

Sanctions - the EU's Approach to Russia's War in Ukraine

The European Union (EU) has supported Ukraine since Russia launched its full-scale invasion in February 2022. This conflict has become the second major crisis after the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the invasion, the EU has shown unprecedented support for Ukraine at both the supranational and intergovernmental levels. The EU's measures have included diplomatic efforts and strategic defense policies, such as the Strategic Compass and the European Peace Facility (EPF). Additionally, the EU has imposed sanctions on Russia, though questions remain about their long-term effectiveness.

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1. Why did the EU choose sanctions as a primary tool to pressure Russia after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine?

In a short period following the onset of the war, the EU developed new initiatives and strategic tools that significantly influenced its defense integration. The most important one is the Strategic Compass, the EU's first security and defense strategy. During the war, the EU has welcomed millions of Ukrainian refugees, offered Ukraine the chance for future EU membership, and provided financial support for post-war reconstruction. The Strategic Compass notably includes over 80 specific actions to strengthen the EU's resilience to internal and external shocks. Another key instrument is the European Peace Facility (EPF), which was initially designed to fund peace missions in Africa. However, it has since been adapted to support the Ukrainian armed forces. The Strategic Compass and the EPF are tools developed at the intergovernmental level without relying solely on supranational institutions.

Since March 2014, the EU has imposed sanctions on Russia in response to the illegal annexation of Crimea (2014), the full-scale invasion of Ukraine (2022), and the illegal annexation of the Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson regions of Ukraine (2022) (Council of the European Union, n.d.). Notably, the EU's response to the 2022 invasion was much faster than its response to the 2014 invasion. This war has provided a clear example of EU integration and burden-sharing. The European Commission mobilized regional and structural funds for humanitarian assistance and implemented temporary protection measures. In the early stages of the war, parts of Europe were still dependent on Russia's coal, oil, and gas, which undermined the effectiveness of the EU's sanctions. Central European countries largely depended on Russian energy, whereas Estonia and Lithuania had already cut this dependence.

Sanctions are a key element of the EU's foreign policy; however, criticism exists that sanctions are not always effective in the long run. The EU chose sanctions as a tool to weaken Russia's war machine and affect its economy, as well as to respond to human rights violations. Further, the EU has adopted individual sanctions against judges, prosecutors, and other judicial members involved in human rights violations. In addition, the EU received the first payment of 1.5 billion euros, which was given to the European Peace Facility and the Ukraine facility (Council of the European Union 2025). The sanctions were imposed in different fields, including financial schemes, trade, agriculture, and more. The diversity of sanctions can weaken Russia's military capacity and prevent its future aggression. They can be more effective in the long run despite criticisms of their durability.

2. How can sanctions work effectively to weaken Russia's war machine?

Most EU sanctions are "smart sanctions," meaning they target specific individuals and entities to avoid pressure on the general population. The EU's approach to sanctions has changed dramatically since 2014. Financial sanctions and export bans have increased significantly since then. However, the EU remained reluctant to impose severe sanctions, such as travel bans, because they could impact the Russian population. Portela and Kluge (2022) claim that both targeted and comprehensive sanctions are visible in the EU's measures. However, the EU hesitated to implement comprehensive sanctions, such as sanctioning Russian banks, because such actions could also negatively affect the public.

Experts predict that the implications of economic sanctions will continue to affect Russia's economy. A good example of comprehensive sanctions and their effectiveness is the impact on the Russian Central Bank and Russia's technological potential in the future. Additionally, one of the reasons why these effects are not immediate is Russia's resistance to economic pressure. Russia's economy is dependent on Western technological imports. Comprehensive sanctions have been effective over time as it has disrupted Russia's economy and limited access to advanced technology but it was not effective at the level of political goals so far but this picture may change.

While targeted sanctions have limitations in effectiveness, comprehensive sanctions are often more effective. For instance, Russian corporations closely associated with Putin were sanctioned. However, these sanctions have not been effective in the long run. Many of these corporations managed to adapt by reorganizing their supply and distribution chains. Although their performance levels declined in the short term, the long-term impact of these sanctions has diminished.

Another issue with sanctions is the weaponization of the financial system. Using the financial system as a tool of coercion is a new approach. Cutting a central bank off from the global financial network can lead to the creation of parallel systems, threatening financial stability. There have been two waves of sanctions: the European Union's embargo on crude oil and the G7's price cap mechanism. In response, Russia found alternative export markets, particularly in India, China, and Türkiye.

Sanctions are a powerful tool, but there is criticism as well. For example, the Heritage Foundation opposes relying on sanctions as a key strategy, warning of potential harm to all parties involved. Similarly, the UN's "Bossuyt Report" argues that the characteristics of sanctions do not align with principles of human rights and humanitarian law. Sanctions are typically used as a last resort when diplomacy fails. In the case of Russia's illegal intervention in Ukraine, they represent one of the tools employed to pressure autocratic regimes into changing their course.

One of the primary challenges in evaluating the impact of sanctions on Russia's economy is the unreliability of Russian data. However, a Yale study estimates that approximately 1,000 Western companies have left Russia since the invasion began (Yale School of Management 2024). Another metric to consider is the number of Russians who left the country, reflecting the broader consequences of sanctions.

The rationale behind the critique of sanctions as ineffective derives from Russia's ability to find alternative ways to avoid sanctions. However, sanctions can have a long-term impact, as their primary goal is to weaken Russia's 'imperialistic policies'. Although their impact is gradual, the Russian economy is shrinking, as the data shows. Russia's GDP trended downward from 2018 to 2023, with a decline in 2023 (European Union 2024).

The comprehensive sanctions framework adopted by the EU represents a novel approach to penalizing Russia. This design considers the humanitarian implications, focusing instead on maximizing economic and political pressure on Russia. The EU aims to impose the highest possible costs on Russia and its economy by doing so. In her 2022 speech, the European Commission President described these measures as the "toughest sanctions the world has ever seen" (European Commission 2022).

This comprehensive approach has both strengths and weaknesses. On the downside, as mentioned above, the weaponization of banking systems could lead to adverse effects in the future. On the upside, this strategy effectively helps to stop Russia's efforts to advance in the war and influence other countries.

Targeted sanctions, by design, focus on specific individuals, leaving the broader population unaffected. This approach aligns well with the EU's humanitarian principles and reduces the impact on the target population, making it a more acceptable strategy. While this method has advantages, such as adhering strictly to international law standards, it has significant limitations in effectively restraining Russia's war efforts.

For the EU, such an unprecedented level of sanctions is new, and it obviously attracts criticism, but the European states will learn from this experience. Applying comprehensive sanctions could be more effective in the long run to weaken authoritarian states or push them to alter their political route. Despite widespread skepticism about their effectiveness, sanctions are impactful. Russian imports dropped by up to 50% in the first half of 2022. Additionally, sanctions have forced Russia to seek new customers for its gas. Thus, when used strategically, sanctions are an effective bargaining tool and can ultimately weaken Russia.

3. Why is multilateralism important in the EU's sanctions approach?

Countries that provide military support to Russia include Belarus, Iran, North Korea, and China. Additionally, some countries, such as China, India, Iran, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia, oppose sanctions against Russia.

Sanctioning these countries could block alternative ways for Russia to avoid sanctions. However, a significant challenge with this approach is the lack of unified participation among EU member states in targeting these nations.

European and NATO countries have imposed sanctions on Russia following its intervention in Ukraine in 2022. However, despite this unified approach, Central and South America and most of Asia have not participated in the sanctions. This reluctance is mainly due to the vulnerability of these regions and concerns over the long-term effects of sanctions. Multilateralism is crucial when targeting Russia and its war machine. However, it is important to analyze the reasons behind the reluctance of certain countries to join the sanctions. Understanding the fears and concerns of these nations is essential for encouraging broader participation in the sanctions against Russia.

Furthermore, it is vital to address the perspective of countries that feel "this is not our fight" and to emphasize that Russia's war in Ukraine is a global issue that requires a unified response. If Russia wins the war in Ukraine or if the conflict freezes, it is unlikely that Russia will stop there. The country may continue its efforts to reinforce its influence and escalate tensions in other countries, such as Moldova and Georgia.

Russia is actively seeking alternative alliances as it strives to advance in the ongoing conflict. However, Russia does not always receive support from its formal allies. For example, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) did not support Russia when it recognized the independence of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, or when it annexed Crimea. The most significant alliance for Russia is BRICS, which holds considerable potential to influence the Global South. In 2017, China proposed the BRICS Plus initiative, a multilateral cooperation model to reshape the WTO, IMF, and World Bank agendas to help developing countries. Through this initiative, Russia seeks to offer an alternative world order. The Global South has alternative perspectives on the war, and the BRICS countries present a narrative that differs from the West. Not a single BRICS nation has supported the Western sanctions imposed on Russia. This presents a significant challenge for the EU, as Russia's alliances with these countries complicate the effectiveness of sanctions.

Another challenge is that countries avoid sanctions and offer illegal ways for Russia to export its products through alternative routes.

Hence, a multilateral approach towards sanctions is critical on both supranational and intergovernmental levels to show unity in decisions. The EU has shown this unity recently: on July 18th, 2025, the EU approved its 18th sanction package against Russia, as Kallas stated in her role as EU High Representative.

"The EU just approved one of its strongest sanctions packages against Russia. Each sanction weakens Russia's ability to wage war. The message is clear: Europe will not back down in its support for Ukraine. The EU will keep raising the pressure until Russia ends its war" (Council of the European Union 2025).



About the Author

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