

UDC: 327.7:341
DOI: 10.59214/ua.fa/5.2025.85

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The political nature of the EU's sanctions policy in the field of international security

Abstract. The relevance of studying the European Union's sanctions policy is due to its function as a tool for countering threats to international security. The aim of the study was to clarify the political nature of the European Union's sanctions policy during the period 2014-2025 in the context of its transformation into a strategic foreign policy instrument. The methodological basis included systemic, functional, comparative, institutional, legal, and case methods, which allowed for the investigation of the multi-level nature of sanctions. The application of a systemic approach revealed the holistic architecture of sanctions policy with its legal, institutional, and political dimensions. Three main functions of sanctions were identified: political messaging, deterrence, and behavioural change. Case analysis showed different rationales for applying sanctions against Russia, Iran, Belarus, Syria, China, and North Korea. The sanctions against Russia after 2014 demonstrated a shift towards a long-term strategy of political isolation. The analysis of the legal framework and institutional architecture revealed a close relationship between the legitimacy of decisions and the effectiveness of implementation. The European Union has demonstrated its capacity for normative innovativeness, particularly through the launch of the Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime. At the same time, key limitations were identified, related to international coordination, economic interdependence, and implementation difficulties. The European Union's sanctions policy has evolved from a tool of economic influence into a political means of strategic deterrence. Despite institutional shifts, sanctions remain only one part of the European Union's complex set of foreign policy tools, the effectiveness of which depends on external and internal factors. The results obtained can be used to improve decision-making mechanisms in the area of sanctions policy and to optimise international coordination

Keywords: mechanism of influence; political message; deterrence; behavioural change; isolation

Introduction

The European Union's (EU) sanctions policy has become a key tool for responding to violations of international law and threats to security. Its use gained relevance after 2014 following the annexation of Crimea and subsequent events in Ukraine. At the same time, the shift from an economic to a politically-oriented approach raised questions about the coherence of sanctions with the EU's values and international commitments. This has led to a focus in academic research on their effectiveness, legitimacy, and impact on targeted and third countries. In a 2021 study,

S. Portela highlighted the growing role of targeted sanctions within the EU's horizontal human rights regime. However, the author also emphasised the many problems that limit this approach's effectiveness, including fragmented sanctions design, a lack of proper coordination with international partners, and the dubious effectiveness of visa bans. S. Beaucillon (2021) analysed the complex architecture of unilateral EU sanctions under the Common Foreign and Security Policy, drawing attention to legal and humanitarian challenges. The author noted that the EU's

Received: 09.07.2025, Revised: 19.09.2025, Accepted: 26.10.2025

Suggested Citation:

Meleshchenko, T., & Tsybukh, V. (2025). The political nature of the EU's sanctions policy in the field of international security. *Foreign Affairs*, 35(5), 85-95. doi: 10.59214/ua.fa/5.2025.85.

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desire to avoid extraterritoriality in applying restrictive measures creates tension with a number of third countries and simultaneously limits the political potential of sanctions as a tool of influence. K.B. Olsen (2022) presented an innovative vision of EU sanctions policy through the lens of “geoeconomic diplomacy.” This perspective views sanctions not as an isolated tool of pressure but as part of a broader strategy of political influence amid competition between state and non-state actors in the global market. However, the author stressed that the effectiveness of this approach depends on the level of institutional coordination between EU bodies, the capacity for strategic planning, and interaction with the private sector.

In a broader macroeconomic context, D. Halcoussis *et al.* (2021) argued that the spread of protectionist trends and a decline in globalisation significantly complicate achieving goals through sanctions. This is because targeted states gain more room to manoeuvre to circumvent restrictions. B.R. Early (2021) focused on the institutional capacity of sanctioning states. He demonstrated that the effectiveness of sanctions policy directly depends on investment in its implementation, effective monitoring, and mechanisms to prevent circumvention, which in turn leads to uneven results among different countries. V. Veebel (2021) addressed the geopolitical aspect, describing how the EU, NATO, and Russia promote conflicting security narratives that make constructive dialogue impossible and contribute to further escalation. In the author’s opinion, sanctions in this context play a more symbolic role than serving as an effective tool for deterrence. R. Barber (2021) analysed the position of the UN General Assembly, which tries to balance condemning illegal coercive measures with recognising legitimate sanctions that comply with international legal norms. This creates an ambiguous international backdrop for the EU’s sanctions practice, which simultaneously seeks legal legitimation and political effectiveness. Despite the intensive development of research in this field, the question of the political nature of the EU’s sanctions policy in the context of its evolution, strategic direction, and its relationship with the international security system remains insufficiently explored. Most works have focused on either the legal or economic aspects of sanctions, without paying due attention to their political implications and their role as an element of the EU’s broader geopolitical positioning. The lack of a comprehensive analysis covering the conceptual, institutional, and strategic components of sanctions policy has limited the understanding of its place in the system of international relations and global security. The aim of this article was to outline the specifics of the European Union’s sanctions policy in the period 2014–2025 and to assess its political nature in the context of international security. The study’s hypothesis was that EU sanctions are becoming an independent instrument of foreign policy, rather than just economic regulation.

Materials and Methods

Methodologically, the study was based on a combination of systemic, functional, comparative, legal, institutional and case methods, each of which was applied in accordance with the logic of analysing the European Union’s sanctions policy in its multi-level, political, economic and

regulatory dimensions. The application of a systemic approach made it possible to consider sanctions as part of the EU’s comprehensive foreign policy architecture, which includes both legal and institutional components. The functional method was used to identify the key vectors of sanctions policy. Each of the functions of sanctions was analysed in relation to the relevant instruments (personal sanctions, sectoral restrictions, diplomatic measures) and the mechanisms for their implementation (public statements, sanctions lists, EU legal acts). The case study method was used to conduct an in-depth analysis of individual sanction situations, which made it possible to take into account the specifics of their emergence and development. The study included cases of EU policy towards the Russian Federation (Nordenberg, 2025), the Islamic Republic of Iran (Ghobadi *et al.*, 2019) and the Republic of Belarus (Whartnaby, 2023). Sanctions regimes against the Syrian Arab Republic (Portela, 2012), the People’s Republic of China (Emtseva, 2021) and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (Ballbach, 2022) were also considered. The analysis of these cases covered not only the legal basis for the introduction of restrictive measures, but also factors of the geopolitical context, human rights violations, the intensity of the EU’s response and an assessment of the effectiveness of the instruments chosen. The comparative analysis method made it possible to compare these cases in order to identify both common institutional models for imposing sanctions and differences in the logic of their application depending on political and regional conditions. In particular, the cases of Iran and Syria were considered as examples of a combination of sanctions pressure and diplomatic channels, while the case of Russia demonstrated the most extensive and systematic sanctions campaign in the history of the EU. An institutional approach was used to reproduce the procedure for adopting sanctions within the EU, with a clear reflection of the role of each body. In particular, the functional participation of institutions such as the European Council (n.d.), the European Commission (n.d.) and the European External Action Service (n.d.) was analysed. The role of the Political and Security Committee (PSC) (n.d.) was studied separately, as were the relevant formats of EU Council meetings that formalise sanctions decisions.

Attention was also paid to the legal basis, in particular Articles 21 and 29 of the Treaty on European Union (2012), Article 215 of the same treaty, as well as the impact of the Treaty of Lisbon (European Parliament, n.d.) on the redistribution of powers between EU institutions. The historical development of institutional capacity for sanctions was analysed in the context of the evolution from the Single European Act (European Parliament, 1987) to the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) (European Union, n.d.). All these documents were used as a regulatory framework defining the mechanisms for the legal functioning of sanctions. The regulatory analysis method was used to reconstruct the intra-European mechanisms for implementing sanctions, which include: asset freezing, trade bans, regulation of financial flows, export controls and monitoring of sanctions circumvention. In this regard, the role of the European Commission (n.d.) as the executive institution responsible for ensuring compliance with the sanctions regime in member states, developing relevant regulatory

acts, and monitoring the EU internal market was taken into account. In addition, the mechanisms of multilateral coordination of EU sanctions policy with the UN, the US, the UK and the G7 were analysed. Particular attention was paid to innovative elements of sanctions policy, in particular measures against circumvention of restrictions through third countries and regulation of digital areas (cryptocurrencies, satellite technologies, cloud computing), which were reflected in the 2025 sanctions package.

Results

Conceptual foundations of the European Union's sanctions policy. The primary mechanisms of sanctions were first shaped within the framework of the European Coal and Steel Community. However, it was with the adoption of the Single European Act and the creation of the CFSP that the foundations for sanctions policy in its modern sense were established (European Parliament, 1987; European Union, n.d.; Gordon, 2023). The legal basis for the application of sanctions is regulated by Articles 21 and 29 of the Treaty on European Union (2012), which define sanctions as an instrument aimed at achieving the EU's foreign policy objectives, in particular the protection of human rights, the promotion of democracy, and the maintenance of peace and international security. With the entry into force of the Treaty, the powers to impose sanctions were institutionally strengthened: the Council of the EU was given a central role in decision-making, while the implementation of sanctions was entrusted to the Member States, in coordination with the European Parliament (n.d.). The historical development of sanctions policy can be divided into several key stages. In the 1990s, EU sanctions were mostly reactive, serving as a response to human rights violations or armed conflicts, such as the sanctions against the former Yugoslavia (Giumelli *et al.*, 2020). In the 2000s, sanctions became more preventive in nature, with an emphasis on restricting weapons of mass destruction proliferation programmes (Stangarone, 2021). A new stage of development began after 2014, when, in response to Russia's annexation of Crimea, the EU for the first time imposed large-scale sectoral sanctions against a country that is a significant economic and political partner (Nordenberg, 2025). This step marked a shift in the understanding of the function of sanctions – from an auxiliary economic measure to a political signal that shapes the EU's international normative position. The political and economic logic of sanctions

differ significantly in the European approach. Economic sanctions in the narrow sense are instruments designed to inflict economic damage on the target country in order to encourage a change in its behaviour. In this context, sanctions are seen as a means of economic pressure with clear indicators of effectiveness: restrictions on imports, exports and financial transactions. However, in EU practice, these instruments often have not only an economic but also a symbolic, normative function. The political logic of sanctions goes beyond pragmatic interests. It involves the use of sanctions as a way to demonstrate political solidarity, support international norms, and strengthen the EU's authority as a normative force. In many cases (e.g., sanctions against the Belarusian regime or the military junta in Myanmar), the economic effect of sanctions is limited, but their political function is to signal the unacceptability of certain actions by the international community (Okello, 2023). The EU consistently avoids using sanctions solely as instruments of coercion. In many cases, sanctions are accompanied by offers of dialogue or conditions for their lifting, forming the concept of “smart sanctioning”, in which restrictions are not an end in themselves but part of a broader diplomatic strategy. This is evident in cases of multilateral sanctions agreed with the UN or the US, where the political logic of sanctions is reinforced by coordination with allies and participation in shaping international legitimacy.

In the European Union's foreign policy system, sanctions are a multifunctional tool capable of performing various tasks, from symbolic demonstrations of position to direct influence on the behaviour of individual states, government regimes, non-state actors, or legal entities and individuals. In EU practice, there is a clear typology of objectives to which sanctions regimes are subject. The most representative of these are three main functional vectors: political messaging, deterrence and behavioural change (Nwador *et al.*, 2023). Each of these objectives is implemented through specific forms of sanctions, mechanisms for their implementation, and types of target recipients. An essential feature of the EU's sanctions policy is its comprehensive nature: individual sanctions packages can simultaneously perform several target functions, although the dominant objective is usually decisive for their architecture. Table 1 summarises the examples and mechanisms for implementing these three objectives, structuring the types of EU sanctions according to their functional purpose.

Table 1. Main objectives and types of EU sanctions in the field of foreign policy

Sanctions objectives	Nature and function	Types of sanctions	Examples of countries/situations	Implementation mechanisms
Political signalling	Expressing the EU's political position, condemning violations of international norms, human rights or democratic principles	Diplomatic sanctions, personal restrictions (entry ban, asset freeze), contact ban	Belarus (2020), Venezuela (2017), Myanmar (2021)	EU Council statements, public justification, symbolic inclusion in sanctions lists, European Parliament resolutions
Deterrence	Deterring undesirable behaviour (in particular armed aggression or authoritarian escalation) by the target actor	Sectoral restrictions, bans on the sale of weapons, dual-use goods, financial restrictions	Russia (2022), Iran (since 2006), North Korea	Coordination with UN/US sanctions, pressure through economic losses, prohibition of cooperation with sensitive sectors

Table 1. Continued

Sanctions objectives	Nature and function	Types of sanctions	Examples of countries/situations	Implementation mechanisms
Behavioural change	Encouraging specific actions: ending repression, starting negotiations, releasing political prisoners or returning to international law	Personal sanctions + sectoral restrictions with retroactive effect (conditions for lifting sanctions)	Iran (2015 nuclear agreement), Zimbabwe, Cuba	Flexible mechanisms for reviewing sanctions, phased lifting of sanctions subject to compliance with conditions, clear criteria for assessing compliance

Source: compiled by the authors based on A. Aslund & J. Hagemejer (2021), E.J. Ballbach (2022), I. Prezas (2022), H. Doutaghi (2024)

An analysis of Table 1 shows that the EU's sanctions policy has a clear functional stratification, within which different types of sanctions correspond to different levels and logics of foreign policy influence. Sanctions aimed at sending a political message are often symbolic in nature and are used to preserve the EU's moral authority on the international stage. In such cases, the EU demonstrates its commitment to international law and democracy, even if the economic effect of the sanctions is minimal. Sanctions aimed at deterrence are primarily preventive in nature and involve inflicting material losses on the target. In the case of Russia, following its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the EU imposed 13 packages of sanctions, including restrictions on imports and exports, the freezing of assets of the Central Bank of the Russian Federation, disconnecting banks from SWIFT (Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication) and other levers aimed not only at punishment but also at systemic isolation (Nordenberg, 2025). Sanctions aimed at changing behaviour are the most difficult to implement, as they require not only precise formulation of political demands, but also the creation of transparent review mechanisms. An example of such a strategy is the nuclear agreement with Iran (JCPOA – Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action), under which some sanctions were lifted in exchange for Iran's commitment to limit its nuclear programme (Batmanghelidj & Rouhi, 2023). This approach demonstrates the EU's willingness to act within the framework of compromise and negotiated rule-making. The adoption of sanctions within the European Union is a multi-level process that combines legal mechanisms, political decisions and inter-institutional coordination. At the heart of this system is the institutional architecture of the EU, which ensures both the legitimacy of sanctions decisions and their operational effectiveness. The adoption of sanctions is not an automatic or purely technical process – it is a politically charged decision that requires the consent of all Member States (European Council, n.d.). It involves coordination between several key EU institutions, in particular the European Commission (n.d.) and the European External Action Service (n.d.). The PSC (n.d.) also plays a role in this process. The European Council (n.d.), which determines the general strategic directions of EU foreign policy, plays a primary role in the political approval of the need to impose sanctions. It is at the level of heads of state and government that decisions are made on the need to respond with sanctions to a crisis situation, violations of

international law or human rights. The political decision is transformed into specific proposals with the participation of the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, who also heads the External Action Service and participates in meetings of the Foreign Affairs Council.

Further technical development of sanctions measures is carried out by the European External Action Service (EEAS, 2015), in particular its Global Issues and Sanctions Department. The EEAS formulates proposals, consults with Member States and prepares legal drafts. In this process, one of the functions is performed by the PSC (n.d.), which ensures coordination at the level of the permanent representations of the Member States and submits proposals for consideration by the Council of the EU. The European Commission (n.d.) develops draft legislation to ensure the proper implementation of sanctions decisions in member states, in particular with regard to the freezing of assets and the prohibition of transactions or trade. The Commission also coordinates activities in the field of export control, monitoring of sanctions violations and detection of circumvention of restrictions. At the final stage, the Council of the EU (in the format of foreign ministers) formally adopts decisions on the imposition of sanctions on the basis of the legal framework – Articles 21 and 29 of the Treaty on European Union (2012). Decisions are taken unanimously, which ensures their legitimacy but at the same time reduces flexibility in crisis situations. Therefore, each stage of the sanctions process requires both legal precision and political agreement, which makes the institutional architecture of sanctions policy both strong and complex. The procedure for adopting sanctions is illustrated in Figure 1.

This institutional chain demonstrates that the EU refuses to apply sanctions spontaneously or impulsively. On the contrary, the process requires deep intergovernmental coordination and support from all member states, which reduces the risk of sanctions abuse but also limits flexibility in emergencies. It is this institutional complexity that is the source of both the strength (democracy, legitimacy) and vulnerability (delays, blurred political will) of the EU's sanctions policy. In a broader context, the sophistication of this architecture allows sanctions to be viewed not only as a means of pressure, but also as an instrument of strategic positioning for the European Union in the world system, strengthening its role in global politics and consolidating its identity as an actor that acts in accordance with the norms of international law, rather than geopolitical domination.

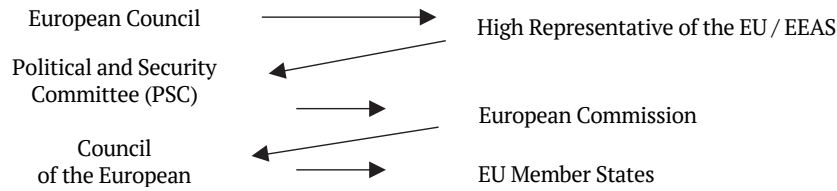


Figure 1. EU sanctions adoption procedure

Source: compiled by the authors based on F. Giumelli *et al.* (2020)

The European Union's sanctions policy as a factor in international security. The geopolitical dimension of the European Union's sanctions policy is evident in the specifics of its application to various regional actors who either violate international law or pose a threat to security, stability or human rights. In this context, sanctions are not a universal tool, but a flexible mechanism that adapts to the specific conflict,

level of threat and intensity of political influence. Within the framework of a case study of sanctions regimes against the Russian Federation, the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Republic of Belarus, the Syrian Arab Republic, the People's Republic of China and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, a general overview of the sanctions measures imposed by the European Union in 2014-2025 was presented (Table 2).

Table 2. Main EU sanctions packages and their political consequences (2014-2025)

Year of implementation	Country/Target of sanctions	Types of sanctions	Political objective	Key results	Reaction of the addressee	Coordination with other actors
2011	Syria	Individual, financial, oil embargo, transport	Ending repression against civilians, pressure on Bashar al-Assad's regime	Ban on Syrian oil imports into the EU, freezing of regime assets, ban on Syrian airlines, gradual economic isolation	Strict disregard for demands, continued repression, strengthening of alliances with Russia and Iran	Partial coordination with the US, Turkey, and the League of Arab States
2014	Russian Federation	Financial, trade, visa, individual	Stopping aggression against Ukraine, promoting implementation of the Minsk agreements	Restrictions on the Russian financial sector, partial isolation from capital markets, GDP (gross domestic product) decline of 2.5% by 2016	Negative – counter-sanctions, militarisation of Crimea, rhetoric of “siege”	Full coordination with the US, Canada, Japan, G7
2017	North Korea	Import-export restrictions (coal, fish, oil), financial, individual	Stopping the nuclear programme, bringing the DPRK (Democratic People's Republic of Korea) back to the negotiating table	35% reduction in North Korean exports, diplomatic isolation, partial cessation of currency flows	Open hostility, refusal to engage in dialogue, intensification of rhetoric against “external pressure”	Full coordination with the UN, US, South Korea
2018	Iran	Individual, financial, transport, export	Responding to human rights violations, monitoring the missile programme	Partial restriction of access to European financing, but preservation of the INSTEX channel (a mechanism for supporting trade settlements)	Moderate criticism, continued cooperation with China and Russia, attempts to circumvent sanctions	Disagreements with the US (which withdrew from the JCPOA), limited support from the G7
2020	Belarus	Individual, sectoral, aviation, technological	Ending repression, supporting the democratic process	Restrictions on exports of potash fertilisers, ban on air travel, freezing of assets of Lukashenko and entourage	Ignoring demands, orientation towards Russia, intensified repression	Partial coordination with the US, UK – synchronisation of dates

Table 2. Continued

Year of implementation	Country/Target of sanctions	Types of sanctions	Political objective	Key results	Reaction of the addressee	Coordination with other actors
2022	Russian Federation	Full-scale sectoral sanctions: energy, banks, transport, mass media	Responding to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, strategically weakening the Russian Federation	EU's exit from energy dependence, freezing of Russian assets (about EUR 300 billion), destruction of logistics chains	Systematic escalation of the conflict, attempts to adapt through China, Iran, Africa	Maximum coordination with the G7, US, Japan, Australia
2023	China (restricted)	Individual sanctions against officials involved in human rights violations in Xinjiang	Protecting human rights, supporting the international humanitarian order	Symbolic reaction, diplomatic protests from the PRC (People's Republic of China), no economic effect	Sharp criticism, temporary restriction of high-level dialogue	No full coordination – the US has imposed broader sanctions

Source: compiled by the authors based on C. Portela (2012), Y. Ghobadi *et al.* (2019), A. Aslund & J. Hagemejer (2021), J. Emtseva (2021), M. Bělín & J. Hanousek (2021), E.J. Ballbach (2022), L. Whartnaby (2023), E. Nordenberg (2025)

Russia is undoubtedly the most complex and long-standing target of EU sanctions. After the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the start of the armed conflict in Donbas, the EU imposed a series of sanctions, including visa restrictions, asset freezes, and sectoral bans in the energy, financial, and defence sectors (Anyalebechi, 2025). Since February 2022, following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the nature of the sanctions policy has changed radically. The EU has moved to large-scale sectoral restrictions in the energy, transport, media and banking sectors, which has significantly affected Russia's financial stability and accelerated its economic isolation. At the same time, it should be emphasised that Russia is actively adapting by diversifying its foreign trade and strengthening cooperation with China, Iran and the countries of the Global South. Sanctions against Iran illustrate a different model – a combination of pressure and diplomacy. While in 2006-2015 the sanctions regime primarily concerned the nuclear programme, the situation changed after the US withdrew from the JCPOA. The new EU sanctions package of 2018 focused on human rights issues and the missile programme. The restrictions covered financial, transport and export operations, but at the same time, the EU left the INSTEX mechanism in place in an attempt to maintain humanitarian trade channels and support a minimum level of interaction. This demonstrated the EU's characteristic balance between political pressure and the desire to avoid humanitarian consequences for the civilian population (Nordenberg, 2025). Belarus is an example of a regional neighbour whose sanctions policy is normative in nature. After the rigged 2020 presidential election and the violent crackdown on peaceful protests, the EU imposed personal sanctions against key representatives of Alexander Lukashenko's regime, as well as sectoral restrictions on the potash industry, petroleum products and finance (Aslund & Hagemejer, 2021). Particularly telling was the EU's reaction to the forced landing of a Ryanair flight in May 2021, which was perceived as an act of state terrorism (Whartnaby, 2023). This led to a ban on Belarusian airlines

using EU airspace and confirmed Brussels' willingness to resort to tough measures even in areas directly related to civil transport. Syria is an example of a protracted crisis in which the EU has focused on personal and sectoral sanctions against Bashar al-Assad's regime. In response to massive human rights violations during the civil war that has been ongoing since 2011, restrictions on Syrian oil imports, a freeze on the assets of the Central Bank of Syria, a ban on trade in internet monitoring technologies, and an arms export ban were introduced. Despite the duration of the sanctions, they did not lead to political transformation of the regime, but they did clearly reinforce the European position on the unacceptability of war crimes and support for international humanitarian law (Portela, 2012). North Korea became the target of EU sanctions in 2017 due to its nuclear and missile programme. The EU fully joined the sanctions regime agreed with the UN Security Council, in particular by restricting imports of coal, fish and oil from the DPRK, as well as introducing financial and individual sanctions. This resulted in a reduction of the country's export revenues by about a third and further diplomatic isolation. However, Kim Jong-un's regime responded with a demonstrative refusal to engage in dialogue and intensified anti-Western rhetoric. This case demonstrated the low effectiveness of sanctions in the absence of internal incentives for negotiations (Stangarone, 2021). China is a special case, as the EU's sanctions policy towards it remains limited. In 2023, the EU imposed individual sanctions against Chinese officials involved in human rights violations in Xinjiang for the first time. These measures were symbolic in nature, as they did not cover key areas of economic cooperation between the EU and China. Beijing's reaction was sharp – diplomatic protests, a temporary suspension of political dialogue and mirror restrictions against European figures. At the same time, the lack of full coordination with the US, which acted much more harshly, underscores the EU's desire to balance its principled position on human rights with the need to maintain economic partnership (Emtseva, 2021).

The EU's sanctions policy in response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 was the subject of in-depth analysis in the context of the study. This case was exceptional in terms of the scale of sanctions and the level of international coordination. For the first time in EU history, comprehensive sectoral sanctions with long-term strategic implications were applied, including the reorientation of the Union's entire energy policy. Despite significant economic pressure on Russia, the EU's political goals, in particular the cessation of aggression, remain unfulfilled, which raises the question of the limits of sanctions' effectiveness in the context of highly conflictual environments. The 2025 sanctions package is innovative and aggressive in nature: it targets not only the target country, but also third parties that contribute to circumventing the restrictions. For the first time at the EU level, sanctions have been imposed on data processing, satellite technology, cloud computing and cryptocurrency transactions, responding to the new challenges of digital geopolitics (Moiseeva, 2023). The impact of EU sanctions on the architecture of international security is twofold – both stabilising and conflict-generating. On the one hand, sanctions become an instrument for strengthening international responsibility, reducing tolerance for violations of sovereignty and international law, and forming a common European position in conflict situations. They contribute to the consolidation of EU member states, the deepening of the transatlantic partnership, and the enhancement of the EU's role as a political actor with global influence. On the other hand, excessive or inadequately scaled sanctions policy can have negative side effects: it can radicalise those targeted, cause humanitarian harm to the civilian population, provoke anti-Western mobilisation or the search for alternative alliances (e.g. rapprochement between Russia and China, deepening cooperation between Iran and BRICS (an alliance of countries: Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa)). In some cases, sanctions fail to achieve their objectives, which calls into question the effectiveness of the instrument and creates precedents for the selective application of principles, undermining confidence in the EU as a consistent global player. In addition, attempts to circumvent sanctions through third countries (e.g. Serbia, UAE – United Arab Emirates) indicate limited effectiveness in an open global economy. The Russian Federation systematically circumvents restrictions by using transit chains through third countries (China, Hong Kong, Kazakhstan, Belarus), falsifying customs data, using "false transit" schemes and civilian proxy companies to transfer Western military technologies. In order to circumvent the oil embargo, the Russian Federation actively uses a "shadow fleet" – tankers with AIS trackers turned off and false registration through the UAE, China, and India – which has been used to export more than 70% of Russian maritime oil even after the G7 cap (Bousso, 2025). At the same time, China receives oil from Iran and Russia using the so-called "dark fleet" – tankers with disabled trackers, often flying "flags of convenience" (Beckman *et al.*, 2025). Iran has been actively circumventing sanctions for years through complex financial networks with offshore companies, gas-for-gold schemes, barter (e.g., exchanging oil for gold or goods via Turkey, the UAE) and a network of front companies in Hong Kong, Dubai, Turkey, etc. (Laudati &

Pesaran, 2022). Similar practices are being copied by Russia to circumvent oil restrictions.

In the modern system of international relations, European Union sanctions are increasingly seen not as a reactive instrument of short-term influence, but as part of a long-term strategy aimed at transforming the behaviour of target entities within the EU's overall course of action to ensure international legality, protect human rights, and prevent aggression and destabilisation. This evolutionary transition allows to understand the EU's sanctions policy in the paradigm of strategic deterrence, which combines both normative and coercive elements. Strategic deterrence as a category of the EU's current sanctions policy primarily involves long-term, coordinated and flexible influence on the decision-making system of the target state or organisation with the aim of changing not only individual practices but also strategic orientation. It should be emphasised here that EU sanctions do not operate in a vacuum, but in coordination with other foreign policy instruments – diplomatic initiatives, development programmes and security policy. They reinforce each other, and this is the essence of the strategic approach, as opposed to the tactical use of sanctions. For example, the sanctions against the Russian Federation, introduced in response to its aggression against Ukraine, combine sectoral and individual restrictions with energy initiatives, support for Ukraine, and information policy. In this context, the question arises: have EU sanctions really transformed from an auxiliary foreign policy instrument into a full-fledged political mechanism of influence? Confirming this hypothesis requires considering the sanctions toolkit not only in terms of the number or frequency of its use, but also through the prism of institutionalisation, specialisation and integration of sanctions into the overall architecture of EU strategic planning. Since the 2000s, sanction procedures have become significantly more complex: legal mechanisms for appealing decisions (in particular within the EU Court of Justice) have been introduced, a clear distinction between types of sanctions (individual, sectoral, geographical) has been established, and criteria for expediency and proportionality have been developed. A notable example is the creation of the EU global human rights sanctions regime, which for the first time establishes universal (rather than geographically bound) responsibility for serious crimes, including torture, extrajudicial executions, slavery and sexual violence (European Council, 2024). In this case, it is not just a reaction to specific events, but an attempt to institutionalise sanctions as an instrument of moral and political influence, comparable in significance to traditional diplomacy. Thus, the hypothesis about the transformation of sanctions from an auxiliary economic regulation into a full-fledged political instrument is partially confirmed, but not without reservations. The European Union has indeed modernised and complicated its sanctions policy, but sanctions, despite their growing importance, have not become a universal or dominant means of influence. The effectiveness of sanctions is largely determined by external factors – the level of international support, the structural vulnerability of the target state, and the political will to maintain pressure over the long term. In strategic terms, EU sanctions serve a dual function – as a means of coercion and an instrument

of norm-setting, which determines both the complexity of their implementation and their potential for further development within the concept of strategic deterrence.

Discussion

The study traced the evolution of the European Union's sanctions policy, which gradually transformed from an auxiliary instrument of economic influence into a strategic political mechanism. This transformation correlated with the conclusions presented in the works of a number of scholars. A comparison with the study by H. Jessen (2021) showed that his interpretation of sanctions as an instrument of coercion in the context of violations of international norms partially corresponded to the approach defined in this study. However, while H. Jessen focused primarily on the legal dimension of coercion outside the UN system, this study analysed EU sanctions as an instrument that combined normative legitimacy with functional flexibility. H. Jessen's study took less account of the institutional specificity of the EU, while this analysis paid considerable attention to the decision-making process, legal grounds, and interaction between institutions. Moreover, while H. Jessen considered sanctions predominantly reactive measures, this study highlighted their transformation into a strategic mechanism incorporating elements of prevention, signalling, and long-term isolation, particularly in the case of the Russian Federation. The work of P.J. Cardwell & E. Moret (2022) emphasised the growth of the European Union's autonomous sanctions capacity, which corresponded to the findings of this study regarding the EU's evolution from an auxiliary instrument to an independent mechanism of foreign policy influence. P.J. Cardwell & E. Moret placed particular focus on the cohesion of EU member states and the shortcomings of the UN sanctions system, which drove the EU to expand its own toolkit. In this respect, there was consistency with this study's conclusions regarding the EU's role as a regional leader in the field of sanctions. At the same time, Cardwell & Moret's research concentrated mainly on the macro-level manifestations of sanctions policy, whereas this analysis explored not only strategic but also functional and institutional dimensions, including case studies on Iran, Belarus, Syria, China, Russia, and North Korea. The limited impact of the EU on the global stage, identified by P.J. Cardwell & E. Moret, was also confirmed in this study, particularly in the context of the dependence of sanctions on international coordination and cooperation with the G7. The study by A. Tsatsos (2024) provided an analytical framework for evaluating the effectiveness of sanctions, particularly through a focus on their diplomatic expediency and political consequences. Within this research, the key findings of A. Tsatsos were confirmed, namely the influence of regime type, level of international cooperation, and economic structure on the effectiveness of sanctions. However, unlike A. Tsatsos's work, which emphasised a universal approach and historical comparison, this study concentrated specifically on the European approach to sanctions, with a clear distinction between political signalling, deterrence, and behavioural change as separate functions. A. Tsatsos pointed to the adaptability of sanctions to conflict conditions, which was consistent with this study's findings on the EU's flexibility in the cases of Syria

and Iran, where restrictive measures were combined with diplomatic initiatives. The problem of sanctions circumvention, also raised by A. Tsatsos, was elaborated further in this study in the context of the 2025 sanctions and the introduction of new mechanisms to control digital technologies and third-country involvement.

In comparison to the work of J. Walterskirchen *et al.* (2022), which focused on the sanctions regimes against Russia, Iran, and North Korea, this study found a shared tendency to use sanctions not only as a tool of pressure but also as a means of strategic signalling. However, unlike J. Walterskirchen *et al.*, whose work focused on comparative effectiveness without a deep analysis of the EU's institutional context, this study demonstrated that the EU's institutional architecture, with its need for consensus, significantly influenced the speed and scale of its response. While J. Walterskirchen *et al.* used an empirical database to assess impact, this research emphasised the normative and strategic dimension of the EU's sanctions policy, revealing its gradual transformation into a tool for long-term geopolitical isolation. Thus, although both approaches highlighted the limitations of sanctions, the current study provided a broader analytical context by analysing the legal basis, strategic transformation, and role of the EU's diplomatic initiatives. In comparison to the work of D. Plakhov (2021), which explored NATO's hypothetical potential for creating a unified sanctions policy, this study focused on the EU as an already existing and effective actor in sanctions policy. Unlike D. Plakhov's hypothetical examination of a NATO mechanism, this research analysed the functioning EU sanctions system, its legal foundation, institutional model, and actual application, showing that even within a single supranational structure, the effectiveness of sanctions depends on the level of internal agreement and political will. Compared to the work of P.A.G. Van Bergeijk (2022), which analysed historical precedents of sanctions and their connection to political regime types, financial channels, and strategic goals, this study gave more attention to the transformation of sanctions as a political instrument. While both studies acknowledged the EU's vulnerability to the economic consequences of sanctions, this research, unlike P.A.G. Van Bergeijk's macroeconomic focus, revealed the complex evolution of the EU's sanctions paradigm – from economic pragmatism to political principledness – as well as the strengthening of the normative component through the creation of the Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime. The work of S.M. Anyalebechi (2025), which covered the period of the Russia-Ukraine war from 2014 to 2025, highlighted the ineffectiveness of sanctions in altering Russia's foreign policy. Its main focus was on realism and geopolitical dimensions, which partially aligned with the findings of the present study regarding Russia's continued aggressive behaviour despite sanctions. At the same time, S.M. Anyalebechi (2025) devoted less attention to the internal institutional specificities of EU sanctions implementation, which in this study were analysed as a key factor shaping effectiveness. Both approaches recognised the necessity of combining sanctions with diplomacy and coalition-building; however, the present research extended this perspective by emphasising the role of strategic signalling and the legal legitimacy of sanctions. In the study by

S. Steininger (2021), sanctions in the form of membership restrictions within regional organisations were examined as a tool for the protection of human rights. Compared with this approach, which was oriented primarily towards the normative-legal dimension, the analysis of EU sanctions policy demonstrated how sanctions within a unified legal framework can combine normativity with geopolitical influence. Both approaches raised concerns about the negative impact of sanctions on civil society; however, in the case of EU sanctions policy, such limitations were considered as factors influencing the internal balance between humanitarian considerations and strategic expediency. While S. Steininger focused on exclusion as an extreme form of sanctions, this study illustrated the EU's systemic flexibility in choosing instruments of influence – ranging from sectoral measures to global normative regimes. Overall, present study found that while previous works viewed sanctions primarily as a reactive tool or a means of economic pressure, the modern EU sanctions policy has demonstrated a capacity to transform into a strategic and normative mechanism. This contrasts with some previous authors' conclusions, who underestimated the institutional complexity and political weight of sanctions as a European foreign policy instrument. At the same time, there was a strong correlation between the factors of effectiveness identified in external literature and the empirical findings of this study, particularly regarding the importance of international coordination, the type of target regime, and the institutional design of the sanctions architecture.

Conclusions

A study of the European Union's sanctions policy for the period 2014-2025 revealed the complex evolution of this instrument from an auxiliary mechanism of economic influence to a full-fledged political instrument of strategic deterrence. Historical analysis has shown that the formation of the EU's current sanctions policy has gone through several key stages: from limited trade measures within the European Coal and Steel Community to a comprehensive system institutionalised in the 2009 Treaty of Lisbon, which combines sectoral, individual and geographical restrictions. The legal basis for sanctions policy, enshrined in Articles 21 and 29 of the Treaty on European Union, defined sanctions as an instrument for achieving foreign policy objectives, in particular the protection of human rights, the promotion of democracy and international security. The institutional architecture for adopting sanctions decisions, which includes the European Council, the Council of the EU, the European Commission and the External Action Service, has ensured a balance between political legitimacy and technical efficiency, although it has limited the speed of response due to the need for unanimous decision-making. An analysis of the functional stratification of EU sanctions policy has identified three key objectives for its application: political messaging (symbolic expression of position), deterrence (prevention of undesirable

behaviour) and behavioural change (encouragement of specific actions). An analysis of EU sanction cases revealed a differentiated approach and varying effectiveness depending on the political context and objectives. Sanctions against Russia (after 2022) were unprecedented in scale (13 packages, freezing of Central Bank assets, disconnection of banks from SWIFT, energy embargo), causing significant damage to the aggressor's economy and military-industrial complex, but did not lead to the end of the war, which indicates the limited effectiveness of sanctions in stopping large-scale aggression.

In the case of Iran, sanctions acted as a catalyst for negotiations (JCPOA), proving their effectiveness as an instrument of conditional diplomacy, but their success proved fragile due to the US withdrawal from the agreement and insufficient coordination. Belarus has become an example of targeted sanctions (freezing of regime assets, restrictions on potash exports, aviation embargo) aimed at signalling and putting pressure on the elites, which, however, did not lead to political change due to Russia's geopolitical patronage. Syria demonstrated long-term sanctions as a tool for normative isolation and prevention of the financing of repression, which, however, failed to influence the internal dynamics of the conflict. Limited personal sanctions against China for human rights violations in Xinjiang were purely symbolic, highlighting the EU's structural limitations in influencing major geopolitical powers. On the other hand, comprehensive sanctions against North Korea, agreed with the UN, although contributing to diplomatic isolation, did not stop the nuclear programme, demonstrating their ineffectiveness against highly resistant authoritarian regimes. The strategic dimension of the EU's sanctions policy was manifested in the creation of the EU global human rights sanctions regime, which institutionalised sanctions as an instrument of global normative influence. However, analysis has shown that sanctions remain part of a broader set of foreign policy instruments, and their transformation into an autonomous mechanism of influence is limited by external factors (geopolitical competition, economic interdependence) and the internal need to balance effectiveness with humanitarian consequences. Further research could focus on developing quantitative methods for assessing the effectiveness of sanctions, taking into account their combination with other foreign policy instruments, as well as analysing the impact of digital technologies on the evolution of sanctions regimes in the context of global digitalisation.

Acknowledgements

None.

Funding

None.

Conflict of Interest

None.

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