Interview – Dawid Walentek

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E-INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, AUG 8 2022

This interview is part of a series of interviews with academics and practitioners at an early stage of their career. The interviews discuss current research and projects, as well as advice for other early career scholars.

Dawid Walentek (PhD), is a political economist at the University of Warsaw. Dawid's research area is conflict and cooperation in international relations. He has published in International Interactions, Public Choice and the Journal of European Integration. His article on Economic Peace received the EISA Best Graduate Paper Award in 2019. Dawid is also a member of the Centre for Complex Systems Studies (CCSS) at the University of Utrecht. Before joining academia he was a Trade Officer at the Embassy of the Republic of Poland in The Hague.

What (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking or encouraged you to pursue your area of research?

In the summer of 2014 Russia introduced counter-sanctions against, among others, the European Union. At the time I was working at the Embassy of the Republic of Poland in The Hague, in the Trade Section that was directly under the supervision of the Ministry of the Economy. The morning after the measures were introduced, we received a list of products that needed to find an alternative market – immediately. Russian counter-sanctions were targeting European food exports and it was an important market for Polish producers. At the time the Minister of Economy was vice-Prime Minister Janusz Piechociński from the PSL, an agrarian party that was a junior coalition member with the ruling Civic Platform, adding additional political weight to the issue of Russian counter-sanctions. In 2014 the Prime Minister in Poland was Donald Tusk and Poland was among the most hawkish Member States in respect to restrictions on Russia, positioning itself as a representative of Kiev in Brussels. First, this created a fascinating dynamic, with conflicting interests at the domestic and international level. Second, it made me think more about sanctions – how in a liberal order states and leaders that see themselves in the vanguard of liberalism chose economic means to reach political goals. I address the former in an article in the Journal of European Integration looking at the consensus in the European Council on sanctions against Russia, and I study the later in a working paper on Economic Peace and my dissertation more broadly.

What are the main factors that drive states towards using sanctions as opposed to other tools in international relations?

A Western diplomat told me during a small conference bringing sanction scholars and practitioners together that "sometimes you have to do more than diplomatic pressure, but you won't go to war; then you use sanctions". And this indeed seems to be the logic that drives democratic leaders – and democracies are the most prolific users of this tool. The underpinning mechanism seems to be two-fold. On the one hand, democratic leaders appear to receive a boost in popularity for engaging in economic sanctions – regardless of the outcome. Second, democracies are more likely to succeed at the threat stage of economic sanctions – because of higher audience costs for stepping back and lower rates of uncertainty about their intentions. These two mechanisms reinforce one another, this probably explains part of the rise in economic coercion since the end the Cold War.

What conditions make sanctions more or less effective?

I think there is a growing consensus on sanctions' effectiveness. To start, sanctions are more likely to succeed if they are more costly to the target state. And the same applies to threats of sanctions, prospective high costs increase the chances of a successful threat. This is rather intuitive, yet there are cases that substantially defy this logic, for example, Iraq, which lost around half of its GDP due to sanctions – and Russia is currently on this trajectory too. Second, it matters how much states know about one another at the threat stage for a threat to be successful; one way to measure this knowledge is by looking at alliances. Again, this is somehow intuitive, as cheap talk will not get you far. Third, the potential for the domestic audience of the sanctioned state to perceive the sanctions as costly seems to matter most also at the threat stage – it makes backing-off an attractive avenue. Fourth, we also know that multilateral sanctions are, on average, more effective. At the same time, we have important cases that do not follow this trend and it makes the discussion of effectiveness difficult. In addition, the topic is often studied with a particular institutional perspective – for example the effectiveness of the EU sanctions – which is highly relevant, but also makes it harder to provide a satisfactory answer to the question "when do sanctions work?". Certainly a question of increasing urgency.

Have the EU's sanctions against Russia been effective, and do you see these sanctions enduring moving forward?

This question links neatly with the previous one. The mere idea of success, or being effective, in this case is problematic. Here, I would say that Western sanctions against Russia were effective – given what was possible – as they have tamed Putin's ambitions. However, the situation in Ukraine is far from optimal, and making Nord Stream 2 operational is likely to further deteriorate it. I think that the European Council will keep sanctions in place – Russia does little to deescalate the conflict, and the poisoning and imprisonment of Navalny has been a reminder to European elites. Lifting sanctions and also opening Nord Stream 2 would send a signal of weakness from the EU; and that's not what European leaders want at the moment.

What are you currently working on?

When it comes to sanctions, I am working on cooperation on coercion. I want to find out under what circumstances senders of sanctions decide to work together on a sanction regime. The preliminary findings show two mechanisms at play. First, I identify a strong role in the state's reputation for adherence to any past sanction regimes. Second, repeated interaction appears to help cooperation on sanctions. In other words, it seems that when it comes to multilateral economic coercion, building a coalition is driven by two rules: "I will do to you, what you have done to others" and "I will do to you, what you have done to me". I have gathered these findings in a working paper. Interestingly, the results on cooperation on economic sanctions are consistent with recent theoretical work on the evolution of cooperation in a broader sense.

I am currently a Post-Doc at the University of Warsaw, working on a project focused on refugee policy across Europe. Our objective is to move away from the literature predominantly focused on the type of migrants or refugees that Europeans want or do not want and focus on what kind of refugee policy is desired across the EU. We plan to investigate questions on European solidarity, the right to work or move, or the costs of the policy. We have recently conducted a large survey experiment in 10 Member States with around 16,000 participants. You can find more about this current project on our website.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars?

A PhD is a job and you are not in education any more. While being a student is a great lifestyle, making your life all about your PhD can be exhausting. Take your holidays and claim back overtime, do not check your e-mail after work (it's hard, I am typing these words on a Tuesday at 21:30) and do not assume that people will work on weekends