

Autocratic Isolation: How the Club of Autocrats Undermines Sanctions

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Abstract

Sanctions remain a central tool in international relations to influence or punish states violating global norms. Yet, their effectiveness against authoritarian regimes is debated, as such regimes frequently adopt sophisticated survival strategies. This research addresses an empirical puzzle: why are sanctioned autocracies shifting from isolationist mechanisms toward collective cooperation via authoritarian international organizations (IOs)? Through mixed-methods analysis combining quantitative data (1990–2023) and qualitative case studies of Russia, Iran, and Syria, this study investigates how authoritarian IO membership enhances regime stability by mitigating sanctions' impacts. The study identifies three mechanisms: material substitution, diplomatic shielding, and strategic coordination that authoritarian IOs use to circumvent sanctions collectively. Findings suggest that membership in such organizations increases regime durability and decreases leadership turnover under sanction-induced pressure. Consequently, policymakers should rethink traditional sanction designs, targeting authoritarian alliances, the “Club of Autocrats” that offer economic, diplomatic, and strategic support. This research underlines the limits of sanctions and suggests a broader strategy combining economic pressure with diplomacy and support for liberal institutions to erode authoritarian resilience.

Introduction

Up until today, sanctions have remained a prominent tool used by both states and International Organizations (IOs) to punish violators of international norms or force a state to change its foreign policy. Clearly, sanctions are seen as a less destructive alternative than direct military confrontation. However, their effectiveness and impact on target states remains debated, especially in the cases of autocratic regimes. Some believe that sanctions undermine such regimes by damaging their economies, increasing domestic unrest, and causing higher probabilities of leadership turnover (Marinov, 2005; von Soest and Wahman, 2014; Escribà-Folch and Wright, 2010, 2015; Yu, 2024). Meanwhile, others argue that authoritarian leaders use sanctions to solidify their power and tighten control over their citizens (Pape, 1997; Fathollah-Nejad, 2014; Grauvogel and von Soest, 2014; Hellmeier, 2021; von Soest, 2023). This raises an important question: How do authoritarian states manage to survive and maintain their regimes under the colossal pressure of international sanctions and global isolation?

For quite some time, autocratic regimes have relied heavily on isolationist strategies, such as developing shadow economies or implementing sanction-busting strategies, like trading with third parties to mitigate the destabilizing effects of sanctions. Bryan Early's (2009, 2012, 2019) works highlight how sanctioned states circumvent global economic and political restrictions through profit-driven firms and informal economic networks, allowing them to endure international pressure. Yet, recent geopolitical trends highlight a notable shift away from purely isolationist survival mechanisms toward active engagement in authoritarian international and regional organizations (IOs and ROs) (Libman and Obydenkova, 2018, 2019; Debre, 2022, 2025; Cottiero and Haggard, 2023). Such transition underscores a significant empirical puzzle: Why are sanctioned autocracies increasingly shifting from isolationist survival strategies to collective cooperation through authoritarian ROs and IOs?

This shift in behavior is particularly puzzling considering traditional views that autocratic states generally prioritize national sovereignty and self-reliance over multilateral cooperation (Ginsburg, 2020; Libman, Obydenkova, 2018). Recently, however, numerous autocracies have established or joined organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and others. These entities not only serve as political and economic alliances but also play a critical role in countering the isolating and destabilizing effects of sanctions.

To illustrate this phenomenon clearly, consider the contrasting outcomes of sanctions on Belarus and Libya. Belarus, under intense Western sanctions following the 2020 fraudulent presidential election, utilized its membership in authoritarian ROs, particularly its alliance with Russia within the EEU and CSTO, to sustain its regime economically and politically despite significant external pressure (U.S. Department of Treasury, 2023; Council of the EU, 2025; Centre for East European and International Studies, 2024). Conversely, Libya under Muammar Gaddafi faced severe international isolation without substantial institutional backing from authoritarian regional alliances. The country implemented various survival strategies, including the creation of a shadow economy (for instance, Libya illicitly traded oil with third parties)

(Eaton 2018; Nephew, 2018). Consequently, the lack of support networks, despite the implementation of various survival strategies, eventually contributed to the regime's demise in 2011, highlighting the potential stabilizing effects provided by authoritarian IOs.

Current literature on sanctions effectiveness reveals substantial contradictions and mixed findings. While Marinov (2005) suggests sanctions increase leadership turnover, particularly in democratic contexts, Early (2009, 2012), Early and Peksen (2019) demonstrate that authoritarian states successfully utilize various survival strategies to mitigate sanctions' impacts. Moreover, literature on authoritarian regionalism increasingly recognizes these IOs' roles in providing diplomatic shielding, material substitution, and strategic coordination. Nevertheless, there are not many works that specifically link authoritarian IO membership to enhanced regime survivability under sanctions, which underlines a significant research gap.

Addressing these theoretical gaps, this study explores how authoritarian IOs institutionalize and enhance collective sanctions circumvention, thus contributing to regime stability in autocratic states. This paper emphasizes three primary mechanisms used by autocratic IOs to mitigate sanctions' effects: material substitution, diplomatic shielding, and strategic coordination. Material substitution refers to authoritarian IOs providing economic alternatives and financial support, thus enabling regimes to offset the direct economic costs imposed by sanctions. Diplomatic shielding involves offering political legitimacy and collective backing, thus effectively reducing the isolating effects of global condemnation. Finally, strategic coordination includes collaborative efforts among authoritarian states to develop and implement policies that strengthen internal stability and collective resistance against a myriad of external pressures.

This study employs a mixed-methods research design combining quantitative analysis and qualitative case studies. Quantitatively, the analysis uses a time-series cross-sectional dataset covering authoritarian regimes from 1990 to 2023. The key dependent variables include regime stability and leadership turnover, measured through regime duration and instances of irregular leadership transitions. The primary independent variables focus on authoritarian IO membership, operationalized through an ordinal measure of engagement and a weighted IO participation score, which examines the strength and institutional significance of autocratic IOs. Sanctions severity is classified through an ordinal scale of economic coercion intensity. Qualitatively, detailed case studies of Russia, Iran, and Syria will complement the statistical findings, illustrating how IO membership, or lack thereof, influences regime survival under sanctions. Ultimately, this paper seeks to understand how modern authoritarian states adapt strategically to global pressures through institutionalized cooperation, thus redefining the geopolitical landscape in the era of increasing economic and political conflicts. By examining the conditions under which authoritarian states successfully utilize IOs and ROs to circumvent sanctions, this study aims to enhance our understanding of the complex relationship between international economic coercion and authoritarian resilience.

Literature review

To develop my theory and argument, I draw on a wide range of existing research. My literature review can be grouped into several different categories. The first group covers the topic of sanctions and their effectiveness, the second group focuses on the methods states use to bypass sanctions, and the third group examines the emergence and spread of a new trend, authoritarian regionalism.

I will first focus on literature covering sanctions and their effectiveness. Pape (1997), Fathollah-Nejad (2014), Grauvogel and von Soest (2014), and Hellmeier (2021) argue that sanctions are ineffective since they prevent democratization in autocratic regimes. They instead have a rally 'round the flag effect, which strengthens the domestic political standing of authoritarian leaders and fuels nationalist sentiments in target states. The number of domestic players is also crucial when evaluating the success and effectiveness of economic sanctions. For instance, Jeong and Peksen (2019) argue that states with more internal veto players face greater institutional constraints, making it harder for leaders to adjust policies or implement sanctions countermeasures, as a result increasing the likelihood of compliance with sanctions and restrictions.

Sanctions may not always be effective and successful in forcing target states to comply; however, a simple threat of imposing sanctions can have a stronger impact. As seen in Drezner's (2003) paper, he argues that simple threats of economic coercion can be more effective, as the imposition of sanctions can provoke retaliatory consequences for the countries enforcing them. He also argues that economic coercion ends at that very threat stage and thus such episodes are quite often excluded in empirical research that focuses on sanctions and their effect. This could explain the prevalence of negative discourse surrounding sanctions.

It may seem that sanctions are ineffective since they result in unintended consequences; they usually cannot result in a significant policy change or even a regime change. Nonetheless, this may not always be true. In his paper, Marinov (2005) argues that sanctions can, in fact, destabilize political leaders. By analyzing panel data from 136 countries between 1947 and 1999, Marinov finds that sanctions significantly increase the likelihood of leadership transition, especially in democratic regimes, where leaders are more vulnerable to public and institutional pressures. He underlines that sanctions can result in a 28% average increase in the risk of a leader losing power. Sanctions can also affect autocracies since they can result in a dangerous political opening (e.g., protests or any other forms of dissent).

If sanctions do indeed increase the probability of leadership turnover, then how come many autocratic states manage to survive despite enormous global pressure? Such states implement various survival strategies. Early and Peksen (2019) and Meyer et al. (2023) argue that international sanctions significantly disrupt the institutional framework of international and local businesses, as well as the lives of ordinary citizens. They emphasize that sanctions result in the significant growth of the shadow economy, which may significantly limit the effectiveness of sanctions and allow target states to mitigate the impact of economic restrictions. Something we

can see in the case of Russia with its implementation of the “parallel import” policy from friendly third countries (UNCTAD, 2022; Shmagun, 2024; Reuters, 2023).

In his 2009 study, Early develops competing realist and liberal explanations for sanctions-busting, ultimately finding stronger support for the liberal perspective that emphasizes the role of profit-maximizing firms and commercial interests. He stresses that profit-seeking firms in third-party states are the primary drivers of sanctions evasion, lobbying their governments to avoid participating in sanctioning efforts or turn a blind eye to sanctions-busting trade. The key contribution of Early’s research is his finding that close allies of the sender state are often more likely to sanctions-bust than other third-party states, especially when they have substantial commercial relationships with the sanctioned target, which refutes the common realist belief that allies of the sending states would align their foreign policy with the sanctioning country.

In his follow-up 2012 paper, Early further refines his argument by theorizing that the effect of alliance relationships on sanctions enforcement is conditional on the economic dependence between third-party states and the sanctioned target. He argues that while allies with weak commercial ties are likely to support sanctions, those with significant economic stakes are more inclined to circumvent them, knowing that their alliance status provides a degree of protection from coercive enforcement. Early’s empirical analysis of ninety-six U.S. sanctions episodes supports this logic, demonstrating that the allies whose cooperation is most critical for sanctions success are often the ones most likely to defect.

I also focus on the literature which covers the emergence and increasing prominence of ROs and their impact on the survival of authoritarian regimes, the phenomenon which became known as ‘authoritarian regionalism’. Libman and Obydenkova (2018, 2019), Debre (2022, 2025), and Cottiero and Haggard (2023) argue that autocratic regimes form such international bodies in order to withstand external pressure and ensure the survival of their regime. They draw a parallel between democratic ROs and autocratic ROs and argue that such ROs help stabilize and legitimize autocratic rule, since such entities significantly stall democratization among their members. Furthermore, Debre (2022) introduces a novel concept of “Club of Autocrats”, IOs or ROs, where all or most members are countries with authoritarian regimes.

While existing research has explored sanctions and authoritarian regionalism, important gaps still remain. First of all, we can notice significant contradictions and mixed findings regarding the effectiveness of sanctions. Marinov argues that sanctions significantly increase the likelihood of leadership turnover, particularly in democratic regimes. In contrast, Early and Peksen emphasize that autocratic regimes employ sophisticated survival strategies, such as developing shadow economies, exploiting profit-driven third-party actors, and leveraging alliances to circumvent economic restrictions, often successfully mitigating sanctions’ destabilizing effects. These conflicting findings highlight a gap in understanding the true effectiveness of sanctions across different political regimes. Secondly, despite emerging research on authoritarian ROs and IOs, the literature has not thoroughly examined how these “Clubs of Autocrats” specifically facilitate economic resilience and sanctions evasion collectively. The

papers on authoritarian regionalism examine how these entities stall democratization among their members and how they shield their members from external threats, but there is not much work focusing specifically on authoritarian IOs' effects on sanctions' circumvention and increased regime survivability. Consequently, this study addresses these gaps by analyzing how authoritarian IOs institutionalize and enhance collective sanctions circumvention, providing a deeper understanding of regime survivability under international economic pressure.

Theory

The theoretical approach of my Capstone project is founded on several assumptions. Firstly, authoritarian leaders are primarily focused on maintaining their regimes and ensuring their political survival in office, often achieved through collaboration with fellow regimes (von Soest 2015; Ginsburg, 2020; Cottiero and Emmons, 2024). This assumption primarily draws from a realist school of thought, which argues that regimes prioritize self-preservation above other objectives. Secondly, economic and political sanctions can indeed trigger political instability and can even result in regime change. We noticed such transformations when sanctions were imposed on Nicaragua in 1996, and on Thailand in 1993 (von Soest and Wahman, 2014). However, such an outcome heavily depends on internal political structures, regime types (personalist regimes are more likely to comply with sanctions), and other factors (Escribà-Folch and Wright, 2010). Lastly, today, authoritarian regimes are actively engaged in strategic regional and international alliances, which was described by Maria Debre as the “Club of Autocrats”, an entity that counteracts external pressure and global isolation (Debre 2022, 2025).

The key actors that I am planning to focus on include authoritarian regimes, as well as states that are subjects of significant international pressure. I primarily focus on the state level, which includes the regime and its institutional structure responsible for strategic decision-making and survival. Rather than focusing on individual leaders or public opinion, this study treats the state as the principal and key agent through which survival strategies and policies, including alliance formation and sanctions evasion, are implemented. I will also focus on international and regional authoritarian organizations, like the SCO, the EEU and others, which act as crucial actors that provide diplomatic solidarity, economic support, and strategic coordination, consequently strengthening the regime resilience of their members. On the other side, sanctioning entities include Western democracies and IOs, such as the US, the EU, the UN, G7. These actors design, coordinate, and enforce sanctions, aiming to exert maximum pressure on target regimes and force them to comply with their demands, or even result in regime change. My theoretical framework consists of three primary mechanisms that explain how membership in authoritarian IOs enhances the resilience of sanctioned regimes.

The first mechanism includes material substitution. Authoritarian IOs introduce economic alternatives that help member states offset the direct costs of sanctions. As underlined in Cottiero et al.'s paper (2024), financial aid can significantly bolster the resilience of authoritarian regimes. In autocratic IOs, most of the aid comes from wealthy illiberal member states with the intent of

supporting fellow authoritarian co-members’ resilience. The received aid and funds can be used to support development projects that are popular with the domestic audience; these resources can be used to deal with crises, and they can be used to sustain elite patronage networks (Cottiero et al., 2024).

The second mechanism involves diplomatic shielding. Autocratic alliances offer collective political backing, normative legitimacy, and a platform to counteract international condemnation, thereby reducing the isolating effects of sanctions. Authoritarian IOs endorse illiberal incumbents and promote norms such as “unlimited sovereignty”. Although many authoritarian IOs (just like many democratic IOs) prefer a non-interference policy when dealing with domestic issues, autocratic IOs are more likely to support regimes restricting activities that democracies would tolerate, for instance, protests (Cottiero et al., 2024).

Finally, strategic coordination. Authoritarian IOs often serve as platforms for sharing best practices and collaborative strategies that could damage the standing of regimes. For instance, counter-regime protests, coups d’état as well as sanctions. Through such close coordination, member states agree on collective responses to threats, introduce common messaging, and undertake legislative actions to bolster regime stability (Cottiero et al., 2024).

Overall, the mechanisms can be summarized in the diagram below.

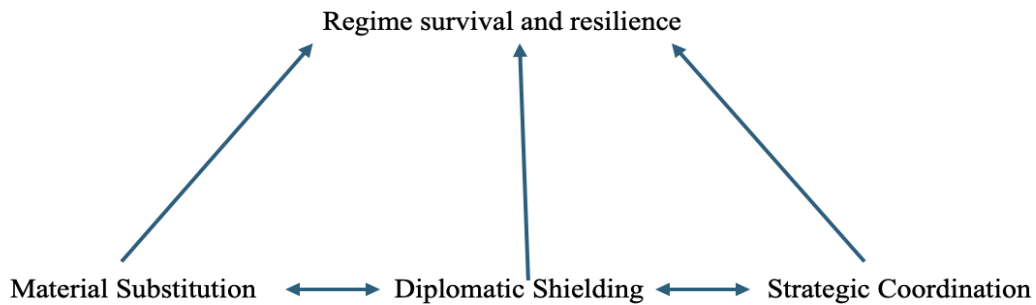


Figure 1. Mechanisms of Sanctions Circumvention and Regime Resilience

Based on the previous literature and the theoretical mechanisms I have outlined earlier, I argue that, today, authoritarian regimes actively form autocratic ROs and IOs, the “Club of Autocrats”. The literature on autocratic alliances and authoritarian regionalism emphasizes that these entities aim to safeguard regime stability among their members, withstand any forms of external pressure, as well as inhibit democratization (Libman and Obydenkova, 2018, 2019; Debre, 2022, 2025; Cottiero and Haggard, 2023, 2024). I further underline that such alliances, aside from preventing democratization, provide sanctioned regimes with diplomatic solidarity, economic material support, and strategic cooperation. Consequently, participation in such IOs or ROs significantly improves sanctioned regimes’ diplomatic standing and economic resilience, which allows them to resist external pressures more effectively.

Building off the literature gaps and the theoretical mechanisms above, I suggest several testable hypotheses:

H1: Membership in authoritarian alliances significantly enhances the ability of autocratic states to resist sanctions and maintain regime stability.

H2: Participation in authoritarian alliances significantly reduces the likelihood of leadership turnover in autocratic states subjected to international sanctions.

The first hypothesis implies that authoritarian ROs and IOs provide vital diplomatic support, economic resources, and offer strategic cooperation, which enables regimes to mitigate economic hardships and international isolation caused by sanctions. As a result, regimes in these alliances are better equipped to maintain internal stability and political cohesion.

The second hypothesis underscores that autocratic alliances help regimes sustain domestic legitimacy and satisfy elites through diplomatic recognition and external economic support. This significantly reduces internal pressures and elite defections, thus decreasing the probability of forced leadership changes under sanction-induced stress.

Overall, this theoretical framework provides insight into the complex dynamics through which authoritarian regimes manage to mitigate the effects of international sanctions and global isolation. While sanctions inherently aim to destabilize regimes by creating severe economic and political pressures, authoritarian states implement various strategies to combat these effects. My hypotheses build directly from previous literature, emphasizing that membership and active participation in authoritarian ROs and IOs, the “Club of Autocrats”, significantly strengthen regime stability and reduce the likelihood of leadership turnover. By examining these mechanisms empirically, with the focus on both sending and target states, my research seeks to expand the understanding of how authoritarian alliances allow sanctioned regimes to survive despite extreme external pressure.

Research Design

The unit of analysis in this paper is country-year, which allows for a time-series cross-sectional analysis of authoritarian regime stability and leadership turnover from 1990 to 2023. The sample includes all countries classified as authoritarian regimes based on the Geddes, Wright, and Frantz (GWF) dataset, Polity5 scores, and V-Dem regime classifications (Geddes, Wright, Frantz, 2014). Based on these datasets, I classify an authoritarian state if at least 2 out of 3 datasets classify it as autocratic (GWF dictatorship / Polity ≤ 5 / V-Dem LDI < 0.42) (Kasuya, Mori, 2019). I use this classification since there are many mixed regimes. In case both datasets depict the regime as mixed, I can manually review a state and decide whether to include the regime or not. I include only surviving authoritarian regimes, those that faced international sanctions and those that did not. The latter will be used to examine the baseline condition of an

autocratic regime without any external pressure. The time period from 1990 to 2023 was specifically chosen to reflect the post-Cold War era, the period characterized by two key trends. First, international sanctions became the most prominent tool of international economic and political coercion. Second, authoritarian IOs and ROs began rapidly emerging and gaining geopolitical significance (e.g., SCO, EEU, Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and many others).

This study includes two key dependent variables. My first DV is regime stability. I define it as the durability or longevity of the authoritarian regime. I plan to operationalize it through: regime duration (in years) from the GWF dataset; regime failure events (binary), defined by major breakdowns or shifts in regime type, 0 no major changes, 1 major shifts in regime. I will use GWF as my primary dataset (Geddes, Wright, Frantz, 2014). It is particularly suited for this analysis due to its comprehensive focus on autocratic regimes and their transitions. To ensure the robustness of my findings, I will cross-validate the results using the Polity5 and V-Dem datasets, which provide alternative measures of regime characteristics and changes. My second DV is leadership turnover. I define it as the stability of political leadership. I plan to operationalize it through irregular leadership transitions (e.g., coups) using the Archigos dataset (Goemans, Gleditsch, Chiozza, 2009).

My independent variables include membership in authoritarian IOs. I define an authoritarian IO as an entity predominantly composed of autocratic member states and structured in ways that strengthen regime survival rather than promote liberal-democratic norms. Such IOs provide material, political, and ideational resources that enable member regimes to withstand external democratic pressures and resist liberalizing influences, consistent with definitions in the literature on autocratic regionalism (Debre, Libman, Cottiero). Building on this foundation, I further refine the concept by incorporating the framework of Tallberg et al. (2020), who demonstrate that liberal IOs are characterized by high democratic density among their members and commitments to liberal norms such as democracy promotion, human rights, and sustainable development. On the contrary, I identify authoritarian IOs as those with low average democratic density, which is measured via Polity or V-Dem scores, weak or absent commitments to liberal norms, and institutional designs that limit pooling of authority, delegation to supranational bodies, and access for transnational actors. Membership in such IOs is thus defined not only by the regime type of participants but also by the organization's normative orientation and institutional structure.

I plan to operationalize my first IV through an ordinal measure to see whether a state is a full member of a recognized authoritarian IO/RO (e.g., SCO, EEU, CSTO, and others), where 0 = not a member, 1 = observer, 2 = full member. I am also planning to examine a Weighted Autocratic IO Engagement Score. It will allow me to examine not only if a state is a member of one or several autocratic IOs but also assess the relative strength of each IO. If an autocratic state is a member of several strong authoritarian IOs, the effect of the autocratic club on sanctions effectiveness and regime stability would be more significant. To complete this examination, I will have to identify the relevant IOs and then assign a weight based on the IO characteristics.

For instance, the degree of institutionalization (does an IO have strict binding treaties), military capacity (any defense guarantees), economic integration (free trade area, customs union, economic union, etc.), membership size, and political alignment (similar ideology). The weights can be based on a scoring rubric like military capacity +0.4; economic integration +0.3; membership size + 0.2; political alignment: +0.1.

I envision the formula to look like:

$$Autocratic\ IO\ score_i = \sum_{j=1}^n (Membership_{ij} \times Weight_j)$$

Where i refers to the country index (e.g., Russia, Iran, Syria, etc.); j is the IO index (e.g., SCO, CSTO, EEU, etc.); n is the total number of IOs included in the score calculation; $Membership_{ij}$ is the membership status of a country i in an IO j : 0=not a member; 1=observer; 2=full member. $Weight_j$ is the assigned weight for the IO j , which depicts the IO's strength or importance.

My other IV includes sanctions severity, which I define based on the escalation stages model from Glasl's (1982) paper and the coercive strategies framework developed by Pape (1996). I outline four stages of sanctions escalation: (1) initial warning measures (e.g., travel bans, limited asset freezes, symbolic diplomatic actions); (2) targeted sector sanctions (focused restrictions on specific industries while avoiding essential goods); (3) broader economic measures (expanded restrictions affecting multiple sectors and financial systems); and (4) comprehensive sanctions involving near-total economic isolation. Sanctions severity will be coded using the Global Sanctions Database (GSDB) and the Threat and Imposition of Economic Sanctions (TIES) datasets and operationalized as an ordinal scale (0 = no sanctions; 1 = warning measures, 2 = targeted, 3 = financial, 4 = comprehensive). I will also examine duration and number of concurrent sanctions, since some authoritarian regimes are heavily sanctioned or have been under such restrictions for more than several decades.

My study will also include several control variables that can explain authoritarian resilience. These include GDP per capita to account for economic capacity, fossil fuel income as a percentage of GDP to capture resource-based regime financing, and regime type (e.g., personalist, military, single-party), which affects how regimes respond to pressure, and since some regimes are more susceptible to international pressure (Escribà-Folch, Abel, and Wright, 2010). I also control for the number of institutional veto players, which may constrain leadership flexibility (Jeong, Peksen, 2019), and trade volume with non-sanctioning countries as a proxy for access to alternative economic support. In addition, I include fixed effects (μ_i) to account for unobserved, time-invariant differences between countries, such as political history or geographic location.

To empirically test my hypotheses, I use two main quantitative models to test how sanctions severity and membership in authoritarian IOs influence regime stability and leadership

turnover. To test my first hypothesis, I will utilize the Cox proportional hazards model. I decided to use this model since it would allow me to estimate the hazard rate, the probability that an authoritarian regime will fail (collapse or experience a major breakdown) at a specific point in time, given that it has survived up until that point. The model formula is going to look like:

$$h(t) = h_0(t) \times \exp(\beta_1 \times \text{SanctionsSeverity} + \beta_2 \times \text{AutocraticIOScore} + \beta_3 \times (\text{SanctionsSeverity} \times \text{AutocraticIOScore}) + \chi_\gamma)$$

Where $h(t)$ is the hazard rate: the probability that the regime fails at time; $h_0(t)$ is the baseline hazard rate; $\beta_1 \times \text{SanctionsSeverity}$ is the effect of sanctions severity on the hazard of regime failure; $\beta_2 \times \text{AutocraticIOScore}$ is the effect of authoritarian IO membership on the hazard; $\beta_3 \times (\text{SanctionsSeverity} \times \text{AutocraticIOScore})$ is the interaction term (does IO membership moderate (weaken or strengthen) the effect of sanctions?); finally, χ_γ are my control variables.

For my second hypothesis, I will be using a random effects logistic regression model. I will be using this model because it will allow me to estimate the probability that a regime experiences regime failure (1 = failure, 0 = stable), or a leader experiences irregular turnover (e.g. through a coup). The model formula is going to look like:

$$\Pr(Y_{it} = 1) = \text{logit}^{-1}(\beta_0 + \beta_1 \times \text{SanctionsSeverity} + \beta_2 \times \text{AutocraticIOScore} + \beta_3 \times (\text{SanctionsSeverity} \times \text{AutocraticIOScore}) + \chi_\gamma + \mu_i)$$

Where Y_{it} is a leadership turnover in country i , year t (1 = turnover, 0 = no turnover); $\text{logit}^{-1} \times$ is a logistic function converting linear predictor into probability (between 0 and 1); μ_i is a random intercept for each country (accounts for unobserved, time-invariant country characteristics).

In addition to the quantitative analysis, in this study, I will include qualitative case studies of Russia, Iran, and Syria (under Bashar al-Assad) to explore how these authoritarian regimes have navigated international sanctions and membership (or lack of such) in authoritarian international organizations affected their regime stability and decreased the effectiveness of the sanctions imposed against them. These cases were specifically selected for their variation in both sanction exposure and IO engagement. Russia, as a founding member of multiple autocratic alliances such as the SCO, the EEU, the CSTO, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), offers a critical case for understanding how these institutions bolster regime stability during periods of intense international pressure. Iran, while heavily sanctioned, has historically operated more independently and had more of an isolationist foreign policy; however, more recently, the country has increasingly sought closer ties with authoritarian states and institutions. Syria, on the other hand, lacked substantial IO membership but had relied on bilateral support from authoritarian allies like Russia and Iran.

Although my research design is extensive, I do believe that there are multiple challenges that might arise when conducting this study. First, there is a problem of endogeneity, as more

stable regimes may be more likely to join authoritarian IOs, which creates potential reverse causality. This can be addressed by using lagged IVs, robustness checks, or instrumental variables. Secondly, Authoritarian IOs vary in strength and function, and membership may not reflect meaningful support (some IOs are more symbolic than strategic). This can be mitigated by developing a weighted index of IO participation, which I mentioned. Finally, data limitations. Sanctions data may differ between datasets, which can affect the sample size or misrepresent patterns. This problem can be handled through cross-validation with multiple datasets and transparent coding.

Implications

The findings of this study suggest that orthodox traditional approaches to sanctions are becoming less and less relevant in the context of growing authoritarian collaboration through IOs and ROs. Policymakers should rethink sanction design to account for the broader networks that sustain autocratic regimes. Rather than focusing solely on individual states, future sanctions should target the authoritarian alliances themselves, which provide critical material, diplomatic, and strategic support. This could include imposing secondary sanctions on firms, banks, or state entities operating within these authoritarian-led organizations, thus disrupting the structural foundations that enable sanctioned regimes to survive international pressure.

A second implication underlines the need to counter diplomatic shielding provided by authoritarian alliances. These organizations offer their members political legitimacy and collective resistance against international condemnation, decreasing the effectiveness of isolation strategies. Western democracies and liberal IOs should prioritize delegitimizing authoritarian IOs by exposing their role in sustaining repression and engaging diplomatically with neutral or non-aligned states to prevent their drift into authoritarian spheres of influence.

Third, the international community should focus on strengthening alternative liberal IOs, alliances, and partnerships, specifically, in the context of authoritarian states' attempts to gain support from developing countries. By providing attractive economic, political, and security alternatives to authoritarian alliances, liberal democracies can reduce the incentives for vulnerable states to seek support from authoritarian networks. Expanding access to international development initiatives, trade agreements, and diplomatic forums focusing on commitment to democratic norms can help tilt the balance in favor of liberal institutions and diminish the appeal of the "Club of Autocrats". In other words, the liberal international community should win the battle for hearts and minds.

Finally, this research underscores the necessity of recognizing the limits of sanctions. While sanctions remain a key tool of international pressure, they often fail when authoritarian regimes can rely on external alliances for material and diplomatic support. Policymakers must view sanctions not as standalone measures, but as one component of a broader strategy that combines economic coercion with diplomatic engagement, support for civil society, and information campaigns to erode authoritarian resilience. Without such a multidimensional

approach, sanctions are likely to remain strong but ineffective instruments in the struggle against autocracies.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the evolving dynamics of authoritarian regimes under international sanctions reveal a novel relationship between global coercion and strategic resilience. This study has demonstrated that traditional sanction approaches, targeting individual states through economic isolation, frequently fail in their objectives when sanctioned states utilize collective responses from authoritarian alliances. As can be seen through quantitative analyses and illustrative case studies of Russia, Iran, and Syria, authoritarian IOs and ROs have emerged as pivotal mechanisms enabling sanctioned states to mitigate sanctions' intended pressures.

The research outlined three critical mechanisms: material substitution, diplomatic shielding, and strategic coordination, that authoritarian alliances utilize to counteract sanctions. Through material substitution, these alliances provide sanctioned regimes with crucial economic resources and alternative financial funds, reducing their dependence on global economic systems dominated by sanctioning states and allowing them to satisfy their domestic audiences. Diplomatic shielding further empowers these regimes, offering political legitimacy and collective diplomatic backing, thereby effectively weakening the international community's ability to isolate targeted states. Lastly, strategic coordination facilitates a unified authoritarian front, promoting shared tactics and collective strategies that reinforce internal regime stability and external resistance.

This study's empirical findings could suggest a clear pattern: membership in authoritarian IOs significantly enhances regime durability and decreases the likelihood of leadership turnover under sanctions-induced stress. The implications of these findings are profound for policymakers aiming to counter authoritarian resilience. Effective future sanctions policies must adopt a broader, network-focused perspective rather than isolated, state-specific approaches. By targeting authoritarian alliances and disrupting their capacity to provide material, diplomatic, and strategic support, sanctions could regain significant efficacy and hurt authoritarian regimes.

Furthermore, democratic states and IOs must actively engage in diplomatic efforts aimed at delegitimizing authoritarian IOs, countering the normative narratives these organizations promote. Moreover, strengthening liberal IOs and providing appealing alternatives to authoritarian alliances could significantly diminish the allure of authoritarian regionalism.

Ultimately, this research underscores the necessity of adopting a comprehensive strategy, combining economic coercion with diplomatic engagement, enhanced support for civil society, and strategic communication initiatives. Sanctions alone, without consideration of the complex institutional and diplomatic networks sustaining authoritarian regimes, will likely remain inadequate and ineffective. By recognizing and addressing the strategic adaptability of autocratic states, the international community can better design measures that effectively support

democratic governance and international norms, even in the face of sophisticated authoritarian collaboration

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