The EU's Identity – Using Sanctions to Construct the International 'Self'

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On March 17, 2014, the European Union (EU) imposed its first sanctions against Russia.[1] The sanctions were the Union's reaction to the culmination of tensions between Ukraine and Russia, which resulted in the violation of Ukraine's sovereignty and the annexation of Crimea. The already strained relationship between EU and Russia was aggravated by the Russian continuation of destabilization manoeuvres in Ukraine. This in turn lead to intensified EU sanctions against Russia.[2]

Sanctions are not only understood as responses to norm violations in the international system, but also as *communicative acts*, the meaning of which takes form in relation to both targets and bystanders.[3] The EU is still in the

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[1] European Council. "Tidslinje – EU:s restriktiva åtgärder med anledning av krisen i Ukraina."

[2] European Council. "Tidslinje – EU:s restriktiva åtgärder med anledning av krisen i Ukraina."

[3] Hellquist, Elin. Creating 'the Self' by Outlawing 'the Other'? EU Foreign Policy Sanctions and the Quest for Credibility. European University Institute, Department of Political and Social Sciences, Florence, December, 2012, p. 52.

process of forming an identity by claiming itself as an international actor. Consequently, the communicative aspect provides the EU with a significant opportunity to make sense of its own and others' positions through the use of sanctions. This study examines the EU sanctions against Russia that were introduced on March 17, 2014, and the sanctions that have followed since. The sanctions are not evaluated in themselves, instead the study demonstrates how EU's discursive understanding of sanctions function in the process of forming an identity.

Forming an identity — the constructivist perspective

Foreign policy can no longer be considered to be a domain exclusive to sovereign states as the formulation of the EU's common foreign policy is in full swing. This is providing researchers with a unique opportunity to study how an international actor is constructed.[4] An examination of the discourse in the five European Parliament debates gives a telling account of the EU's perception of 'the Self' and 'the Other.' This is, according to constructivist theory, the essence of what constitutes an actor's identity.[5]

According to the theoretical framework of this study, identity formation processes are *relational*, meaning that 'the Self' is constructed in relation to the actor's conception of 'the Other.' For example, when a state creates the image of itself as a democratic or peaceful actor, it generally does so by declaring another state as authoritarian. This is called *differentiation* and is a concept of the critical constructivist school.

According to the conventional constructivist perspective, national interests form the basis for a state's identity, which is then expressed through the

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[4] Hellquist, 2012, p. 1.

[5] Wendt, Alexander. *Social Theory of International Politics*. Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 231.

behaviour of the state.[6] There are two types of interests, which in turn dictate the formation process, so-called *objective interest,* which form the basis for an identity *to be* produced and *subjective interests* that determine *how* it is produced.[7] In this study the analytical weight will be put on the subjective interests, that is, *how* the EU's identity is formed.

Objective interests are so called necessary conditions, which means that an identity cannot be formed unless the entity meets the requirements. A Western state is only a state (located) in the West if it does not comply with certain criteria of solidarity with other Western states.[8] Subjective interests are an actor's preferences, or the motivation to act in a manner that aims to fulfil the prerequisites for formulating the identity as perceived by *the actor*. An actors' self-understanding of its subjective interests will in turn generate certain motivational and behavioural dispositions.

Determining motivational dispositions is not the easiest of tasks, and so, the theoretical framework is complemented by *logics of action*. Two different logics of action relate to the EU-parliamentarians' ways of justifying their positions on sanctions focusing on: (1) behavioural change of the target, and (2) purposive identity formation.[9] When sanctions are advocated in terms of (1) behavioural change, it is primarily for two reasons: strategic (self-interest) or altruistic aims. Sanctions may also be imposed with (2) the purpose of identity formation if they are advocated for reasons of punishment or "doing something."[10]

The study exposes the multi-layered nature of discursive identity formation, by critically monitoring the arguments put forward in the Parliament's Chamber. The identity formation is dependent on the EU's

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[6] Rumelili, Bahar & Cebeci, Marmara. "Theorizing European Identity:
    Contributions to Constructivist IR Debates on Collective Identity", 2016,
    p. 10.
[7] Wendt, 1999, p. 231.
[8] Wendt, 1999, p. 232.
[9] Hellquist, 2012, p. 63-76.
[10] Hellquist, 2012, p. 75.

understanding of 'the Self" and the conception of 'the Other.' Findings of the study confirm that the European Parliament's debate on sanctions proves to be a space for active identity formation for the EU.

Making sense of the threat

The starting point of the analysis corresponds with one of the most fundamental interests of any actor: to ensure the existence or survival of the entity. [11] First and foremost, there seems to be a consensus among the parliamentarians regarding the situation in Ukraine. Throughout the debates it is made clear that this crisis is not just about Ukraine, but rather peace and security in the whole of Europe is perceived to be under attack. One parliamentarian voices her concerns accordingly, by saying that:

> [W]hat is at stake is not only Ukraine; it is really the future of the
> whole of Europe; it is security and peace in the whole of Europe. Putin
> is obviously testing the strength and unity of all of us and we have to
> show that we have that strength and unity. [12]

Several statements emphasize the idea that Russia is 'testing' the EU. This idea gives the EU reason to respond by showing strength and unity. Acting on this impression boosts the idea of the EU as the whole of Europe's rightful defender. Ukraine is then understood as *part* of what is threatened rather than the whole, and the EU can act on behalf of the continent to help both themselves and Ukraine in one. This conceptualization demands a clear differentiation between 'the Self' and 'the Other', reinforced by the understanding of Russia as a threat to the EU's absolute core: the European peace. In the case that Russian behavior is perceived as a threat to security or any other of the EU's interests, sanctions must be understood as interest-

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[11] Hellquist, 2012, p. 71.
[12] Marju Lauristin. Debate 3.

driven. In turn, the rational response to a threat perceived as such is to remove the threat in order to secure the basic interest of survival.

However, an identity cannot be reduced to interests alone, since identity describes *who* or *what* an actor is, and interests solely describe what an actor *wants*. An interest thus requires an identity because an actor cannot know what it wants until it knows who it is. Two interpretations of the issue of peace follow. Either the EU understands itself as normative and therefore wants to sanction Russia to protect the *principle* of peace, or the EU, which is also interested in the survival of the entity, wishes to impose sanctions to protect itself against the *physical* threat to peace. The latter seems less likely since it does not match the proportional threat of violence in the crisis, since Russian behavior primarily threatens the physical peace of Ukraine. However, the physical threat towards Ukraine is by extension a threat to the principle of peace in Europe and the values of the EU.

Historical significance is ascribed to the threatened values of the situation, with peace in Europe as an example. Peace and freedom are norms that have become historically contingent for the EU, due to its constellation of states with a violent past. Thus, by invoking the memory of Europe's past, contemporary threats can be given a historical weight. A parliamentarian understands the EU's role as follows: "[w]e cannot afford and we cannot allow a large-scale war in Europe to take place again.[13] The conception is that it is the duty of the EU to make sure that another war does not break out in Europe. This also aligns with previous research arguing that Europe's history is a sensitive point for the EU.[14]

Historical analogies play an important role in the reasoning of restrictive measures. The debates contain both historical references to World War I, the Cold War and the Balkan War, as well as analogies to more current crises in Georgia and Moldova. Parliamentarians tend to invoke historical events to emphasize how devastating regional and international instability can be.

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[13] Doru-Claudian Frunzulică. Debate 3.
[14] Rumelili & Cebeci, 2016, p. 12.

Sanctions are thus justified as a way of avoiding such instability. In such cases, sanctions are considered to be *means* of securing the survival of the entity.

The discourse in the Chamber also reveals that the EU forms its identity through *differentiation*. The portrayal of Russia as undemocratic and warmongering reinforces the idea of the EU as democratic and peaceful. At the same time, historical analogies serve the identity formation process by creating a distinction between a contemporary and a former self. In other words, the history of the Member States can be perceived as an 'internal other' against which the EU constructs its 'contemporary self.'

Yet another strand in the debates approach the threat from a different angle, which might not necessarily be connected to the construction of 'the Self.' This strand reflects upon which consequences the crisis in Ukraine has on its citizens, by bringing attention to the impact on their living conditions, rights, and security as the main reasons for imposing restrictive measures. One parliamentarian emphasizes that "the people of Ukraine cannot be forgotten."[15]

This example of a more humanitarian perspective is relatively uncommon in the debates, although the humanitarian perspective is more in line with the idea of the EU as a normative actor. Rather, the effects and measures tend to be discussed in more technical and institutional term. The humanitarian strand, however, promotes the general idea that sanctions should be imposed on the basis of protecting human rights. In this sense, sanctions are understood as means of a more altruistic goal. The purpose is to change an actor's behavior based on the intention of strengthening human rights and improving people's living conditions. Respect for human rights is a constitutional norm that is expressed in various policies and is generally understood as a constituent part of the EU identity.[16] What this strand hints at is that EU may be considered a normative actor, as it brings a normative

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[15] Anna Maria Corazza Bildt. Debate 4.

[16] Treaty on European Union, 1992; Manners, Ian. "Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?" *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 40, 235-258, 2002, p. 242.

dimension to the reasoning on restrictive measures into the debate. This strand clearly broadens the understanding of what interests, norms, and values might guide the reasoning in the EU.

The strands discussed here might not necessarily contradict each other but represent different ways of achieving a similar goal: peace. It is thus difficult to determine which strand is more normative than the other, or if both are interest-driven. What this tells us is that there are different ways of making sense of what is being threatened in presence of the crisis, which leads to different arguments for imposing sanctions. Besides, it cannot be excluded that the EU may act out of security interest as well as with the intention of bringing about a normative change at the same time.

Motivating the restrictive measures

To commit to international norms is an indisputable way of showing that you, as an international actor, have normative tendencies and respect human rights in accordance with international law standards. Sanctions are also widely recognized responses to norm violations. Seemingly, imposing sanctions might correspond with an objective interest, as being recognized as a *legitimate* international actor may require this type of action, regardless of whether the intentions are normative or otherwise. Alternatively, and corresponding with a subjective interest, is the case in which EU understands itself as normative. It follows that the only way of acting in accordance with the conditions of *formulating* normative identity – is to impose sanctions.

The two following thematic categories – sanctions with instrumental and normative purposes – are based on the understanding that the EU wants to be perceived as a legal actor, but give rise to different ways of interpreting the function of sanctions for the identity.

a) Sanctions with an instrumental purpose
Starting off the instrumental side is a deeply rooted norm regarding what constitutes an international actor – the principle of sovereignty. The EU has

also adopted this norm as a fundamental right of states, which makes the Russian violation absolute. It is considered a definitive violation of the standards that both the EU and Russia have pledged to respect. In this way, the Russian invasion and its involvement in the illegal referendum in Crimea serve as clear reference points for the EU in deciding the respective actors' positions. Both within, and as part of the larger international community, but also to underscore the Russian behavior as a deviation from the norms connected to 'the Self.' A parliamentarian points out that: "Russia will not be able to normalize its relations with the EU through these measures."[17]

This also places the EU squarely into the situation, by pointing out that this kind of behavior will not help the EU–Russia relations. What is at stake here is regarded as the interests of both the EU and Russia, that is, their diplomatic relations. Following this reasoning, the EU's interference in the crisis may be regarded as more legitimate, and Russia is left illegitimate in its conduct, for Russia's behavior also threatens diplomatic relations on top of everything else.

The discourse reveals an inherent respect for territorial borders and state sovereignty in discussions regarding Ukraine and its constitution. This aspect of EU identity formulation is particularly interesting since the EU is *not* a sovereign state but consists of several states that have all given up some of their sovereignty to the international organization of the EU. Given the EU structure, sovereignty is indeed a prerequisite of the possibility of giving up sovereignty in the first place. The EU's self-image is thus based on respect for the principle of sovereignty, because the EU's own (collective) identity is dependent on existing in parallel to – and not at the expense of – the national identities of the Member States. Consequently, the EU foreign policy cannot be formulated without respect for the principle of sovereignty.

Another prominent idea in the debates is that the EU must send a clear and definite message to Ukraine, Russia and the rest of the world with its sanctions. In other words, actions are formulated with clear regard to 'the Self'

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[17] Francisco José Millán Mon. Debate 1. [Transcribed speech].

(EU), 'the Other' (Russia), but also with regard to the notion of other actors' (the international community) expectations on the EU. One parliamentarian argues for sending a more definite message by saying that: "if our message is hesitant, and if we are even unable to agree on a firm resolution, it will send a signal that the sanctions are more of a problem for the EU than they are for Russia."[18] This line of reasoning leads the EU to use sanctions as a tool for maintaining the image that corresponds with its conception of – and possibly actual – external expectations.

The debate is characterized by a norm *to act*, but it is not as easy to grasp what the intended consequences of the sanctions might be. Several addresses in the Chamber convey the motivation for imposing sanctions, but only briefly reflect on the intended effects of the restrictive measures. This strand stresses the use of restrictive measures as a punishment for Russia's norm violations, by holding that: "the EU must hit Russia hard with tough economic sanctions. Putin must understand that these sorts of aggressive actions have no place in *modern* [emphasis added] Europe and will not go unpunished."[19] Here, Russia is not only to be hit hard by sanctions, but is discursively contrasted against the 'modern' Europe, rendering antagonist Russia as 'backward'.

b) Sanctions with a normative purpose

A simplified division of international law into two kinds of norms renders the distinction between state rights and individual human rights. Previous research shows that respect for these principles is fundamental in order to be understood as a normative actor.[20] The fact that respect for human rights is raised relatively seldom as an argument for sanctions, in comparison to the rights of the state, can be understood in two different ways. On the one hand, the EU is not consistent in promoting these values, and should therefore not

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[18] Tunne Kelam. Debate 5.
[19] Charles Tannock. Debate 1.
[20] Manners, 2002, p. 240-244.

be understood as a normative actor. This aligns with the previous critique of the EU for its supposedly arbitrary human rights policies and attempts of democracy promotion, which in turn challenges the idea of the EU as a normative power.[21] On the other hand, the aim of altering a state's behavior can be understood as an implicit part of the sanction itself. The latter is supported by research that shows that EU-representatives tend to understand sanctions as a means of promoting certain norms and values, such as human rights and democracy.[22]

Targeted sanctions are used to influence the behaviour of specific individuals or sectors of a society's economy. One parliamentarian puts forth that: "we must target sanctions at Russia's policymakers."[23] The advocacy of targeted sanctions is thus centered on 'the Other', embodied by President Putin and other Russian policymakers. Action logic (1) informs us that sanctions that are promoted for behavioral change can be understood as normative. Another interpretation is that parliamentarians promote targeted sanctions on the basic understanding of them as more normative, or altruistic, than broad economic sanctions. This is based on the devastating consequences of the UN sanctions regime against Iraq in the 1990's, which inflicted serious harm onto the Iraqi population.[24] After this, the UN and the EU had to reconsider their foreign policy tools, and the EU started using restrictive measures targeting state leaders, other political elites or sections of the society responsible for the violations, in order to reduce civil and social damage.[25]

Previous research shows that the EU no longer promotes sanctions at the expense of the population, which coincides with this study that has detected no such tendencies. However, it cannot compensate for the surprisingly low

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[21] Diez, Thomas. "Normative power as hegemony", *Cooperation and Conflict*, Vol. 48, No. 2, 2013, pp. 194-210, 2013, p. 197.

[22] Hellquist, 2012, p. 108.

[23] Graham Watson. Debate 1.

[24] Portela, Clara. *European Union Sanctions and Foreign Policy: When and Why Do they Work?* Abingdon, Oxon. and New York: Routledge, 2010, p. 7.

[25] Portela, 2010, s. 7.

amount of explicit addresses of imposing sanctions in respect for human rights.

The differentiation of 'the Other'

Russia is understood as the main, if not the only actor responsible for the crisis. The separatists and others involved play a relatively small role in comparison. There is a need to create a clear distinction between the EU and Russia, in order for the parliamentarians to comprehend the EU's position in the international system. Conceptions of 'the Self' and 'the Other' are repeatedly used as reference points of the navigation. The parliamentarians emphasize that: "[t]he EU is for free democratic and unitarian Ukraine"[26] and that: "Russia is not a democratic country, as we see it."[27] In addition to claiming that: "[w]e of the democratic world will not cooperate with Russia whatever it regards."[28] Consequently, the image of the EU is strengthened as a democratic, peaceful, diplomatic, and potentially also a *normative* actor.

The tendency to impute personal responsibility to Putin for the situation could be derived from the transition from broad economic sanctions to targeted sanctions. Targeted sanctions are considered to strengthen individual accountability in international relations. Nevertheless, the reasoning of the debate rarely distinguishes between individual sanctions and economic sanctions when referring to Putin, indicating that there is a strong need of scapegoating. A parliamentarian asserts that: "[t]he EU must stand by the people of Ukraine, as well as the people of Russia, who are both victims of the irresponsible, vengeful hubris and, indeed, the weakness of Putin."[29] The risk of individual accountability claims is that it reduces the structural factors or shortcomings that triggered and/or continue to fuel the crisis. One way of making the EU's role more comprehensible is, first, to define Russia and the

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[26] Jacek Saryusz-Wolski. Debate 1. [Transcription]

[27] Nikola Vuljanić. Debate 1. [Transcription]

[28] Krzysztof Lisek. Debate 2. [Transcription]

[29] Ana Gomes. Debate 1.

EU as anti-poles. Secondly, to let Putin represent the face of aggression, by which the personalization of politics will reduce the complexity of the situation.[30]

Putin and Russia are along the same lines accused of being an imperialist aggressor. The reasoning suggests that the crisis in Ukraine is part of a larger machinery. A parliamentarian states that: "Russia is repeating a strategy that started in Georgia, Moldova and Transnistria. In Crimea it's starting all over again."[31] The repeated references of the debate to Russian involvement in independence claims and separatist struggles supports the idea that Russia – through the aggression in Ukraine and similar aggressions – is trying to recreate the old Soviet empire. Further reinforced by depicting Putin as the face of the aggression, as another parliamentarian claims that: "Putin said that the fall of the Soviet Union was the tragedy of the 20th century. He is now rebuilding his empire first Georgia, now Ukraine."[32]

Historical crises are, as shown, steadily brought up as reference points. Here, Russia's 'historical self' plays a significant role in justifying the EU's contemporary actions. This, with the crucial difference that the EU tries to formulate its identity by renouncing its past, while defining Putin and Russia by its predecessor's actions.

Concluding remarks

Russia is consistently perceived as peripheral in relation to the EU, both geographically as well as normatively and behaviorally. The differentiation between the EU and Russia is expressed strongest through the recurring references to international legal norms. The EU understands itself as a righteous organization and an upholder of international law. Russia is, in the capacity of being the aggressor and the adherent of deviant norms, the

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[30] Hellquist, 2012, p. 122.
[31] Johannes Cornelis van Baalen. Debate 2.
[32] Jacek Olgierd Kurski. Debate 1. [Transcription]

opposite of the EU. Sanctions may, therefore, serve as a tool of emphasizing that distinction – for the EU itself and others.

Historical analogies are used throughout to emphasize the distinction between the EU's historical and current self. Europe's history can be understood as an 'internal other', in the sense that the EU tries to create its contemporary identity by differentiating itself from the historical one. The former self of Russia, the Soviet Union, also plays a role in justifying sanctions, but with a significant difference. While the EU tries to create its identity by distancing it from a former self, it defines Russia by its history.

In conclusion, the formation of identity is dependent on 'the Other' as a reference point, although it can take on different shapes such as Russia, Putin, or a historic self/other. Different strands of reasoning ascribe sanctions, 'the Self' and 'the Other' different meanings, which in turn has different meanings for the identity. The conclusion is that the EU's discourse in the European Parliament regarding sanctions is a battlefield of norms, attitudes, and interests, which in turn makes it an extremely important space for an *active* identity formation for the EU. The EU is understood as a dynamic apparatus, and the Parliament is understood as one of its more dynamic elements. It follows that the European Parliament debates are a discursive source of EU identity formation.

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