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Fakulta medzinárodných vzťahov Ekonomickej univerzity v Bratislave
Dolnozemská cesta 1, 852 35 Bratislava, Slovak Republic
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E-mail: mv.fmv@euba.sk

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DISSECTING ARMED BANDITRY IN NORTHERN NIGERIA: EVOLUTION, TRAJECTORIES AND STATE RESPONSES

Olawale James Gbadeyan,[1]

This paper examines armed banditry not only as an inherent form of violence but also as a catalyst for reconstituting violent conflicts within the evolving landscape of northern Nigeria. Adopting qualitative methods, with 31 Key Informant Interviews and 6 Focus Group Discussions in the 3 of the most affected LGAs in Zamfara State, the findings reveal that various forms of violence intersect in complex ways with armed banditry, highlighting crucial implications for understanding the spectrums and trajectories of conflicts in the region. Although the government's counter-banditry program, which employs military reconnaissance and raids, is praiseworthy, operational challenges, particularly a lack of expertise in the region's topography, have impeded its effectiveness. Consequently, the study recommends moving beyond state-centric responses to embrace community-based initiatives and dialogues addressing the longstanding perceived marginalisation and exclusion of populations susceptible to bandit recruitment.
Key words: armed banditry, bandits, state responses, Northern Nigeria
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1 INTRODUCTION

In response to the changing dynamics of insecurity across the Sahel region, Nigerian public discourse has become increasingly focused on what has been called "armed banditry or "rural banditry." The increasing incidence of rural banditry, particularly across Nigeria's northwestern and central states, has led to widespread concern among security personnel, academics, policymakers, and civilians seeking to understand its root causes and formulate strategies for preventing and containing it. However, despite its salience, armed banditry, sometimes referred to as rural banditry, has been an elusive and under-researched concept in the field of armed conflict and security studies in Nigerian scholarship. Most contemporary analyses of insecurity in

[1] Olawale James Gbadeyan Ph.D., Department of Peace and Conflcit Studies, Faculty of Liberal Studies, Osun State University, Oke Bale Street 210001 Osogbo, Nigeria, e-mail: olawale.gbadeyan@uniosun.edu.ng. https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3566-1450

Nigeria continue to emphasise non-state armed groups such as Boko Haram or other forms of criminality, such as ethnic or religious violence (Ochu et al., 2023). By focusing on armed banditry and the broader dynamics of insecurity in Nigeria, this study represents a novel interdisciplinary contribution to the field. By combining ethnographic observations with the critical and theoretical tools of geography, geopolitics, and African studies, this study explores how local communities in the northwestern State of Zamfara experience and respond to insecurity. Such an approach enables new insights into what rural banditry is, how it operates, and crucially, its implications for everyday understandings of governance, resistance, and the role of the State in Nigeria.

To achieve this, the study examines trajectories in armed banditry activity by identifying the spatial and temporal patterns of banditry activities, tracing the roots and emergence of armed banditry and understanding forces driving increasing violence and decreasing poverty as well as critically examining the various state responses to the incursion of armed banditry and how this helps in diminishing or escalating the impacts, and to trace the roots of armed banditry in Nigeria.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Armed banditry has become a current and significant menace to the national security of Nigeria. Experts and researchers have consistently identified various factors contributing to Nigeria's current security situation. These include poverty, conflicts between herders and farmers, the presence of warlords, areas without effective governance or ungoverned space, transnational criminal networks, and the increase in the availability of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) from Libya. These dynamics have been highlighted by commentators and scholars, including Ojo (2020), Ojo et al. (2023), and Oyewole et al. (2022).

Understanding the nature of armed banditry in Nigeria and deciding whether to categorise such a group as terrorism or organised crime is a significant difficulty. While the group has incorporated specific operational strategies from organisations like Boko Haram, ISWAP, and Ansaru, its early emergence followed a route rooted in organised criminal activities driven by economic opportunism. Nevertheless, a recent revolution has occurred in the entity's operations, strategies, structure, and organisational patterns. Although the Nigerian government has labelled the organisation as a terrorist, the entrapment should be evaluated in the context of its current characteristics. Defining armed banditry necessitates meticulous analysis (Azeez, 2020; Abdulrasheed, 2021; Ojo, Aina and Oyewole, 2024).

According to Osasona (2023), armed banditry is a form of criminal activity that closely resembles activities such as kidnapping, theft, armed robbery, and property destruction. Armed banditry, when considered within the framework of organised crime that is deeply entrenched in the illegal economy, is primarily driven by economic incentives. Organised crime, commonly referred to as a sort of criminal enterprise,

frequently includes the deliberate destruction of properties, the infliction of harm on people, and the acquisition of victims' belongings by the use of force. Armed bandits, in this sense, refer to criminal syndicates that forcibly take away possessions, such as livestock and money, from civilian populations and engage in acts of sexual violence. (Ojo et al., 2023)

Ojewale (2023) found that armed bandits have a quasi-arrangement characterised by a coordinated command structure comparable to militias worldwide. These bandits primarily operate in rural areas and wield lethal firearms like AK-47 rifles. Examining rural attachment, one may propose that armed banditry activities are centred in places that lack effective governance by state authorities. This area exhibits a minimal government presence, with the notable absence of police and other security agencies responsible for upholding law and order. In certain regions, the prevalence of informal government is heightened, with coordination mainly facilitated by traditional institutions. This type of setting provides a sanctuary for criminal organisations that encourage illegal actions driven by materialistic motives.

Similarly, Obi & Iwuoha (2023) argued that armed banditry is driven by the desire to acquire economic resources through acts of looting, robbery, intimidation, and physical attack. Armed bandits employ force or extortion to deprive individuals of their possessions. It has also encompassed the act of acquiring and controlling sources of income, such as animals, which are subsequently sold in several locations. The primary culprits of armed banditry in Nigeria, as identified in the literature, are the Fulani, Hausa, Kanuri, and other ethnic groups who utilise Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) throughout their operations (Obi & Iwuoha, 2023; Ojo, 2020).

The discourse on the theoretical underpinnings of armed banditry in Nigeria emphasises the importance of many perspectives. Arising from various viewpoints, such as resource conflict, organised crime, political violence, and ethno-religious perspectives, the use of overlapping discourse to comprehend armed banditry in Nigeria continues to be a subject of controversy. While certain researchers depend on a solitary origin for its inception, others integrate these diverse viewpoints to examine its historical development and transformative path.

A prominent theory attributes armed banditry in Northwestern Nigeria to resource-based conflicts between Fulani pastoralists and farmers stemming from rivalry for natural resources. Fulani pastoralists in the Sahel region consistently seek greener pastures to feed their herds due to climate-induced drought. Host communities are sedentary farmers, yet herds disrupt farmlands, leading to conflicts between the two groups. Additionally, farmers kill cattle to protect farm crops, and local communities may rustle cattle. Events often lead to conflict between Fulani pastoralists hunting for lost animals and farmers who suffer damage to their crops (Ojo, 2023).

Another approach focuses on ungoverned areas where criminal gangs grow due to weak state oversight. Ungoverned spaces are remote areas where local inhabitants

experience no government presence. Local residents in these locations are ruled by informal authorities. Here, rules are rooted in local customs and traditions (Ojo, 2020). Competition for natural resources in ungoverned areas has led to a new perspective on armed bandits in Nigeria. According to Ojewale (2021), terrorist groups collaborate with those who sponsor armed banditry to gain access to mining areas. It implicitly highlights state involvement in armed banditry. Ojewale (2021) noted further that criminal gangs use violence to displace local residents, including in mining areas, in addition to livestock rustling (allowing for their operations).

The partnership between armed bandits and the Islamic State of West Africa Province (ISWAP) in northwestern Nigeria underscores the severity of the conflict in the evaluation of the terror-crime nexus. There is conjecture regarding the collaboration between armed bandits and the terrorist group known as ISWAP. This alliance has the potential to offer armed bandits operating in Nigeria with training, logistics, recruitment techniques, and operational mobility (Ojo et al., 2023).

3 METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a multidisciplinary approach to provide a thorough analysis of armed banditry in Northern Nigeria. This encompasses historical and socio-economic analyses, as well as qualitative methods. In terms of the historical investigation, we conducted a review of the pertinent academic, policy and news analysis literature. However, given the persistence of the menace of banditry and the scarcity of empirical studies on the discourse, the review was not confined to peer-reviewed articles alone; policy documents, grey literature, and news reports considered important were also incorporated in sketching the development of banditry in Nigeria. This was complemented by a comprehensive investigation of the socio-economic climate in Nigeria, through the analysis of major international indices and reports. The various socio-economic factors relevant to banditry were mapped to ensure comprehensive coverage in our analysis.

The qualitative data collection exercise was conducted in the three senatorial zones of Zamfara State, namely Zamfara North, Zamfara Central, and Zamfara West. Hence, Gusau (ZC), Zurmi (ZN), and Anka (ZW) LGAs represent each of the three senatorial zones. The selected LGAs of Anka, Gusau, and Zurmi have been the most hit by armed banditry in the State. In all of these, thirty-one purposively sampled respondents were carefully selected for the study and interviews were conducted with respondents from diverse backgrounds, primarily traditional rulers, farmers and pastoralists, village and district heads, security personnel, heads of vigilante Units, journalists, as well as Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and Heads of IDP Camps. The researcher visited the troubled communities multiple times from June 2024 to February 2025 to observe and conduct interviews. Between January and March 2025, the researcher also took time to conduct 6 FGD sessions with people who suffer internal displacement or have been

personally affected by armed banditry, governmental and non-government organisations and journalists who have reported on the issue in Zamfara State between January 2023 and December 2024. This was done to allow for real-time verification of the historical and socio-economic factors. This approach, which integrates historical research, contemporary socio-economic analysis, and the collection of interviews, has provided a multi-layered and detailed understanding of the root causes and developmental trajectories of armed banditry in Nigeria. It also enabled the study to progress beyond the existing literature, which has often focused on only one of these research areas.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Evolution and prevalence of armed banditry in Northern Nigeria

There are currently three conflicting theories regarding the evolution, development, and nature of banditry in Northern Nigeria. The first viewpoint considers banditry as a result of terrorism and a continuation of the historical Fulani jihad in the twentieth century, which specifically targeted farming communities in northern Nigeria. The Global Terrorism Index (2015) argues that the nature of terrorism in Nigeria differs from that in Iraq and Afghanistan. The terrorist activity in Nigeria exhibits similarities to the strategies employed by organised criminal syndicates and gangs, with a greater emphasis on armed assaults, including firearms and knives, rather than the use of bombings, which is more characteristic of larger terrorist organisations. The Fulani militants, a terrorist group from Nigeria, ranked as the fourth most lethal terrorist group in 2014. This represents a significant increase from their previous ranking, as they had not been among the deadliest groups before. The death toll caused by the Fulani militants rose dramatically from 63 in 2013 to 1,229 victims in 2014.

The second perspective is an alternative and contentious account of the evolution of banditry in the region. This viewpoint posits that banditry is a state-sanctioned crime with genocidal intentions. The school perceives banditry as a form of violence that is supported by external forces with the intention of reducing the population of communities and promoting the spread of Islam in the northern regions of Nigeria, specifically in areas that are not predominantly Hausa- or Fulani-dominated. The perspective is mostly shaped by popular dissatisfaction with the government's ineptitude in managing the crisis (ACAPS, 2020).

The third, which seems to be the most prevailing, connects rural banditry to the mismanagement of conflicts between farmer-pastoralists in Northern Nigeria. Responses from the in-depth interviews reveal that rural banditry is closely linked to the ongoing conflict between Fulani herders and crop farmers. This conflict may be influenced by broader factors such as identity politics and intergroup relations, including the dynamics between pastoralist groups and the Nigerian state system. Transhumant pastoralists are often perceived as aggressive and are sometimes equipped with weapons to confront unprepared crop farmers. The farmers accuse them of deliberately causing damage to

crops through their animals. Conversely, the herders consider themselves as victims of political exclusion, lacking representation within the Nigerian state system (Ojewale et al, 2024).

Initially, there are shreds of evidence to suggest that the current wave of armed banditry in Nigeria, especially in the northern region, began in the late 1990s and early 2000s. This was a period characterised by internal security challenges and conflicts, such as the ethnic and religious violence that erupted in the northern city of Kaduna in 2000 and the introduction of Sharia law in many northern states. As Gettleman (2018) explains, "gang leaders began to hire disenfranchised young men as hit men in the emerging battles over religion." Therefore, there is a linkage between the use of youth groups and political militia groups in the recurrence of violence in the North and the beginning of armed banditry in the region. This period, commonly referred to as the early stage of the Fourth Republic, saw the dominion of retired military generals in the political landscape and was associated with the proliferation of vigilante groups, political militias, and ethno-religious organisations (Osadola and Emah, 2022). These groups of youths were either co-opted by politicians to advance their cause or were used as a means of pressuring the government to respond to the demands of these various interest groups. This resulted in the political elites and security agencies manipulating these groups to suppress rival groups or opposition in some parts of the country. As Nwokora (2015) observes, "While these given roles of the [various] groups in each regime continue, they have created a well-worn path for the use of patronage networks, corruption, and violence to securitise and control state power. These tendencies have continued to entrench the survival of non-state armed groups in Nigeria, of which many end up resorting to criminal activities."

Maiangwa (2018) asserts that the symbiotic relationship between the art of governance and the use of both State and Non-State Violent Groups (NSVGs) meant that "violence has become a normalised form of communication and interaction among society." He notes that the vitality of violence in Nigerian society, that is, this growing cultural acceptance of violence and the monopoly of its interpretation by the prevailing government, has had a significant impact on the evolution and entrenchment of armed banditry today. It is in the light of this historical exploration and, as Baba (2012) notes, the exacerbating factors and causes of violence in the North that the extent and chronology of the proliferation of political militias from the return to civilian rule in 1999 and the spread of violence and banditry are often analysed to reflect the position of the North within the Nigerian nation.

Several factors contribute to the evolution of banditry in Nigeria, including climate change, the growing availability of arms, and increasing competition over resources. First, with the encroaching desertification in the northern regions, the frequency of droughts has increased, which forces herders, especially in the Fulani ethnic group, to migrate southward in search of arable land for grazing (Gbadeyan and Osadola, 2023b). This has led to more clashes with sedentary farming communities, many of which

have formed local militias to defend their land against what they perceive as "invasive" herders. These militias, initially set up to provide community defence, have increasingly become involved in criminal activities and banditry over the years.

Another major factor believed to have been responsible for rural banditry in the regions is attributed to the trafficking of small arms and ammunition. The widespread availability of arms has drawn the attention of scholars and professionals, particularly since the end of the Cold War (Adeleye and Osadola, 2022). Estimates regarding the number of bandit groups and bandits in the Northwestern region have been diverse. However, a prominent Nigerian researcher on banditry asserts that there are approximately 120 bandit camps in the region and that the bandits possess over 60,000 AK-47 rifles (Rufai, 2021). According to a clergy member chosen by bandits to act as a mediator with the government, there are around 100,000 armed bandits in the north-west region (Odeniyi, 2024).

Moreover, a prominent figure in the community within one of the six states impacted by the crisis in the North-west region asserted that there exists a staggering number of over 30,000 armed bandits actively carrying out operations alone in Zamfara State. Certain factions possess significant weaponry and maintain a network of individuals who cooperate with them within the security services and broader society. These factions are well-funded and possess extensive knowledge of the region's intricate topography (GJF, 2021).

The global proliferation of small arms is regarded as the source of various negative consequences, such as civil wars, organised crime, and the transformation of minor insurgents into internationally recognised terror groups. This is exemplified by the situation of armed banditry in Nigeria's North-west. The proliferation of weaponry among citizens seeking firearms is increasingly fueling an internal "arms race" within the region. Armed criminals acquire weapons with the purpose of assaulting the Nigerian government and questioning its exclusive control over the use of force by state actors. Also, the fact that neighbouring countries like Libya and Mali have been plunged into chaos as a result of civil wars after the Arab Spring has led to the proliferation of arms and light weapons in the Sahel region as a whole. Northwestern states such as Kebbi, Zamfara, and Katsina have experienced the spillover of illegal arms coming in from neighbouring countries, making it increasingly difficult to curb the activities of armed bandits. It has also been reported that some of the combatants who fought alongside Muammar Gaddafi in Libya moved southward into the Sahel and the Lake Chad Basin after his downfall, exacerbating the spread of armed banditry in these regions. The most recent empirical research, including (ICG, 2021), suggests that there is a fundamental shift in the nature and trends of armed banditry in Nigeria, with a clear increase in lethality and also in the number of reported violent events performed by these groups in the last two years.

Over time, there has been a fundamental shift in the modus operandi of the bandits in the level of atrocities committed by them and the rate of killings of the populace and ransom activities. For instance, in 2021 alone, there were over 1000 kidnappings for ransom issues as a result of armed bandits across North-west Nigeria, with increasing attacks on military bases, airports, moving trains, and local communities. Its dynamics have transformed north-west and north-central Nigeria into an enclave of disorder, creating severe security threats (Ojo et al., 2024).

According to the International Crisis Group (ICG), in 2021, the number of civilians murdered by firearms in north-west Nigeria alone from 2013 to 2021 exceeded 52,000, while a total of 105,000 guns were confiscated in this region within the specified time frame (ICG, 2021). Notwithstanding Nigeria's stringent weapons control legislation, the prevalence of illicit firearms has experienced a substantial rise. Gun violence has surpassed all other causes of death for the first time in recorded history, resulting in a decrease in the average lifespan of the inhabitants in the region. This shift has been most tangible in the central states of Zamfara, Kebbi, and, to a certain extent, Sokoto. These largely rural and underdeveloped states have experienced numerous incidents of mass abductions for ransom, herder-farming community clashes, and attacks on local settlements by armed bandits. It is critical that the Nigerian government takes immediate measures to disrupt and neutralise the activities of these increasingly bold and elusive armed bandit groups before they further entrench themselves and potentially merge with larger insurgent groups such as Boko Haram in the future.

4.2 Typologies of armed banditry

Responses gathered from the interviews on the field revealed that nomadic Fulani herdsmen, political militias turned bandits, and local criminal gangs have become the major typologies of armed bandits in Northern Nigeria. The Hausa-Fulani, the largest ethnic group in Nigeria, which is predominantly found in the North, have a significant number of members engaged in herding activities. One of the respondents claimed that:

"*The Fulani herdsmen have been involved in several clashes with local farmers over grazing rights and access to natural resources, resulting in the loss of lives and displacement of communities. However, in recent years, some Fulani herdsmen have become more organised in carrying out pre-meditated attacks on local villagers and, in some cases, engaging in cattle rustling," IDI – male 44 years.*

Researchers have noted that there are elements of politicisation and instrumentalisation of the Fulani ethnicity by the political elites in power, to the extent that the Fulani herdsmen are now perceived and categorised as the new face of terrorism in Nigeria (Muhammed et al., 2023; Gbadeyan and Osadola, 2023a). On the other hand, there were several State and non-state-sponsored militias created and armed to address

specific political or ethno-religious goals in Nigeria. The most notable of these militias is established in the Middle Belt, a region known for its ethno-religious conflicts and its strategic location between the predominantly Muslim North and the predominantly Christian South of Nigeria. In the voice of one of the participants,

"These political militias have now transformed into armed bandit groups, targeting local communities for financial gains and engaging in organised crimes such as cattle rustling and kidnapping for ransom. There were also local criminal gangs that have been identified to be involved in various forms of armed banditry in different states. For example, the "Yan Sa Kai" in Zamfara State originated as a vigilante group established to support the State in providing internal security," FGD – male 62 years.

However, due to the lack of a legal framework for such groups and the corruption within the security agencies, "Yan Sa Kai" has gradually mutated and turned into one of the most active and influential armed bandit groups in the State. These local criminal gangs are often formed by local youths who are disillusioned, disempowered and lack any sense of belonging or opportunities. It is widely argued that any sustainable solution to armed banditry in Northern Nigeria must tackle these underpinning factors that give rise to local criminality.

Similarly, the involvement of nomadic Fulani herdsmen in armed banditry in Northern Nigeria has recently attracted scholarly attention (Ojo, 2023; Gbadeyan, Ola, Osadola, and Ojo, 2024). The first aspect to understand is the notion of Fulani identity, which is complex and fluid. In modern Nigeria, the Fulani people are primarily known for their cattle rearing, and their presence on the roads and in the hinterland of northern Nigeria is widely acknowledged. This is often referred to as the 'cattle Fulani' image. But the Fulani people have more complex identity than just being cattle rearers. It is worth noting that there are divisions within the Fulani communities between those who identify themselves as indigenes and those who see themselves as settlers. Indigenes are traditionally regarded as the 'masters of the land', and they are dominantly engaged in farming. This has changed with the settlement of many Fulani people in localities and the development of a type of interaction between the Fulani cattle herders and local farmers. But there are widespread stereotypes and suspicion against the Fulani in Nigeria, which has sometimes led to negative stereotypes against them. Fulani herdsmen in Nigeria have been involved in conflicts with host communities and neighbouring ethnic groups, especially in the Middle Belt and the North-west geopolitical zones.

Osadola and Gbadeyan (2023) argued that the reasons for these conflicts are much more complicated than simply racial or ethnic clashes. The historical "identity" related explanation for the Fulani's involvement in banditry appears to be falling out of favour in the academic circle. Most experts argue that the struggle for resources such as land and water between cattle herdsmen and local farmers is the root cause of Fulani

rampaging, particularly in the Middle Belt. However, it is hard to draw a direct line between those conflicts and the spate of deadly attacks carried out by the Fulani herdsmen against rural villagers. The changing patterns of violence by the nomadic Fulani herdsmen have become an increasing worry for both the Nigerian government and the international community. And now, there is a shift from reliance on a type of "essentialist" argument based on historical Fulani identity to a more dynamic argument that focuses on contemporary socio-economic and political dynamics in explaining the crime pattern linked to the Fulani herdsmen. According to Adenuga et al. (2023), the pastoral Fulani people and their affiliated groups and militias were reportedly implicated in 70% of all documented instances of ethnic conflicts in Nigeria from 1999 to 2021.

Furthermore, political militias have also evolved into banditry, which has led to the cycle of mobilisations, political violence, and the empowerment of partisan elements that sustained the societal division in Nigeria. In reality, a multitude of social orders existed when Nigeria's political parties were under colonial influence. This left Nigeria with a legacy of divisions in faith, regionalism, and ethnicity. Political elites in Nigeria understood this social condition and have continuously mobilised to resolve those divisions. They anchor and expand their own interests through engaging, controlling, and manipulating these divisions into factional adoption.

In principle, under the current regime in Nigeria, the State has significant control over the legal use of violence, such as the defence and the police. There exist pre-formed societal structures in our world, regardless of the specific type we are discussing. This is due to the innate human aversion to living in uncertainty. People have always naturally preferred living in an organised and well-defined society. This need for structure in human conditions explains the social order, be it democratic or autocratic.

Lastly, in recent years, "local criminal gangs" have become the most prevalent type of armed banditry in Northwestern Nigeria. The emergence of local criminal gangs can be traced to the breakdown of law and order from the 1990s due to the disbandment of a government-organised vigilante group called "Yan Sa Kai" by the northern administration. The Yan Sakai's excessive actions eroded its credibility, especially among the Fulani ethnic group who were deeply affected by the Yan Sakai's presence. As a result, there was an escalation of violent conflict between the Hausas and the Fulanis in the North West region. The Fulanis formed an armed militia group called Yan Bindiga in retaliation to the actions of the Yan Sakai. The successful expansion of local criminal gangs is a clear testament to the inefficiency and biased political agendas of the rural administrative mandates. This notable success has sent ripples of fear among the "civilised" political circles; in the past two years, not only the amount of open violence under the name of the gangs has escalated, but also reports of violent confrontations between local gangs and the federal forces are becoming more and more common, giving rise to a more and more self-justified security restraint and the inception of a militarised police state.

4.3 Trajectories and tactics of armed bandits in Northwestern Nigeria

Armed banditry in the north-west region of Nigeria, specifically in Zamfara state, is characterised by attacks against rural communities and transportation, cattle rustling, illegal artisanal gold mines, conflicts between farmers and herders, kidnapping, and other forms of violence demanding a ransom. The modus operandi of bandits has transformed significantly in recent years, while their movements have remained relatively sporadic and fluid. Unlike insurgent groups like Boko Haram, armed bandits do not seem to hold particular territories or directly confront the Nigerian State or security forces. Instead, they have been continuously adapting to the context in which they operate. For example, interviews conducted with key informants suggested that bandits in Zamfara state have been dispersing into smaller groups and have become more exploratory in their movements. On the other hand, the knowledge gained from decades-long operations in places like Birnin Gwari has given certain bandit groups the confidence to engage in more coordinated and brazen attacks, such as kidnapping travellers or raiding small rural settlements from multiple directions at once.

It is worth noting that the repeated attack or use of a particular tactic in an area has the propensity to create levels of almost absolute fear and vulnerability amongst local populations, which inevitably makes the recovery of that area particularly challenging. Also, such methods have the potential to provoke and escalate intercommunal violence over time. The interviews and fieldwork observations reiterated that banditry, as it operates today, may not be a cohesive social or political movement per se. However, there currently exist multiple, localised and small-scale civil conflicts and contestations over resources, criminal economies, and power between communities that are often used and instrumentalised by bandits.

The geographic spread of armed banditry in northern Nigeria has shifted dramatically within the past decade. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, banditry was concentrated in the north-west region of the country, particularly Katsina and Sokoto states. However, recent evidence suggests a westward migration of armed banditry, with Zamfara state emerging as the new epicentre of violence and criminality. Ojo et al. (2023) argued that the Northern region experienced not less than 909 instances of armed bandit attacks, resulting in the deaths of over 8300 individuals from January 2013 to March 2022. While Kaduna, Katsina, Sokoto, and Zamfara are the northern states that have been highly impacted the most, in Kaduna State, armed bandits are directly responsible for the death of 1917 individuals through 342 attacks. Similarly, in Katsina State, there were 208 attacks resulting in the loss of 1416 lives. Sokoto State had 54 attacks and 644 fatalities, while Zamfara experienced 275 attacks with 4114 casualties. Furthermore, armed banditry in the north-west has resulted in the abduction of numerous individuals and the displacement of hundreds of thousands, as reported by Ojo (2023).

This change in hotspots mirrors longstanding patterns of "push-and-pull" factors for banditry, where security vacuums, weakened local governance, and resource

competition, such as land disputes or cattle rustling, drive bandits out of one area and attract them to another. One of the interviewed respondents, being a stakeholder in the security sector, claimed that:

"The establishment of "firebases' by security forces in Katsina and Zamfara has also influenced the geographic spread of armed banditry. Such military encampments, which are intended to disrupt armed group movements, have effectively displaced banditry from traditional territories in Katsina and pushed activities further south and wes," IDI – male 49 years (Security Personnel).

The importance of firebases in driving bandit displacement was reflected in a recent response strategy by the Zamfara state government, which made clear that proximity to firebases was one of the main criteria for siting new police divisions. Overall, the geographic spread is driven by the shifting dynamics of opportunity structures for bandits and the efforts of security forces to disrupt established territories.

On the modus operandi and tactics adopted by the bandits in Zamfara, findings from the FGDs revealed that bandits mostly frequently employ the 'hit-and-run' approach, a proven tactic originally used by guerrilla warfare and counter-insurgency groups around the world. The tactic enables the groups to sustain pressure on the government and army by constantly attacking them in specific, methodical ways, making it a challenging problem for the State to effectively respond to the multifaceted dynamics associated with armed banditry. The bandits typically select trails of 'soft targets' such as villagers, motorists, security patrols, local defence operatives, and moving trains to perpetrate their attacks against. These targets are generally considered as easy goals to attack and disembark without any immediate and strong riposte from the taken-aback security quarters. The villagers, for example, are often intentionally targeted by the bandits, as they are located in rural settings that are usually characterised by a lack of close security backups or rapid response mechanisms from state security operatives. It is significant to note that the choice of victims usually differs with respect to regions and the type of armed banditry involved, as nomadic Fulani herdsmen are known to target and attack farming communities as a result of resource conflict and schism.

Last but by no means least, another feature of the tactics seen in armed banditry is the desire to loot and pillage. The interviews and narrative accounts revealed during in-depth interviews have consistently outlined how the bandits' assault commenced and climaxed into mass loot and devastation of victims' properties, cattle, foodstuffs and farm produce. Such rampant and brigandish actions, as evidenced in the course of each attack, which are conspicuously material-focused, have proven influential in shaping decision-making in tactics. Since the groups have adapted and personalised their approaches to align with the desired effects of undermining the State's capacity and governance, these actions have been particularly effective.

The targets for armed banditry within Nigeria typically include civilians, especially in rural areas, wealthy individuals, and critical infrastructure, including transportation, communication and energy assets. Western hostages have also been taken, indicating an increasing threat to international interests by the group. The motives behind such behaviour include spreading fear and gaining widespread attention through the media, but these are primarily driven by financial or material considerations. In the north-west of Nigeria, bandits continue to constitute a diverse range of economically motivated, non-ideological organised criminal group gangs engaged in widespread livestock theft, rape, extortion, kidnapping for ransom, armed robbery, plunder, and harassment of road users.

In recent years, there has been a growing trend of armed bandits specifically targeting and robbing artisal gold miners, particularly in the State of Zamfara. This State has had a significant increase in artisanal gold output, resulting in scattered discoveries around the region. Since about 2009, a significant increase in the worldwide value of gold has attracted numerous young men to engage in gold mining. These individuals have predominantly grown up in various places, Anka, Bin Yauri, Maru, Malale, Gurmana, and Okolom-Dogondaji (ICG, 2020).

Interviews conducted during the fieldwork revealed that bandits have become attracted to the strong financial incentives associated with kidnapping operations, which can act as a rapid and effective means of gaining substantial funds for the purchase of arms, ammunition and consolidating power. It is also likely that these groups are motivated by a desire to benefit from a lack of effective protection of mining sites and the potential loot that is available. However, these explanations are likely to be more applicable to the actions of well-organised and criminalised armed groups, such as MEND, than to the opportunistic actions of other "professional" criminals. Groups such as MEND and other separatist movements in the Niger Delta region and Nigeria itself have managed not only to secure their primary objectives, such as the acquisition of substantial funds through illegal activities, but also have been able to generate widespread attention and discontent. This has been achieved through media-friendly activities such as political strikes and a sustained campaign of crime against the oil and gas infrastructure in the region. This has caused significant economic hardship and the loss of millions of barrels of oil to the international market. While the clear motives for groups such as MEND may appear politically oriented, it is important to remember that their actions have significant commercial implications both domestically and internationally.

4.4 Dissecting state responses to armed banditry in Northwestern Nigeria

A multi-faceted approach is employed to assess the current State's responses to armed banditry in Northern Nigeria. Government reactions to the escalating violence carried out by bandits and other criminal factions in Nigeria's north-west have primarily alternated between kinetic and non-kinetic approaches. Although the federal government

has primarily utilised military strategies, the state governments, lacking direct control over the armed forces due to federal control over security agencies, have endeavoured to negotiate peace agreements with the bandits and other criminal organisations. The discrepancy in strategy adequately reflects the disagreement between the federal and State governments in their efforts to address banditry. The lack of harmony between these two tiers of government in combating banditry is shown by the fact that the former Governor of Zamfara State, Abdulaziz Yari Abubakar, expressed his anger by publicly renouncing his constitutional duty as the State's main security officer.

Historically, successive Nigerian governments' strategies for dealing with armed banditry have fluctuated between periods of direct military intervention and attempts at finding political solutions to what is, at root, a social and economic issue. However, as we identify in the next paragraph, the ascendancy of armed banditry as a critical security issue within Nigeria's national and international security agenda has been accompanied by a sea change wherein the Nigerian State has abandoned efforts to address armed banditry through non-militarist strategies in favour of a preoccupation with counter-insurgency and military solutions to the problem. Most significantly, in response to both the Katsina protest movement to re-brand armed banditry as 'terrorism' and recent attacks on prominent political and religious leaders in the Northern states, Nigerian President, Buhari, had progressively depicted armed bandits as constituting a national security risk to the State rather than framing them as common criminals against whom law enforcement strategies can be engaged in isolation from the transnational flows of arms, people and finance that fuel the banditry itself. Prior to his election in 2015, Buhari and his political party had been accused of adopting strategies of appeasement to armed banditry directed by powerful figures in the North West and North East with regard to the mobilisation of political violence and the rigging of elections.

These military interventions and response efforts aim to contain and degrade the armed groups, diminish their capabilities and strengths, and disrupt and dismantle their operational networks. It is suggested that Nigeria's counterterrorist military operations have been heavily influenced by external sovereignty and national security agendas. For example, the US government has been extensively training and assisting the Nigerian military, probably serving its own geopolitical or security interests to tackle the spread of terrorism and quell any instability in the oil-rich Sub-Saharan Sahel region (Onuoha 2016). On the one hand, this type of counter-insurgency approach demonstrates relative successes in influencing the locals and isolating the operational capacities of armed bandit groups in the North and Northwestern States. Yet, data shows that properly calibrated and well-directed military engagements may serve as a conducive resource in disrupting the organisational capacities of armed banditry. The Military activities have undeniably had an impact and yielded results, as the military and police have apprehended numerous individuals believed to be affiliated with herder-aligned paramilitary organisations and criminal syndicates (CDD, 2015). Additionally, a significant number of these individuals

have been neutralised, several forest encampments have been dismantled, and substantial quantities of weapons and ammunition have been seized. Furthermore, the military and police have successfully liberated numerous individuals who were previously abducted. Despite these achievements, security agencies have been unable to dismantle a diverse array of armed bandits. Despite intensified efforts, the current resources, including personnel, logistics, and equipment, are inadequate to respond promptly to armed group attacks.

Governors of states in the North-west have also risen to find a solution to the ravaging bandits. For instance, in 2019, the armed bandits and the Governors of Zamfara, Sokoto, and Katsina came to a mutual understanding. The agreement encompassed the process of disarmament, the liberation of kidnapped individuals, and the granting of pardons to bandits. Although there was a decrease in the number of deaths from August to November due to efforts to reconcile, a resurgence of attacks occurred in 2020 (Dami, 2021). Despite official denials, both the Nigerian federal and State governments have regularly resorted to paying ransom in order to ensure the survival of victims and secure their release (Mustapha, 2019). Due to the regular payment of ransom by Nigerian authorities to preserve the lives of victims and secure their freedom, mass kidnappings have emerged as a significant means of generating funds for criminal and extremist groups (Lamidi, 2024). However, this practice also serves as a motivation for bandits to persist in their illegal activities.

In Zamfara state, a peace process led by the government successfully reached an agreement with armed groups in October 2016. As a result, an arms-for-development deal was established. In April 2017, the police reported that more than 1000 armed fighters and criminals who were allied with herders had renounced banditry and handed over their weapons in exchange for monetary commitments. This case serves as a notable illustration of concession and policy interventions implemented at the subnational level. The effort in Katsina state led to the confiscation of 107 AK-47 rifles, 361 Dane guns, and 28,000 stolen animals, all of which were sold for money. In Kaduna state, a campaign spearheaded by the then Police Commissioner, Austin Iwar, successfully persuaded approximately 1150 members of armed organisations to voluntarily relinquish their firearms and other weapons (Lamidi, 2024). As a condition for amnesty, the men made a solemn oath on the Quran and the Bible to cease their activities as bandits and criminals. Although these accords initially brought a period of calm, they eventually fell apart after about a year, leading to an escalation in attacks by the predominantly herder-aligned armed groups.

Other community-based approaches have been encouraged and adopted. The federal government and security forces promoted the establishment of self-defence militias, known as "vigilante groups" or the "Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF)," in local communities. In 2018, the Zamfara state government established the CJTF with approximately 8,500 young men and women (Mustapha, 2019). These vigilante groups

worked with the military and other security forces to gather intelligence, conduct patrols, and provide local security. However, their functions and behaviours have been controversial. There are concerns from human rights organisations about alleged extrajudicial killings, ill-treatment of arrestees, and abuses of civil liberties. Besides, political manipulation and power struggles have been observed in some vigilantism practices. As positivist scholars pointed out, militarising local communities and placing the monopoly of violence into the hands of these self-defence groups would only lead to further insecurity and violence. It is noteworthy that there are calls for more comprehensive socio-economic and political initiatives to address the governance and development challenges in rural areas where armed banditry is most rampant. However, the success of such community-based initiatives is heavily dependent on the workings of a clientelist system, in which political elites would often co-opt or even establish groups to advance their own interests. Such issues are deeply rooted in local power dynamics and state-society relationships in Northern Nigeria. On the other hand, dialogue and conflict resolution mechanisms play a vital role in the secondary prevention of mass atrocities and armed conflicts in the North.

As an economic response to curbing the menace of armed banditry, in 2019, the Zamfara state government allocated about 8.6 billion naira (equivalent to around $23.6 million) to build three rural grazing areas, with one designated for Fulani pastoralists in each of the three senatorial zones (Lamidi, 2024). Additionally, due to the gradual expansion of farmland into grazing areas and livestock routes, there has been a significant increase in conflicts with pastoralists. As a result, the government has decided to revoke all titles and farmland allocations that have been granted since 1999, with a commitment to conducting a thorough examination. The Zamfara government has also implemented a social intervention strategy known as the Zamfara State Social Intervention Programme. This initiative aims to support and offer other means of livelihood to herder-allied organisations, vigilantes, and other armed individuals who are willing to surrender their weapons. The recipients of this effort, aimed at about 18,000 young individuals, received instruction in a diverse range of skills that will equip them for gainful employment or enable them to become self-reliant entrepreneurs. The inaugural phase commenced in November 2019 with a total of 8600 individuals enlisted, as reported by Altine (2020) and Shinka (2020).

5 Conclusions and recommendations

Nigeria has experienced a complex national crisis with significant geographical consequences as a result of armed banditry and other sources of insecurity. This study situated armed banditry not only as a source of violence itself but also as a means through which violent conflicts are being reconstituted in the changing landscape of northern Nigeria. We found that different forms of violence now intersect in diverse ways with armed banditry, and this has significant implications for understanding the spectrums and

trajectories of violent conflicts in the region. The current government's counter-banditry programme, which employs military reconnaissance and raids, is commendable. Unfortunately, the expected relief has not been achieved because of operational challenges resulting from a lack of competence in the topography of the region. This highlights the importance of local vigilantes and community watch organisations, which possess a superior understanding of the area. Individuals within these systems, nonetheless, must receive proper instruction, be provided with necessary tools, and be closely supervised to prevent hazardous extremes and improper utilisation. The establishment of community-based law enforcement, supported by local staff and information, is thus the most viable path forward. Hence, to find a lasting solution to curb the ravaging armed banditry in the north-west, the following recommendations must be attempted:

1. The importance of moving beyond purely state-centric responses and understanding banditry as a localised, albeit multi-scalar, security concern, the role of the co-option of state security resources in cases of well-armed and well-connected banditry, and the impact of climate change, particularly on rural economies and livelihoods, in the evolution and reinforcement of banditry. Instead, there should be effective community-based initiatives and dialogues that tackle the longstanding marginalisation and exclusion of many of the populations that have become fertile recruiting grounds for armed bandit groups.
2. Moreover, gun trafficking plays a crucial role in exacerbating the bloodshed caused by armed bandits in northern Nigeria. Ensuring security in the problematic region and beyond requires the essential monitoring of border communities involved in the illicit trafficking of small arms and light weapons (SALWs). Simultaneously, the government should actively include individuals in the process of reorienting their values to cultivate ethical ideals and a deep respect for life and human rights.
3. Given the complex, multidimensional nature of banditry in Northern Nigeria, any effort to address the phenomenon should recognise the need for holistic and comprehensive socio-economic measures rather than a heavier emphasis on military solutions.

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HUNGARY AND THE LIMITS OF EUROPEANIZATION: INEFFICIENT ENLARGEMENT AND EU'S STRATEGIC VULNERABILITIES

Anvar Ismayilli[1]

This research analyses Hungarian foreign policy in the context of recent geopolitical events and reveals existing limits of Europeanization. Through taking a Hungary as a case study, the paper argues that the European Union experiences particular challenges due to its less efficient conditionality approach, especially during times of harsh geopolitical competition where other actors are also seek to expand their spheres of influence. At the end, main conclusion of the paper is that EU-Hungary internal divisions clearly demonstrates insufficiency of institutional membership since without comprehensive and deep normative alignment the Western solidarity and consolidation will continue facing substantial challenges.
Key words: inefficient enlargement, EU strategy, illiberal democracy, conditionality, Hungary
JEL: F20, F50

1 INTRODUCTION

The 2004 eastern enlargement of the European Union was widely celebrated as a historic step toward the reunification of Europe not only geographically, but also politically, economically and ideologically. By welcoming an accession of ten countries, primarily from Central and Eastern Europe EU sought to stabilize post-socialist democracies, and promote core, liberal values. Hungary was among the early success stories, rapidly adapting its institutions to meet the Copenhagen criteria and positioning itself as a committed participant in European integration. However, more than two decades later, the trajectory of Hungarian domestic and foreign policy has raised fundamental questions about the effectiveness and sustainability of this enlargement process.

[1] Anvar Ismayilli, Institute for European Studies, Tbilisi State University, Chavchavadze avenue 3, 0179 Tbilisi, Georgia, e-mail: anvarrashidoglu@gmail.com. https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9487-4459

Since Viktor Orbán and the Fidesz party came to power in 2010, Hungary's political trajectory has moved noticeably away from the European Union's established normative framework. A series of constitutional amendments, curbs on judicial independence, and the consistent centralization of executive authority have drawn sustained criticism from Brussels. At the same time, Budapest has pursued foreign policy positions that frequently diverge from the EU consensus, most notably its cautious stance on economic sanctions against Russia, willingness to receive large-scale Chinese investment, maintaining of close ties with Türkiye and its resistance to certain EU-NATO cooperative measures. Together, these trends have highlighted structural vulnerabilities within the Union, particularly its limited ability to uphold democratic norms and ensure geopolitical unity among its members under harsh geopolitical circumstances.

This study employs a process-tracing approach to examine key political and foreign policy events involving Hungary since its EU accession, such as Budapest's veto of EU sanctions against Russia and its facilitation of Chinese investment projects. These case events are analyzed as critical indicators of the Hungarian government's normative divergence from EU principles and its pursuit of an autonomous foreign policy agenda since for the Brussels relations with the Kremlin are strained, while China against the background of unfolded geopolitical events in the Eastern Europe and contradictions with the USA began to be associated as a Russia's situational partner or even strategic partner. In this context, deviations from the general course of EU policy puts Hungary in an unfavorable light. Taking it into consideration, Hungary can serve as a test case for potential enlargement of the EU.

By systematically linking these events to the broader theoretical framework of enlargement efficiency, the study assesses whether Hungary's formal compliance during accession masked underlying dissonance with EU norms. Specifically, the logic follows that if Hungary's policy decisions consistently undermine collective EU strategies or contradict shared values, this evidences the "inefficient enlargement" phenomenon where accession does not guarantee substantive integration. This method allows for tracing causal mechanisms between Hungary's actions and the erosion of EU normative cohesion, thus testing the central hypothesis of the paper.

2 METHODOLOGY AND DATA

The research adopts a qualitative, case-study approach supported by the analysis of empirical data. The primary focus is Hungary's integration trajectory within the European Union and NATO, with special attention to the period following the Russia–Ukraine war of 2022. To ensure the reliability of findings, the study incorporates multiple sources: official EU and NATO documents, resolutions of the European Parliament, voting records of Hungary in EU and UN institutions, as well as government statements and policy papers published in Budapest. Statistical data from Eurostat, World Bank, and Freedom House indices were also reviewed to contextualize Hungary's economic,

democratic, and geopolitical standing within Europe. The empirical framework is organized around process tracing, which enables identifying sequences of political decisions and their outcomes in both domestic and foreign policy. Case evidence from Hungary's obstruction of EU sanctions against Russia, its approach to NATO's collective defense measures, and its energy dependency on Moscow serves as the foundation for comparative evaluation. These empirical cases are further supported by content analysis of speeches by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and his cabinet members, which highlight the ideological justifications behind Hungary's foreign policy behavior.

Secondary academic sources-peer-reviewed articles, policy briefs, and think-tank reports are employed to triangulate findings and reduce interpretive bias. Combining empirical institutional data with political discourse analysis ensures that the study balances structural evidence with leadership-driven explanations.

This methodological design allows for a comprehensive understanding of Hungary's dual role as both an EU and NATO member state and a challenger to their collective policies in the context of modern geopolitical challenges.

The study is constrained by its reliance on publicly available secondary data and official documents, which may reflect institutional or political biases. While discourse analysis of governmental rhetoric provides insights into Hungary's strategic positioning, it does not fully capture informal negotiations or behind-the-scenes decision-making processes. Additionally, the focus on Hungary's role within the EU and NATO inevitably narrows the scope, leaving broader comparative perspectives underexplored. Despite these limitations, triangulation of multiple sources mitigates bias and enhances the validity of the findings.

3 LITERATURE REVIEW

Academic scholarship touching upon the EU enlargement is quite extensive, with much of the earlier research focusing on the transformative influence of EU conditionality. A central assumption in this body of work was that commitment to the Copenhagen criteria - covering democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and a functioning market economy would naturally pave the way for the long-term consolidation of liberal democracy in countries which were once post-communist ones (Hungary Today, 2024). The pre-accession process, supported by detailed screening procedures and ongoing monitoring, was widely credited with encouraging institutional reform and political modernization across the states of Central and Eastern Europe.

However, scholars such as Kochenov and Dimitrova have highlighted the imbalance between the EU's strong leverage during the pre-accession stage and its relatively weaker capacity to enforce rules after a concrete country's accession (Kochenov, 2008; Dimitrova, 2010). Once it is achieved, much of the Union's ability to preserve and provide compliance diminishes, leaving it dependent on softer tools like political dialogue, peer influence, and, in exceptional circumstances, the Article 7 TEU

procedure. However, the latter requires unanimous agreement among member states and has proven politically difficult to implement in practice.

Within this discourse, Hungary is often referred as the most notable case of democratic backsliding after EU accession. Particular experts documented the steady weakening of checks and balances under the Fidesz government, showing how constitutional redesign, tightened control over the media, and manipulation of electoral rules have eroded liberal democratic norms (Bánkuti et al., 2012; Kelemen, 2020). At the same time, Hungary's deliberate cultivation of bilateral ties with other powerful actors like Russia, Türkiye and China has drawn attention from scholars of international relations, who view these moves as raising questions about the EU's strategic autonomy and its susceptibility to internal divisions (Government of Hungary, 2013).

New scholarship has shifted the discussion from questions of enforcement to the very design of the enlargement framework. Sedelmeier claims that the EU's heavy dependence on formal, legalistic benchmarks left it ill-equipped to recognize deeper political dysfunctions (Sedelmeier, 2017). Against this backdrop, Hungary's place within the EU became a subject to discussions in light of ongoing geopolitical challenges, including the war in Ukraine. (Ranschburg and Schlanger, 2024).

This analysis draws on two overlapping theoretical perspectives: One of the grand theories of the European integration, namely neo-functionalism and enlargement conditionality theory. Classical approaches such as neo-functionalism offers a distinct explanation for how states integrate and what holds supranational cooperation in a sustainable or desirable level. Neo-functionalists, following E. Haas and L. Lindberg, argue that integration generates spillover effects, leading over time to deeper cooperation through the work of supranational institutions.

Interestingly, Hungary's behavior in recent years challenges the expectations of the mentioned theoretical frameworks. Although economic integration has advanced without major obstacles, political convergence has either stagnated or moved in the opposite direction. The country continues to draw substantial material benefits from membership, especially through cohesion funds and recovery programs yet remains resistant to further political integration. This pattern indicates that material interdependence on its own is not enough to uphold shared democratic norms, casting doubt on the explanatory power of both paradigms. The conditionality framework has long been a cornerstone of the EU's enlargement policy, constructed on the assumption that prospective members would adopt and internalize EU norms in order to secure accession. According to the "external incentives model," compliance is most effectively achieved when the Union's conditions are perceived as credible and consistent, and when the potential rewards, such as full membership carry substantial political and economic value (European Commission, 2021). Although Hungary fulfilled the formal requirements for accession, its subsequent divergence from EU norms underscores the limits of conditionality once the main incentives have been secured. The Union's

post-accession tools: relying largely on financial leverage, public criticism, and legal infringement proceedings have proven insufficient in countering determined illiberal practices. As Kelemen observes, this situation produces an "authoritarian equilibrium," in which governments are able to erode democratic standards while continuing to enjoy the material and political advantages of EU membership (Kelemen, 2020).

4 DEFINING THE CONCEPT: DIFFERENTIATION AND CONDITIONALITY

The concepts of conditionality and differentiation are closely interrelated in the study of European integration, especially in the context of enlargement. Conditionality shapes the criteria and incentives for joining or remaining in good standing within the Union, while differentiation reflects the reality that member states do not always integrate at the same pace or to the same extent (Hooghe and Marks, 2022). In practice, the two interact in complex ways. Conditionality sets the benchmarks that prospective members must meet, yet differentiation often determines the extent to which those benchmarks are applied, enforced, or adapted to distinct national circumstances. This means that even before accession, differentiation can emerge in the form of tailored requirements, transitional arrangements, or opt-outs. For example, some candidate states may receive extended timelines for implementing parts of the acquis, creating an asymmetry in integration depth from the outset. Once states become members, post-accession conditionality is constrained by the same political realities that drive differentiation (Schimmelfennig, n.d). Governments that resist certain EU norms can exploit differentiated arrangements, such as opt-outs or exceptions, to shield themselves from deeper compliance pressures. Conversely, the absence of strong post-accession conditionality can unintentionally widen differentiation, as compliant and non-compliant members drift further apart in their adherence to shared values. This dynamic has been visible in the divergence between states committed to deeper political integration and those prioritizing sovereignty over supranational authority. At the same time, differentiation can serve as a pragmatic tool to keep the integration process moving when uniform compliance is politically unrealistic. In such cases, the EU may tolerate partial integration in exchange for stability, even if this weakens the credibility of conditionality. This trade-off becomes particularly problematic when illiberal actors use the benefits of differentiated integration without maintaining the democratic standards that conditionality was meant to secure. In short, conditionality is the formal mechanism for aligning members around common norms, but differentiation often determines the political space within which compliance is negotiated, contested, or avoided. The interplay of the two helps explain why the EU can appear both cohesive and fragmented at the same time, especially in periods of political crisis.

Among the newest works dedicated to the analysis of post-accession conditionality and enlargement in whole, the research works of Bakó (n.a.) and König (n.a.) deserves attention. Bakó states that full membership in the EU no longer promises

absolute access to its fundamental assets, but rather it causes mutual suspicion and skepticism between the EU and the candidate states, which undermines solidarity (Bakó, n.d). In turn, M. König considers that approach demonstrated by EU to outsiders in the context of its enlargement can barely be acknowledged as efficient since 'eternal waiting room' for candidate states leads to frustration, weakens reform incentives and fosters the perception of selective treatment, significantly undermining the credibility of the EU (König, n.a.).

Conditionality has been the cornerstone of the European Union's enlargement strategy, functioning as both an incentive structure and a mechanism for norm diffusion. It refers to the EU's practice of linking benefits, most notably membership to the fulfillment of specific political, legal, and economic conditions. This practice has evolved into two distinct phases: pre-accession conditionality and post-accession conditionality, each with different tools, leverage, and levels of effectiveness. Pre-accession conditionality operates during the candidacy phase, when prospective member states must align their institutions, legal systems, and policies with the EU's acquis communautaire and the Copenhagen criteria (Vachudova, 2005). The EU wields significant leverage in this phase, as membership itself serves as a powerful incentive. Compliance ismonitored through regular progress reports, and accession negotiations can be delayed, suspended, or conditioned on further reforms. This stage has historically proven effective, as seen in the widespread institutional transformations across Central and Eastern Europe in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Vachudova, 2005). Candidate countries often pursued reforms not only to gain membership but also to signal alignment with Western democratic norms. In opposite, post-accession conditionality refers to the EU's ability to enforce compliance with its values and rules after a state has become a full member. This phase is considerably more constrained. Once accession is granted, the EU's main enforcement tools shift from conditional rewards to legal and financial penalties, such as infringement proceedings (via the European Court of Justice), suspension of voting rights under Article 7 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU), or the withholding of EU funds through mechanisms like the Rule of Law Conditionality Regulation. However, these instruments often face political, procedural, or legal limitations (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2004). For example, Article 7 requires unanimity among member states to impose sanctions, rendering it politically difficult to activate in practice-especially when illiberal governments form protective alliances, as seen between Hungary and Poland.

5 THE CASE OF HUNGARY

During last decade, Hungary has experienced a profound political transformation that has drawn concern from both EU institutions and scholars of European integration. Once regarded as a model for successful post-socialist transition and EU accession, Hungary in recent years has shifted toward what Orbán himself described as an "illiberal democracy" – a system characterized by centralized authority, weakened checks and

balances, and deliberate constraints on pluralism (Biro-Nagi, 2017). These domestic changes have strained Hungary's relationship with the EU, highlighting the Union's limited capacity to enforce post-accession conditionality and safeguard its foundational values. The 2010 electoral victory of Fidesz, securing a two-thirds parliamentary majority, provided the party with constitutional authority to reshape Hungary's political and institutional framework without meaningful opposition oversight. This supermajority allowed the government to consolidate power through a series of legal and structural reforms that systematically curtailed democratic safeguards. Rather than dismantling democracy entirely, the government engineered a model of enduring dominance, often described as "electoral autocracy" or "illiberal democracy".

One of the most noticeable measures taken at earlier stage was the adoption of a new constitution, the Fundamental Law of Hungary in 2011 (Government of Hungary, 2011). Drafted and passed with minimal input from opposition parties, the constitution curtailed the independence of key institutions, redefined the powers of the Constitutional Court, and embedded ideological principles closely aligned with Fidesz's nationalist and conservative agenda (Bánkuti et al., 2011). At the same time, the government moved decisively to control the media landscape. The establishment of the National Media and Infocommunications Authority (NMHH) and the Media Council have fostered self-censorship and reduced media pluralism. Independent outlets faced financial pressure, ownership consolidation, and diminished advertising revenue, while pro-government media benefited from state subsidies (Schimmelfennig, 2018).

Tensions between Hungary and the EU reached a peak in 2018 when the European Parliament invoked Article 7(1) of the Treaty on European Union, arguing that there was a "clear risk of a serious breach" of core EU values such as democracy, the rule of law, and fundamental rights (De la Baume and Bayer, 2018). This was a historic move, as the mechanism had never before been triggered. Yet, in practice, the process has stalled. The reason lies in the high political bar set by Article 7: sanctions can only be adopted if all other member states agree unanimously. Hungary, however, has managed to block progress by relying on its close alliance with Poland, which faces similar accusations of democratic backsliding (European Parliament, 2018). These developments have reignited debate over whether the Union needs stronger enforcement tools or new models of differentiated integration in order to defend its core values and maintain cohesion in the future. In response to persistent institutional gridlock, the EU has increasingly turned to financial instruments as a means of enforcing compliance. In 2020, it introduced the Rule of Law Conditionality Mechanism, which links the disbursement of EU funds to adherence to rule-of-law standards (European Commission, 2020).

Despite these measures, their effectiveness remains contested. Orbán has framed EU criticism as an infringement on Hungarian sovereignty, using nationalist rhetoric to strengthen domestic support and deflect attention from governance shortcomings. At the same time, EU institutions face a difficult balancing act: enforcing compliance without

undermining overall cohesion, particularly in an era of geopolitical instability exacerbated by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Critics argue that Hungary's resistance demonstrates the limits of post-accession conditionality, highlighting the challenge of ensuring that member states maintain democratic standards once the benefits of membership have been secured. Moreover, the selective application of financial leverage has fueled debates over fairness, as some question whether the EU is able to treat all member states consistently while respecting political realities. Observers also note that Hungary's ability to exploit procedural complexities and form strategic alliances with like-minded states weakens the deterrent effect of conditionality.

6 GEOPOLITICAL DEVERGENCE OF HUNGARY'S FOREIGN POLICY

While Hungary's democratic backsliding has received substantial attention from EU institutions, its growing geopolitical divergence presents an equally serious political challenge to the Union's strategic coherence. In an era defined by external instability, the EU's foreign policy relies increasingly on coordination and solidarity among its member states. Yet Hungary has repeatedly undermined these collective efforts, aligning itself with authoritarian powers and obstructing unified decision-making. This pattern not only underscores the limitations of the EU's enforcement mechanisms but also exposes the inherent geopolitical vulnerabilities of the enlargement model, where strategic loyalty is often assumed, rather than guaranteed.

6.1 Alignment with Russia: strategic outlier

Perhaps the clearest example of this divergence is Hungary's persistent closeness to the Russian Federation, even as most EU member states have sought to distance themselves following Moscow's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its military activities of unprecedented levels in relation to Ukraine in 2022. Budapest has repeatedly criticized, delayed, or watered down EU sanctions packages against Russia, frequently citing energy dependence and economic considerations as justification. As Orban said "Europe shot itself in the lungs with sanctions against Russia" (Euractive, 2022). In several instances, Hungary has leveraged its veto power to stall collective EU initiatives aimed at penalizing the Kremlin, frustrating efforts to present a unified front. Hungary's bilateral relations with Moscow remain robust, particularly in the energy sector. The 2021 long-term gas supply agreement with Gazprom exemplifies Hungary's continued reliance on Russian energy, while the planned expansion of the Paks nuclear power plant-financed and technologically supported by Russia, further entrenches these ties. Such decisions directly contradict the EU's broader strategy of reducing dependency on Russian energy and developing a cohesive European energy policy. Beyond policy alignment, Orbán's public rhetoric has often echoed Kremlin narratives, framing the war in Ukraine as a consequence of Western expansionism and portraying NATO's posture as unnecessarily provocative (The Straits Times, 2025). Hungary's stance illustrates how

domestic political calculations can intersect with foreign policy in ways that challenge collective European action. Orbán's approach is shaped by a combination of nationalist ideology, electoral considerations, and strategic opportunism. Domestically, portraying the EU as intrusive or hostile resonates with his political base, consolidating support through appeals to sovereignty and national identity. Internationally, cultivating ties with Russia allows Hungary to secure favorable economic deals, particularly in energy and infrastructure, which are vital to the government's domestic agenda. This strategic outlier behavior has broader implications for the EU. First, it complicates the Union's attempts to present a unified foreign policy, weakening sanctions regimes, diplomatic efforts, and defense coordination. Second, it sets a precedent for other member states that may consider prioritizing national interests over collective commitments, potentially eroding trust within the Union. Third, Hungary's actions highlight the limitations of post-accession conditionality: while the EU can attach incentives to membership, it struggles to enforce normative compliance in domains that intersect with high-stakes geopolitics.

In sum, Hungary's foreign policy trajectory represents a dual challenge: it undermines EU solidarity and exposes the structural weaknesses of an enlargement model that assumes loyalty and convergence once accession is achieved. The combination of domestic political centralization and strategic opportunism abroad allows the Orbán government to navigate between EU rules and external partnerships in ways that maximize national advantage. This dynamic illustrates the interdependence of domestic illiberalism and international behavior: the erosion of democratic norms at home enables a foreign policy that diverges from collective European goals. From a broader perspective, Hungary's case raises pressing questions for EU governance. How can the Union ensure strategic alignment among its members when enforcement mechanisms are limited, and veto power can be exercised to obstruct common action? What lessons does Hungary provide for future enlargement, particularly in regions where candidate states might possess divergent strategic interests or strong ties to external powers?

Addressing these questions requires a multi-dimensional analysis. Observers argue that differentiated integration may offer partial solutions, allowing willing states to advance more rapidly on shared initiatives, while constraining the influence of outlier members. However, differentiation alone cannot fully mitigate the risks posed by states that exploit institutional loopholes to pursue unilateral agendas. Hungary's case underscores the importance of combining normative conditionality, strategic enforcement mechanisms, and a vigilant monitoring of member-state alignment in foreign and security policy. Failure to address these challenges risks not only short-term policy fragmentation but also long-term erosion of the EU's credibility as a cohesive geopolitical actor.

6.2 Engagement with China: strategic opportunism

Hungary's foreign policy divergence extends well beyond its stance toward Moscow; it has also actively courted economic and diplomatic ties with China, often in clear defiance of efforts to foster a unified EU approach toward Beijing. Hungary joined China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2015 (Li, 2023) and quickly became one of Europe's top recipients of Chinese investment, receiving approximately $571 million in outbound capital that year and accounting for nearly a quarter of all Chinese foreign direct investment in Europe between 2022 and 2024. In 2023, bilateral trade with China exceeded $10 billion, and Hungarian territory now hosts significant ventures in energy, technology, and manufacturing (Wu, 2024).

Diplomatically, Hungary has repeatedly obstructed unified EU messaging on sensitive Chinese issues. In 2021, it single-handedly vetoed an EU Foreign Ministers' statement condemning China's national security law in Hong Kong, undermining collective efforts to speak with a single voice on human rights and democracy (Chalmers and Emmott, 2021). While that source draws from diplomatic statements reported in media, the pattern is consistent: Budapest often acts as China's European foil, diluting EU criticism on topics ranging from Hong Kong and Xinjiang to Taiwan. Taken together, these developments reinforce Hongar's role as a key outlier within the EU- a member actively deepening ties with Beijing across economic, educational, and diplomatic frontiers. These policies not only bolster Hungary's strategic autonomy in the short term but also complicate Brussels's bid for unity in foreign affairs, especially amid rising global competition with China.

6.3 Relations with Türkiye

In response to Hungary's democratic divergence, the EU has attempted to strengthen its enforcement arsenal. A significant step was the adoption of the Rule of Law Conditionality Mechanism in 2020, which explicitly linked the disbursement of EU funds to respect for rule of law standards (Wahl, 2022). Hungary became the first member state to face suspension of funds under this framework, with billions of euros withheld pending reforms to anti-corruption bodies, judicial guarantees, and public procurement transparency. Yet despite these innovations, effectiveness remains debated. Orbán has portrayed EU criticism as an assault on Hungarian sovereignty, framing disputes as part of a larger struggle between "Brussels bureaucrats" and "national democracy." Such nationalist rhetoric has helped consolidate domestic support, while EU institutions remain constrained by the need to preserve cohesion, particularly amid heightened geopolitical instability following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. It is against this backdrop of tension with Brussels that Hungary's deepening ties with Türkiye must be understood. Far from being an isolated diplomatic pivot, Hungary's engagement with Türkiye forms part of a broader strategy of diversifying partnerships beyond the traditional Euro-Atlantic sphere. Orbán has consistently emphasized the concept of "Eastern Opening" (*Keleti*

Nyitás), a foreign policy doctrine announced in 2010 that sought to expand Hungary's economic and political cooperation with non-Western powers, particularly in Asia. Within this framework, Türkiye has emerged as a central partner due to geographic proximity, shared historical legacies, and complementary geopolitical aspirations.

On the bilateral front, Budapest-Ankara links have deepened markedly over the past decade. Trade between the two nations reached a record high of USD 4.3 billion in 2023, up 18% from 2022, with Hungarian exports to Türkiye growing by 29% and contributing to Hungary's historic €150 billion export total (Daily News Hungary, 2024). This expansion included significant trade in medical supplies, printing services, and beverages, reflecting a broader diversification of exchange and cooperation . Defense and security ties have simultaneously accelerated. In 2025, Hungary and Türkiye established a Defense Innovation Working Group, signaling a strategic deepening of their relationship in defense industry research, training, and innovation (Brader, 2025). The cooperation involves Hungary's Defense Innovation Research Institute (VIKI) and Türkiye's TÜBİTAK, as well as joint planning for R&D, educational partnerships, and technology development.

This relationship is undergirded not merely by transactional interests but also by memory, narrative, and political symbolism. Hungary's leadership increasingly frames the partnership as rooted in shared heritage and as part of a broader civilizational identity. As Hungary's Minister of Defense emphasized, "Hungary is proud of its Asian cultural roots and its close and friendly relationship with Türkiye," portraying the partnership as bridging Europe and the Turkic world. Orbán himself has repeatedly alluded to Hungary's "Eastern roots" and its role as a bridge between Europe and the Turkic cultural space, a narrative that underpins both strategic and ideological dimensions of the bilateral bond.

This civilizational rhetoric has found its most concrete institutional expression in Hungary's engagement with the Organization of Turkic States (OTS). Hungary was granted observer status in 2018, becoming the first non-Turkic country to formally join the organization's institutional framework. This was a highly symbolic development, as it underscored Hungary's willingness to identify with Turkic heritage narratives and to institutionalize its relations with the Turkic world. For Orbán, participation in the OTS represents not merely cultural diplomacy but also strategic positioning. By embedding Hungary within the structures of the Turkic world, he signals that Budapest has alternative partnerships beyond the EU, thereby bolstering Hungary's bargaining position in Brussels (Hamzaoğlu, 2025). At the same time, Hungary benefits from access to new markets, energy corridors, and political platforms that extend its influence eastward. Hungary's active presence within the OTS has elevated its role beyond that of a passive observer. Budapest has hosted OTS-related events, promoted cultural and educational exchanges, and emphasized energy cooperation, particularly in relation to Azerbaijan and Central Asia. Hungary's advocacy for the diversification of energy supplies aligns closely with the OTS agenda, which seeks to establish transport and energy connectivity across

Eurasia (Egeresi, 2021). In this context, Hungary sees Türkiye as a vital transit hub for Caspian gas and as a partner in advancing connectivity projects such as the Southern Gas Corridor. By linking itself to Turkic networks, Hungary enhances its strategic autonomy in energy policy, reducing reliance on Russian supplies while also signaling independence from EU-dominated frameworks.

The convergence between Hungary and Türkiye also reflects broader geopolitical dynamics. Both Orbán and Erdoğan pursue what might be described as "sovereigntist" politics, emphasizing national sovereignty, challenging liberal norms, and asserting an alternative model of governance. This ideological affinity facilitates political cooperation, particularly in multilateral arenas where both leaders seek to resist what they perceive as Western overreach. For Hungary, Türkiye provides not only an economic partner but also a political ally within NATO and beyond, capable of supporting Budapest's positions or mediating between Hungary and other regional actors. For Türkiye, Hungary represents an important EU member willing to endorse Ankara's regional role and to advocate for closer EU-Türkiye ties at a time when accession negotiations remain stalled.

At the same time, Hungary's engagement with Türkiye should not be seen as a rejection of the EU but rather as an attempt to diversify its external alignments. Orbán continues to emphasize Hungary's full membership in the EU and NATO, while simultaneously highlighting that sovereignty requires openness to non-Western partnerships. This dual-track strategy creates a delicate balancing act: while Brussels views Hungary's illiberalism with concern, Ankara values Budapest as a European interlocutor sympathetic to Türkiye's interests. Thus, Hungary is able to leverage its unique position, presenting itself to Türkiye and the Turkic world as a gateway into Europe, while signaling to Brussels that it has viable alternatives. Nevertheless, this convergence raises important questions about the coherence of EU foreign policy and the resilience of European integration. Hungary's identification with the Turkic world, coupled with its deepening bilateral ties with Türkiye, underscores the limits of EU cohesion at a time when common responses to external challenges are urgently needed. In the long term, Hungary's pivot eastward may complicate the EU's ability to pursue unified policies in areas such as energy, migration, and security. Yet from Budapest's perspective, the strategy is rational: by aligning with Türkiye and the OTS, Hungary secures alternative channels of influence, bolsters its domestic narrative of sovereignty, and enhances its geopolitical significance.

6.4 Friction within NATO and transatlantic relations

Hungary's role inside the Atlantic alliance has grown more complicated over the past decade. On paper, Budapest checks many of the boxes allies care about: it contributes troops to NATO missions, participates in major exercises, moved to meet the alliance's defence-spending benchmark (Hungary Today, 2024). In practice, though, the Orbán government's rhetoric and some high-stakes vetoes have run against the grain of NATO's

strategic line since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The result is a layered picture: operational cooperation continues, but trust is thinner, and Hungary is viewed and perceived as a transactional sometimes unpredictable ally whose domestic politics and external ties affect alliance decision-making.

Nothing illustrated this tension more vividly than the months-long delay in ratifying Sweden's NATO membership (Bayer, 2024). While most allies cleared Stockholm's bid in 2022 – 2023, Budapest slowed the process until 26 February 2024, when the Hungarian parliament finally voted to approve accession (Csonka, 2024). The passage broke a long impasse that had irritated both Washington and Brussels and placed Hungary alongside Türkiye as the last holdouts. The episode was widely read as leverage politics unrelated to Sweden's qualifications for membership, and it strained Budapest's standing among partners who treated enlargement as a core security priority after Russia's 2022 escalation.

Senior U.S. lawmakers publicly warned that Hungary's delay undermined alliance cohesion and suggested a tougher U.S. line if the stalemate dragged on. The chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, for example, questioned whether Budapest remained a sufficiently "trusted partner," even flagging potential scrutiny of Hungary's status in the U.S. Visa Waiver Program. Those signals made clear that what Budapest framed as sovereignty-driven tactics were, for key allies, tests of reliability with costs that could outlast a single vote. In early 2024, the Senate Foreign Relations chair publicly questioned whether Hungary remained a "trusted partner" and urged the administration to consider tougher tools if Budapest kept obstructing allied priorities. Hungary has positioned itself as a flagship for national-conservative politics in the West, hosting the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) and using those platforms to champion "sovereignty" against what it casts as a liberal, globalist orthodoxy. Orbán's speeches at the Budapest editions of CPAC have openly courted U.S. conservatives and praised former President Donald Trump, giving the relationship a culture-war dimension that often bleeds into foreign policy messaging (on migration, LGBTQ issues, or the "peace vs. war" frame regarding Ukraine).

7 CONCLUSION

Hungary's experience as an EU and NATO member offers one of the clearest case studies of the tension between formal integration and substantive commitment to shared values. When Hungary joined the European Union in 2004 and had already become a NATO member in 1999, its accession was widely celebrated as a step toward completing the "reunification of Europe." Both institutions regarded Hungary as a democratic success story that had emerged from decades of Soviet domination and embraced liberal-democratic reforms. Yet, two decades later, Hungary has come to symbolize many of the contradictions inherent in the EU's enlargement project and the transatlantic alliance system. Instead of reinforcing Western unity, Budapest has

repeatedly acted as a spoiler, exposing the institutional vulnerabilities of both the EU and NATO.

At the heart of these tensions lies the Orbán government's distinct geopolitical orientation. While Hungary has remained formally embedded in Western institutions, it has systematically pursued policies that deviate from their collective agendas. In the EU, this has been most visible in Hungary's obstruction of sanctions against Russia, its resistance to deeper integration in areas such as migration, and its frequent use of veto power to extract concessions. These actions reflect a transactional logic that treats EU membership not as a commitment to shared norms, but as a bargaining platform where Budapest maximizes its political and economic gains.

Within NATO, the same contradictions play out in different ways. Hungary remains militarily active and continues to participate in allied operations and exercises, but its political discourse undermines the cohesion of the alliance. Orbán's skepticism about military aid to Ukraine and his calls for negotiations with Russia position Hungary closer to Moscow's narrative than to NATO's consensus on deterrence. The delay in ratifying Sweden's NATO membership further demonstrated Budapest's willingness to instrumentalize alliance processes for political leverage. Such behavior not only damages NATO's credibility but also raises uncomfortable questions about how much divergence the alliance can tolerate from within. In the long run, Hungary's approach risks normalizing a form of semi-detachment in which member states enjoy the security benefits of NATO while selectively disregarding its political and strategic direction. These institutional frictions cannot be separated from the ideological dimension of Hungary's foreign and domestic policy. Orbán has articulated a vision of "illiberal democracy" that places national sovereignty and cultural homogeneity at the center of political life. This model has increasingly aligned Hungary with other right-wing populist and sovereigntist movements across Europe and North America. By framing liberal internationalism as a threat to traditional values and state autonomy, the Hungarian government has positioned itself not merely as a pragmatic outlier, but as part of an ideological struggle against the liberal-democratic order that underpins both the EU and NATO.

The Hungarian case also exposes the limitations of enlargement as a geopolitical tool. The EU's eastward expansion was driven by both strategic and normative motivations: to stabilize the post-communist region, prevent the re-emergence of spheres of influence, and extend the reach of liberal-democratic governance. Yet, two decades later, Hungary demonstrates that accession does not guarantee internalization of norms. Instead, it highlights the difficulty of reconciling the Union's dual identity as both a community of values and a geopolitical actor. The EU's inability to enforce compliance with its own rule-of-law standards has emboldened illiberal practices not only in Hungary, but also in other member states such as Poland. Similarly, NATO's broad

membership brings strategic depth but also amplifies the risk of internal dissent, as Hungary's pro-Russian rhetoric illustrates.

At the same time, Hungary's divergence should not be overstated as a complete rupture. Budapest continues to rely on EU funds, benefits from access to the single market, and remains dependent on NATO for its security. Its deviations have not translated into an outright exit from either organization, but rather into a precarious balancing act between East and West. This duality is perhaps the defining feature of Hungary's geopolitical strategy: retaining the material benefits of Western integration while cultivating political and economic ties with Russia, China, and other non-Western powers. Such an approach may provide short-term autonomy, but in the long run, it risks deepening Hungary's isolation within the very institutions that safeguard its stability and prosperity. Ultimately, Hungary's trajectory illustrates the paradox of modern European integration. Enlargement has undeniably expanded the EU and NATO's reach, but it has also introduced internal fractures that both institutions struggle to manage. Hungary exemplifies how a member state can simultaneously be inside the structures of the West and yet challenge their very foundations.

In this light, Hungary is not merely a domestic anomaly but a test case for the future of the European solidarity and transatlantic unity. Considering that candidate states from the Western Balkans and Eastern Neighborhood are still waiting for full accession to the EU, it would be safe to assume that Brussels faces a critical dilemma. On the one hand, accelerating enlargement remains a key strategic objective to promote stability and deter external influence in these regions. On the other hand, the Hungarian case underscores the risks of integrating states that may not fully commit to the EU's foundational values, potentially undermining cohesion and effectiveness from within. Therefore, the EU must carefully balance the geopolitical imperatives of enlargement with robust mechanisms to ensure compliance with democratic norms, lest future expansions replicate or exacerbate the institutional vulnerabilities currently exemplified by Hungary. It would be prudent for the EU to undertake a comprehensive analysis of the strategic culture of any nation seeking accession, including an assessment of the state's capacity and willingness to adhere to EU norms and standards, the degree of its political and economic autonomy in managing relationships with external actors, and the societal perceptions embodied in how citizens of that country understand and identify with the concept of being "European."

Finally, Hungary's geopolitical stance reveals the fragility of the liberal order when confronted with populist nationalism from within its own ranks. As the EU and NATO confront mounting external challenges-from Russia's revisionism to global competition with China and strategic narratives of Türkiye the capacity to manage internal dissent will become a decisive factor for their survival. Hungary's example warns that institutional membership alone is insufficient; without deeper normative alignment, the very foundations of Western unity remain vulnerable.

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THE IMPACT OF SANCTIONS ON ECONOMIC GROWTH: THE CASE OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION

Lazizakhon Saydalieva,[1] *Zebo Kuldasheva*[2]

This paper explores the economic impact of international sanctions imposed on the Russia, particularly after the geopolitical conflicts. Sanctions have long been used as a diplomatic tool effecting to state behaviour to restrict access to global market, limiting financial transactions and controlling the trade circulation. These economic restrictions have significantly hindered Russia's economic growth. This paper conducts a comprehensive analysis of the effects of sanctions on key economic indicators, including Gross Domestic Product (GDP), Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), inflation, trade balance, and currency stability. Using time-series data from 1992 to 2022, the study applies the Vector Auto Regression (VAR) model within the framework of dependency theory to assess the relationship between various economic variables and Russia's economic well-being. The results indicate that there is a negative correlation between oil prices and their impact on economic growth. However, FDI and oil prices had a negative impact on the economy when compared to other indicators like sanctions. Furthermore, it explores potential growth trajectories for the Russian economy. The article concludes with policy recommendations for both sanction-imposing countries and Russia, emphasizing the need for adaptive economic strategies, diversified trade partnerships, and diplomatic engagement to mitigate economic vulnerabilities and ensure long-term stability.
Key words: economic impacts, sanctions, economic growth, dependency theory
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1 INTRODUCTION

Economic sanctions serve as coercive measures that lie between mere diplomatic pressure and the extreme of military intervention. As former United Nations (UN) noted

[1] Lazizakhon Saydalieva, Department of World Economy and International Economic Relations, Tashkent State University of Economics, Islam Karimov 49, 100066 Tashkent, Uzbekistan, e-mail: l.saidalieva@tsue.uz. https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7680-1638
[2] Zebo Kuldasheva, Associate Professor, Department of World Economy and International Economic Relations, Tashkent State University of Economics, Islam Karimov 49, 100066 Tashkent, e-mail: z.kuldasheva@tsue.uz. https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6367-2192

in Secretary-General Kofi Annan's speech, "sanctions" represent more than just verbal condemnation and less than the use of armed force. Similarly, former United States' (US) President Woodrow Wilson put it (Drezner,1999): "A nation boycotted is a nation that is in sight". Recently, globally the most discussed state is Russia. Initial round of sanctions was imposed in 2014 by the United States of America (USA), European Union (EU) and several other countries in response to the situation in Crimea (a small city in the northeast of Russia). However, the early sanctions targeted specific individuals and companies, having limited impact on broader Russian economy. As the conflict between Russia and Ukraine escalated, EU and USA glazed to additional sectoral sanctions such as limitation of oil and gas production companies, restricted financial transactions in commercial banks and no access to advanced production technologies. However, according to the words of the President of Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin, European sanctions have done no harm on Russia "We have growth and they have decline" (BBC, 2024). It means that through the bordered countries such as Kazakhstan, Georgia and Belarus it is able to get sanctioned Western goods.

Though sanctions are in a run for some time, there is still no measurement of its impact assessment. For example, before the US Congress in January 2015, B. Obama said that "the Russian economy is in fail" although the other economists suppose sanctions have no significant impact or little (The White House, 2015). An International Monetary Fund (IMF)'s report was about decreasing value of ruble by 76% against US dollar while consumer goods experienced the 16% inflation and Russian's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) decreased by 3% (Stepanyan et al., 2016).

According to National Broadcasting Company (NBC) News data in 2015 $576 million assets are frozen in the Russian banks while USA announced not only the extension of sanctions in several sectors especially in food industry but also prolonged the duration of implemented sanctions to Russia (NBC, 2022). Alternatively, because of the collection of sanctions to Russia also impacted to the diplomatic relations among the other states which supported them against sport activities as an example. It means that according to the International Olympic Committee rules recently in Olympic games 2024 Russia's athletics were banned to take part there as long as only few numbers of athletes were allowed only in the case of not presenting Russian iconography including flags, colors and anthems. Consequently because of weak diplomatic relations with western countries, not only the country suffered from the lack of income which may reduce the investment in sports infrastructure and programs, affecting long-term development and potential future revenue but also athletes may lose opportunities for endorsements and career advancement, leading to a decline in economy.

Based on above mentioned issues, there is a high demand for empirical research of the sanctions and its impact on Russian economy. Therefore, this paper aims to study economic channels of sanctions' impact and also political effects on Russia's economic growth. The main objectives of current study as follows: Initially, analyze the direct

effects of economic sanctions on Russia's GDP growth and key economic indicators and then Investigate changes in foreign direct investment (FDI) in Russia post-sanctions. Finally, investigating how Russia most affected by economic sanctions and their broader implications for economic growth. By using this, in the future, big sectors like oil and gas industry may find easy solutions to unpredictable external factors, making their services adaptable preventing from going bankruptcy. Additionally, the research is also about how sanctions will affect the diplomatic decisions.

Russia is considered one of the biggest economic players in global arena. According to the World Trade Organization (WTO) report in 2015, 167 countries trade is dependent with Russia (WTO, 2015). Strong trade relations and diplomatic ties were mutual beneficial for both countries. Because of the current sanctions, number of countries such as Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Armenia, Georgia, Uzbekistan and Russia itself having significant challenges (IMF working papers, 2023). According to recent study by Stepanyan in 2015 (Stepanyan et al., 2015), Migrant remittances account for a huge source of external income and financing for many Commonwealths of Independent States (CIS) countries. Russia is the owner of one of the largest majority of remittances, comprising 19% of GDP for Tajikistan, 7% for Armenia and 2% for Georgia and Moldova in the case of 2021. The flow of remittances from Russia is usually associated with the non-trade sector of Russia, where labor migrants from region work. This is a potential source of vulnerability for remittance-receiving countries as the recession in Russia is propagated by declining cross-border remittance flows. However, according to IMF report, some countries advantaged from the changes in real and financial boundary inflows in the short run. As an example, sanctions have decreased the potential of import ability from EU and the US, encouraging to higher trade with other neighborhood countries (IMF, 2023). Therefore, it again calls urgency of deeply researching this topic and give potential recommendations by scholars to academia. In order fully analyze the research framework, the authors applied Vector autoregression (VAR) method along with regression analysis, which gives more accurate and exact results of the scenario. The research is covered the dataset of the last 30 years from 1992 to 2022.

Structure of the article follows with literature review in section 2. While Methodology section is placed in third part. Results and discussion located in section 4 and the last conclusion section ends the study.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Over the past several years, sanctions are getting serious in the international politics to prohibit the targeted state’s economic activity and no country has used from sanctions considerably more a lot than USA and its power is enough statistically to decrease the economic power of issued country. It has had a major impact on how the Russian economy has developed. The goal of these sanctions, which target important industries like energy, banking, and defence is to put economic pressure on the Russian

government and influence how it behaves internationally. Foreign investment has been hampered and significant hurdles have been created for Russian enterprises by the sanctions, which limit the access to international financing markets, technological transfers, and essential imports. As an example, Russia is the second large user of The Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunications (SWIFT) system after the USA to transfer the international payments regarding with the oil sector especially. Even though EU was against to ban SWIFT system in Russia because of being trade partner, later on totally this payment method was removed from the all banks. Instead of this Russia had to use from their own services and domestic financial infrastructure for the operations.

Furthermore, statistically one group of studies claimed that imposing UN sanctions into the country moderately decreases annual real per capita of GDP growth rate by more than 2% (Neuenkirch and Neumeier, 2015). Hence, the political attack of US to Russia (Kasymov, 2012) because of its combination of Crimea in 2014 and further causes bringing to its invasion of Ukraine in 2022 for a long time are still highly discussed topic.. Since then, many scientists are studying how well this giant country can withstand these shocks. As an example, Galbert (2015) measure the outcome and future of Russia sanctions from the European perspective while the others (Nusratullin et al., 2021) identified the less significant effect of sanctions to Russia than the leaders of these countries expected. Furthermore, Oxenstierna's and Olsson's (2015) studies regarding with division of sanctions are about examining effectiveness of sanctions to supply the compliance and those that consider the economic and political impacts of sanctions.

Evaluating the success of sanctions took the great deal of attention from researchers and policymakers. Earlier studies were covered more about qualitative and from the political perspective while the others approached from only the economic sides. As an example, Brown (2020) went deeper with oil-related economic sanctions influencing the global oil markets by constraining supply and altering trade dynamics while Tuzova and Qayum (2016) through the VAR quantified the oil prices which led to the opposite effect of increasing prices and, in the event of its cancellation, a fall in supply and prices that could complicate the balance sheet. From another side, one of the first sanctions researchers to observe that penalties frequently result in higher degrees of political integration in the target country is Galtung (1967). This phenomenon, known as the "rally-around-the-flag effect," has drawn the attention of numerous authors in the sanctions' literature. Consequently, Mayall (1984) states that penalties "often have perverse effects, generating a unity and strong feeling which will succeed in tough times, which was not there before because of a defensive mindset."

A study by Ghomi (2022) analyzed the macroeconomic and distributional effects of the sanctions against Iran. Applying the synthetic control method, the research finds that the Iranian economy suffered a maximum decline of 19.1% in real GDP four years after the sanctions were imposed, with incomplete recovery even after their removal.

Contrary to the intended objectives of the sanctions, the patterns of poverty indicate that educated individuals and those employed in the public sector remain largely unaffected. However, the sanctions have disproportionately driven young, illiterate, rural, and religious minority households into poverty. Moreover, the old investigation by Torbat (2005) also focused on trade and financial sanctions on Iran. The study concludes that while the economic impact of the sanctions has been substantial, their political influence has been limited. It proposes that redirecting sanctions specifically toward the ruling clergy could enhance their effectiveness while reducing their unintended consequences on the general population. Implementing well-targeted sanctions may help to control Islamic fundamentalism in the region, developing greater stability and improved relations with the West.

The consequences of economic sanctions are always hot topic to debate. Number of scholars researched on this topic, raising different outcomes with the case of several countries. For instance, Özdamar and Shahin (2021) examines the relationships between various types of sanctions, their enforcers, and target states. Additionally, the study highlights thematic, methodological, and theoretical gaps in the existing literature on sanction consequences. It emphasizes the need for a unified approach to analyzing sanctions within the broader framework of international interdependence. Similarly, Morgan et al. (2023) investigates the evolution of economic sanctions in the post-World War II era. A review of economic and political science literature suggests that integrating both perspectives could enhance the understanding of sanction processes and address key challenges in the field. Lastly, Meyer et al. (2023) studied the international business activities under the sanctions, which indeed valuable research. By synthesizing scholarly evidence, researchers examine how sanctions reshape institutional frameworks and how firms adapt, drawing on theories such as the institution-based view, resource dependency theory, and behavioural theories of the firm. As politically driven disruptions, sanctions challenge key theoretical assumptions, highlighting the need for strategic responses from businesses and governments in an increasingly geopolitically sensitive world.

Sanctions of this kind frequently result in a rise in public support for the target country's governing regime (Mack and Khan, 2000). Furthermore, sanctions may backfire as Galtung (1967) notes since they might create a new elite part in the issued country that gains international isolation. Still two side researches are seeming not adequate to get both economically and politically insights about sanctions' affect to Russia. Hence, in addition to available investigations current study contributes to this path of the literature by empirically examining long term effects of sanctions within the segments of Russia using Stata as a tool because there is limited comparative study on the effectiveness of US sanctions in comparison to those imposed by other nations or international entities. Understanding how different sanctions regimes affect economic growth might give useful information. Additionally, the modelling of future possibilities for the Russian economy under different levels of sanction severity and global economic trends is limited.

3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

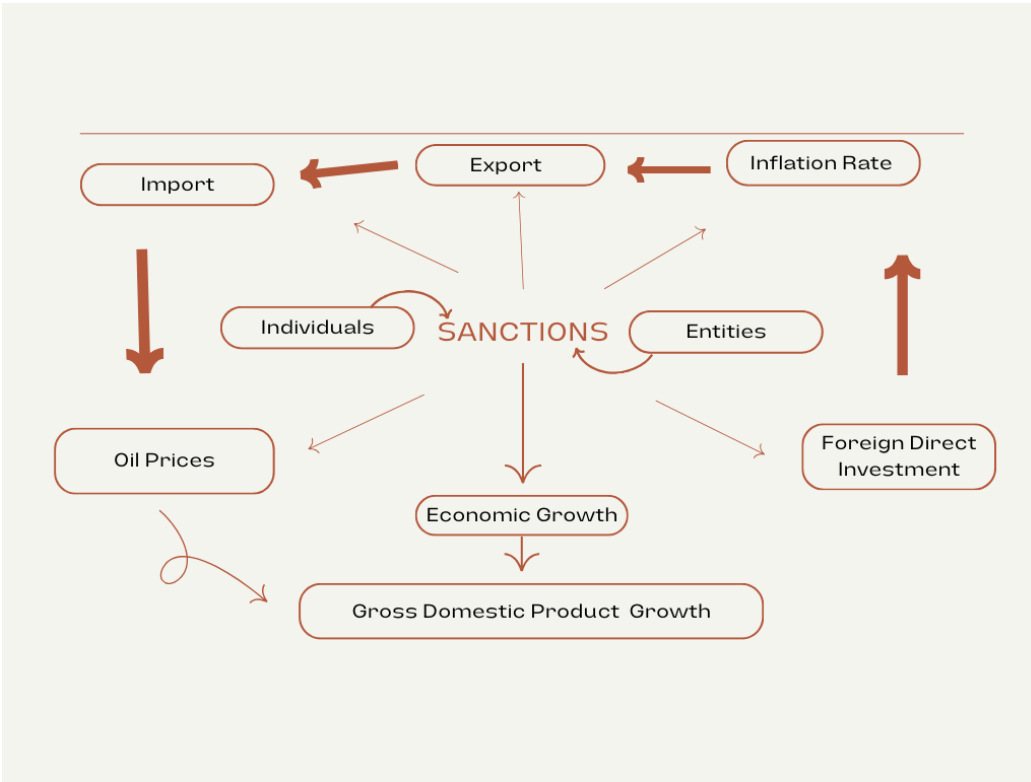
Accordingly, current research attempts to extend the scope of the literature by exploring the casual relationship between the Russia's economic growth and sanctions through dependency theory. There have been discovered many topics linking to the dependency theory but regarding with sanctions it is lacking. However, dependency theory matches with the sanction because dependency theory assumes that peripheral countries' economic growth is significantly impacted by their interactions with core countries. By highlighting preexisting disparities, this framework aids in the explanation of how sanctions may impact economic growth. Core countries use sanctions as a tool to affect economies in periphery regions, such as Russia. These policies have the potential to impede economic progress and increase dependency by restricting access to international markets. The theory itself published in the late 1950s by the Argentine economist and statesman Raul Prebisch where this theory is analyzed in terms of three forms of explanation: structural, functional, and intentional (Simon and Ruccio, 1986). Hence, we applied two theoretical constructs according to current study: first one is "Core-Periphery Dynamics: Sanctions could make Russia an even more peripheral economy by limiting its access to markets". Second is "Structural Dependence: Due to its reliance on energy exports, Russia is less able to diversify due to external pressures". Furthermore, reviewing previous sanctions reveal the trends that align with dependency theory and emphasizes the historical effects they have had on Russia. It proves as the outstanding technique to run analysis and give potential solution for economic growth factors in targeted state.

While dependency theory provides a strong foundation for understanding the economic impact of sanctions on Russia, integrating additional theoretical perspectives can offer a more comprehensive analysis of their implications. In this study, we further incorporate the political economy of sanctions and neoclassical economic theory to examine the broader consequences and strategic dynamics surrounding economic restrictions.

The political economy of sanctions approach offers valuable insights into how different domestic and international actors respond to sanctions. Sanctions often fail to achieve their intended political goals because they disproportionately impact civilian populations rather than ruling elites (Peksen and Drury, 2010). In Russia's case, despite economic constraints, the government has maintained political stability through various mechanisms, including state-controlled media, economic nationalism, and increased trade with alternative partners such as China and India. This theory explains how authoritarian regimes can manipulate economic hardship to consolidate power rather than succumb to external pressure. From a neoclassical economic (Goodland and Ledec, 1987) perspective, sanctions are seen as external shocks that change market equilibrium, leading to inefficiencies in production, trade, and consumption. This theory assumes that economic agents act rationally and respond to changes in market conditions by adjusting

their behaviour to minimize losses. In the context of Russia, sanctions have led to supply chain disruptions, increased transaction costs, and restricted access to foreign capital and technology. The reduction in efficiency negatively impacts GDP growth by reducing investment opportunities and technological innovation. Additionally, neoclassical theory suggests that sanctions create welfare losses, meaning that both the target country and the sanctioning countries experience negative economic consequences due to reduced trade and investment flows. This perspective emphasizes the broader economic consequences of sanctions beyond the targeted state.

Figure 1: Conceptual framework of the study



Source: processed by author.

On the other hand, Game theory provides a strategic perspective on sanctions, analyzing them as an interactive decision-making process between Russia and sanctioning countries. Sanctions are a strategic tool used by core countries to pressure peripheral economies, but their success depends on the responses of the targeted state and its allies (Drezner, 1999). Russia's response to sanctions illustrates a classic game-theoretic scenario, where the country engages in counterstrategies such as import substitution, alternative trade alliances, and currency de-dollarization. The effectiveness of sanctions is thus contingent on whether Russia can effectively counteract the imposed

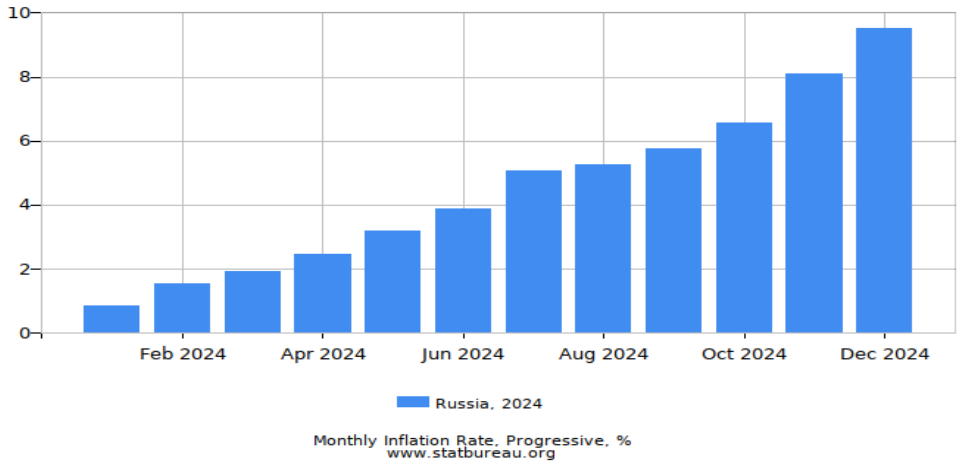
restrictions. Moreover, game theory suggests that sanctions can lead to unintended retaliatory measures, such as energy supply restrictions or cyber-economic warfare, further complicating international economic relations.

In this study, we represent a conceptual diagram to illustrate relationship between sanctions imposed on individuals and entities and their impact on economic growth, specifically indicated by GDP growth. This figure serves as a visual aid of our research framework, including independent variables and dependent variable. The main independent variables are the sanctions and at the center of the map their effect to GDP Growth was described. Furthermore, this figure not only clarifies the pathways but also shows the interconnectedness of these variables.

4 Overview of the sanctions and Russia's economic performance

Despite recent strains in diplomatic relations between the U.S. and Ukraine, both the United States and the European Union persist in enforcing sanctions against Russia, with a particular emphasis on its financial sector. The goal of these sanctions is to limit Russia's financial operations on a global scale. Notably, as the dynamics of U.S. – China relations evolve, China has increasingly turned its attention to the Eurasian region to bolster its economic connections – a development that indirectly supports Russia. Additionally, some Western nations have opted to exempt specific Russian banks that are involved in oil exports from sanctions, enabling Russia to sustain limited but crucial economic interactions with the rest of the world.

Figure 2: Inflation rate in Russia between February and December in 2024, %



Source: Stat Bureau, 2025.

In terms of overall economic performance, however, Russia's economy continues to be susceptible to vulnerabilities. After a contraction of 2.1% in 2022, the country experienced a rebound with a growth of 3.6% in 2023. Nonetheless, the forecast for 2024

points to a deceleration, with anticipated growth of merely 1.5% – a slowdown primarily driven by stricter monetary policies and diminishing global demand.

Inflation has also risen sharply, prompting the Central Bank of Russia to increase the key interest rate to 21% in an attempt to stabilize the ruble and manage escalating domestic prices. These changes highlight the ongoing economic strain Russia endures due to international sanctions and inherent structural difficulties.

This figure demonstrates the growing economic pressure brought on by continued geopolitical tensions and makes it abundantly evident that Western sanctions have contributed significantly to the Russian economy's ongoing inflation. These sanctions have restricted access to necessary products and services and disrupted supply chains, especially those that target important industries like technology, energy, and finance. Because of this, the cost of living has been rising significantly, which has put more strain on both people and companies. Additionally, people's buying power is gradually declining due to the ongoing increase in inflation, which means they could purchase less with the same amount of money. One of the main drivers of domestic economic activity, consumer spending, may diminish as a result of this drop in real income. Such a situation will probably damage the economy's general stability over time, slow down economic development, and raise social inequality.

5 EMPIRICAL FRAMEWORK

Our empirical analysis is based on the Russian macroeconomic variables and the political impact of altering oil prices. We use this experience to analyze deeply a shock that mimics the sanctions against Russia. Hence, to know the existed effect of economic sanctions to the GDP growth in Russia Federation. In order to know the proper impact of sanctions to the economic growth we have used from the other independent variables as an example, FDI index, oil prices, currency exchange rate, inflation rate, export and import measurements during this period. All data except from the number of sanctions have been retrieved from the World Bank Data and the remained indicator was accepted from EU Sanctions Map. Granger causality and test employed to test the existence and direction of causality between the variables with help of statistical application STATA 18. This methodology has its roots in economics (Sims, 1980) and is also recognized as the effective tool for political measurement (Freeman et al., 1989). Because of insufficient data, the time series are quarterly proportioned dividing each year into four three years. Hence, the final result gave us 128 observations which made across Russia as a time series data. Because of insufficient data years are quarterly distributed in order to supply the significance of overall result.

Non-stationary time series results can lead to false correlations when used in econometric modelling (Dickey and Fuller, 1981). To check if the time series data is stationary, Augmented Dickey-Fuller (ADF) test is applied. The null hypothesis H_0 posits – series has a unit root i.e., series is non-stationary, while alternative hypothesis

suggests, H_1 – series has no unit root i.e., meaning it is stationary. Hence, the following intercept is considered:

$$\Delta Y_t = a_1 + a_2 San\_ind_t + a_3 San\_ent_t + a_{FDI} FDI_t + a_{INF} INF_t + a_{exp} Exp_t + a_{Imp} Imp_t + a_{Cur\_ex} Cur\_ex_t + a_{Oil\_p} Oil\_p_t + \mu t, \quad (1)$$

where Y_t is GDP Growth while San_ind_t, San_ent_t, FDI_t, INF_t, Exp_t, Imp_t, Cur_ex_t, Oil_p_t are the number of sanctions imposed for individulas, sanctions imposed for entities, FDI index, Inflation rate, amount of export and import, cureency exchange rate in US dollars, Oil prices respectiveley and μt is the error term.

The VAR approach simplifies the process by using the past values of the endogenous variables in the system, avoiding needs of complexion of structural model. Instead, its focus is towards modeling each endogenous variable directly. The mathematical form of a VAR is as follows:

$$z_t = \binom{x_t}{y_t} = \beta + \beta_1 t + \sum_{i=1}^{k+1} A_t z_{t-1} + u_t; \quad (2)$$

$$A_t = \begin{vmatrix} a_{11} & a_{12} \\ a_{21} & a_{22} \end{vmatrix}; \quad (3)$$

$$\Delta GDP\_gr_t = \alpha + \sum_{i=1}^{k} \gamma_1 \Delta GDP\_gr_{t-1} + \sum_{i=1}^{k} \gamma_2 \Delta Sanct_{t-i} + \sum_{i=1}^{k} \gamma_3 \Delta Oil_{t-i} \sum_{i=1}^{k} \gamma_4 \Delta FDI_{t-i} + \sum_{i=1}^{k} \gamma_5 \Delta Inf_{t-i} + \sum_{i=1}^{k} \gamma_6 \Delta Currency_{t-i} + \sum_{i=1}^{k} \gamma_7 \Delta Import_{t-i} + \sum_{i=1}^{k} \gamma_8 \Delta Export_{t-i} u, \quad (4)$$

where in equation 4, $\gamma_1, \gamma_2, \gamma_3, \gamma_4, \gamma_5, \gamma_6, \gamma_7, \gamma_8$ are parameters to be estimated as a coefficient of the estimation and μ represent the serial error terms, and GDP_gr_t and $Sanc_t, Oil_t, FDI_t, Inf_t, Currency_t, Import_t, Export_t$ are defined observation for the *t* time periods; Δ is the differential operator; *k* refers to the number of lags.

6 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The primary objective of this study is to examine the impact of economic sanctions and other variables including oil price, inflation rate, currency exchange rate, FDI, export and import rate, on the development of the Central Asian economy. This section shows the results obtaining from the econometric methods, including descriptive statistics, lag model, a correlation matrix and VAR model. It is essential that economic sanction-related factors be incorporated into our study, as doing so provides a comprehensive understanding in which economic growth in the region is impacted by

sanctions, in addition to conventional factors such as oil price, inflation, currency exchange rate, FDI, export and import rate.

Below descriptive data for study's variables can be presented in Table 1. It indicates that Russian Federation experiences an average economic growth of 1.2. Likewise, the mean value for sanction among individuals is 546 while regarding with the entrepreneur it accounted for 117. Whereas the maximum was 419 and as a comparison the number of individual sanctions four times bigger. Table 2 also presents the high standard deviation for these pertinent variables.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics

Variable	Observations	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max.
GDP Growth	128	1.203	6.034	-14.531	10
Oil price	128	52.626	30.55	13.064	105.01
Inflation	128	56.572	160.184	.898	887.841
Exchange Currency	128	34.823	23.629	.418	85.162
FDI	128	19.347	24.657	-39.8	74.78
Export	128	31.575	7.472	23.083	62.322
Number of Sanctions Individual	40	427.7	545.98	132	1612
Number of Sanction Entrepreneur	40	91.4	117.543	28	419
Sanction Individual	128	.313	.465	0	1
Sanction Entrepreneur	128	.313	.465	0	1

Note: Sample: 1993q1 - 2023q4, Number of obs = 124
Endogenous: gdp_growth_interp oil_prus_interp inf_gdp_interp exchange_interp fdius_b_interp exp_interp sanction_ind sanction_ent
Exogenous: _cons
z-statistics in parentheses
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1
Source: processed by author.

To test multicollinearity is very important for every study. If the variables are significantly correlated, it can make the results invalid. According to the result, GDP correlates positively with oil prices (0,448) that as oil production increases, GDP growth tends to increase as well. While the other variables like oil production (0,915) and Import (0,861) tend to be strong positively correlated with FDI indicating that oil production and FDI are both linked to higher imports. Overall, oil production, FDI and exports suggested the increases in these areas may reinforce economic growth while inflation (-0.560) and sanctions (-0.014), so slightly) appear to have a negative correlation with GDP growth. Both sanction variables seem to correlate with exchange rates and inflation, which may reflect economic conditions under sanctions.

Table 2: Correlation Matrix of the Variables

Variable	*gdp_growth_int~p*	*lnoil_prus_int~p*	*lninf_gdp_interp*	*exchange_interp*	*lnfdius_b_interp*	*exp_interp*	*imp_interp*	*sanction_ind*	*sanction_ent*
gdp_growth_int~p	1.000								
lnoil_prus_int~p	0.448	1.000							
lninf_gdp_interp	-0.560	-0.675	1.000						
exchange_interp	0.342	0.544	-0.651	1.000					
lnfdius_b_interp	0.524	0.915	-0.669	0.525	1.000				
exp_interp	-0.122	-0.397	0.581	-0.358	-0.472	1.000			
imp_interp	-0.515	-0.522	0.744	-0.497	-0.579	0.861	1.000		
sanction_ind	-0.014	0.320	-0.461	0.849	0.245	-0.337	-0.293	1.000	
sanction_ent	-0.014	0.320	-0.461	0.849	0.245	-0.337	-0.293	1.000	1.000

Source: processed by author.

Table 3: Unit root test

Variables at Level	*ADF Test (P-Values)**	*First Difference(P-Values)*
GDP_Growth	-3.279 **	-11.167***
Sanctions_individuals	-0.664	-11,225***
Oil_Price	-1.562	-11.176***
Inflation_Rate	-6.185***	-11.317***
FDI	-2.522	-11.136***
Export	-4.255***	-11.264***
Import	-5.352***	-11.310***
Currency_exchange	0.025	-11.628***

Note: ** indicates significant at the 5 % level and *** at 1 % level.
Source: processed by author.

In the second step, augmented Dickey-Fuller (ADF) test was applied to check for unit root units in the level series, with the lag length determined by the automatic selection criterion shown in Table 2. As indicated in Table 3, the value of the three series (Inflation rate, export and import) was below 1 per cent at the first difference including the intercept in the test equation. Hence, this led to the rejection of the null hypothesis for inflation rate, exports, and imports, suggesting that these series become stationary. For remained variables, this null hypothesis could not be rejected, indicating they are likely non-stationary. Furthermore, it is necessary to find the optimal number of lags using vector autoregression (VAR).

Table 4 shows the various values for lags 0 and 4, including log L, LR, FPE, AIC, HQIC, SBIC. However, lag 4 had a larger negative value and according to AIC the lowest

values is at lag 4 (AIC=33,8466). So, 4 can be determined as lag length selection criteria and chosen to perform the other relevant tests as it provides the best trade-off between goodness of fit and complexity

Table 4: Results of lag lengh criteria

Lag	*LL*	*LR*	*df*	*p*	*FPE*	*AIC*	*HQIC*	*SBIC*
0	-2984.02				2.1e+12	48.2422	48.3069	48.4014
1	-2101.22	1765.6	49	0.000	3.0e+06	34.7939	35.3113*	36.0675*
2	-2075.89	50.664	49	0.408	4.5e+06	35.1756	36.1457	37.5637
3	-2030.71	90.349	49	0.000	4.9e+06	35.2373	36.6601	38.7399
4	-1895.49	270.45*	49	0.000	1.3e+06*	33.8466*	35.7221	38.4636

Note: AIC – Akaike's information criterion, FPE – final prediction error, HQIC – Hannan–Quinn information criterion, LR– sequential modified LR test statistics (each test at 5 % level), * – lag order.
Source: processed by author.

As shown in Table 5, the GDP growth exhibited a positive value of 0.450*** in the overall model, with a statistically significant P-value, indicating a robust relationship with the independent variables analyzed. The coefficient increases to 0.502*** before sanctions showing the stronger impact whereas because of changing economic environment it further rises to 1.24*** after the sanctions. This suggests that economic sanctions significantly affect GDP growth and further scholars, Hufbauer and Kim proved this tendency (Hufbauer and Kim, 2009). Regarding with the variable of sanctions, -3.203* overall and -4.47** after sanctions reveal a negative effect on GDP growth because of detrimental impact of sanctions. Sanctions sometimes lead to the economic isolation, limiting market and resource access, Pape also showed in his paper the negative affects of sanctions in economic measures (Pape, 1997).

Furthermore, the changes in oil price cause significantly negative changes in economic growth, overall, -0.5*, before -0.3*** and after sanctions -1.2**. Hence, research shows that sanctions can empower the situations related to the oil-reliant economies (Idrisov, Kazakova and Polbin, 2015) implementing the interaction of global oil price with domestic market. However, inflation results a positive coefficient of 0.25* while before sanction It accounted for only 0.124* but after inflation's influence became insignificant once sanctions are in place. This puzzling result can be more clarified through works like those of Dastgerdi, Yusof and Shahbaz (2018), who gave evidence for mixed effects of inflation depending on economic environment. Moreover, the indicator of FDI highlight high significance before sanctions (1.619**) but less so after (0.98**). This is the cause of many transnational companies at once decide to move their investment elsewhere due to increased risks in sanctioned which surely affect to economics, although trade sanctions are not as harmful. On other side, the positive impact of currency exchange rates (0.108**) and its vary before and post-sanctions shows that

currency stability play an important role in GDP growth. This is corresponding to the research from Wang et al., (2019) which included about a stable exchange rate guarantees foreign trade and provides a good external environment for economic development. Lastly, the coefficients for exports (0.272**) and imports (-0.618***) highlight the importance of trade balance. The negative impact of imports suggests that excessive reliance on foreign goods can be harmful, particularly under sanctions, as found in the work of Drezner (2011).

Table 5: Vector auto regression model

Variable	***Overall Model***	***Before Sanctions***	***After Sanctions***
GDP_growth	*0.450***	*0.502***	*1.24***
Sanctions	*-3.203**		*-4.47***
Oil Prices	*-0.5**	*-0.3***	*-1.2***
Inflation	*0.2***	*0.124**	*0.3*
FDI	*0.700*	*1.619***	*0.98***
Currency_exchange	*0.108***	*0.207***	*0.154***
Export	*0.272***	*0.192**	*0.132***
Import	*-0.618****	*-0.452***	*-0.316****
Constant	*5.254**	*10.727**	*6.880***
Observations	*118*	*100*	*40*

Source: processed by author.

7 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study investigates the economic impact of international sanctions imposed on the Russian Federation over the period from 1993 to 2023. It focuses particularly on the role of the other countries' sanctions on Russia's economy- which includes GDP growth, oil price, inflation rate, FDI, the number of economic sanctions implied to individuals and entities. Using VAR model, the analysis explores the dynamic relationships among these variables within the framework of dependency theory. In particular, the results show that sanctions have had a negative and statistically significant effect on GDP growth, both overall and mainly in the period following the imposition of sanctions; the coefficient of GDP growth increased significantly after sanctions, indicating a shift in economic dynamics likely driven by sanctions-induced adjustments and external shocks; and FDI inflows were found to be negatively impacted by sanctions, supporting the evidence that increased geopolitical risk and economic uncertainty have discouraged foreign investment in the Russian economy.

The findings also reveal that fluctuations in oil prices have a considerable negative impact on economic growth, highlighting the vulnerability of oil-dependent nations to global oil market volatility. Similarly, whereas inflation was positively correlated with GDP growth prior to sanctions, its influence became statistically insignificant in the post-sanction period, showing the complicated relationship between

inflationary pressures and economic performance under sanctions. Finally, the results show that, while exports contribute positively to GDP growth, an overreliance on imports, particularly under sanctions, can have a negative impact on economic performance. These findings are consistent with previous research emphasizing the necessity of preserving trade balance and lowering reliance on imported goods in sanctions-affected countries.

The study's empirical findings provide valuable insights to policymakers on the factors that contribute to economic growth. Based on these insights, Russia is partially relied on Western's Market so that it should diversify their economic sector avoiding from hegemonic sector such as oil industry export. Russia should invest in tourism, technology, and agriculture to build an antifragile economy resilient to external shocks, including sanctions. Additionally, the sanctions exposed vulnerabilities in Russia's banking system, particularly after being cut off from SWIFT. To mitigate this, Russia must deepen its FinTech sector by expanding digital payment infrastructure, developing blockchain-based financial solutions, and enhancing cooperation with alternative financial networks like China's CIPS. This allowed us to address digital policy measures for overcoming negative effects of sanctions in Russia. Strengthening domestic financial institutions, encouraging cross-border settlements in national currencies, and fostering innovation in decentralized finance will help Russia maintain economic stability and independence from Western financial systems.

Furthermore, in Russia the trade relations should be fostered with non-sanctioning countries. Building a strong network of markets help to mitigate the strong effects of sanctions and oil price volatility on economic growth which means that it should strength economic and political cooperation with BRICS and Eurasian Customs Union (EACU) to search alternative economic opportunity. Russia can benefit also from it through increasing again competitiveness among domestic markets because the main policy response to the economic crisis is the policy of import substitution. This policy strengthens the sanctions since it is just another way of ensuring that domestic non-competitive producers get resources and makes the economy less competitive. Regarding with promoting stable currency, policymakers should think about the monetary policy that balance inflation under the control and stabilize the exchange rate while stable currency takes an importance of attracting FDI and trade activities. Moreover, the last and the most important suggestion is that Russia should engage in diplomatic efforts to minimize the impact of sanctions. Such as seeking international support that mitigate the negative effects. According to the research, assessing continuously the economic environment and impact of sanctions is essential. Policymakers should deeply analyze each macroeconomic indicator in order to define economic growth because currently even though trade surplus is positive in Russia, it does not mean Russians economy is growing.

The study has certain limitations which highlight opportunities further research in the future. First, it is limited by the availability time series data for specific variables from 1993 to 2023. The minimal number of observations hinders the statistical power of

the study, which may impair the accuracy and generalizability of the conclusions. A longer time series or extra data points would provide a more robust analysis. Second, by assuming linear relationships, VAR model may fail to capture structural breaks or nonlinear effects resulting from significant political or economic shocks like the COVID-19 pandemic, the annexation of Crimea in 2014, or the global financial crisis in 2008. The study does not examine regional or sectoral differences within Russia's economy; instead, it concentrates on overall economic data.

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PERMANENT MEMBERSHIP IN THE UNITED NATIONS SECURITY COUNCIL AS AN IDENTITY-BASED OBSTACLE TO EFFECTIVE CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Uroš Popadić[1]

This article examines how the permanent membership of five states in the UN Security Council creates identity dynamics that obstruct its capacity to resolve conflicts. It argues that the status gap between permanent and rotating members produces entrenched identities that legitimise privilege and generate persistent tension. Using a constructivist approach, it analyses debates related to three major conflicts between 2014 and 2020. The findings show that permanent states defend their status through moralised identity-performances to justify obstruction even when material interests are only indirectly involved, eroding the Council's legitimacy and contributing to recurrent paralysis, creating an identity-based obstacle to effective conflict resolution.
Key words: Security Council, conflict resolution, identity, constructivism, security governance
JEL: F50, F53, D74

1 INTRODUCTION

The Security Council has faced various problems over the years, with its Structure, Legitimacy and Power being contested from multiple angles. The goal of this paper is to go beyond the specific issues and attempt to examine the underlying contradictions at the core of the Council, which stem from the exclusive permanence which several powerful states have. The approach taken is a constructivist one, exploring the identity-based contradictions that create constant tension in the Council, and which stem from the identity of the permanent states as great power arbiters whose national interests are inherently superior to those of other states. The inequality of states in the

[1] Uroš Popadić, PhD Candidate, Faculty of Political Science, University of Belgrade, Jove Ilića 165, Belgrade, Serbia, e-mail: popadics.uros@gmail.com. https://orcid.org/0009-0002-2660-848X
Uroš Popadić is a PhD Candidate in International and European studies, external researcher at the Center for peace studies of the Faculty of Political Science and research coordinator at the European movement in Serbia.

Council undermines its normative power as it allows great powers to instrumentalise it for their own benefit, identifying with their roles to the extent that they refuse any reform, while blocking any conflict resolution solutions that would harm their interests, which they justify by their identity and role. The article explores how these permanent states play out their identities and by doing so harm the Council's functioning and create a difficult atmosphere for the resolution of international disputes. The interests of permanent states are shaped by their status and identity given to them by their role in the Council, and they reify their identities by manifesting their dominance in the Council meetings. The contradiction is that their identities rely upon the legitimacy of the Council, which they undermine by their actions. The role-identity approach and examination through discourse goes beyond traditional approaches to great power rivalry in the Council. Thus the research question is whether permanent membership in the Security Council produces identity dynamics that systematically obstruct effective conflict resolution, and how these appear in Council discourse during acute crises.

The article uses a comparative case study of several processes of attempted conflict resolution in the Council in relation to some of the most acute crises in recent times, the conflicts in Ukraine, Syria, and between Israel and Palestine. It integrates the identity-based discourse in Council debates, in order to explore the relations between the permanent states themselves, and their relations towards the non-permanent states. The goal of this is to explore whether the status of exclusive permanence, and the identification of states with this status and its resultant role, is the main underlying cause for the limitation of the Council's efficiency in conflict resolution. The identity of a great power, coupled with the status of permanence and the resulting power in the Council, leads these states to overuse their powers to the extent that the rest of the UN members increase their contestation of their status, especially during excessive overuse and acute crises which require resolution.

The Council was created as a forum for mediation and consultation, but it is nowadays expected to be an instrument of conflict resolution in relation to peace and security. Whether it can be both effectively at the same time is an open question, especially as its structure is significantly anachronistic, and as permanent states derive authority and base their identities on the power they derive from it as it is. The article is divided into three parts. The first reviews the literature related to the main issues related to the Council, those being Structure, Legitimacy, and Reform, and does so by examining the issues historically and through the lens of identity. The second part provides a theoretical framework based on constructivism in order to be able to examine interests as related to identity and as manifested in discourse. This is followed by an empirical analysis and a discussion of results.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In order to examine identity and discourse, as well as the interpretation of the process of attempted conflict resolution by the participants, the article relies on conventional constructivism, using a traditional theory with a new approach. If following Wendt's view that the fundamental structures of international politics are social instead of material and that these structures shape the identities and interests of states as well as their behaviour (Wendt, 1995), as well as the the position that identities are intersubjective and therefore continually evolve (Wendt, 1994), the Council's legitimacy and authority are then constantly constituted through its activity, with the roles the members have then affecting their identities and interests individually and collectively. As the international system has a social nature, its constituent states are continually producing and reproducing its rules and norms (Guzzini, 2000), and if the position of Hopf is taken that agency and structure are mutually constituted so that identity can be intersubjectively changed (Hopf, 1998), the unequal power distribution in the Council would give the permanent states a power to affect not only the policies but identities of non-permanent states, which they would be unwilling to abjure. Norms are essential to the process, as they influence behaviour in a community such that its members are socialised by internalising these norms.

These identities allow for the existence of at least a minimal level of predictability and order, even while being constantly reconstituted through action and perception. The exclusive permanence would then be constantly reconstituting and reifying itself through norms and behaviour that is socialised on the non-permanent states, necessitating a continuation to maintain the benefits to their identity. The power relations in the Council shape how issues are framed and debated, and which norms are spread and which prevented from being diffused, giving the permanent states a mechanism of protecting their great power identity against challenges such as calls for reform. If all actions by states in the system affect their identities and the perception of the selfsame by others, which then directly affect their interests (Wendt, 1992), then the permanent states would be cautious to protect their positions and status against any attempt, even to the detriment of conflict resolution. The paper argues that the identity of the permanent states is the key to understanding their behaviour and the behaviour of other states in the Council towards them, and that the protection of the identity against reform is an underlying cause of the Council's inability to perform reliable conflict resolution in relation to crises and security breaches, due to the contradictions and tension it creates between permanent and non-permanent members.

The identity of a superior state would incentivise the permanent states to overuse their powers in an unfair way so that they protect their interests, justifying it by their importance to the international system, which is justified by their permanent status. The analysis follows how decisions and discourse in the Council unfold over time and lead to specific outcomes which prevent the conflict resolution role for the sake of maintenance

of the great power identity for the permanent states, exploring how identity is protected to the detriment of the Council's functioning and how non-permanent member reactions to it undermine the foundation for the identity. The argument is that the structure of the Council creates inequality due to an identity hierarchy, which undermines its legitimacy and leads to blocking of the conflict resolution and security governance role, which then leads to calls for reform which is resisted because it threatens those identities. The greater importance of national interests and the desire to retain their great power identity should lead the permanent states to limit and undermine their conflict resolution role in order to assert their power and status, leading them to overuse the powers that the Council gives them to protect both their interests directly, and their status indirectly, through the use of the status-defining powers and double standards, resisting all criticism and challenge. Precisely because identities are evolving through dynamic interaction, the permanent states refuse contestation of their authority, so that the power asymmetry stabilises their identities and makes them resistant to change.

3 METHODS

The analysis consists of qualitative comparative case studies of the Council deliberations on three major crises between 2014 and 2020, those being Ukraine, Syria and Israel-Palestine, examining the process and discourse related to failed conflict resolution over time. These were the most significant acute but lasting problems the Council was seized of during the period. Process and discourse are analysed concurrently as they are mutually dependent, as the analysis explores whether the discourse changes over time in reaction to the development of the process of attempted conflict resolution and security governance in relation to these acute crises. Discursive strategies and procedural actions are examined to provide insight into identity-protecting behaviour and the protection of status to the detriment of Council functioning. The period was chosen due to the unique character of having three concurrent crises which were related to the national interests of the permanent states but did not acutely endanger those interests. Tension was high during these years, along with increased calls for reform and activity of the non-permanent members. The sources consist of the minutes of Council debates, examining each debate concerning the three specific cases over the period.

Challenges are examined both within the permanent states, and between them and the non-permanent ones, taking into account the coalitions that certain permanent states have with non-permanent ones. Identity performance was operationalised through recurrent status and role claims in which speakers invoked permanent prerogatives, special responsibility, or historical authority, in order to legitimate their positions, which is expected t obe framed in moralised terms related to sovereignty and guardianship. Identity contestation was operationalised through explicit challenges to veto legitimacy and Council credibility, as well as references to Charter-based responsibility and accountability and calls for reform or veto restraint. The processes of failed conflict

resolution are connected to identity-relevant discourse which appears in relation to the perceived failures. The comparative analysis of the cases allows for commonalities of Council dysfunction and contesting discourse in them. Indicators of identity protection include references of the permanent states to their status and their justification of their use of veto powers in relation to their interests based on their status and identity. It is also expected that the use of veto powers would increase the disruption and consternation by other permanent states, as well as status contestation and critiques of effectiveness by non-permanent states, but that in each case this challenge to legitimacy would be deflected by the permanent states as their status and identity are more significant to them than conflict resolution, with only the excuses changing.

4 THE COUNCIL'S STRUCTURE, LEGITIMACY, AND REFORM IN RELATION TO IDENTITY

After the end of the Cold War the Council has developed its role in conflict resolution in line with its increased role in global governance, especially due to its ability to create an environment that shapes norms, yet its unequal structure provides a problem for this role (Barnett and Finnemore, 1999). The role of the UN has increased despite its heterogeneous nature and critiques aimed at it, as it remains the most legitimate international organisation, which has even achieved a symbolic and ethical role in international politics due to its unique universality and authority (Barnett, 1997), The UN forms the most effective normative structure for the international order, and its role in global governance and conflict resolution has increased with the expansion of multilateralism which characterised the period (Ruggie, 1992), and it is based on the Council as the only institution which can make binding decisions in the name of the international community (Caron, 1993).

The Council has been providing a collective global identity and a soft authority, giving a limited kind of norm based governance in the international system, and it retains significant influence in international politics, especially through mutual regulation (Voeten, 2005). Even non-permanent membership in the Council provides both real and symbolic power and authority, which is derived from the legitimacy of the institution, no matter the unequal position vis a vis the permanent states (Hurd, 2002). Ruggie warned that the system can allow for the permanent states to have a narrow multilateralism that excludes other states, incentivising them to perpetuate the structure (Ruggie, 1992). The two groups are then defined in opposition ot each other, and their struggle for influence and for legitimacy is part of the underlying structure of the Council and one of the longstanding obstacles to its efficient functioning.

As the permanent members never change, the agenda inevitably reflects their interests, often leaving others dissatisfied and excluded, and causing them to call for reform or to align themselves with permanent states as protectors of their interests. This has led the Council to extend its definition of what constitutes a threat to peace and

security to accept a much larger number of cases, expanding the power and influence of the permanent members (Hassler, 2015). This expansion is in their interest and it serves to increase their legitimacy and strengthen their role, which over a long period should lead them to connect their identity to the role and guard it despite inefficiency. In relation to this, Howard and Dayal propose that the Council's power to authorise force is done not only for the sake of a current goal such as peacekeeping, but for its own sake in order to preserve its authority, with the permanent members acting as an identity group.

Each authorisation of force thereby strengthens the collective legitimacy of the Council, which is in the interest of all permanent members (Howard and Dayal, 2018). The authority and identity gained by the status allows these states greater leverage in the Council, but also to act outside of the Council to achieve favourable outcomes in multilateral bargaining (Voeten, 2005). This identity gains the states benefits which they would seek to protect despite decreased Council functioning, and it incentivised them to attempt to expand the Council's role in international politics (Bosco, 2014). This means that the identity of a permanent state should be more important to these states than the role of conflict resolution, or any reform that would increase efficiency or legitimacy.

Criticism against the Council's structure mostly come from the General Assembly, and include a lack of transparency, accountability, and inconsistency in applying moral and legal principles, as well as the domination and abuse of power by the permanent states (Binder and Heupel, 2015). The resolutions it produces maintain the stable identities of the permanent members, yet there is disappointment with practical results which motivates the critique from the Assembly and leads to demands for its increased role to the Council's detriment (Carswell, 2013). This is consistent with the Council's main institutional function of preventing conflict, which necessitates action (Buchanan and Keohane 2004), which, as Voeten notices, allows for collective legitimization through the organisation, which receives direct power to influence the policies of states (Voeten, 2005).

As powers can be abused in the Council, criticism for abuse is mostly related to the substantial veto power which is used at critical moments, yet the permanent states also have procedural advantages which come out of experience, and can delay issues beyond the two year terms non-permanent states get. The permanent states often act as a group in order to preserve their status when their national interests are not affected (Langmore and Farrall, 2016). They have advantages over all other members as they are constantly engaged with all matters of international security, often failing to provide honest explanations for their major decisions like the use of veto, which is often abused in order to protect an ally. The use of privileges for national gain despite criticism undermines the Council's role in providing stability in the long term (Wouters and Ruys, 2005). These create a clear role and identity differentiation for the permanent states, which allows them to avoid accountability and maintain influence.

Being the final decision makers increases their prestige, privilege and relevance in relation to other states, giving them an added reason to avoid structural reform (Howard and Dayal, 2018). Voeten characterises the permanent members as a "concert of powers" (Voeten, 2005), which Bosco concurs with, adding that it continues to function as a diplomatic forum of powers rather than as an instrument of governance (Bosco, 2014). Cronin described a duality in the UN's role as an intergovernmental security-oriented organisation and its transnational role of promoting the common good (Cronin, 2002). Berdal considers that even with the inherent dysfunction of the Council that often leads states to take unilateral action, it retained its indispensable character, yet warns that this does not mean that it achieves good governance (Berdal, 2003) This adds to both the argument of the permanent members deriving group and individual identity from their privileges, and the Council's current structure being unsuitable for effective conflict resolution in line with its global governance role due to its power asymmetry.

Another issue is that the international power structures have changed significantly since the Council was formed, yet it is still expected to authorise legitimate collective action despite the power inequality between the members (Caron, 1993). Even so, the permanent members rejected all proposed reforms (Sarwar, 2011). Legitimacy is required for the functioning of the Council as its decisions have the power to compel, yet another purpose of legitimacy is for its actions to be obeyed voluntarily rather than challenged (Voeten, 2005). The enactment of Council powers relies on compliance and support from other states which is related to legitimacy, giving the permanent states power even though their superior status harms legitimacy (Hurd, 2002), meaning that the status and identity the permanent states derive from the Council at the same time undermines their position, especially when instrumentalised through enactment, as the perception of their status by non-permanent members affects their legitimacy.

These critiques generally concern the status and power of the permanent states, which despite arguments refuse reform, yet as they have the power to veto each other their resistance might not be only based on practical and power-related matters but also to their identity as leading states. When their national interests are not threatened the permanent states cooperate to perform their governance role in accordance with their role, with approval from the membership (Howard and Dayal, 2018). Among them, China has generally been sceptical and cautious towards authorising force (Medeiros and Fravel, 2003), as it sought to increase the legitimacy of the Council even if it leads to a lack of Council action (Wuthnow, 2010). However a lack of action often causes consternation and tension in the Council and Assembly and increases calls for reform (Carswell, 2013). This torpidity bolsters the calls for expansion, especially in the Assembly, and thus increases discontent among the membership (Afoaku and Ukaga, 2001), yet the various candidates for permanent status wish to deny the same status to their rivals, as otherwise the increase would have to be large, so that these states generally have to be satisfied with non-permanent membership (Blum, 2005).

The discontent has led to states calling for the Assembly to have a greater role in providing peace and security if the Council fails (Schrijver, 2007). The UN Secretariat itself is concerned that if the Council is not seen as legitimate or objective enough, states could circumvent it, but also that expansion would render it less effective (United Nations, 2004).Even so, attempts at reform regularly fail due to rejection from the permanent states which retain authority through their power (Weiss and Young, 2005). This would suggest that the resistance to reform is related to the self-identification of the permanent members as the guardians of international order which they seek to protect primarily, thus reform can be seen as an identity threat. The UN has the role of normative integration of states and the collective legitimization of its members (Barnett, 1997), and with the expansion of the Council's agenda the permanent states now have an even larger responsibility to the organisation as the legitimacy of the body impacts the authority of the institution as a whole (Cronin, 2002). This further sets them apart in status and identity from the other states. In practice, legitimacy is conferred by both practice and discourse, and while negative statements about the Council in the Assembly outnumber the positive ones, it retains its legitimacy due to its legal position and the power of its permanent states (Binder and Heupel, 2015).

The unequal status has led to regular calls for an increase of the role of the Assembly (Morris, 2000), especially in relation to the crisis of legitimacy and concomitant calls for reform due to changing geopolitical conditions (Sarwar, 2011). The legitimacy of the Council can be assessed by whether it addresses the most severe conflicts in the world, rather than simply serving the narrow national interests of the veto powers (Frederking and Patane, 2017), as the membership at large would expect. This would mean that the Council's failure to act in regard to major crises, especially when their interests are affected, would cause the greatest consternation and lead to identity-based challenges to legitimacy and roles. Criticism that undermines the legitimacy is largely directed at the veto power and the lack of expansion of permanent members, and it has led to calls for reform in order to improve the Council's global governance role and remove dysfunctionality (Koskenniemi and Ville, 2020) Such reform would have to be structural rather than just practical, with reform discussions being always related to legitimacy and effectiveness in governance, and critique directed at the permanent members (Winther, 2020).

The non-permanent members have influence on the Council through coalition-building and changing the agenda, using their regional networks and proposing resolutions. Their influence is contextual, however they help stabilise decision-making in a polarised Council and foster multilateralism (Pay and Postolski, 2022). While the non-permanent states cannot determine outcomes in the Council, their support is necessary to legitimize resolutions. This may provide an area for informal reform through practice (Gifkins, 2021). The non-permanent members join permanent ones in coalitions which are aimed at producing global governance in line with the coalition's policies.

Monteleone distinguishes a dominant transatlantic coalition which increasingly competes with a Russia-China axis, and which contributed to greater participation in global governance as states participate in Council debates more (Monteleone, 2015). Gifkins notes that informal practices and negotiations are essential to the conduct of the Council, and that through them the permanent states maintain domination beyond formal rules (Gifkins, 2021). Even with increased participation of non-permanent members, their influence is limited and they rely on the permanent members to support their initiatives, yet through coalitions their criticism is then directed towards certain permanent members for those actions which all permanent members can be accused of.

5 RESULTS

5.1 The case of Ukraine

In the early stages of the Ukraine crisis in 2014 we can observe an example of the Council being unable to perform its crisis resolution and security governance role, with the resolutions it produced being able to simply reaffirm the right of member states to their sovereignty and integrity, calling on all parties to pursue a peaceful resolution of their disputes and exercise restraint while refraining from unilateral action and inflammatory rhetoric. The resolution produced called for accepting international mediation efforts (Security Council, 2014a), yet this fell on deaf ears. As a referendum was held in Crimea, a draft resolution was prepared by western states that accused it of being against the territorial integrity of Ukraine, calling for international law to be respected (Security Council, 2014b). Russia was directly involved in the matter considered, and it blocked the resolution, while its ally China abstained, and this was framed by proponents of the resolution as being an action in clear violation of the charter for the sake of national interests. The Russian discourse provided a clear performance of its great-power identity, relying on its historical continuity and sovereign prerogative to interpret international law.

Russia framed the veto not as obstruction but protection of legitimate interests and of international law, anchoring it in its historical role. The US ambassador, who supported the resolution, relied on his country's identity as a guardian of international law and universal norms, framing Russia as deviant in that regard, also doing so by invoking history and the founding of the UN as a war-preventing organisation. Non-permanent members who supported the resolution engaged in an identity confrontation, positioning themselves as the better protectors of the Council's purpose and value, contrasting the use of the veto against their support for collective rule-based governance and conflict resolution. They complained that the veto closed the window to a diplomatic solution and took the problem out of the Council, preventing the Council from carrying out its responsibility, with some calling for a discussion on Council reform, especially regarding the restriction of the veto power. (Security Council, 2014c).

Pressure was continually mounted in the Council regarding the management of the crisis, while Russia continued to block substantive action and to refuse compromise. The following debates were an opportunity for the powers to protect and perform their respective identities rather than to collectively deliberate as a governance body. Ethical arguments were raised by the US as it framed itself as a responsible Council member and protector of the international order, with the UK and France following along the same line and stressing a moral superiority which legitimised their status in order to avoid the criticism Russia was exposed to. Russian discourse argued that political attacks based on narrow interests were instrumentalised in the Council, protecting its identity as a responsible great power in the face of non-permanent state moral accusations (Security Council, 2014d). Western states and many non-permanent members thus critiqued Russia as an irresponsible member of the Council, providing a challenge

Russian discourse reversed the accusation and rejected moral blame, framing Russia as a sovereign great power acting as a regional stabilizer defending its national interests. It was accused by non-permanent states for its perceived prioritisation of interest over the Council's fulfilling of its charter responsibilities, with condemnation that it ignored its special responsibility related to its permanent status. China maintained caution and urged all sides to remain calm and exercise restraint to avoid any actions that could lead to escalation. It maintained a discursive neutrality while aligning with Russia through actions, in order to maintain its status and identity and prevent any disputation of it even with Council effectiveness deteriorating. (Security Council, 2014e). As each power reasserted moral or legal superiority, identity-protection was prioritised, causing an atmosphere not conducive to the Council achieving its role and causing frustration.

The failure to provide a solution led to a deterioration in the situation in Ukraine and to actions being taken by the permanent states outside of the Council through the Minsk process. After the failure of the initial ceasefire the Council again fell into disarray as the western permanent states invoked moral and legal universality to reassert their collective identity as custodians of international order, while accusing Russia of undermining it. In return Russian discourse asserted its historical position as a great power protecting the international order, while non permanent members aligned with the west used the opportunity to further question the Council's role in light of the perceived blocking of Russia (Security Council, 2015a). Moral polarisation increased and the debates deteriorated into ethical attacks, with Russian discourse accusing its western critics of hysteria, with both sides framing themselves as the responsible and rational great powers working towards dialogue and peace. Non-permanent members demanded compliance with the Charter and accountability of the permanent states to their collective responsibility. (Security Council, 2015b).

After the Minsk 2 agreement was signed there was an uneasy convergence of interests in the Council, both sides framing themselves as responsible powers which create and guarantee peace, justifying their actions as constructive in the end and

expressing mistrust of the other. The non-permanent members expressed cautious optimism, their demands having been partly satisfied with the permanent states performing their expected roles, yet they expressed that was conditional on further success (Security Council, 2015c). As the acute crisis was turning into a chronic one, Council sessions became standardised reiterations of the identities of its members, with the same patterns of accusation and counter-accusation further deteriorating the confidence of the non-permanent states towards the permanent. The permanent states defended their status identity through discourse and action, asserting their moral superiority and action. Non-permanent states were frustrated by the inability for a final resolution of the conflict, criticising permanent members for their division performing role contestation through appeals to collective responsibility and normative alignment with the charter (Security Council, 2015d). Therefore continual obstruction caused a functional prevention of conflict resolution due to the Council's structural form and resulting identity-based disagreement.

The veto was taken as evidence by the western permanent states and their coalition of the prevention of the Council's carrying out of its responsibilities, leading them to use morally charged discourse and framing the Council's role as being also symbolic and related to ethics. Russian discourse was that of a besieged sovereign power responding to politicisation motivated by the strategic interests of its opponents, both sides performing a status and identity defence narrative. China maintained its neutral stabiliser identity, although its discourse leaned towards its ally, while it urged for mutual respect and non-interference rather than the performing of conflict resolution, presenting their passive neutrality as responsible great power conduct. Non-permanent members openly began to dispute the legitimacy of the Council in reference to the overuse of the veto power, holding the permanent members accountable for their power, with several states openly calling for reform and widening the issue from one crisis to the general functioning of the body (Security Council, 2015e).

With a failure of the Council to act the chronic crisis continued, with many breaches of the ceasefire, and an increase of instability in the region. The tension and instability was mirrored in the Council, where a decision remained impossible and the discourse become harsher and filled with more disappointment and mistrust. Four years after the Minsk agreements the debate was ongoing in the same way, with great powers performatively reaffirming their status. The permanent states acted according to their great power interests and prerogatives, one accusing the other of instrumentalising the crisis and presenting themselves as standing up for the stability of the international order. Russia continued to frame its prior use and defence of the veto as an expression of its sovereign great-power identity protecting its interests against western interference, while the western permanent states accused it of using it to protect its national interests to the detriment of international law, performing their collective identity as defenders of international law (Security Council, 2019a). Non permanent states accused the permanent

states of failing to act against a threat to peace, using moral discourse as a form of contestation of the legitimacy of permanence and aligning with a normative universalism based on the charter's goals (Security Council, 2019b; 2020). In this crisis it seemed that the Council remained symbolically authoritative while remaining functionally limited in regard to crisis resolution, as Russia instrumentalised the veto and the debate to defend its interests while framing obstruction as a legitimate expression of great-power responsibility. In doing so it defended its status through identity-performance in justificatory discourse, so that its discourse was contested by opposing states which accused it of obstruction as conflict resolution failed.

5.2 The case of Israel and Palestine

The end of 2014 was marked by another failure of the Council, as Russia and China led six other members of the Council in an attempt to regulate the long-standing Israel-Palestine conflict by calling for the respect for previous Council resolutions regarding Israel's withdrawal from the territories occupied in 1967, demanding that it take place within a year in order to force negotiation and lead to a two state solution.The action was blocked by the US, acting as protector of Israeli interests in the region, claiming that such a resolution would be tantamount to unilateral action, even though it was based on Council resolutions, calling instead for direct negotiations between conflicted sides. The US discourse defended the veto as an act of principled restraint, protecting peace negotiations by delaying them, framing itself as the responsible actor guaranteeing international peace. The veto was also meant to confirm the status of the US by exercising its structural privilege ostensibly for the sake of peace but in actuality for their own strategic interests. The US did not have the full support of its coalition as France and the UK expressed regret and called for a collective approach, while framing themselves as prudent and patient. Russian discourse criticised the US for supposedly monopolising the peace process through preventing a collective approach with the veto.

Non-permanent states criticised the US for putting national interests over those of the international community and preventing conflict resolution. Many expressed frustration with the Council and criticised it on moral grounds, especially those sympathetic to Palestine who framed it as a great disappointment and failure of the Council's role (Security Council, 2014f; 2014g). The US framed the attempt to force a solution as unilateral, demanding direct negotiations between the conflicted sides instead, acting at the same time according to their great power identity and prerogative, and framing themselves as a responsible great power, while obstructing conflict resolution for their national interests. It asserted its authority to decide how international mediation will proceed in spite of the majority view. (Security Council, 2015f; 2015g; 2015h, 2015i). The opposition of non-permanent members to the use of veto power or lack of implementation of previous resolutions leads many of them to criticise the gap between

between discourse and action and expressing frustration with the powers of the permanent states and the functioning of the Council.

As the crisis remained unresolved there was another attempted resolution vetoed by the US, and which called on member states not to establish diplomatic missions in Jerusalem, which was attempted in response to the unilateral decision of the US to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital against international law. The Council was unable to find a solution and was split along identity lines. The decision of the US was criticised as irresponsible, and several non-permanent members explicitly accused the Council of losing relevance due to such unilateral behaviour that undermined the charter's goals and the body's purpose, risking the Council's loss of relevance. As the US was the only vote against with the rest of the Council in favor, their discourse expressed a sovereign exceptionalism and identity defence through the veto, emphasizing that it was a special prerogative used to mark core interests and conducted to protect their sovereignty. This was a departure from their previous critiques of other states using the veto, and translated structural privilege into moralised sovereignty.

In this case it was Russia and China whose discourse defended multilateral legitimacy, and now that Russia's own interests were not directly affected its discourse called for the Council to act collectively, now performing the role of a responsible multilateral power. It also emphasised the need to respect the Council's own resolutions, highlighting the power of the permanent members with those resolutions having been accepted by them previously. Multiple non-permanent states from all over the world used discourse that included sharp normative resistance, challenging the Council's role on account of the veto power and the structure that allowed it, remaining within the institution's framework (Security Council, 2017a; 2017b; 2017c). In this case the veto was defended through moralised claims of responsible restraint and authority over the peace process, showing how the same structural privilege was protected through different identity narratives than in Ukraine depending on which permanent member's interests were implicated.

5.3 The case of Syria

Another example of Council ineffectiveness during this period is the failure to provide a solution for the crisis and conflict in Syria, which had been raging for years. After attempts at peace failed in early 2014, the Council attempted to exercise governance and mediate in the resolution of conflict. The permanent states were again divided, with Russia supporting the Syrian government and blaming western permanent states for supposed interventionism, protecting its ally from censure. The three western permanent states, and the non-permanent states which supported them, who were mostly western states, criticised Russia's actions as a serious challenge to the Council which displayed how a lack of unity by permanent states can cause obstruction and failure to act, condemning them for supposed political competition and irresponsibility. They

contrasted their responsible support for the charter against the permanent states who subjected the Council to their strategic interests, preventing conflict resolution and security governance (Security Council, 2014i). When a small respite came in the form of a weak and minimal resolution calling for ceasefire, brokered by Russia and the US outside of the Council, both sides framed themselves as responsible states protecting international law and stressed their own importance to the international order and maintenance of peace. Other states remained sceptical and non-permanent states deplored governance being taken out of the paralysed Council, for which they blamed the permanent states (Security Council, 2016a).

As Russia entered the conflict directly in order to support its ally it became even more obstructive in the Council, and its discourse leaned on its great power prerogative and attempted to delegitimise western attempts and moralising discourse as undermining a sovereign country. All attempts at ceasefire collapsed and the two sides blamed each other in a symbolic discussion in which the powers acted from an identity-based position and expressed their views of the international order from their privileged positions, with Russia and China prioritising state sovereignty and the western states supporting Council governance in this case. China raised the argument that western states previously conducted interventionism according to their own national interests but were now calling for veto restraint when the interests of another were at stake, accusing them of double standards behind moralising language. The non-permanent states displayed dissatisfaction with any side using the veto rather than governance being performed. Attempts at regulation of the conflict were framed by Russia as provocation and that western states were politicising the issue, while non-permanent states expressed frustration at the Council's division and questioned its credibility as even minimal resolutions had become impossible and it failed again to fulfil its role (Security Council, 2016b; 2016c)

As pressure mounted Russia continued to use its position and privileges to prevent any censure of its ally, engaging in harsh discursive conflict with the US. Non-permanent members criticised the disunity and the damage such a crisis caused to the image and role of the Council, demanding action and governance and lamented the politicising of humanitarian issues. Multiple members argued the Council was failing in its responsibilities and losing credibility due to great power rivalry in it. Russia accused western states of politically motivated accusations and political propaganda, as well as of using a disrespectful language of ultimatums that undermined the role of the Council. The US harshly criticised the use of the veto, together with its western allies in the Council, while China was against confrontation and called for a unity of the Council rather than action (Security Council, 2017d; 2017e; 2017f). The continued lack of resolution and regulation led to an intensification of both the conflict in Syria and the conflict in the Council, exacerbating polarisation.

The US fully accused Russia of being complicit in the exacerbation of the crisis rather than regulation and demanded accountability, framing itself as defending international norms. Russia counterattacked and presented itself as a responsible member of the international community which the US was attempting to mislead it, arguing that it was standing up for impartiality and sovereignty in line with its role. Each side accused the other of acting unilaterally and hiding political agendas behind their discourse, while the Russian use of veto was deplored by western states as impunity that undermined the Council. The non-permanent states complained that the great powers ignored them when creating drafts and were breaking the Council apart from their power positions, increasing mistrust towards the other members and using it for political competition. The western powers took action outside of the Council, Russia being already engaged, with the two sides arguing that the other was violating the charter. The non-permanent states condemned the failure of consensus and argued that the credibility of the Council is gravely damaged (Security Council, 2018a; 2018b)

Non-permanent states continued to produce drafts, with European states taking the lead, but Russian discourse considered them as having unacceptable political language and being unrealistic, using their position to determine what is acceptable, while promoting their own draft instead. Russia's veto was accused as motivated by political and strategic reasons, and the non-permanent states argued it was causing greater disunity and failure of the Council's responsibility (Security Council, 2019c). The different sides continued producing competing draft resolutions and couldn't even agree on how to deliver humanitarian aid, leading all sides to warn of the failure of the Council and complain about its sidelining. The non-permanent members were especially critical of the failure of the Council and the chronic state of the crisis, some saying the Council was not up to the task due to the political manipulations of the great powers who pursued their own interests instead of managing global peace and security. China aligned with Russia and vetoed alongside it in order to support the concept of sovereignty and to protest the perceived western politicisation of the topic (Security Council, 2019d; 2020b). The dynamics manifested in these discussions demonstrate that that conflict resolution was not only blocked by competing national interests but by identity-defensive role performances enabled by the structural inequalities between the members.

6 Discussion and conclusion

The empirical analysis examined how identities affect interests and behaviour and how this manifests in the Security Council in relation to crisis resolution. Its results show that the Council's discussions of the selected crises remained symbolically authoritative while remaining functionally limited, with permanence being performed discursively by the great powers and inequality affecting identity directly. The permanent members' behaviour manifested identity-defensive performance rather than producing conflict resolution as a part of the Council's global security governance and conflict

resolution role. All sides presented their positions as moral, especially the great powers, with the US and its western allies expressing their identity of an internationalist benign power, Russia their identity of a power protecting the norm of sovereignty, and China their identity of a responsible and neutral power. The permanent states seem to have internalised their identities as great powers, deriving that identity from the structure of the Council and their role in it, so that they acted in accordance with their great power privilege rather than effective conflict resolution, both through discourse and through action. They implicitly acted from a superior and privileged position and expressed both symbolic and actual power.

The capacity of the Council to resolve crises can be understood only by examining how these identities were performed in debates. The behaviour of the permanent members aligned with the theoretical expectation that identity is reproduced through interaction, as they repeatedly invoked their roles, responsibilities, and historical narratives, which reaffirmed permanence as a source of status and authority. The debates also show that the obstruction was not only motivated by interests but by identity defence, as their behaviour expressed identity-defence and was symbolically justified through their identity positions. As expected, they resisted all changes that threaten their self-conception and status, and they framed their positions in moral terms while stressing their high position in the global order. Repeated failures produced legitimacy erosion, and as dominant states undermine the body, they undermine the structure that legitimises them. Calls for reform, criticism of the veto, and references to responsibility can be read as expressions of this identity contestation. It is evident that in all three cases, while powers protected their material interests, they did so while taking extra care to frame their positions in a way that protected their identity as righteous great powers taking responsibility for the resolution of the very conflicts their behaviour helped prolong

The identities were instrumentalised and used to justify obstruction, but the obstruction itself provided a way for identity to be confirmed, as obstruction was used even when material interests were not harmed because resolutions and discussions were concerned with symbolic or moral matters. This created a context in which permanence produces identity, identity legitimises privilege, privilege encourages behaviour that undermines legitimacy, and legitimacy loss in turn solidifies identity-defensive behaviour. Therein might lie the reasons for the Council's chronic failures to exercise its role, as the institutional inequality and the importance of the unequal positions for identity reflect the expectation that institutional inequality produces dysfunctional behaviour. This implies that the Council is not simply paralysed by material interests but by identity structures that the institution itself reproduces, which is something other theoretical approaches overlook. In all cases, permanent members reverted to identity-defensive behaviour when proposed actions challenged their status or role, showing that the identity logic operated consistently across different types of conflicts despite variation in context.

These findings also indicate that Council inaction is not merely the product of strategic rivalry, but is also the consequence of identities shaped and defended through permanence, so that identity functions as an obstacle to conflict resolution which emanates from the Council's structure. The identity-producing effects of permanent status show that institutional hierarchy does not simply reflect power but creates behavioural patterns that systematically constrain conflict resolution, and that the Council's structure actively shapes how major states define their interests and roles during crises. The Council remains indispensable as a symbol and structure of international authority, yet its ageing structure enables behaviours that undermine the legitimacy on which that authority rests, and it fails to reflect the geopolitical changes that have occurred since it was founded. The implication is that the more great powers rely on their permanent status to defend their identities, the more they risk weakening the institution that confers that identity in the first place, which suggests that meaningful improvement in the Council's conflict-resolution capacity would require either moderation of great-power behaviour or reform that limits the protection of great power identities to the detriment of the Council's role. Resolving this dysfunction requires recognising the identity dimension of power, not only institutional design flaws. Without identity transformation structural reform is unlikely to succeed, since legitimacy and relevance would continue to be placed at risk, with commensurate challenges to great power identities. Future research could examine how the intensity of a crisis affects how strongly identities are performed, and how non-permanent members navigate the identity-based hierarchy created by permanent status, including whether they adapt to it or resist it.

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