup>47</sup>

Additionally, according to data from the Levada Centre, President Putin's popularity ranged between 60 and 80% between 2000 and 2022. This extremely high approval rating has attracted the attention of researchers. In an empirical study, Frye et al. examined the extent to which polls on the president's popularity are biased. Their results confirm the extremely high popularity documented in the opinion polls.<sup>48</sup>

President Putin's increased popularity after the attack on Ukraine can be explained by the fact that Putin regularly tries to compensate for domestic failures with foreign policy successes.<sup>49</sup> Another study comes to the same conclusion, pointing out that President Putin's foreign military operations are most successful at home when framed by Moscow as the defence of groups belonging to the Russian nation or the reconquest of ancient Russian territory.<sup>50</sup> For example, the de facto annexation of Crimea indeed boosted the president's popularity at the time. As we have seen from the empirical studies presented earlier, in spite of the sanctions, Russia was able to become more independent, reform its institutions and change the distribution of wealth so that its overall losses were less than the damage caused by the sanctions.

The war against Ukraine which started in February 2022 was followed by the imposition of the most comprehensive sanctions to date by the international community. These include both financial and sectoral sanctions, mostly blocking the import of Western technology while seizing assets and restricting the free movement of many individuals. However, historical examples suggest that financial and sectoral sanctions have not been successful in affecting the behaviour of Russia. This is partly because the cost of maintaining sanctions was too high for previous sending states, and they were subsequently lifted in various ways. On the other hand, third parties were less willing to cooperate with the sender country, so the target country managed to obtain the necessary products from other markets. An important aspect in the case of Soviet Union and Russia is that it has never had a strong, effective opposition that could have gained political traction due to the sanctions.

## Conclusions

Throughout history, economic sanctions have been a common feature of political disputes. The second half of the twentieth century was determined by the Cold War, with the United States and the Soviet Union as its main protagonists. The sanctions imposed as a result of this rivalry often revolved around the third party, Western Europe.

<sup>46</sup> Al Jazeera 2022.

<sup>47</sup> Levada Center 2022.

<sup>48</sup> FRYE et al. 2017: 1–15.

<sup>49</sup> BELIAKOVA 2019.

<sup>50</sup> INGIMUNDARSON 2022.

Sanctions against Russia have been mostly linked to the export of energy resources to Western Europe. The U.S. has sought to prevent the construction of oil and gas pipelines, and several sanctions were imposed on the Soviets to end its export projects. Third parties, i.e. Western European states, have mostly cooperated with the U.S. and imposed partial embargoes. However, the sanctions imposed on the Soviets proved to be counter to their own economic interests, which led Western Europe to relax or lift the sanctions.

Western European countries have so far mostly been able to find a balance between the two great powers. While they bought cheap energy from the Soviets, they did not have to fear abuse from it, as Western technology was often indispensable to the Soviets. At the same time, they had a very close military and security cooperation with the U.S. The fact that the Western European states bought energy from the U.S.'s rival reduced the influence the U.S. could exercise over them. Currently it seems that the Russian–Ukrainian war since 2022 has put an end to this era. Most EU countries will stop buying Russian coal and oil from 2023 onwards, and at the time of writing this article an embargo on Russian gas is also on the agenda.

The sanctions imposed by the EU, as Josep Borell has described them, are unlikely to achieve their goal of weakening Russia's political power, even in the medium term. On the one hand, as seen with the examples of South Africa and Rhodesia, sanctions on individuals are not always able to impose costs that are serious enough to lead to a change in behaviour. Moreover, as several studies have shown, sanctions typically do not work against authoritarian regimes. It is debatable whether Russia is really an authoritarian state, but the opposition is extremely weak. Moreover, the Russian president has enjoyed high popularity over the last 20 years. His military operations, when framed as defensive warfare, usually boost his popularity. The sanctions imposed in 2014 made Russia more independent, as the country managed to reorganise its internal markets while it saw increased anti-Western sentiment.<sup>51</sup> The European sanctions imposed in 2022 are framed by the Russian political leadership as part of the West's anti-Russian and "imperialist" ambitions, while the aggression is presented as a legitimate and defensive war. After the partial mobilisation in September 2022, the Russian president's popularity declined significantly, but it *was still higher than before the war began*. Considering these facts, it is more likely that the sanctions introduced by the EU will strengthen Russian political integration than weaken it.

The losses resulting from the embargo on energy and materials required for technological development are indeed significant.<sup>52</sup> Nevertheless, Russia might be able to make up much of these losses over time by exporting to third-party markets – even if this means building new pipelines. As we have seen from historical examples, in most cases, third parties ended up looking after their own economic interests. In this situation, China, India and Brazil, as the second, third and seventh largest importers of energy in the world, could become Russia's key partners. It is noteworthy that these countries

<sup>51</sup> KIRKHAM 2022.

<sup>52</sup> GROSS–SEDDON 2022.



abstained from the vote on the Russia case put to the UN Security Council at the end of September.<sup>53</sup> The resolution condemned the referendums held in four Ukrainian provinces and called on all countries not to recognise Moscow's intention to annex new territories from Ukraine.

The EU sanctions on the Russian energy sector and the damage to pipelines could be seen as the latest episodes in a geopolitical rivalry that has been going on for decades. The United States has been concerned by a possible loss of influence in the European market for more than six decades. It has repeatedly sought to prevent its competitor from exporting energy to it. In an increasingly competitive international economy,<sup>54</sup> the United States' interest is to serve the European Union's energy market. Following the imposition of sanctions, EU Member States could support the economies of the United States (Exxon Mobile, Chevron Corporation), the United Kingdom (BP), Norway and Algeria, which are the largest exporters of LNG oil and gas. Meanwhile, Russia provides its cheaper product to third parties such as India and China,<sup>55</sup> at a price below the market rate, increasing the competitiveness of the Asian countries. Both China and India are highly motivated to access cheaper Russian raw materials, since in certain ways they are rivals of the sending countries, thus motivating them to cooperate with Russia.

It seems that the European Union is unable or unwilling to continue balancing between the two competing powers. The coal and oil embargoes will certainly remain for the time being and currently it is questionable whether gas will be subject to sanctions. Cheap Russian energy has given the EU a certain competitive advantage, which soon might be lost. In the past, the risk of an embargo on Western technology could avert possible abuses by Russia. However, the EU currently has few tools at its disposal to counter possible abuses by its current energy trading partners. It would be in the EU's vital interest to base its industry and its domestic energy needs on domestic energy sources, and not be critically exposed to either one or the other of the major energy exporting powers.

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<sup>53</sup> CEDÊ 2022.

<sup>54</sup> Bloomberg News 2022.

<sup>55</sup> LIN et al. 2022.

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