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About the Author

Leila Chkhetiani is a Georgian graduate of the College of Europe, where she completed an advanced Master's degree in EU International Relations and Diplomacy Studies as recipient of a European Neighbourhood Policy scholarship. Her academic interests focus on EU foreign policy, sanctions, populism, and democratic resilience. Leila Chkhetiani has professional experience in policy research. She has worked with several organizations, including Zinc Network, Transparency International, the Media Development Foundation and ENEMO, focusing on the Eastern Partnership region and Russia, civic space, elections, and democratic resilience. This paper is based on her Master's thesis at the College of Europe.

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Abstract

In the face of geopolitical turmoil, sanctions are the primary instrument of the European Union (EU) for exerting influence externally. Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the EU has adopted more than 20 comprehensive packages of restrictive measures against Russia. This process has often been obstructed by populist governments such as Hungary and, more recently, Slovakia. Academic debate in recent years has increasingly recognized that the growing influence of populism extends beyond domestic politics and affects foreign policy as well. This paper asks to what extent, how, and under which conditions populist governments have affected the adoption of EU sanctions against Russia since February 2022. Through a case study, semi-structured interviews with EU diplomats, and a content analysis of populists' public discourse, the paper traces the sanctions-adoption process.

The paper argues that populist member-state governments are more likely to contest consensus-building during sanctions negotiations by linking the issue to domestic political gains through the 'hostage-taking' of negotiations. However, despite such contestation, the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) has remained resilient by exerting political pressure, employing negotiation strategies, granting targeted exemptions, and relying on procedural norms. This resulted in the unanimous adoption of the sanctions packages despite populist contestation. Nonetheless, the paper notes that the impact of populism extends beyond behavior in the Council, as populist leaders politicize and antagonize sanctions in public discourse to secure domestic political gains. Despite its indirect nature, such politicization of the CFSP weakens the EU's external coherence and credibility.

Lastly, the paper shows that responses to sanctions have differed among four populist governments: Hungary, Slovakia, Poland, and Italy. To identify the conditions that encourage particular policy choices among populists, the paper reinterprets the academic literature and presents a framework for measuring the 'low risk' and 'high gain' associated with sanctions contestation.

Introduction: Populism, Sanctions, and the CFSP

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has shattered the security of the European continent and the liberal international order. The European Union (EU), as an economic and normative power, has relatively limited options for resisting Russian military aggression. Restrictive measures are one such option. The salience of the war, public support, and the 'geopolitical Commission' have pushed EU member states to accept a broad range of measures aimed at curbing Russia's war effort. Over the past four years, the EU has adopted 20 packages¹ of restrictive measures targeting sectors previously closely tied to the Russian economy, such as oil.

Despite the Union's unity, media reports have indicated that some member states that have been governed by populists, such as Hungary and Slovakia, either resisted sanctions or linked the adoption process to partisan domestic goals, including REPowerEU and the reactivation of the Druzhba pipeline. Considering that restrictive measures are a major instrument of the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), it is important to examine whether populism, which often focuses on domestic issues, affects foreign policy and the adoption of sanctions and, if so, how, and under what conditions. Over the past decade, the growing influence of populist parties in government has generated an academic debate over whether populism can be treated as a variable in foreign policymaking, given that populists have historically focused on domestic issues while foreign affairs have been less salient.

In this paper, I seek to answer the following research question: To what extent, how, and under which conditions have populist governments affected the adoption of sanctions against Russia since February 2022? The research serves both academic and policy-related interests. On the one hand, it contributes to the emerging literature on populism and foreign policy. On the other hand, it examines whether populists can affect one of the main instruments of the CFSP: sanctions.

I argue that populists in power are more likely to contest the sanctions-adoption process by linking it to domestic political goals and increasing its politicization. However, the EU's CFSP limits the populists' impact by pressuring them to compromise

¹ This paper has an analytical cut-off date of May 2026. References to the number of sanctions packages therefore reflect the situation at that date, notwithstanding subsequent developments prior to publication. For further details, see: Leila Chkhetiani, "Domestication and Contestation of Sanctions : How Does Populism Affect the CFSP?", Master's thesis (Bruges: College of Europe, 2026).

through established procedural norms and negotiation strategies. I also contend that populists do not necessarily make the same policy choices and that certain conditions, such as risk perception, can lead to divergent responses. The paper is divided into several parts. Firstly, I present the analytical framework, followed by an examination of contestation during sanctions adoption at both the process and outcome levels. I then analyse the politicization of sanctions in public discourse. Finally, I discuss why certain populist actors behave differently and what factors explain this divergence.

Framework of Analysis

Sanctions are among the EU's most tangible and frequently used foreign-policy instruments, making them a useful test case for theories on how populists shape foreign policy. By April 2026, the EU had adopted 20 broad sanctions packages against Russia. The continuity of the process, the unanimity requirement, and the issue's political salience create favorable conditions for populist influence over the CFSP.

To answer the research question, firstly, it is essential to define who the populists are. While there are several definitions of populism², this paper will employ Cas Mudde's definition of populism, which is "an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people".³ The analysis draws on the PopuList dataset,⁴ which identifies and classifies populist parties. However, the extent of populist influence depends on their position in government. I therefore distinguish three levels of participation: when the prime minister is from a populist party (prime-ministerial control); when a populist party participates in government alongside other coalition partners but does not control premiership (a cabinet participation); and when a populist party holds a junior position within a coalition government (junior coalition participation).

Therefore, between February 2022 and April 2026, populist parties exercised prime-ministerial control in Poland under Law and Justice until December 2023, Slovakia under Smer from October 2023, the Czech Republic under ANO from December 2025,

² For an overview, see Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, "Populism", in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Ideologies*, eds. Michael Freeden and Marc Stears (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 493–512.

³ Cas Mudde, "The Populist Zeitgeist", *Government and Opposition* 39, no. 4 (2004), 541–563.

⁴ The PopuList, Version 4.0 (June 2026), accessed 31 July 2026, <https://populist.github.io/Visualizations/table/table.pdf>.

Hungary under Fidesz until April 2026, and Italy under Brothers of Italy from October 2022. Populist parties participated at the cabinet level in Finland through the Finns Party from June 2023, the Netherlands through the PVV from July 2024 to June 2025, and Italy through the Five Star Movement and Lega until October 2022. Junior coalition participation occurred in Bulgaria through ITN until June 2022 and again from January 2025, Spain through Podemos until November 2023, Slovenia through Levica from 2022, and Croatia through the Homeland Movement from May 2024.

The adoption of sanctions constitutes an observable CFSP outcome, that is, whether a proposed package or individual measure appears in the EU's final official act. However, the final decision alone does not reveal how agreement was reached or how far the original proposal was modified. I therefore assess both the outcome and the adoption process. The possible outcomes include adoption or renewal without reported changes, changes in wording, technical clarifications, exemptions or carve-outs, transition periods, delays, the removal or weakening of measures, concessions linked to unrelated issues, adoption after political pressure, and temporary blockage that does not prevent final agreement. The Commission rarely publishes its initial sanctions proposals, making direct comparison with the final acts difficult. I therefore rely on media reports and six semi-structured interviews with EU diplomats to identify amendments and negotiation outcomes.

Yet, the adoption of sanctions alone neither captures the effects that opposition has on the CFSP nor explains how dissenting governments were persuaded to compromise. It is therefore necessary to examine the process of contesting sanctions. To do so, this study focuses on the contestation of the consensus-building norm at the core of the CFSP. To understand how political actors challenge and reinterpret established norms, it is necessary to clarify what is meant by norm contestation. Wiener defines norm contestation as an "interactive social practice" through which actors express disapproval of particular norms.⁵ Because objections are common in foreign-policy negotiations, the analysis must distinguish ordinary bargaining from norm contestation. Following Juncos and Pomorska,⁶ I identify three indicators of norm contestation: First, diplomats may challenge consensus without an issue-specific justification, including by linking agreement to unrelated matters. Second, the same

⁵ Ana E. Juncos and Karolina Pomorska, "Contesting Procedural Norms: The Impact of Politicisation on European Foreign Policy Cooperation", *European Security* 30, no. 3 (2021), 367-384.

⁶ *Ibid.*

representatives may repeatedly become isolated within the group. Third, national representatives may depart from positions previously agreed at the committee level.⁷ The combined presence of these indicators suggests that consensus-building norms have been contested.

To assess whether opposition is substantively justified, I distinguish between issue-specific and norm-inconsistent arguments. Issue-specific justifications include energy dependence, economic harm, legal or technical concerns, limited implementation capacity, and security exceptions. Norm-inconsistent justifications include linking sanctions to unrelated matters, such as rule-of-law disputes or domestic political issues and relying on Russia-aligned policy justification, meaning reasoning that mirrors Russian narratives and supports Russian foreign-policy objectives. In this regard, it is relevant to bring up the concept of domestication. According to Juncos and Pomorska, domestication happens when foreign-policy objectives are subordinated to domestic or party-political goals and it can thereby become an instrument through which political parties claim to defend popular sovereignty against international elites, mobilize domestic audiences, and legitimize their actions.⁸

To compare the behavior of populist and non-populist governments, I classify state responses according to their intensity. Governments may express concern by raising questions, reservations, or cost-related objections; demand concessions such as exemptions, carve-outs, transition periods, or delisting; delay adoption or renewal without explicitly threatening a veto; signal a possible veto; temporarily block or veto agreement; or eventually compromise after receiving concessions, wording changes, side payments, or facing political pressure. As mentioned before, there is no comprehensive dataset that records voting behavior, veto threats, or informal opposition during sanctions negotiations, which limits the available data and analysis.

Outside of the Council, populists are prone to politicization. Following Destradi et al., politicization is the process of making a previously unpoliticized topic a matter of public discussion, while populist politicization is framing foreign policy in anti-elitist and people-centered terms.⁹ For observing the politicization of sanctions among the

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Ana E. Juncos and Karolina Pomorska, "Populists in the Shadow of Unanimity: Contestation of EU Foreign and Security Policy", *Politics and Governance* 12 (2024), article 8099, <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.8099>.

⁹ Sandra Destradi, Johannes Plagemann and Hakkı Taş, "Populism and the Politicisation of Foreign Policy", *British Journal of Politics & International Relations* 24, no. 3 (2022), 475-492.

populists, I conducted a content analysis of public statements by the populist leaders who most frequently contested sanctions adoption within the Council. Using MAXQDA, I coded 245 speeches and social-media posts by prime ministers and foreign ministers of populist governments during the time period studied. The coding scheme included three categories. Anti-elite framing covered references to the Brussels elite, technocrats or bureaucrats, and leaders portrayed as ignoring citizens. People-centered framing included references to 'our citizens', Hungarians, ordinary people, families, workers, households, and businesses. Crisis framing captured statements presenting the EU as being in crisis. The analysis examines how frequently and in what contexts populist leaders used these frames to politicize sanctions. To avoid overgeneralization, frequencies are calculated per 1,000 words within a purposive, relevance-based corpus. These methodological choices provide the basis for assessing how populist actors influenced both the process and outcomes of sanctions adoption.

Populist Impact on the Adoption of Sanctions

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine not only transformed the international world order but also triggered changes in the sanctions-adoption process. Before 2022, the EU had limited experience with restrictive measures. The external shock of the invasion pushed the EU to adopt sanctions of unprecedented magnitude, including the areas previously regarded as sensitive, such as energy and finance.

EU sanctions can be divided into two categories: individual and sectoral. Individual sanctions target persons and entities that support Russia's war effort through their economic or political activities. Those listed include senior political figures, such as Vladimir Putin and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, as well as Russian oligarchs, businesspeople, companies, and other entities.¹⁰ These measures primarily involve asset freezes within the EU and travel bans preventing listed individuals from entering EU territory. Over the past several years, the EU has placed more than 2,000 individuals and entities on its sanctions lists.¹¹

¹⁰ Interview with EU Member State Diplomat 1, Brussels, 14 April 2026.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

The second category consists of sectoral sanctions, which include trade restrictions and prohibitions on the provision of certain services to Russia. These measures cover import bans, export restrictions, financial measures, and service prohibitions. Sectoral sanctions have fueled the greatest political contestation because of their direct effects on European economies. Among the most sensitive issues have been the gradual decoupling from Russian energy products, including coal and oil (LNG sector moderately); restrictions on maritime services and Russian-flagged vessels; bans on luxury-goods exports to Russia; the exclusion of Russian banks from SWIFT; and limits on imports of critical materials, such as synthetic rubber.¹² Because these foreign-policy measures directly affect national economies, the EU has frequently accommodated member states' concerns through exemptions, carve-outs, transition periods, and quotas relating to energy, services, and industrial materials.

Opposition to Sanctions and CFSP Outcomes

Table 1 provides an overview of reported opposition to sanctions, the governments' justifications, and the outcomes.

Table 1: Debated sanctions

Date	Sanction	Opponent	Behavior	Justification	Outcome
03/22	Excluding Russian banks from SWIFT	DE, IT, HU, CY ¹³	Concerned	Economic harm	Measure removed/ watered down (Gazprombank was not removed)
03/22	Banning the export of luxury goods to Russia	IT ¹⁴	Delayed	Economic harm	Package delayed ¹⁵

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Jorge Liboreiro and Shona Murray, "Ukraine War: What Is SWIFT and Why Is Expelling Russia a 'Last Resort'?", *Euronews*, 25 February 2022, accessed 4 May 2026, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2022/02/25/eu-to-consider-russia-s-expulsion-from-swift-in-third-sanctions-package>.

¹⁴ *Euronews*, "Ukraine Invasion: EU Leaders Agree 'Massive and Severe' Sanctions on Russia", *Euronews*, 24 February 2022, accessed 4 May 2026, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2022/02/24/as-russia-s-invasion-of-ukraine-continues-eu-leaders-gather-in-brussels-to-slap-drastic-sa>.

¹⁵ European Commission, "EU Agrees Fourth Package of Restrictive Measures against Russia", IP/22/1761, Brussels, 14 March 2022, accessed 4 May 2026, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_22_1761.

04/22	Banning Russian coal	BG, DE ¹⁶	Demanded concessions (longer transition period)	Energy dependence	Measure removed/ watered down (longer transition period) ¹⁷
04/22	Banning Russian-flagged vessels	CY ¹⁸	Concerned	Economic harm	No reported change
06/22	Banning Russian crude and refined oil	DE, BG, AT, CZ, SK, IT, GR, CY, BE, NL, MT, HU	SK, CZ, BG demanded concessions (exemptions); ¹⁹ HU threatened veto; ²⁰ DE, ²¹ GR, MT, CY, BE, NL concerned; ²² IT, GR, AT demanded concessions (transition period) ²³	Energy dependence; Economic harm	Package delayed (it took one month to adopt); ²⁴ Exemption/carve-out (granted to HU, SK, CZ, BG)
06/22	Listing Patriarch Kiril	HU	Threatened veto (threatened to block the whole package without removing the Patriarch) ²⁵	Russia-aligned reasoning	Measure removed/ watered down (person removed)
02/23	Banning Russian synthetic rubber imports	DE, IT	Concerned ²⁶	Economic harm	Exemption/carve-out (quotas granted) ²⁷

¹⁶ Jorge Liboreiro and Pedro Sacadura, "Coal, Trucks, Vodka and Putin's Daughters: Here's What's in the Latest Round of EU Sanctions", *Euronews*, 8 April 2022, accessed 4 May 2026, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2022/04/08/coal-trucks-vodka-and-putin-s-daughters-here-s-what-s-in-the-latest-round-of-eu-sanctions>.

¹⁷ Maeve Campbell with Reuters, "Russian Coal Will Still Be Heading to Europe until at Least August, Says EU", *Euronews*, 8 April 2022, accessed 4 May 2026, <https://www.euronews.com/2022/04/08/russian-coal-will-still-be-heading-to-europe-until-at-least-august-says-eu>.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Jorge Liboreiro, Efi Koutsokosta and Shona Murray, "EU Leaders Endorse Ban on Russian Oil, Exempting Pipeline Imports", *Euronews*, 30 May 2022, accessed 4 May 2026, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2022/05/30/eu-leaders-meet-in-brussels-in-the-midst-of-impasse-on-russian-oil-ban>.

²⁰ Alice Tidey, "Ukraine War: Sanctions on Russian Oil and Gas a 'Red Line' for Hungary, Says Orban", *Euronews*, 6 April 2022, accessed 4 May 2026, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2022/04/06/watch-live-hungary-s-viktor-orban-speaks-to-the-press-after-election-victory>.

²¹ Jorge Liboreiro, Efi Koutsokosta and Shona Murray, "Brussels Proposes to Stop Russian Oil Imports by the End of the Year", *Euronews*, 4 May 2022, accessed 4 May 2026, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2022/05/04/brussels-proposes-to-stop-russian-oil-imports-by-the-end-of-the-year>.

²² Liboreiro et al. *Brussels Proposes to Stop Russian Oil Imports by the End of the Year*, op.cit.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Jorge Liboreiro, Efi Koutsokosta and Shona Murray, "EU Leaders Endorse Ban on Russian Oil, Exempting Pipeline Imports", *Euronews*, 30 May 2022, accessed 4 May 2026, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2022/05/30/eu-leaders-meet-in-brussels-in-the-midst-of-impasse-on-russian-oil-ban>.

²⁵ Interview with EEAS Official, Brussels, 20 March 2026.

²⁶ Jorge Liboreiro and Efi Koutsokosta, "EU Approves Fresh Round of Sanctions on Russia, Almost Missing Self-Imposed Deadline of 24 February", *Euronews*, 24 February 2023, accessed 4 May 2026, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2023/02/24/eu-approves-fresh-round-of-sanctions-on-russia-almost-missing-self-imposed-deadline-of-24->.

²⁷ Weibold, "EU Sanctions on Russian Synthetic Rubber and Carbon Black Imports", 6 March 2023, accessed 4 May 2026, <https://weibold.com/eu-sanctions-on-russian-synthetic-rubber-and-carbon-black-imports>.

02/23	Sanctioning family members of blacklisted Russian oligarchs	HU	Threatened veto ²⁸	Russia-aligned reasoning	Measure removed/ watered down (names were not included in the list) ²⁹
06/23	Whole 11th package	HU, GR	Blocked/vetoed; ³⁰ Compromised after concessions ³¹	Linking to unrelated issues (designation of HU and GR companies in the Ukrainian sanctions list of "war sponsors") ³²	Package delayed (took more than a month to adopt); ³³ Issue-linkage/ unrelated concession
12/23	Banning Russian diamonds	BE	Blocked/vetoed; ³⁴ Compromised after concessions (after G7 coordinated ban) ³⁵	Economic harm	Package delayed (it was proposed in 2022); ³⁶ Adoption after political pressure ³⁷
12/23	Whole 12th package	AT	Blocked/vetoed; ³⁸ Compromised after concessions ³⁹	Linking to unrelated issues (designation of AT bank in the Ukrainian sanctions list of "war sponsor") ⁴⁰	Issue-linkage/ unrelated concession (after Ukraine removed the bank) ⁴¹
02/24	Sanctioning individuals and companies	HU	Delayed ⁴²	Legal/technical concern (asked for a time to check companies and individuals ⁴³)	No reported change

²⁸ Liboreiro, Koutsokosta, *EU Approves Fresh Round of Sanctions on Russia, Almost Missing Self-Imposed Deadline of 24 February*, *op.cit.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Jorge Liboreiro and Efi Koutsokosta, "EU Agrees New Sanctions against Russia, Targeting Chinese Companies Suspected of Circumvention", *Euronews*, 21 June 2023, accessed 4 May 2026, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2023/06/21/eu-agrees-new-sanctions-against-russia-targeting-companies-suspected-of-circumvention>.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Jorge Liboreiro, "Ukraine Suspends Listing of Five Greek Companies as 'War Sponsors' but Maintains Hungary's OTP Bank", *Euronews*, 21 June 2023, accessed 4 May 2026, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2023/06/21/ukraine-suspends-listing-of-five-greek-companies-as-war-sponsors-but-maintains-hungarys-ot>.

³³ Liboreiro, Koutsokosta, *EU Agrees New Sanctions against Russia, Targeting Chinese Companies Suspected of Circumvention*, *op.cit.*

³⁴ Barbara Moens, "Belgium braces for Zelenskyy's fury over Russian diamonds", *Politico*, 29 March 2024, accessed 4 May 2026, <https://www.politico.eu/article/diamond-trade-puts-belgium-in-antwerp-tough-spot-in-front-of-ukraine-zelenskyy>

³⁵ Jorge Liboreiro, "EU Agrees New Sanctions on Russia, with an Import Ban on Diamonds", *Euronews*, 18 December 2023, accessed 4 May 2026, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2023/12/18/eu-agrees-new-sanctions-on-russia-with-an-import-ban-on-diamonds>.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Reuters, "Austria Backs EU Russia Sanctions after Ukraine Removes Raiffeisen from Blacklist", *Reuters*, 16 December 2023, accessed 4 May 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/austria-backs-eu-russia-sanctions-after-ukraine-removes-raiffeisen-blacklist-2023-12-16>.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Daria Shekina, "EU Ambassadors Fail to Approve 13th Sanctions Package against Russia, Journalist Says", *RBC-Ukraine*, 14 February 2024, accessed 4 May 2026, <https://newsukraine.rbc.ua/news/eu-ambassadors-fail-to-approve-13th-sanctions-1707932062.html>.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

06/24	Banning LNG-related services	HU, DE	HU threatened veto; ⁴⁴ DE delayed ⁴⁵	Energy dependence; Legal/technical concern	Package delayed (they missed a self-imposed deadline); ⁴⁶ Technical clarification ⁴⁷
07/25	Whole 18th package	HU, SK	Blocked/vetoed; ⁴⁸ Compromised after concessions	Linking to unrelated issues (connected to the REPowerEU) ⁴⁹	Issue-linkage/unrelated concession (political pressure and involvement of the Commission) ⁵⁰
10/25	Whole 19th package	SK, AT, HU	HU concerned; ⁵¹ SK, AT blocked/vetoed; ⁵² Compromised after concessions	Linking to unrelated issues (SK demanded from the Commission to address energy prices and automotive industry crisis; ⁵³ AT asked to unfreeze the shares of a blacklisted Russian company, Rasperia Trading, to compensate one of its largest banks, Raiffeisen Bank International, for a €2.1 billion legal defeat in a Moscow court ⁵⁴	Adoption after political pressure ⁵⁵
10/25	Amended derogation from import ban for items needed for Budapest metro maintenance ⁵⁶	HU	Demanded concessions ⁵⁷	Implementation capacity	Exemption/carve-out (exemption was granted) ⁵⁸

⁴⁴ Jorge Liboreiro, "EU Agrees New Sanctions on Russia, Targeting LNG for the First Time", *Euronews*, 20 June 2024, accessed 4 May 2026, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/06/20/eu-agrees-new-sanctions-on-russia-targeting-lng-for-the-first-time>.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Sandor Zsiros, "Hungary and Slovakia Set to Block EU's Fresh Russia Sanction Package", *Euronews*, 23 June 2025, accessed 4 May 2026, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/06/23/hungary-and-slovakia-set-to-block-eus-fresh-russia-sanction-package>.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Jorge Liboreiro, "EU Imposes New Sanctions on Russia's Oil and Banks after Robert Fico Lifts His Veto", *Euronews*, 18 July 2025, accessed 4 May 2026, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/07/18/eu-agrees-new-sanctions-on-russias-oil-and-banks-after-robert-fico-lifts-his-veto>.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Jorge Liboreiro, "Slovakia's Fico Vetoes EU Sanctions against Russia Again and Asks for New Concessions", *Euronews*, 15 October 2025, accessed 4 May 2026, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/10/15/robert-fico-vetoes-again-eu-sanctions-against-russia-asks-for-new-concessions>.

⁵⁶ Interview with EU Member State Diplomat 1, Brussels, 14 April 2026.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

10/25	New derogation from the import ban on items necessary to disinfect drinking water ⁵⁹	AT	Demanded concessions ⁶⁰	Implementation capacity	Exemption/carve-out (exemption was granted) ⁶¹
04/26	Ban on maritime services	GR, MT, CY ⁶²	Concerned ⁶³	Economic harm	Adoption after political pressure (waiting for G7 coordination) ⁶⁴
04/26	Whole 20th package	SK, HU	Blocked/vetoed; ⁶⁵ Compromised after concessions	Linking to unrelated issues (demand from Ukraine to repair Druzhba pipeline) ⁶⁶	Package delayed (delayed by ca. 2 months beyond the anniversary target); ⁶⁷ Issue-linkage/unrelated concession (pipeline was repaired) ⁶⁸
01/25	Renewal of the previous 15 packages	HU	Threatened veto ⁶⁹	Linking to unrelated issues (energy concerns)	Issue-linkage/unrelated concession (after getting reassurance from the Commission) ⁷⁰
03/25	Delisting Russian oligarch Mikhail Fridman	LU, HU	Demanded concessions; ⁷¹ Compromised after concessions	LU: Legal/technical concern (oligarch sued the state); ⁷² HU: Russia-aligned reasoning	No reported change

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Jorge Liboreiro, "EU Countries Still at Odds over New Russia Sanctions as Deadline Nears", *Euronews*, 20 February 2026, accessed 4 May 2026, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2026/02/20/eu-countries-still-at-odds-over-new-russia-sanctions-as-deadline-nears>.

⁶⁴ Jorge Liboreiro and Euronews, "EU Agrees Fresh Sanctions on Russia but Leaves Maritime Services Ban on Hold", *Euronews*, 23 April 2026, accessed 4 May 2026, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2026/04/23/eu-agrees-fresh-sanctions-on-russia-but-leaves-maritime-services-ban-on-hold>.

⁶⁵ Gabor Kiss and Beatrix Asboth, "Hungary Blocks Adoption of EU Sanctions Package until Transit Oil Supplies Resume", *Euronews*, 22 February 2026, accessed 4 May 2026, <https://www.euronews.com/2026/02/22/hungary-blocks-adoption-of-eu-sanctions-package-until-ukrainian-oil-supplies-resume>.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ European Commission, Directorate-General for Financial Stability, Financial Services and Capital Markets Union, "EU Adopts 20th Package of Sanctions against Russia", 23 April 2026, accessed 4 May 2026, https://finance.ec.europa.eu/news/eu-adopts-20th-package-sanctions-against-russia-2026-04-23_en.

⁶⁸ Jennifer Rankin, "EU Formally Approves €90bn Ukraine Loan and 20th Sanctions Package against Russia", *The Guardian*, 23 April 2026, accessed 4 May 2026, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/apr/23/eu-approves-ukraine-loan-sanctions-russia>.

⁶⁹ Jorge Liboreiro, "Hungary Backs Down from Veto Threat and Allows Renewal of EU Sanctions on Russia", *Euronews*, 27 January 2025, accessed 4 May 2026, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/01/27/hungary-backs-down-from-veto-threat-and-allows-renewal-of-eu-sanctions-on-russia>.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ Interview with EU Member State Diplomat 1, *op.cit.*; and Jorge Liboreiro, "EU in Race against Time to Make Hungary Renew Sanctions on Russia before Deadline", *Euronews*, 13 March 2025, accessed 4 May 2026, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/03/13/eu-in-race-against-time-to-make-hungary-renew-sanctions-on-russia-before-deadline>.

⁷² Interview with EU Member State Diplomat 1, *op.cit.*

03/25	Renewal of the previous 16 packages	HU	Blocked/vetoed ⁷³ ; Demanded concessions (delisting 7 oligarchs); ⁷⁴ Compromised after concessions	Russia-aligned reasoning	Renewal delayed (almost missing the expiration date); ⁷⁵ Measure removed/ watered down (4 oligarchs delisted) ⁷⁶
09/25	Renewal of the previous 18 packages	HU, SK	Demanded concessions (delisting several names) ⁷⁷	Russia-aligned reasoning	Renewal delayed (almost missing the expiration date); ⁷⁸ Technical clarification ⁷⁹
03/26	Renewal of the previous 19 packages	HU, SK	Blocked/vetoed; ⁸⁰ Demanded concessions (delistings several names) ⁸¹	Russia-aligned reasoning	Renewal delayed (almost missing the expiration date); ⁸² Technical clarification ⁸³

Source: compiled by the author.

As explained earlier, opposition to a particular decision does not necessarily constitute norm contestation. Objections and bargaining are common features under the CFSP. Table 1 demonstrates that opposition is not exclusive to populist governments, as non-populists have used similar methods. Nevertheless, opposition occurred proportionally more frequently among the populist cases. This increases the likelihood of populist contestation.

Despite the common nature of opposition in CFSP negotiations, its form and intensity vary. The analytical framework distinguishes between different forms of state behavior, ranging from the mildest category, *concerned* to the most severe, *blocked* or *vetoed*.

⁷³ Liboreiro, *EU in Race against Time to Make Hungary Renew Sanctions on Russia before Deadline*, op.cit.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ Jorge Liboreiro, "Hungary Drops Veto and Agrees to Prolong EU Sanctions on Russian Individuals", *Euronews*, 14 March 2025, accessed 4 May 2026, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/03/14/hungary-drops-veto-and-agrees-to-prolong-eu-sanctions-on-russian-individuals>.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ EEAS Official, op.cit.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

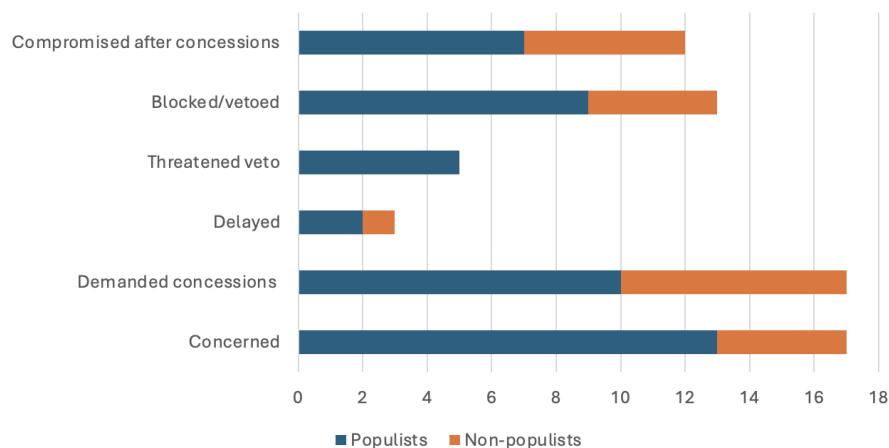
⁸⁰ Interview with EU Official 2, Brussels, 17 March 2026.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid.*

Figure 1: Member States' behavior



Source: compiled by the author.

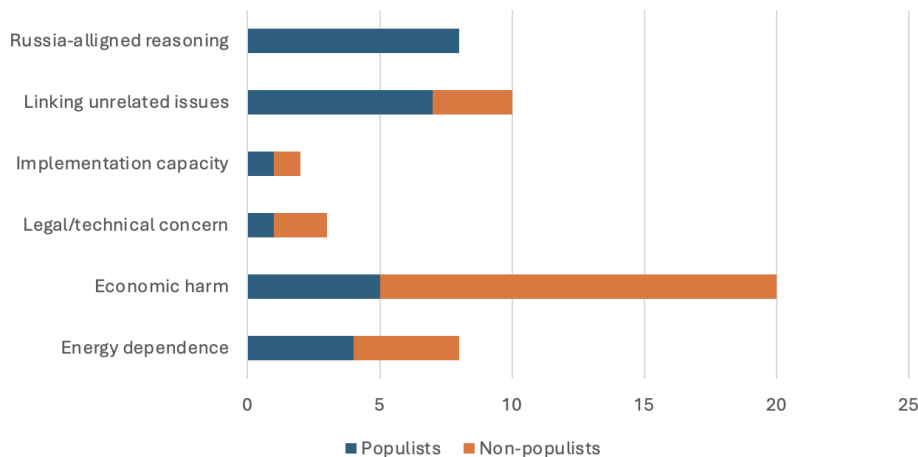
As Figure 1 indicates, the articulation of objection does not differ fundamentally between populists and non-populists. Both groups may raise concerns, demand concessions, delay negotiations, or block adoption. However, the frequency of such behaviors is higher among populists.

Norm contestation arises when objections are linked to unrelated political issues or depart from the CFSP objectives, particularly aligning with the Russian reasoning. By contrast, issue-linkage justifications, such as economic harm or energy dependence, cannot be classified as norm contestation. As argued by Juncos and Pomorska, threats to consensus-building practices may constitute CFSP norm contestation when they lack a credible national-policy justification and form part of a systematic pattern of obstruction.⁸⁴

Figure 2 shows that norm-inconsistent arguments, including Russia-aligned reasoning and the linkage of unrelated issues, are more prevalent among populists.

⁸⁴Juncos, Pomorska, *Contesting Procedural Norms: The Impact of Politicisation on European Foreign Policy Cooperation*, op.cit.

Figure 2: Justification of opposition to sanctions



Source: compiled by the author.

A major form of norm-inconsistent contestation has involved linking sanctions adoption to unrelated disputes. In these cases, governments had already accepted the content of a sanctions package but subsequently withheld final approval in order to secure concessions on a separate matter (cases of HU, GR, AT, SK). These practices can be understood as norm contestation because they move CFSP negotiations beyond the policy area's mandate and use sanctions decisions to exert pressure on other EU institutions, particularly the Commission or third countries. Their purpose is often to generate domestic political support, either among the broader electorate or among influential interest groups – labelled as domestication in the analytical framework. Müller and Slominski describe such a behavior as “soft hostage-taking”, whereby a member state uses tactical issue linkage and its veto power to extract concessions from another actor, generally in pursuit of domestic political objectives; issue linkage occurs when concepts are “in no intellectually coherent way related to one another”.⁸⁵

For example, Hungarian and Slovak policymakers argued that REPowerEU would adversely affect their national energy markets, as it aims to phase out Russian energy. However, because the strategy had already been adopted through qualified majority voting, its implementation had become unavoidable. They therefore used sanctions negotiations, where unanimity applies, as leverage to extract concessions or

⁸⁵ Patrick Müller and Peter Slominski, “The Soft Hostage-Taking of EU Foreign Policy: Hungary’s Rule of Law Conflict with the EU and Russia’s War against Ukraine”, *Journal of European Public Policy* 33, no. 3 (2026), 740-766.

guarantees from the Commission. Such a strategy risks sacrificing the CFSP to disputes arising from policies adopted through the Community method, thus paralyzing a policy field that already faces a 'capability-expectations gap'.⁸⁶

A further concern is policy learning and coordination among populist governments, which can prevent obstructive states from becoming isolated during negotiations. Kopper et al. argue that authoritarian and illiberal actors learn from one another and exchange political strategies.⁸⁷ Before Russia's invasion, Poland adopted elements of Hungary's long-standing approach to challenging the rule of law and weakening EU institutions, a process described as "bringing Budapest to Warsaw"⁸⁸ – while cooperating to shield one another from the possible activation of Article 7 TEU. After 2023, Slovakia became another importer of Hungary's strategies. Coalition-building is a normal, legitimate element of CFSP negotiations. However, coordination intended primarily to obstruct common decisions or weaken EU objectives may be detrimental to the Union's functioning.

Although issue linkage was also observed in the non-populist cases of Austria and Greece, Hungary and Slovakia used the tactic more explicitly in pursuit of domestic political goals, particularly in disputes involving REPowerEU and the Druzhba pipeline. This suggests that populist governments may be more likely to instrumentalize CFSP decisions as leverage for objectives outside the sanctions process.

Russia-aligned reasoning represents a second form of norm-inconsistent justification observed among some populist governments. As an example, since 2023, Hungary and Slovakia have repeatedly demanded the removal of Russian oligarchs and their family members from EU sanctions lists, for example Alisher Usmanov, Mikhail Fridman, and Nikolay Tokarev.⁸⁹ Prime Minister Orbán also threatened to block the already-negotiated oil phase-out agreement unless Patriarch Kirill was removed from the sanctions list.⁹⁰

⁸⁶ Christopher Hill, "Closing the Capabilities-Expectations Gap?", in *A Common Foreign Policy for Europe? Competing Visions of the CFSP*, eds. John Peterson and Helene Sjursen (London: Routledge, 1998), 18-38.

⁸⁷ Akos Kopper, Andras Szalai and Magdalena Góra, "Populist Foreign Policy in Central and Eastern Europe: Poland, Hungary and the Shock of the Ukraine Crisis", in *Populist Foreign Policy: Regional Perspectives of Populism in the International Scene*, eds. Philip Giurlando and Daniel F. Wajner (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 89-116.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ Interview with EU Member State Diplomat 1, Brussels, 14 April 2026.

⁹⁰ Interview with EEAS Official, Brussels, 20 March 2026.

EU sanctions do not remain in force indefinitely and must be periodically renewed. Renewal provides an opportunity to correct technical errors or remove individuals and entities when their behavior has changed or when the evidence supporting their listing is no longer sufficient. However, the renewal requirement also creates a significant institutional vulnerability. If the Council fails to reach unanimous agreement before the relevant deadline, the sanctions regime expires. This could result in the unfreezing of billions of euros in Russian assets and the reversal of trade and financial restrictions.

Table 1 indicates that, while both populist and non-populist governments contest the adoption of sanctions packages, renewal procedures have been exploited primarily by populist governments. The risks associated with expiration are exceptionally high. Nevertheless, Hungary and Slovakia have demanded the removal of particular individuals from sanctions lists on at least four occasions in recent years; as a result, negotiations repeatedly reached peak points, almost missing the deadlines.⁹¹ Given the potentially severe consequences of non-renewal, the use of Russia-aligned arguments at this stage can be regarded as a norm contestation.

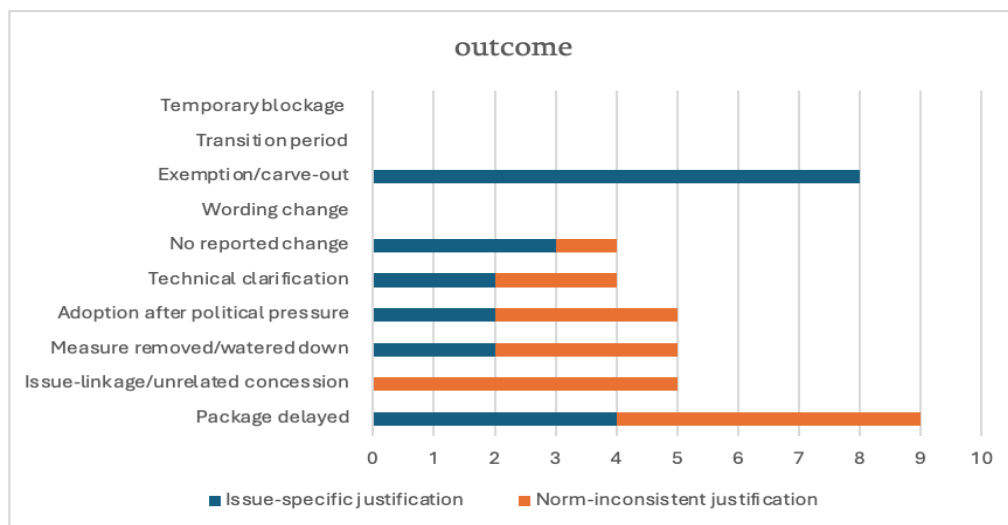
Overall, the analysis of adoption and renewal dynamics indicates that populist governments are more likely to challenge CFSP norms through norm-inconsistent justifications, particularly by linking sanctions decisions to unrelated domestic political objectives. Renewal procedures appear especially vulnerable to Russia-aligned demands because the costs of failing to reach an agreement are exceptionally high.

Despite contestation, all proposed sanctions packages have ultimately been adopted and renewed, suggesting that the CFSP has remained resilient despite persistent opposition. Nevertheless, it is therefore necessary to examine how compromises were reached and which concessions were granted.

As Figure 3 shows, exemptions and carve-outs were among the most common outcomes of sanctions negotiations. Given the depth of the EU's economic ties with Russia, immediate decoupling was particularly difficult for some member states. The Union therefore granted several issue-specific accommodations, including exemptions for pipeline oil supplied to landlocked countries, transition periods for particular industries, and quotas for materials such as synthetic rubber.

⁹¹ Interview with EU Official 2, Brussels, 17 March 2026.

Figure 3: CFSP outcomes



Source: compiled by the author.

Additionally, delays constituted the most common CFSP outcome. Economically sensitive measures, such as restrictions on Russian oil, required longer negotiations because some member states faced greater adjustment costs. Persuading Italy to accept restrictions on luxury-goods exports and Belgium to support a ban on Russian diamonds also required lengthy negotiations and economic concessions. Strategic issue linkage caused additional delays. Although member states had agreed on the content of certain packages, final approval was postponed because of unrelated matters, such as repairing the Druzhba pipeline. The EU consequently missed several self-imposed deadlines, including politically symbolic dates connected to anniversaries of the invasion. These delays generated doubts about European unity and effectiveness. However, they did not ultimately prevent the sanctions packages from being adopted.

Political pressure was another important response to both issue-specific objections and norm-inconsistent contestation. Member states have frequently attempted to isolate opposing governments during negotiations and increase the reputational costs of obstruction. The evidence presented in Table 1 suggests that political pressure was applied to both populist and non-populist governments. In some cases, non-populist governments faced particularly strong pressure, for example Austria. The political salience of the war and the reputational consequences of maintaining commercial relations with Russia have also encouraged compromise (e.g. Belgium and diamonds). Media scrutiny and the emotional impact of events such as the Bucha massacre

further strengthened the political incentives to maintain restrictive measures.⁹² Lastly, the adoption of a sanctions package during Hungary's presidency of the Council further illustrates the resilience of formal and informal CFSP norms.

To conclude, the adoption and renewal of EU sanctions have been repeatedly contested by some populist governments, which have often used CFSP negotiations to pursue domestic political or economic objectives. Opposition itself, however, should not automatically be equated with norm contestation. Objections based on energy dependence, economic exposure, or limited adjustment capacity remain part of ordinary bargaining when they are directly connected to the content of the sanctions. The more serious challenge arises when governments link sanctions approval to unrelated demands, reproduce Russia-aligned arguments, or threaten non-renewal in order to obtain concessions outside the CFSP. These practices are more prevalent among populist governments, although they have also been observed among non-populist actors. Long-standing CFSP practices, such as political pressure, diplomatic isolation, public naming and shaming, and the provision of issue-specific exemptions have generally encouraged dissenting governments to compromise. As a result, all proposed sanctions packages have ultimately been adopted and renewed. Nevertheless, strategic issue linkage remains a significant vulnerability. Its use by non-populist governments, although less frequent, suggests the possible diffusion and normalization of norm-contesting behavior within the Council. Future research should therefore examine whether practices initially associated with a small number of populist governments are gradually becoming part of the broader bargaining repertoire available to all member states.

The analysis therefore turns from contestation within EU decision-making to the domestic communication of sanctions.

Politicization and Domestication of Sanctions

Beyond contesting sanctions in the Council, populist governments may weaken the CFSP by portraying EU sanctions negatively in domestic discourse. To test this hypothesis, I conducted a content analysis of statements and social-media posts by

⁹² Cecilia Navarra and Lenka Jančová with Isabelle Ioannides, *Qualified Majority Voting in EU Foreign Policy: A Cost of Non-Europe Report, Study*, European Parliamentary Research Service, European Added Value Unit (Brussels: European Parliament, 2023), accessed 4 May 2026, https://csds.vub.be/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/EPRS_STU2023740243_EN.pdf.

the prime ministers and foreign ministers of Hungary and Slovakia, the two populist governments that most consistently opposed sanctions in the Council.

Politicization

As explained in the analytical framework, populist politicization is framing foreign policy in anti-elitist and people-centered terms. The analysis of political rhetoric reveals a sharp contrast between Hungary and Slovakia.

Anti-sanctions rhetoric has been a persistent feature of Hungarian official discourse. Prime Minister Orbán and Foreign Minister Szijjártó repeatedly described sanctions as “primitive”⁹³ and “senseless”,⁹⁴ questioned their effectiveness, and portrayed the EU as “a dwarf imposing sanctions on a giant”.⁹⁵ Such rhetoric undermines the EU's external coherence because a member state publicly delegitimizes policies that it has formally accepted within the Union. As Juncos and Pomorska argue, even when populist governments fail to reshape CFSP decisions directly, rhetorical divergence can still weaken the EU's external credibility.⁹⁶

Hungary relied particularly heavily on anti-elite framing, which appeared at a rate of 0.3 references per 1,000 words. The prime minister produced 79% of sanctions-related statements, compared with 21% by the foreign minister, supporting arguments about the personalization of foreign policy under populist leadership. Hungarian officials presented sanctions as policies imposed by detached “Brussels bureaucrats”⁹⁷ and “technocrats” who ignored the needs of ordinary citizens, acted incompetently,⁹⁸ and

⁹³ BT/MTI, “Orbán: EU Sanctions Policy ‘Primitive, Catastrophic’”, *The Budapest Times*, 11 October 2022, accessed 4 May 2026, <https://www.budapesttimes.hu/world/orban-eu-sanctions-policy-primitive-catastrophic>.

⁹⁴ Daily News, “PM Orbán: Ukraine Would Not Add Value to the Bloc but Bankrupt It”, *Daily News Hungary*, 7 May 2025, accessed 4 May 2026, <https://dailynewshungary.com/pm-orban-ukraine-would-not-add-value-to-the-bloc-but-bankrupt-it>.

⁹⁵ Prime Minister's Cabinet Office. “Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's Address to the Hungarian Parliament before the Start of Daily Business”. Speech, Budapest, 26 September 2022. Accessed 4 May 2026, <https://2015-2022.miniszterelnok.hu/prime-minister-viktor-orbans-address-to-the-hungarian-parliament-before-the-start-of-daily-business-7>.

⁹⁶ Ana E. Juncos and Karolina Pomorska, “Populism and EU Foreign Policy”, in *Routledge Handbook of Populism and Foreign Policy*, eds. David Cadier, Angelos Chrysogelos and Sandra Destradi (Abingdon: Routledge, 2026).

⁹⁷ Gabriel Cruz, “Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's “State of the Nation” address, February 2023”, *Visegrad Post*, 19 February 2023, accessed 4 May 2026, <https://visegradpost.com/en/2023/02/19/prime-minister-viktor-orbans-state-of-the-nation-address-february-2023/>

⁹⁸ Independent, “Hungary's Orbán launches EU election campaign with pledge to ‘occupy Brussels’”, 19 April 2024, accessed 4 May 2026, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/orban-ap-hungary-brussels-ukraine-b2531618.html>

dragged Europe into conflict.⁹⁹ Although “Brussels” usually represented the EU institutions collectively, the Commission was singled out because of its role in designing sanctions.

People-centered framing appeared less frequently, at 0.1 references per 1,000 words. When it was used, Orbán and Szijjártó portrayed “ordinary people,” families, farmers, and Hungarian citizens as victims of policies imposed by EU elites, instead of emphasizing the virtues of people and the purity of the general will.

In contrast, regarding Slovakia, anti-elite rhetoric, people-centered appeals, and direct antagonism toward sanctions appeared only rarely. Sanctions did not become a similarly sustained or divisive theme in their domestic political discourse.

Domestication

As defined by Juncos and Pomorska, domestication is the increasing subordination of foreign-policy objectives to domestic or party-political goals.¹⁰⁰ At the discourse level, it appears when EU concessions are presented as national victories, sanctions are portrayed as contrary to national interests, or sanctions are blamed for domestic problems such as economic and energy crises.

In Hungary, the most frequent sanctions-related narrative blamed restrictive measures for the energy and economic crises, appearing at a rate of 0.4 references per 1,000 words. As Szulecki describes, since energy is the ‘lifeblood’ of modern societies, the topic is more prone to populist contestation.¹⁰¹ Orbán’s portrayal of sanctions as the cause of inflation reflects Moffitt’s concept of populist crisis performance, in which leaders identify a threatening elite and offer simplified explanations for complex problems.¹⁰² Hungarian officials blamed “Brussels-imposed sanctions” for rising prices and portrayed citizens as victims while presenting the government as the defender of the national interest.¹⁰³

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ Juncos, Pomorska, *Populists in the Shadow of Unanimity: Contestation of EU Foreign and Security Policy*, *op.cit.*

¹⁰¹ Kacper Szulecki, “Populism, Energy Transition, and International Politics”, in *Routledge Handbook of Populism and Foreign Policy*, eds. David Cadier, Angelos Chrysosgelos and Sandra Destradi (Abingdon: Routledge, 2026), 524-541.

¹⁰² Kopper et al., *op.cit.*

¹⁰³ Prime Minister’s Cabinet Office, “Prime Minister Viktor Orbán on the Kossuth Radio Programme ‘Good Morning Hungary’”, interview, Budapest, 14 November 2025, accessed 4 May 2026, <https://kormany.hu/kormanyzat/miniszterelnok/interjuk/orban-viktor-interjuja-a-kossuth-radio-jo-reggelt-magyarorszag-cimu-musoraban-20251114?isSpecial=true>

Concessions obtained during EU negotiations were framed as national victories, while resistance to EU policies was described through the language of battle.¹⁰⁴ This transformed CFSP bargaining into a 'zero-sum game' between Hungary and Brussels. The government also extended this narrative through its 'National Consultation' on sanctions, a government-promoted survey criticized for misleading questions.¹⁰⁵ Fidesz claimed that 97% of respondents opposed sanctions.¹⁰⁶

Slovak officials referred to sanctions far less frequently. The corpus contained approximately 68 coded references for Slovakia, compared to 707 for Hungary. Prime Minister Fico and Foreign Minister Blahšík discussed sanctions mainly during concrete Council disputes, particularly when seeking concessions related to REPowerEU or the competitiveness of the automotive industry. Unlike Fidesz, Smer did not build a sustained domestic campaign around sanctions and displayed greater rhetorical openness to negotiation.

To conclude, both governments politicized and domesticized sanctions, but at markedly different levels. Fidesz developed a sustained discourse portraying sanctions as an elite-imposed threat to Hungarian citizens and used resistance to demonstrate its defence of the national interest. Smer referred to sanctions more selectively, primarily when public rhetoric supported its bargaining position in the Council. Similar behavior within the Council therefore does not necessarily produce the same degree of domestic politicization. These differences in domestic politicization provide the basis for comparing how and why populist actors diverge in their broader approach to sanctions.

Comparative Analysis of Populists

In the literature referred to above, authors such as Juncos and Pomorska, Cadier, Destradi, Plagemann and Taş emphasize that populist governments do not behave uniformly. The sanctions case illustrates this variation. Hungary and Poland had previously cooperated in challenging EU institutions and rule-of-law oversight, yet

¹⁰⁴ Cabinet Office of the Prime Minister, "Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's Address to the Hungarian Parliament before the Start of Daily Business", speech, Budapest, 26 September 2022, accessed 4 May 2026, <https://2015-2022.miniszterelnok.hu/prime-minister-viktor-orbans-address-to-the-hungarian-parliament-before-the-start-of-daily-business-7>

¹⁰⁵ MTI-Hungary Today, "Hungarians Reject Energy Sanctions in National Consultation", *Hungary Today*, 16 January 2023, accessed 4 May 2026, <https://hungarytoday.hu/hungarians-reject-energy-sanctions-in-national-consultation>.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

Russia's invasion of Ukraine sharply divided them. At the same time, Italian populists with earlier pro-Russian positions condemned the invasion and supported EU sanctions.¹⁰⁷ Rather than treating populists as a homogeneous group, this section identifies the conditions that shaped their different responses.

Populists in Coalition Governments

In the analytical framework, I classified the populist presence in power according to three levels: prime-ministerial control, cabinet participation, and junior coalition participation. Coalition dynamics can constrain populist influence on foreign policy. Oktay claims that coalitions in which the contradicting ideological parties coexist deliver less extreme, weaker foreign policy, as drastic deviation from either party's preferences might result in the collapse of the coalition.¹⁰⁸ Corsini suggests that, beyond ideological belonging or leadership type, it is essential to consider coalition dynamics and who is appointed to the different positions within the coalition.¹⁰⁹ Hooghe et al. suggest that the populists, while forming coalitions, are more likely to dilute their extreme positions to become more 'coalitionable', which translates into moderating their positions.¹¹⁰ In the sanctions adoption case, there have been several populists in the coalition governments. Still, their impact on foreign policy was rather limited, as they were either not responsible for the portfolios or were junior coalition members with limited influence. Based on these scholarly arguments, populists within a coalition either have a limited impact or dilute their extreme positions to fit into the coalition.

In Bulgaria, Spain, Slovenia, Finland, and Croatia, populists served as junior coalition partners and had limited influence over CFSP decisions. In the Netherlands, the PVV did not control the foreign affairs portfolio. In these cases, participation in government did not translate into significant obstruction of sanctions policy because coalition structures restricted the parties' room for maneuver.

¹⁰⁷ Cecilia Biancalana, "Italy's Multiple Populisms Facing the Russo-Ukrainian War", in *The Impacts of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on Right-Wing Populism in Europe*, eds. Gilles Ivaldi and Emilia Zankina, European Center for Populism Studies, 8 March 2023, accessed 4 May 2026, <https://www.populismstudies.org/italys-multiple-populisms-facing-the-russo-ukrainian-war>.

¹⁰⁸ Hanna Corsini, "Populism, Coalition Dynamics, and Foreign Policy", in *Routledge Handbook of Populism and Foreign Policy*, edited by Sandra Destradi, Angelos Chrysogelos, and David Cadier. London/New York: Routledge, pp. 216–232, 2025, accessed 4 May 2026.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ Liesbet Hooghe et al., "The Russian Threat and the Consolidation of the West: How Populism and EU-Skepticism Shape Party Support for Ukraine", *European Union Politics* 25, no. 3 (2024), 459-482.

Prime-ministerial Populists

Coalition constraints explain several cases, but the Czech Republic requires a different explanation. Prime Minister Andrej Babiš returned to office only in December 2025 and had not yet established a clear record of influence over CFSP decision-making by May 2026. This is consistent with Juncos and Pomorska's argument that populist leaders require time to consolidate control over foreign policy, particularly at the European level.¹¹¹

The comparison therefore focuses on Italy, Hungary, Slovakia, and Poland. In each case, populist prime ministers had governed long enough and held sufficient executive authority to shape foreign policy, yet their positions on sanctions differed sharply.

Drawing on Ripoll Servent and Zaun, I expect contestation to be most likely when blocking or delaying a salient policy entails low risk but offers high political gains.¹¹² Risk refers to the potential costs of failing to adopt sanctions, while gain captures the domestic political benefits of opposing them. As Cadier argues, populist leaders use foreign policy "to cater their constituencies" and leave "the topics that are not fungible in terms of votes in the hands of career diplomats".¹¹³

Risk can be assessed through geographical proximity to Russia and Ukraine, perceptions of the Russian threat, dependence on European unity for security, the strategic consequences of EU disunity, and domestic support for Ukraine. Gain is gauged by dependence on Russian energy, the salience of energy prices, the electoral usefulness of anti-sanctions rhetoric, and reliance on critical Russian imports, including nuclear fuel.

Different combinations of risk and gain produce different expected outcomes. High risk and low gain should result in little open contestation. Where both risk and gain are high, populists may politicize sanctions rhetorically but avoid sustained obstruction. Low risk combined with high gain creates the strongest likelihood of norm contestation

¹¹¹ Juncos and Pomorska. *Populism and EU Foreign Policy*, op.cit.

¹¹² Natascha Zaun and Ariadna Ripoll Servent, "Perpetuating Crisis as a Supply Strategy: The Role of (Nativist) Populist Governments in EU Policymaking on Refugee Distribution", *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 61, no. 3 (2023), 653-672.

¹¹³ David Cadier, "Foreign Policy as the Continuation of Domestic Politics by Other Means: Pathways and Patterns of Populist Politicization", *Foreign Policy Analysis* 20, no. 1 (2024).

and politicization. When both risk and gain are low, the issue is expected to remain less salient and generate limited contestation.

Geographical proximity and threat perception strongly shaped the risks associated with opposing sanctions. Poland has traditionally adopted a hawkish position toward Russia because of its location and historical experience. Russia's invasion of Ukraine therefore reinforced the perception that EU unity and strong sanctions were essential to Polish security.

Fidesz and Smer perceived Russia as a less immediate threat and favored more accommodating relations with Moscow. Although Hungary and Slovakia also depend on EU and NATO security structures, their governing parties at the time attached less political importance to maintaining EU unity and frequently employed Eurosceptic rhetoric. Smer's position has nevertheless been less confrontational than that of Fidesz.

Italy is geographically more distant from Russia and historically had a lower threat perception. Before the invasion, several parties within Italy's populist right maintained favorable attitudes toward Moscow. However, the invasion shifted public discourse,¹¹⁴ while European unity became central to Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's effort to present Italy as a credible and reliable partner.

Public opinion also affected the political risk of opposing sanctions. Support for sanctions was strongest in Poland and weakest in Hungary, making anti-sanctions rhetoric considerably more costly for Law and Justice than for Fidesz.¹¹⁵ In Italy, substantial public support for Ukraine and widespread attribution of responsibility to Russia reduced the electoral appeal of openly challenging the EU response.¹¹⁶

Hence, the perceived risk of contesting sanctions was therefore highest in Poland, lowest in Hungary and Slovakia, and moderate in Italy.

The gain dimension concerns whether opposition to sanctions could generate domestic political benefits. Economic exposure was one important factor. Hungary and Slovakia remained heavily dependent on Russian fossil fuels, nuclear fuel, and

¹¹⁴ European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication, *The EU's Response to the War in Ukraine*, Standard Eurobarometer 104, Autumn 2025 (Brussels: European Commission, 2025), accessed 4 May 2026, <https://euneighbourseast.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/standard-eurobarometer-104-autumn-2025-eus-response-to-the-war-in-ukraine-report-en.pdf>

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

other critical materials.¹¹⁷ Poland had also depended heavily on Russian energy but treated the invasion as an incentive to accelerate decoupling. Italy similarly reduced its reliance on Russian oil and gas.¹¹⁸ Although inflation and energy prices remained politically salient across all four countries, economic dependence created stronger incentives for the Hungarian and Slovak governments to oppose sanctions.

The electoral usefulness of contestation was even more important. For Fidesz and, to a lesser extent, Smer, anti-sanctions rhetoric became a means of blaming Brussels for inflation, energy costs, and economic hardship. Contesting sanctions therefore offered substantial domestic political gains. In Italy, support for Ukraine became part of Prime Minister Meloni's strategy to cultivate an image of institutional credibility and governing competence.¹¹⁹ Although some coalition parties had previously expressed pro-Russian views, opposing sanctions would have undermined Meloni's international standing and provided limited electoral benefit.¹²⁰ The potential gains from contestation were therefore low in both Poland and Italy.

The findings support Ripoll Servent and Zaun's argument mentioned above:¹²¹ Hungary and Slovakia combined a relatively low perceived risk of contesting sanctions with high potential domestic gains. Their governments could use economic dependence and anti-Brussels rhetoric to justify opposition while facing limited electoral pressure to adopt a more confrontational stance toward Russia.

Poland presented the opposite configuration. Contesting sanctions would have entailed high security and political risks while offering few electoral gains. This helps explain Law and Justice's break with Hungary, its moderation of hostile rhetoric toward the EU, and its advocacy of stronger measures against Russia.

Italy occupied an intermediate position. The security risk of contestation was moderate, but the potential political gain was low. Meloni chose to present herself as a credible European and transatlantic leader rather than revive earlier anti-sanctions rhetoric.¹²² This illustrates what scholars describe as 'calculated ambivalence': populist leaders adapt their positions when doing so is politically advantageous.¹²³ As Cadier

¹¹⁷ Interview with EU Member State Diplomat 2, Brussels, 24 March 2026.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ Biancalana, *op.cit.*

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ Zaun, Ripoll Servent, *Perpetuating Crisis as a Supply Strategy: The Role of (Nativist) Populist Governments in EU Policymaking on Refugee Distribution*, *op.cit.*

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ *Ibid.*

outlines, “populism is not something that populists are, but something they do, and what they can do more or less depending on the occasion, context, or issue area”.¹²⁴

Conclusion: Contestation, Resilience, and Policy Implications

This paper explored to what extent, how, and under which conditions populist governments have affected the adoption of EU sanctions against Russia since February 2022. The case study of EU sanctions adoption demonstrates that populist governments are more likely to contest CFSP norms, most often by linking agreement on sanctions to unrelated domestic issues. Nevertheless, each of the proposed packages had been successfully adopted and the CFSP has remained resilient due to political pressure, negotiation strategies, and the strength of its procedural norms. Beyond contestation within the Council, populist governments are also more likely to politicize sanctions and subordinate their public discourse on foreign policy to domestic political objectives.

The paper further demonstrates that populist governments hold divergent positions on sanctions and explains the motivations behind either contesting or aligning with the EU position. The combination of a perceived low risk of halting the process and the possibility of high political gains helps explain populist behavior. The empirical evidence also shows that non-populist governments occasionally employ strategies associated with populist foreign policy, such as issue linkage. Further research should therefore examine whether norm-contesting practices are diffusing to non-populist actors.

Slovakia's greater openness to compromise and less hostile public discourse suggest that a change of government in Hungary could reduce pressure on the sanctions-adoption process. However, the vulnerability created by unanimity, patterns of strategic learning, the normalization of norm contestation, and the increasing number of populist governments in power, including in the Czech Republic, indicate that sanctions adoption and the CFSP more broadly may remain vulnerable. EU institutions should therefore make greater use of their strategic tools to limit these risks.

Following Bressanelli et al., one possible response to the politicization of EU external action is depoliticization – EU institutions can frame contested or controversial

¹²⁴ Cadier, *Foreign Policy as the Continuation of Domestic Politics by Other Means: Pathways and Patterns of Populist Politicization*, op.cit.

measures as necessary, technical, or procedural.¹²⁵ The European External Action Service and the Commission already partly follow this approach by presenting sanctions against Russia as an unavoidable response to the invasion, thereby helping to preserve public support.

The Commission's announcement of REPowerEU before the sanctions package had been finalized was also perceived by some EU officials as a strategic miscalculation.¹²⁶ Although this is a relatively technical issue, launching controversial EU policy initiatives during CFSP negotiations may create opportunities for issue linkage and hostage-taking. Greater coordination between EU policy areas is therefore necessary to preserve coherence and reduce the vulnerability of CFSP negotiations.

¹²⁵ Edoardo Bressanelli, Christel Koop and Christine Reh, "EU Actors under Pressure: Politicisation and Depoliticisation as Strategic Responses", *Journal of European Public Policy* 27, no. 3 (2020), 329-341.

¹²⁶ Interview with EU Official 2, *op.cit.*

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