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How Authoritarian Regimes Counter International Sanctions Pressure

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How Authoritarian Regimes Counter International Sanctions Pressure

Abstract

Based on current literature, this paper analyses the nature and effects of external pressure imposed on authoritarian regimes. Around three-quarters of all countries under United Nations, United States, and European Union sanctions are authoritarian, and "democracy sanctions" that aim at improving democratic and human rights in targeted countries constitute the biggest sanctions category. Yet, authoritarian regimes represent particularly problematic targets as they can more easily shield themselves from external pressure than their democratic counterparts can. Authoritarians have a tighter grip on the public discourse and the struggle over the meaning of sanctions. They often even use them to their own advantage, denouncing sanction senders as "imperialist" and blaming them for their economic woes. The paper presents trends in the application of sanctions pressure against authoritarian regimes, reviews mechanisms of how economic and diplomatic restrictions work, and examines authoritarian targets' attempts to engage in pressure proofing.

Keywords: Authoritarian regimes, external pressure, sanctions, rally-round-the-flag effect, pressure proofing

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How Authoritarian Regimes Counter International Sanctions Pressure

Christian von Soest

Article Outline

1 Introduction

Traditionally, Comparative Politics scholars have focused on the inner workings of authoritarian[1] rule and regimes. However, authoritarian regimes are also prime targets of international pressure, for instance from Western countries or the United Nations. Research on authoritarian regimes has, in turn, increasingly acknowledged the importance of international factors for the maintenance and (de)stabilisation of authoritarian rule (Levitsky and Way 2010; Tansey 2016a; Whitehead 1996) and has incorporated insights from research on foreign policy

1 In this paper, I use the terms "authoritarian," "autocratic," and "non-democratic" interchangeably.

instruments – for instance, sanctions (Escribà-Folch and Wright 2015; von Soest and Wahman 2015). Analysing pressure imposed on non-democratic regimes is indispensable to learning more about the international as well as internal politics of authoritarianism.

Two fundamentally opposing developments have characterised the last 15 to 20 years: On the one hand, growing autocratisation processes (Tomini 2021) and the "return of authoritarian great powers" (Gat 2007) have created an increasingly permissive environment for authoritarian practices worldwide. On the other, authoritarian rule is under considerable domestic and international pressure. For example, sanctions are mostly enacted on non-democratic regimes. Around 75 per cent of all countries under UN, United States, and European Union sanctions are authoritarian. In addition, "democracy sanctions" that aim at improving democratic and human rights constitute the biggest sanction category (Portela and von Soest 2012; von Soest and Wahman 2015). As military intervention has become largely discredited and with the public in the West having become increasingly war-weary, sanctions are arguably the most common foreign policy tool used to deal in the twenty-first century with hostile behaviour by authoritarian regimes – such as Russia's aggression towards Ukraine.

In this paper, I present findings from current research on the nature and political consequences of exerting pressure on authoritarian regimes. I review how economic and diplomatic restrictions work and examine authoritarian targets' pressure-proofing strategies. Authoritarian governments represent particularly problematic targets as they can shield themselves from external pressure more easily than their democratic counterparts can. With their limited or – in extreme cases – even non-existent level of political competition, participation, rule of law, as well as considerable control over the public discourse (Brooker 2009; Dahl 1971; Wintrobe 1998), they are harder to influence from the outside than liberal democracies are. In particular, as will be shown, in an attempt to proof themselves against external pressure, authoritarians can more easily fall back on economic, discursive, and repressive resources.

Before analysing the pressure imposed on authoritarian regimes, it is important to make two clarifications. First, there is a fundamental difference between the general international and/or regional environment for authoritarian rule – be it permissive or hostile – and foreign policies, which are directed and intentional: in this case, external pressure applied to authoritarian regimes. Here, I focus on the latter: specific pressure applied to destabilise authoritarian regimes or change their policies. Second, it is a well-established research finding that Western countries and international organisations are not consistent in imposing such pressure. On the contrary, their related decisions are highly selective or even strategic. To be sure, the US and its allies have regularly supported authoritarian rule, for instance in Egypt (Brownlee 2012) or in sub-Saharan Africa (Hagmann and Reyntjens 2016).

Given the wealth and breadth of existing research on the topic, the overview offered in this paper must be selective. I proceed in four steps: First, I present trends in the application of pressure, in particular sanctions, against authoritarian regimes. Second, I review factors that

influence the success of sanctions and, third, I examine authoritarian targets' attempts at pressure proofing to counter the effects thereof. Fourth and finally, I suggest avenues for further research concerning the questions to be tackled, research design, and data.

2 Existing Literature

Two strands of Political Science have examined how external pressure affects authoritarian regimes. Unfortunately, they have often worked in isolation. The first is Comparative Politics research on authoritarianism. Boix (2011, 809) found that the "structure of the international system affects the resources and strategies of pro-authoritarian and pro-democratic factions in client states." Directly after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc, the international context became overwhelmingly supportive of democracy. Yet, the global dominance of liberal democracy proved short-lived. The ascendance of authoritarian great powers (Gat 2007), most notably China and Russia, and of authoritarian states, like Saudi Arabia, has turned the tide once again. The success of populist leaders across the globe (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2018) has also created a more permissive environment for authoritarian regimes. China and other authoritarian powers provide massive material, military, and ideological support while the so-called China Model sets an internationally appealing example (Bader 2015).

Scholars have analysed the different international dimensions of authoritarianism. Levitsky and Way (2010) examined how international linkage and leverage affect "competitive authoritarian" regimes in different world regions. In the following, scholars have also investigated processes of authoritarian diffusion (Bank 2017; Weyland 2017), the collaboration of authoritarian regimes (Tansey 2016b; von Soest 2015), aid provided to authoritarians (Hagmann and Reyntjens 2016), and the international image-building of non-democratic regimes (Dukalskis 2021). This has resulted in a better conceptualisation and more fine-grained understanding of how international factors contribute to the strengthening or weakening of authoritarian rule across the globe.

Second, International Relations research has provided fundamental new insights into the effect of specific foreign policies. The literature on international sanctions has massively expanded in the last 10 to 15 years. The first major data-collecting endeavour on sanctions came from Hufbauer, Schott, and Elliot (2007; first published in 1990). Following in their footsteps, the number of captured sanctions episodes has grown significantly. This has allowed researchers to better differentiate targets, measures, and sanctions goals. Consequently, it has become possible to examine the effect of sanction threats (Morgan, Bapat and Kobayashi 2014); to disentangle different policy demands, most notably separate "democracy sanctions" aiming at strengthening democracy and human rights from measures pursuing other demands (von Soest and Wahman 2015); and, to assess UN targeted sanctions (Biersteker, Eckert, and Tourinho 2016) and EU sanctions (Weber and Schneider 2022), regionally imposed measures, as well as the ending of sanctions (Attia and Grauvogel 2023; Attia, Grauvogel, and von Soest 2020).

Furthermore, new approaches have served to cover the broad range of economic restrictions sanctioning powers utilise (Felbermayr et al. 2020).

In principle, this sanctions data permits scholars to comparatively test factors that affect democracies and authoritarian regimes, as well as various types of the latter, in greater detail. However, only a fraction of newer works has closely investigated the sanctions–authoritarianism nexus (most notably, Escribà-Folch and Wright 2015; Lektzian and Souva 2007). Most studies, if at all, work with an autocracy dummy, to differentiate between democratic and non-democratic regimes, typically using Polity IV as their data source (Marshall and Jaggers 2010). In addition to the compilation of datasets and statistical analysis, scholars have qualitatively assessed the effect of external pressure in authoritarian settings (e.g. Jones 2015; Raynor 2022). However, efforts to explicitly link qualitative and quantitative approaches and combine their respective benefits have remained rare (e.g. Biersteker, Eckert, and Tourinho 2016).

3 Different Forms of Pressure

External pressure may be applied for various reasons: to fight armed conflicts; to stop the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction; to counter support for terrorism; to punish human rights violations; to address democratic deficiencies; to tackle drug trafficking; or, to combat money laundering and corruption. Following Baldwin's (1999) "logic of choice," states, international and regional organisations can react in different ways to undesirable behaviour by authoritarian regimes: They can stay silent or provide incentives – for instance, material ones – to bring about change (Blanchard and Ripsman 2013). Beyond that, they have a large foreign policy toolbox at their disposal to impose pressure on authoritarian regimes.[2] Table 1 presents these measures.

Table 1. Means of Coercion

Form of pressure	Main mode
Military intervention	Military
Economic sanctions	Economic
Foreign-aid withdrawals (and conditionality)	
Human rights prosecutions	Legal
Naming and shaming campaigns	Political/Discursive
Diplomatic efforts	

Note: Measures are presented in descending order of severity.

Seen as being between "words and wars" (Wallensteen and Staibano 2005), sanctions have arguably been the most prominent foreign policy tool used to exert pressure on authoritarian regimes since the end of the Cold War. They can be understood as "penalties linked to real (or

2 In their excellent review, Krasner and Weinstein (2014) consider several external policies and group them into three categories: contracting, coercion, and imposition.

alleged) misconduct," or, more elaborately, as "penalties threatened or imposed as a declared consequence of the target's failure to observe international standards or obligations" (Doxey 1996, 9). It is important to note that economic and/or diplomatic restrictions are not only coercive tools but are also applied to constrain a target's actions and to send a strong signal about international norms (Giumelli 2011). Regularly, they are used in conjunction with other policy means, such as diplomatic negotiations or military interventions.

The term "sanctions" encompasses a wide variety of measures, ones that are specifically packaged in each instance (see Table 2 below). Triggered by the devastating humanitarian consequences of the UN embargo on Iraq in the 1990s, the last 20 years have seen a major transformation of the sanctions tool. In contrast to traditional trade embargoes that indiscriminately affect the whole economy and/or population, Western powers and the UN now almost exclusively impose targeted sanctions. These focus on particular economic sectors and social groups (sectoral sanctions) or on specific persons and entities (individual sanctions) to minimise the adverse humanitarian impacts (Biersteker, Tourinho, and Eckert 2016; Drezner 2011). The most notable trend has been the "individualisation" of sanctions since the early years of the new century. In line with this tendency to individualise accountability (Sikkink 2009), such sanctions seek to coerce responsible individuals and entities into changing their behaviour, constrain their actions, and to send a strong signal about a particular international norm (Giumelli 2011). Yet, as the most recent sanctions packages against Iran, Russia, and Syria demonstrate, sanctions have become more comprehensive again.

Table 2. Nature of Sanctions

Type	Economic costs
Comprehensive trade embargo	High (particular sectoral sanctions such as arms embargos might impose low economic costs; the costs of financial sanctions vary widely)
Sectoral sanctions: a) import and export restrictions b) Investment restrictions c) Stopping arms supplies and military cooperation	
Financial controls and limiting of access to international financial markets	
Suspension of development aid	
Individual sanctions against persons and entities ("blacklists"), mainly by banning them from entering the country and freezing their assets	Low
Diplomatic sanctions (expulsion of diplomats or severance of diplomatic relations)	

3.1 The main sanctioning entities

The imposition of pressure on authoritarian regimes has become widespread since the end of the Cold War. This is due to two main developments: First, the effective blockage on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), as the highest and most legitimate international body, imposing such pressure ended in 1990. While the UNSC had only imposed two sanctions regimes up to 1990, namely against Rhodesia and Apartheid South Africa, it has since enacted over 23

such regimes against 18 countries (Biersteker, Tourinho, and Eckert 2016, 23). All of these targets can clearly be rated "authoritarian." Accordingly, scholars dubbed the 1990s the "sanctions decade" (Cortright and Lopez 2000). However, following this "unipolar moment," the UNSC is now blocked again – the main international decision-making body can hardly agree on new multilateral sanctions. Russia's aggression against Ukraine is the most obvious example here – UN sanctions against this permanent member of the UNSC are completely unrealistic.

Second, the US and later the EU, as the most active sanction senders globally, massively stepped up their use of autonomous sanctions – that is, ones not mandated by the UNSC. As the world's most powerful democracy, the US regularly acts unilaterally on issues of international democracy and human rights promotion (Ignatieff 2009; Moravcsik 2005). Since the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the US has entered into a "new era of financial warfare" (Zarate 2013) and uses the country's dominant position in the global financial system to block the funding of state and non-state actors it perceives as a threat to its security interests. Since the passing of the 2012 Global Magnitsky Act, the US has a special law in place that requires the government to ban purported human rights offenders from entering the country and to freeze their assets (Tama 2018).

In line with its self-understanding as a union of liberal values, the EU has recurrently used "restrictive measures" to strengthen human rights and democracy abroad (Hazelzet 2001; for a critique, see Brummer 2009). Only recently has the EU implemented its own "horizontal" human rights sanctions regime, providing the legal basis for individual designations. With the adaption of this new regime in December 2020, alongside similar initiatives addressing cyberattacks and the proliferation of chemical weapons, EU member states have created the legal basis for sanctions addressing particular issues rather than behaviours linked to specific countries' governments (Portela 2021; von Soest 2019). Australia, Canada, Japan, and the United Kingdom have their own sanctions policies in place and regularly align with US and EU sanctions. Finally, it is important to note that not only Western countries apply autonomous, non-UN-mandated sanctions. Russia and increasingly China use this foreign policy tool themselves, too (Harrell, Rosenberg, and Saravalle 2018; Timofeev 2021).

4 The Success of Sanctions

For years, academics, practitioners, and policymakers have discussed whether sanctions "work," meaning whether they help sanctioning powers achieve their political goals. According to Hufbauer et al.'s (2007) ground-breaking study, sanctions attain their objectives in one-third of all cases. Pape (1997), however, established a considerably lower success rate of just 5 per cent. He set a very high, potentially unrealistic, threshold for success; for him, only complete target acquiescence to the sender's demands counts. Also, concurrent military intervention would render the effect of sanctions meaningless. As a second fundamental consequence,

external restrictions might – in ways intended or not – contribute to the destabilisation or even collapse of authoritarian regimes or rulers' removal from office (Marinov 2005). In principle, the effect of sanctions depends on three groups of factors: the target's institutional characteristics; pressure-inherent factors; and the policy objectives attached to a given sanctions package. In the following, I will address each of these in more detail.

4.1 Institutional characteristics

One of the most established findings in the scholarship is that sanctions are more successful in attaining concessions from democracies than authoritarian regimes (Allen 2008a; Brooks 2002; Lektzian and Souva 2007; Peksen 2009). Authoritarians are less reliant on the consent of their citizens. Going by these studies, authoritarian rulers and their coteries are generally better able to isolate themselves from outside pressure or even use it to their advantage. Democratic governments, on the other hand, are less able to repress growing domestic dissent and tarnish their electoral chances through the economic crises and international isolation caused by outside pressure. They can simply be voted out of power.

Within the category of "authoritarian regimes," there are notable differences when it comes to susceptibility to outside pressure. It is important to note that it is less the sheer size of the winning coalition (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003) but more its composition that fundamentally influences authoritarian-elite behaviour in the face of external pressure. Generally, less institutionalised regimes are more susceptible to sanctions (Escribà-Folch and Wright 2015; Jeong and Peksen 2019). Personalist regimes are more prone to both making concessions and collapsing in the face of such measures. These regimes are highly centralised around the leader at the top while formal institutions such as an impartial bureaucracy or judiciary are weak (Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2014; Frantz et al. 2020; Grundholm 2020). Regularly, personalist regimes lack the capacity to extract taxes on a large scale and are based on patron–client relations (von Soest 2009). In consequence, they tend to be reliant on foreign-aid flows and/or natural-resource rents that can be cut off more easily by economic sanctions.

It is important to take the sender's perspective into account, too. The growing literature on "the determinants of public support for democracy-promotion instruments" (Escribà-Folch, Muradova, and Rodon 2021, 2) implies that public opinion in sender countries like the US regularly drives target selection. For instance, US citizens supported in one study the use of coercive measures against personalistic, oil-rich countries with no ties to their own – characteristics that all make sanctions' success extremely unlikely (Escribà-Folch, Muradova, and Rodon 2021). These findings help to explain why governments impose sanctions in cases where coercive measures and other instruments hardly work.

Sanctions reduce the funds available to co-opt members of the elite, the ruling coalition, as well as the domestic population at large (Gandhi and Przeworski 2006; Morrison 2009). Fur-

thermore, the resources available for the repressive apparatus and the military dwindle. Established and institutionalised party regimes such as China, military juntas, and monarchies are therefore all better able to withstand external pressure.

4.2 Pressure-inherent factors

The nature of pressure – for instance, how economically costly sanctions are and whether targets can redirect trade to alternative partners ("sanctions busting") – determines whether sanctions successfully affect (authoritarian) targets (Early 2011, 2021). All else being equal, higher economic costs increase the chances that a target will capitulate. However, as shown above, this relationship is not linear but instead contingent on factors such as the target's regime type. Furthermore, studies show that multilateral sanctions, for instance by the UN, tend to be more effective than restrictions imposed by one or a small number of countries (Bapat and Morgan 2009; Miers and Morgan 2002). Multilateral sanctions provide fewer loopholes and opportunities for sanctions busting (Early 2011) and enjoy higher legitimacy, particularly mandatory UN sanctions. In these cases, targeted regimes have a harder time denouncing sanctions as "imperialist." These findings counter earlier concerns that to forge multilateral sanctions, sanction senders would settle on the lowest common denominator – meaning weak sanctions (Drezner 2000). Finally, sanctions issued by trade partners and politically aligned senders tend to be far more successful than measures imposed by other countries (McLean and Whang 2010).

4.3 Policy objectives

The nature of the "disputed policy" (Dorussen and Mo 2001) or the "issue salience" (Ang and Peksen 2007) – as seen from the target's perspective – fundamentally affects the prospects for sanctions success. The policy objectives tied to sanctions can be divided into attempts to destabilise the authoritarian regime in question and improve democratic and/or human rights, on the one hand, or to force changes in particular policies, on the other. Naturally, demanding democratisation or even outright regime change goes to the core of authoritarian rule and directly puts the security of rulers' and authoritarian elites' tenure in office at risk (Escribà-Folch and Wright 2015; von Soest and Wahman 2015). Demanding free and fair elections or respect for political freedoms threatens the targeted regime's grip on power. These sanctions goals send strong signals of disapproval and potentially directly undermine the targeted regime's survival and national security. Unsurprisingly, the demand for democratisation or regime change regularly meets stern resistance. In addition, salient goals such as Russia's unlawful territorial conquest of Ukraine can hardly be achieved through sanctions alone. On the other hand, authoritarian targets are more likely to succumb to limited and clearly defined policy demands.

5 Pressure-Proofing Strategies: How Authoritarian Regimes Counter Sanctions

Scholars have devoted their attention and energy mostly to answering the question of how successful sanctions are, meaning the extent to which they manage to coerce the target and stop a particular behaviour. Less discussed is the issue of *how* economic pressure actually translates into policy shifts. Going by a micro-foundations approach (Kirshner 1997), we can differentiate three main ways in which sanctions affect the cost–benefit calculations of authoritarian rulers: they can change tack ("it's not worth it"); the coterie around the ruler or other powerful members of society can force a rethinking of policy (or even regime change); or, citizens may take to the streets. Naturally, these processes are not mutually exclusive and thus feed into each other.

Innovative research applying an interest-group model (Kaempfer and Lowenberg 2000) has shown that measures harming powerful segments of society who initially support government policy tend to be the most successful. Similarly, affecting the interests of "innocent bystanders" (Major and McGann 2005) – that is, internationally linked businesspeople with political influence – is a particularly effective strategy. These groups might, in turn, lobby for policy changes to get sanctions lifted. The crucial insight emanating from this public-choice perspective is that the political pressure coming from influential groups is regularly more decisive than the will of the general population (on authoritarian regimes in general, see Svolik 2012).

Research findings on sanctions' effects on protest remain inconclusive. Sanctions communicate regime disapproval (Schwebach 2000) and may thereby trigger domestic political protest to bring about the desired behavioural changes. Visible sanction threats can work as a signal of support for would-be protestors and stimulate collective action against targeted governments (Grauvogel, Licht, and von Soest 2017). Furthermore, anti-government protest is more likely to occur in times of economic hardship (Kricheli and Livne 2011; Ulfelder 2005). Thus, sanctions' economic costs increase the probability of anti-regime activity. However, there is no consistent empirical support for this deprivation mechanism. The *perceived* probability of success is at least as influential a mechanism for triggering protest as deprivation is (Allen 2008b).

Sanctions put authoritarian rulers at risk – be it through increased elite and/or popular pressure and deprivation and/or signalling mechanisms. Consequently, one of the most solid findings from extant quantitative research is that sanctions increase the probability of regime collapse and a change of ruler (Escribà-Folch and Wright 2015; Licht 2017; Marinov 2005; von Soest and Wahman 2015). Authoritarian leaders are well aware of these destabilising risks. In an attempt to shield themselves, they draw on their power resources and even try to turn such external pressure to their advantage.

At the international level, autocratic regimes try to evade sanctions and find alternative political and trade partners (Early 2011; Lektzian and Biglaiser 2013). In 2019, for instance, the Iranian foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif proudly declared that his country had "a

Ph.D. in sanctions busting" (De Luce 2019). The extent of this "black knight" support depends on how isolated the target is regionally and internationally. Internally, authoritarian regimes use economic, discursive, and repressive strategies to limit the domestic repercussions of outside pressure. As a result, sanctions – be they comprehensive or targeted – often fail to achieve their political objectives and can even have negative consequences: they may strengthen the targeted government's role in distributing scarce resources, contribute to a "rally-round-the-flag effect," and/or induce increased state repression and corruption. Evidence from survey experiments in targeted societies, such as Venezuela, suggests that the framing of external pressure is decisive for public attitudes towards sanctions (Sejersen 2021). Citizens in target countries find external pressure more legitimate when they perceive sanctions to be directed at the incumbent elites and imposed to improve the local human rights situation.

5.1 Economy: Strengthening the role of government

Comprehensive sanctions inhibit the flow of imports and exports as well as financial exchanges. They thereby contribute to the shortage of specific goods and investments or even to economic crisis, as in Iran or in Iraq during Saddam Hussein's rule. However, unintentionally, these restrictions also increase the role of the targeted government in distributing scarcer resources and providing support in countering sanctions' repercussions for citizens and the domestic economy (Escribà-Folch 2012). Thus, the population often becomes more dependent on government subsidies. They can be revoked. In Syria, for instance, the government cut subsidies for oil products, thereby fundamentally increasing the cost of living for citizens (Daher 2021). Regularly, targeted governments focus their resource distribution on politically well-connected businesspeople and those population groups that support the ruler in power.

In principle, *targeted* sanctions are expected to minimise economic and social harm to the general population (Cortright and Lopez 2002). However, targeted sanctions are no silver bullet. Recent studies have criticised them for having adverse humanitarian impacts similar to comprehensive measures (e.g. Gordon 2019; Moret 2021). In addition, even though scholars and policymakers alike deem sanctions targeting top decision-makers to be most effective in changing the policies in question and sending strong signals about international norms (Wallensteen and Grusell 2012), only recently have powerholders become increasingly blacklisted. Currently, Russia's Vladimir Putin, Belarus's Alexander Lukashenko, North Korea's Kim Jong-Un, Venezuela's Nicolás Maduro, and Syria's Bashar al-Assad have asset freezes and travel bans imposed on them, while other powerful decision-makers who have committed similarly egregious human rights violations are not targeted by the US or the EU (von Soest 2019).

5.2 Discursive strategies: Using sanctions to authoritarians' advantage

Using censorship and propaganda, authoritarian governments have a tight grip on the public discourse and the struggle over the meaning of sanctions. Targeted authoritarian regimes regularly even try to use sanctions to their advantage, integrate them into their legitimation strategies, and blame senders for their economic woes – thus diverting attention away from their own mismanagement. Governmental legitimacy and ideology fundamentally influence the vulnerability of rulers to external pressure. Regimes with strong anti-imperialist ideologies can even turn it to their advantage to create a rally-round-the-flag effect (Galtung 1967) and quell internal dissent. Such an effect occurs when the sanctioned government can portray that external pressure as an attack on the entire country and thus successfully appeals to the solidarity of its population (Grauvogel and von Soest 2014; Tannenberg et al. 2021). This is particularly relevant for regimes that have a strong ideological foundation, for instance as a result of past revolutions or wars of liberation (Goldstone 2001; Levitsky and Way 2022). China, Cuba, Iran, Venezuela, and Zimbabwe are prominent examples. On the other hand, regimes that have a thin ideological base and pursue a performance-based legitimation strategy are, all things being equal, more vulnerable to outside coercion (Grauvogel and von Soest 2014).

On the whole, however, current experimental evidence suggests that such a rallying effect is rarely caused by external pressure alone. After the 2014 annexation of Crimea, for example, Russian national euphoria and President Putin's approval ratings skyrocketed because of the deed itself, rather than the subsequent confrontation with the West (Alexseev and Hale 2020; Frye 2019).

5.3 Repression: Tighter grip

There is solid empirical evidence that sanctions on the whole – albeit unintentionally – contribute to increased human rights violations and state repression in targeted regimes (Liou, Murdie, and Peksen 2021; Wood 2008). This negative effect also holds when targeted sanctions are imposed. Sanctions also contribute to reduced human rights protection (Gutmann, Neuenkirch, and Neumeier 2020). Further empirical research shows that political violence tends to increase most in regimes situated between liberal democracies and full autocracies in the face of international sanctions (Allen 2008b) (for a summary, see Table 3 below).

The long-term effects might be more positive. First, as outlined, sanctions are particularly corrosive for personalist regimes. Peksen (2019, 638) states that "[w]eak state capacity and institutions also reduce their ability to use repression and other coercive tools to suppress growing domestic dissent and opposition following the sanctions imposition." Second, sanctions that aim at improving democratic and human rights on average seem to have a slightly positive effect and contribute to increased democracy levels in targeted states in the long run (von Soest and Wahman 2015).

Table 3. Targeted Authoritarian Regimes' Internal Means of Pressure Proofing

Strategies	Examples
Economic	Redistribution to political constituencies, elites, supportive regions and actors
Discursive	Recurrence to glorious past, outsiders' imperialism, and to nationalism; rallying effects
Repressive	"Hard" and "soft repression": increased censorship and propaganda, declaring a state of emergency, quelling protests, extrajudicial killings, greater use of police, military, and intelligence apparatus

6 Conclusion and Outlook

Authoritarian regimes are the prime targets of external pressure designed to alter their policies or even contribute to their destabilisation and regime change. Yet, compared to their democratic counterparts, authoritarians are harder to influence from the outside. Their institutional characteristics – a lower degree of political competition and participation, as well as a more modest rule of law – mean that authoritarian regimes can shield themselves from external pressure more effectively. (As outlined, in addition to these regime-specific characteristics, prior relations between senders and targets and the size of the economy determine the vulnerability to outside pressure.) Variation within the broad category of "authoritarian regimes" is substantial, however. Overall, such pressure is most harmful to less institutionalised personalist dictatorships, while sanctions can hardly affect highly isolated and repressive targets like North Korea.

6.1 Pressure proofing

Potentially influencing state–society relations in targeted countries, external pressure directly affects the "politics of autocratic survival" (Escribà-Folch and Wright 2015). Authoritarian regimes tend to maintain power with a mixture of repression, co-optation, and legitimation strategies (Gerschewski 2013; von Soest and Wahman 2015; Wintrobe 1998). They regularly draw on these strategies to shield themselves against externally imposed sanctions: they redistribute scarce goods to supporters, portray even targeted measures as an imperialist attack on the whole country, and step up repression to intimidate would-be protesters. In addition to these domestic resources, authoritarian regimes are active in the international arena: they try to circumvent sanctions (Early 2011); forge ties between themselves to impede democratic forces (von Soest 2015); attempt to influence public opinion in Western countries (Dukalskis 2021); and, impose retaliatory sanctions (Fuchs and Klann 2013; Timofeev 2021). In sum, the effects of such pressure depend on sanctions-specific factors (most notably the political demands made and economic costs imposed) and on the domestic resources that the targeted regime can draw on (economic, discursive, and repressive).

6.2 Outlook: Avenues for further research

Concurrent with the increasing use of international sanctions – former US president Donald Trump's "maximum pressure campaign" comes to mind – to influence authoritarian regimes, analysis of and knowledge about this key foreign policy tool has fundamentally expanded in the last 15 to 20 years. Conversely, Comparative Politics research increasingly acknowledges how external factors and outright pressure affect authoritarian rule (Levitsky and Way 2010). As authoritarian regimes will remain the main targets of Western powers' pressure in the years to come, further scholarly progress in examining its consequences for incumbents, as well as their pressure-proofing strategies to counter it, is of the utmost importance.

First, despite the considerable advancements made, scholars still largely investigate sanctions in isolation – that is, without linking them to other means of exerting pressure. Yet, sanctions are always used in conjunction with other foreign policy tools – for instance, diplomacy, foreign aid, mediation efforts, and material incentives. In the spirit of Escribà-Folch and Wright (2015), and of Biersteker, Brubaker, and Lanz (2022), future studies should systematically theorise and empirically explore the effect of sanctions on authoritarian regimes vis-à-vis other coercive measures. In doing so, qualitative and quantitative perspectives could be more systematically connected, as could Comparative Authoritarianism and IR research on sanctions.

Second, existing research often fails to capture the highly dynamic and non-linear listing patterns that dominate current sanctions practice. Even targeted measures are normally conceived of as single events with a sole start and end date (Peksen 2019). Individual sanctions are almost exclusively aggregated at the annual and country levels as if they were comprehensive sanctions. One promising analytical strategy to overcome this simplification has been Eriksson's (2011, 47–51; see also, Biersteker, Tourinho, and Eckert 2016, 17) disaggregation of country-level sanctions regimes into separate episodes. This could form a fruitful starting point for further investigations.

Third and finally, newer developments – such as so-called horizontal sanction regimes in the EU and other jurisdictions – that directly target specific persons and entities have led to a sharp increase in individual listings. These require new data-collection efforts. Doing so will help us analyse their repercussions for targeted individuals and entities in authoritarian settings in a more fine-grained manner.

Autocratisation processes across the globe, the increasing antagonism between democratic and authoritarian regimes, and the "weaponized interdependence" (Farrell and Newman 2019) all mean that external pressure and related pressure-proofing strategies will become even more important issues going forward. Continued scholarly efforts will therefore be instrumental to gaining further key knowledge about how authoritarian rule can be influenced from the outside (or not).

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