

Opening Remarks by the Guest Editor

Over the past few years, the issue of economic sanctions has evolved from a relatively marginal one to the core dispute of international politics – both in the West and in Russia. Sanctions are discussed by politicians and government officials, diplomats and business people, journalists and civil society leaders. For obvious reasons, most participants in the discourse cannot claim the role of impartial analyst: they are ideologically biased in one way or another, their own political agenda and the emotions of the current historical moment are also among the factors to consider. Meanwhile, the extensive empirical material accumulated recently concerning usage of economic sanctions as a foreign policy tool creates the prerequisites for bringing the discourse to a new expert level, forming a new conceptual framework for analysis on the phenomenon of sanctions and integrating this issue into the wider context of modern theories of international relations.

This task is associated with certain difficulties, since the evolution of the mechanisms of sanctions is taking place right now. Moreover, this evolution proceeds against the background of the fundamental transformation of global politics, the outcome of which is far from clear. Nevertheless, it is possible to present a whole series of fundamental questions about the present and future of economic sanctions for discussion among the experts. Here are some of them.

First, what is the reason for the sharp expansion of the practice of economic sanctions in modern international relations? Advocates of this practice tend to argue that sanctions sometimes are the only alternative to the use of military force. Accordingly, the more frequent use of the sanctions instrument testifies to the increased “humanism” of world politics, expressed in the unwillingness of the leading powers to carry out military actions against their foes. Opponents argue that sanctions turn out to be an alternative to diplomacy and a replacement for other traditional foreign policy instruments. It is necessary not to speak about “humanism,” but about the crisis of traditional foreign policy instruments that have been displaced by sanctions.

Second, what are the factors that determine the effectiveness of economic sanctions? Many researchers analyzing sanctions argue that in most cases the goals set by the initiators of the sanctions are unattainable. Moreover, sanctions often turned out to be clearly counterproductive in this sense. Nevertheless, sanctions were not lifted; the sanctions policy was exercised for years and even decades. Probably, we need to look for explanations of the remarkable stability of the sanctions regime beyond declared goals. For example, attention should be paid to the domestic political context (U.S. sanctions against Cuba) or to the balance of power within the groupings of countries applying sanctions (European Union sanctions against Russia).

Third, another question arises concerning expanding cooperation in the field of economic sanctions and the ongoing processes of economic globalization. Does this mean that the effectiveness of sanctions will decrease, and thus will new ways to circumvent, sabotage or ignore restrictions constantly appear? And vice versa, should further expansion of the practice of applying economic sanctions, along with other important factors, lead to accelerated economic globalization or even to a complete change in its current trajectory?

The list could be even longer. The articles in this special issue “Economic Sanctions, Global Governance and the Contours of the Future World Order” present a comprehensive approach to the analysis of economic sanctions, various types of these sanctions, their impact and the mechanisms of adoption. I hope that the materials presented in the issue will serve as an incentive for further discussion on this topic of indisputable academic significance.

A.V. Kortunov,
Director General of the Russian Council on Foreign Affairs