

The European Union's sanctions mechanism against Belarus as an instrument of small EU member state political influence: a case study of Latvia

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Abstract

This article discusses how Latvia, as a small European Union (EU) member state, has sought to leverage the sanctions regime imposed on Belarus to increase its political influence within the EU, focusing on the period from 2012 to 2018. The research findings indicate that, first, Latvia's increased interest in either lifting or, conversely, strengthening the sanctions mechanism largely stems from the intensity of economic relations between the two countries. Second, Latvia, through its position on the application of the sanctions mechanism, has managed in several instances to influence the overall policy of the EU, receiving validation for its actions not only from the EU but also from Belarus. These results, in turn, allow for the assumption that Latvia, by using the EU's sanctions mechanism against Belarus as a tool to enhance its political influence, has strengthened its leadership position as a member state whose opinion on Belarusian policy carries significant weight and importance among EU member states. In order to achieve the lifting of the sanctions regime, Latvia has actively advocated for the need to review the EU sanctions imposed on Belarus.

Keywords

Belarus • European Union • influence • Latvia • sanctions

INTRODUCTION

Despite the fact that the overall institutional and political framework of the European Union (EU), as well as the positions of its member states on EU policy towards Belarus, are unified—considering that member states represent the common interests of the EU and *vice versa*—Latvia has demonstrated particular proactiveness in shaping relations with Belarus. This is substantiated by several factors: geographical proximity of the two countries as neighbouring states, historical ties and intensity of economic cooperation. Importantly, since joining the EU, Latvia has consistently maintained its relations with Belarus, advocating both for the need to apply a stricter sanctions mechanism and for reconsidering its removal to promote closer cooperation with Belarus. This approach has been largely influenced by economic cooperation, which naturally arises from the neighbouring status of the two countries. The purpose of this study is to provide insight into how a small EU member state, Latvia, has used the EU sanctions mechanism against Belarus as a tool to enhance its political influence within

the EU framework, strengthening its position as an actor with a significant impact on EU policy towards Belarus by actively advocating for the need to review the EU sanctions regime imposed on Belarus. This study is conducted using a qualitative research method: document analysis.

RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Small member states and the EU: theory and practice

Small states in the international system face several challenges. One of these is the lack of a unified definition (Panke, 2010: 15), which makes it impossible to draw clear boundaries regarding which states fall into this category. Most commonly, small states are classified using quantitative indicators. The second major challenge for small states is adapting their foreign policy to the constantly changing conditions of the international system. Smaller states often have limited material resources, which significantly constrains their ability to influence globally important processes (Hey, 2003). At the same time, traditional international relations theory assumes that small states are more likely to adopt

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a neutral stance on various foreign policy issues, with their foreign policy primarily focused on minimizing economic and political threats (Vital, 1967: 3–7). In this context, the specific foreign policy strategy chosen by a small state plays a decisive role (Livdanska and Bukovskis, 2024). To achieve their foreign policy objectives and strengthen their position, small states most often opt for integration into multilateral frameworks, which is generally considered to be the most effective approach.

The deliberate integration of small states into various international institutions is observed more frequently than among larger states (Ingebritsen et al., 2006). This can be explained by the benefits that international institutions offer, such as broad access to diverse information, a forum for negotiations and decision-making, a framework for forming unified decisions and norms, dispute resolution mechanisms and more (Karns and Mingst, 2010). However, the most crucial aspect is the opportunity for small states to advance issues of particular importance to them within the political agenda through international institutions. At the same time, when specifically addressing the involvement of small states in the EU, it is important to highlight the significant challenges faced by small member states. Small states face greater challenges in advancing their interests due to their limited administrative capacity (Beltrán et al., 2002). In the EU context, administrative capacity constraints mean that small states must set clear priorities and focus on a limited range of issues. However, despite these limitations, they also present an opportunity: encouraging small states to make more active use of informal communication channels within the EU to successfully negotiate and promote issues of particular interest and significance to their political agenda (Livdanska and Bukovskis, 2024). In the EU context such constraints indicate that small states must set clear priorities and focus on a limited range of issues. As noted by Thorhallsson and Wivel (2006), small states traditionally have a significantly diminished role and influence in security policy matters. Instead, they tend to show deeper engagement and seek influence in EU policy sectors where they have distinct economic and political interests, typically avoiding areas related to security and foreign policy. However, Latvia's active role in shaping EU policy towards Belarus challenges these theoretical assumptions, suggesting that small states can, under certain circumstances, assert influence even in traditionally security-related and foreign policy domains.

The nature of the EU sanctions regime towards Belarus

Due to the intensity of economic cooperation between Latvia and Belarus, Latvia's increased interest in the policy of the sanctions regime can be explained. In 2021, Latvia ranked eighth among Belarus's top 25 trading partners. Latvia's share of total Belarus exports amounted to US\$65.5 million,

highlighting the significant economic ties between the two countries and strengthening Latvia's active participation in the EU's policy on Belarus sanctions (Workman, 2022). Compared with 2018, when Latvia ranked tenth among Belarus's trading partners with a total trade volume of US\$479.9 million (Workman, 2022), it is evident that in 2021 significant changes had occurred. Following the implementation of stricter economic sanctions against Belarus, which limited its opportunities for economic cooperation with the EU, Belarus' key trading partnerships also changed considerably. This dynamic underscores Latvia's economic interest in the sanctions regime and, consequently, highlights the role of sanctions in shaping Latvia's engagement with the EU policy on Belarus.

The first sanctions against Belarus were adopted on 24 September 2004, introducing targeted sanctions against specific Belarusian officials. Additional measures were implemented in 2006 and 2011 after illegitimate presidential elections in Belarus, further intensifying the restrictive approach of the EU towards the country.

In 2012, the EU Council adopted Decision 2012/642/CFSP, which established restrictive measures against Belarus and formalised the application of the EU sanctions mechanism. This decision introduced several key restrictions, including an arms embargo, a ban on materials that could be used for internal repression against civilians, and prohibitions on certain services directly related to the supply and development of arms. In particular, the decision also imposed travel restrictions on specific Belarusian officials directly or indirectly involved in human rights violations. In addition, it included the freezing of financial assets and economic resources belonging to individuals and entities closely linked to state repression (Council of the European Union, 2012). These measures aimed to curtail the Belarusian regime's capacity to suppress democratic movements and violate fundamental rights while reinforcing the EU's broader sanctions policy framework against authoritarian governance (Latvijas Republikas Ārlietu ministrija, 2013). The nature of the sanctions regime and the individuals targeted within these sanctions packages indicate that the measures are not solely of an economic nature. Rather, the long-term objective is to induce changes in the political regime of Belarus, specifically by accelerating the democratisation process in the country through economic restrictions.

Latvia's role in shaping EU sanctions against Belarus

Justifying criticism of sanctions: the role of Latvia's economic relations with Belarus

Although fostering economic relations with Belarus remained a key priority for Latvia until at least 2018, this position has evolved over time. For example, the 2012 annual report of

the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia on the country's foreign policy and EU affairs explicitly acknowledged that Belarus was an important trade and transit partner for Latvia. This recognition underscores the strategic economic significance of bilateral relations, which in turn has influenced Latvia's nuanced position on EU sanctions against Belarus, balancing economic interests with broader geopolitical and democratic considerations (Latvijas Republikas Ārlietu ministrija, 2012a,b). This is further confirmed by statistical data compiled by the Latvian Investment and Development Agency. In 2012, Latvia's exports to Belarus amounted to € 278.6 million, while imports from Belarus reached € 485.5 million. In the context of Latvia's total economic turnover, these figures placed Belarus as the 13th largest export market and the 11th largest import partner for Latvia (Latvijas Investīciju un attīstības aģentūra, 2014).

Following the entry into force of the EU Council decision in 2012, discussions emerged among Latvian policymakers at the national level about the justification and effectiveness of the sanctions. Decision-makers questioned the general impact of restrictive measures and expressed concerns about their potential consequences. In these national-level debates, Employer's Confederation of Latvia played an active role in shaping Latvia's national preferences. The confederation argued that the sanctions mechanism against Belarus would not primarily harm the economic sector of Belarus, but rather negatively impact civil society. One of the key objections raised in these discussions was the effect of sanctions on freight transportation. Critics highlighted that restrictions on Belarusian transit trade would lead to redirection of cargo routes to more distant Russian ports, effectively excluding Latvia from regional economic cooperation networks. This concern underscored the potential economic losses Latvia faced as a result of EU-imposed sanctions, sparking domestic debates on how to balance economic interests with political commitments within the EU framework (Kursiša, 2012). The position of the Employer's Confederation of Latvia can be interpreted primarily as an attempt to promote national preferences at the national decision-making level, emphasising the importance of economic interests in the context of the EU's sanctions policy. By advocating for the prioritisation of economic considerations, the confederation sought to influence national policymakers and shape the position of Latvia within the EU.

Similar debates emerged at the political decision-making level, indicating that certain conditions existed for Latvia to transfer its national preferences to the EU level. An example of this is the statements made by the Latvian politician Aivars Lembergs, who argued that the imposition of sanctions on Belarus could pose broader risks to the overall role of Latvia within the EU (Lihtens, 2013). Lembergs' position reflects concerns that strict sanctions could undermine Latvia's economic stability and strategic position within the EU, highlighting the

tension between geopolitical alignment with EU policies and protecting national economic interests. This statement largely confirms that even before the imposition of the EU sanctions mechanism in 2012, Latvia had already established a certain status within the EU as an active promoter of cooperation, particularly in economic relations with Belarus. The application of the sanctions mechanism was considered to be a potential threat to this position, as it risked completely excluding Latvia from the Belarusian network of economic partners. Analysing economic data from 2012, when Latvia's trade volume with Belarus increased by almost US\$3 billion (Pryce, 2013), it is reasonable to argue that Lembergs' statements were not only based on the anticipated increase in transit cargo volumes through the port of Ventspils during this period, but also reflect Latvia's broader national position.

Latvia's national preferences as the basis for its active opposition to the application of the EU sanctions mechanism towards Belarus

The statement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia, following the decision of the EU Council on sanctions against Belarus, reflects the national position of Latvia, which criticised the EU sanctions mechanism. The ministry emphasised that sanctions should not directly or indirectly have a significant impact on the economic situation of EU member states, nor should they restrict their ability to accumulate additional economic benefits. Following the Council decision, the then Minister of Foreign Affairs, Edgars Rinkēvičs, stated that any decision to impose sanctions must be based on clearly defined criteria. At the same time, he stressed that sanctions should not negatively affect the well-being of the Belarusian population or compromise the economic stability of EU member states (Petrova, 2012). If one assumes that the statements made by Edgars Rinkēvičs represent Latvia's national preferences and its official position, and if one further reinforces this position with the concerns raised by trade unions and the evaluations of certain politicians in the section before, this can be understood as part of the national preference formation process at the national level. Consequently, Latvia's subsequent actions should be interpreted as efforts to reverse or mitigate the imposed sanctions mechanism. First, we define civil society as the primary concern, arguing that the sanctions mechanism would disproportionately harm Belarusian civil society, rather than the regime. Second, we emphasise the broader context of economic cooperation, in which Belarus plays a strategically significant role among the economic partners of Latvia. The subsequent actions of Latvia further reinforce this position.

Notably, Edgars Rinkēvičs' efforts to oppose the EU Council decision, in coordination with Slovenia's Foreign Minister, indicate attempts to block the adoption of the 'blacklist'—a

list of individuals identified through investigations as being linked to regime-led repression of civil society and supporting the Belarusian political regime (Latvijas Sabiedriskie Mediji, 2012). This indicates that, in order to achieve a coordinated position with Slovenia, Latvia has likely engaged in active diplomatic communication. After this statement, Latvia has maintained its national position, repeatedly highlighting that the core issue is not about specific individuals or companies whose activities could negatively impact the economic situation of EU member states. Rather, the concern lies in the lack of overall unity in the implementation and content of the sanctions mechanism, as certain member states have been unable to agree on a common list of individuals responsible for the regime's violations, due to diverging national preferences among EU member states. As stated by Latvia's Minister of Economics, Daniels Pavļuts, the political assessment of sanctions is not feasible, citing a general lack of monitoring tools that would allow for a preliminary evaluation of the costs and benefits of sanctions before their implementation in Latvia (Kolyako, 2012). In a broader context, this refers to the overall absence of such monitoring tools within the EU's common policy framework. Therefore, it is possible to generalise that the reduction in the intensity of economic ties in the political agenda and, consequently, in the context of Latvia's national preferences serves as a significant argument for the strict position of Latvia regarding the effectiveness and necessity of the sanctions mechanism.

Latvia's proactive actions, or its attempts to block the EU's decision, were followed by a response from the EU: the imposition of sanctions, but not to the extent initially determined in Council Decision 2012/642/CFSP (Latvijas Republikas Ārlietu ministrija, 2012a,b). This can be largely interpreted as the EU's attempt to offer a form of compromise while still maintaining its original position on the necessity of applying the sanctions mechanism. A key part of this compromise is the annex to the decision, which lists the individuals targeted by these sanctions. Included in this list are figures such as Yury Chiz and Anatolii Ternavskii, who, in the case of Latvia, were particularly controversial, as the subsidiaries of their companies were based in Latvia. Given these circumstances, their companies were not included in the sanctions list, signalling a certain willingness to accept Latvia's efforts to block the decision in its entirety. For Latvia, these actors were particularly significant, as their businesses, *Latgales Alus D* and *Mamas D*, also operated within Latvia (Tamuļeviča, 2012). Although the sanctions were ultimately adopted, Latvia's interests were preserved to some extent.

Despite a brief period of stability in relations between the EU and Belarus, in 2014, in response to repeated human rights violations, Belarus intensified tensions with the EU, leading to the reapplication of sanctions. As a result, the EU Council adopted Decision 2014/24/CFSP, establishing

a new sanctions regime against specific actors, thereby reinforcing the content of the previously imposed sanctions mechanism from 2012 (Council Decision 2012/642/CFSP) (Council Decision 2012/642). A key aspect of this sanctions package was the list of individuals included in the annex, which expanded the scope of targeted sanctions to a broader audience. However, it is important to note that, despite the EU's imposition of the sanctions regime, Latvia, in certain cases, attempted to bypass these restrictions, continuing to intensify bilateral economic relations with Belarus (Latvijas Republikas Ārlietu ministrija, 2015). Latvia responded to this decision by reiterating its position, with Edgars Rinkēvičs stating that the application of the sanctions regime was not the most effective way to achieve Belarus's rapprochement with the EU and to ensure the democratisation process in the country. This statement coincided with the EU Council decision and the Eastern Partnership Summit, which took place in May in Riga (Korovenkova, 2015; Latvijas Republikas Ārlietu ministrija, 2016). Latvia responded to this decision by reiterating its position, with Edgars Rinkēvičs stating that the application of the sanctions regime was not the most effective way to bring Belarus closer to the EU or to ensure the democratisation process in the country. This statement coincided with the Eastern Partnership Summit in Riga in May, aligning with the Council's decision. From this perspective, considering that the EU decided to change its policy on the applied sanctions regime, it is reasonable to assume that the EU, as a larger player, validated Latvia's influence. This suggests that Latvia has a certain degree of authority as an expert in the Eastern Partnership region, while also consistently maintaining its position. As a result, Latvia has gained recognition within the institutional framework of the EU and in the eyes of certain member states.

A year later, in 2016, a significant breakthrough occurred for Latvia in the context of the EU sanctions mechanism. The EU Foreign Ministers failed to reach an agreement, which resulted in the Council being unable to adopt the decision. Latvia played a crucial role in this outcome, by voting, together with another small EU member state Lithuania, against the decision (The Baltic Times, 2016) and successfully convincing other member states to follow their lead. This development highlights Latvia's increasing political influence within the EU. In 2018, when the Council adopted a decision to extend the sanctions regime (Eiropas Savienības Padome, 2018), Latvia remained consistent in its position, despite the 4-month suspension period of the sanctions regime in 2016. Latvia continued to advocate for the need to foster closer cooperation with Belarus. This position was also reflected in high-level diplomatic visits. In July 2018, the Belarusian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Vladimir Makei, visited Riga, where he expressed gratitude to Latvia for its efforts to push for the lifting of the sanctions regime (Latvijas Republikas Ministru

Kabinets, 2018). This is a significant element, as it validates the influence of Latvia not only within the EU framework but also from the perspective of a larger state, Belarus. It allows the conclusion that considering the specific time period [2018], which is largely regarded as the final phase of normalised relations between Latvia, the EU and Belarus, even a larger state recognised and appreciated Latvia's efforts. This underscores Latvia's role as an EU member state that actively advocates for the interests of a larger non-EU country.

CONCLUSIONS

The cyclically imposed sanctions regime against Belarus is a crucial element in understanding how Latvia has sought to increase its political influence. Specifically, Latvia has aimed to shape the EU sanctions policy towards Belarus by advocating for its swift and stringent implementation under certain conditions or, conversely, supporting its removal when deemed necessary.

The change in Belarus' main trade partners after the enforcement of economic restrictions suggests that Latvia's position on the EU sanctions regime is, at least in part, influenced by the economic impact these measures have on its own trade relations. This largely reinforces theoretical assumptions regarding the behaviour of small states, namely, their heightened activity in political sectors where they have pronounced economic interests. This is further reinforced by the argument that given Latvia's geographical proximity and neighbouring relations with Belarus, a high level of economic interaction between the two states has been a natural development.

Active discussions among Latvian decision-makers, calling for an evaluation of the effectiveness of the sanctions mechanism, serve as an illustrative example of how Latvia, as a small EU member state, has sought to balance economic pragmatism with political commitments, potentially shaping its approach to influence EU-level decision-making about sanctions towards Belarus. This position prioritised economic cooperation with Belarus as a strategic interest, strengthening Latvia's role as an important facilitator of regional economic collaboration. As a result, Latvia's position in EU sanctions discussions was influenced by its economic priorities, seeking to balance its role within the EU framework while maintaining strong economic ties with Belarus.

This outcome can be interpreted as the influence of Latvia on securing its national interests, highlighting two key aspects. First, Latvia successfully represented its interests in the negotiation process, which led to modifications in the final implementation of the sanctions. Second, by actively advocating for its position, Latvia accumulated a certain level of influence within the EU, enabling it to secure EU

concessions in the form of exemptions. This is further demonstrated by the alignment of Latvia with Slovenia, which clearly illustrates that Latvia was able to gather like-minded allies around its position. As a result, Latvia became a key driver in the decision-making process, influencing other EU member states to follow their example in shaping the final sanctions regime.

It should also be noted that the validation of Latvia's political influence is not only determined by its ability to impact specific decisions related to the sanctions regime against Belarus at the EU level, but also by the recognition from Belarusian leaders. A crucial aspect here is that Makei's statement serves as an external validation of Latvia's efforts, stretching beyond the institutional boundaries of the EU and, to some extent, proving how Latvia has accumulated its political influence.

From the theoretical perspective explored in this article regarding the ability of small states to influence specific EU policies in sectors such as security and foreign policy, Latvia's example—when examining this particular issue during the period from 2012 to 2018—should be regarded as an absolute exception. This argument supports the notion that even small states can exert political influence in crucial matters, such as the sanctions regime imposed on another country [Belarus]. It should also be noted that the case of Latvia confirms theoretical assumptions suggesting that small states tend to be particularly active within multilateral frameworks—such as the EU in this context—as these structures offer a platform through which they can pursue their political interests more effectively, which would otherwise be difficult to achieve.

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