

Cooperation after exit: how informality is sustaining EU–UK cooperation on sanction negotiations

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The Trump administration's decision to withdraw from the World Health Organization (2026), Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger's withdrawal from the Economic Community of West African States (2025) and, previously, the United Kingdom's departure from the European Union (2021) are just some of the latest instances of unilateral exits from international organizations (IOs). Given the growing backlash against international institutions, the scholarship on the causes and implications of voluntary withdrawals has been booming. Yet we still have a limited understanding of how such withdrawals affect future cooperation between the exiting state and the remaining members. A case such as the impact of Brexit on sanctions cooperation between the UK and the EU²⁷ can help us shed light on this question.

Before Brexit, the UK was arguably a major contributor to the EU sanctions machine, a critical component of European security governance and one of Brussels' fundamental 'instruments of power'.¹ In 2014, the UK played a pivotal role in building the three-staged sanction regime against Russia. However, when the latter launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the UK no longer had access to the formal institutionalized channels of influence afforded by EU membership. The EU, for its part, had lost one of its most competent member states in the area of sanctions policy and a strong advocate of harsh measures against Moscow. From 2016, both experts and academics expressed concerns not only about the blow that the Brexit vote had dealt to EU sanctions capabilities,² but also about the future of UK–EU relations, especially in light

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¹ Stacie E. Goddard, Paul K. MacDonald and Daniel H. Nexon, 'Repertoires of statecraft: instruments and logics of power politics', *International Relations* 33: 2, 2019, pp. 304–21, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0047117819834625>.

² Michael Albrecht vom Kolke, Ryan D. Junck, Margot Sève and Vanessa K. McGoldrick, 'Impact of Brexit on UK and EU sanctions frameworks', 26 Jan. 2021, <https://www.skadden.com/insights/publications/2021/01/2021-insights/litigation-controversy/impact-of-brexite-on-uk-and-eu-sanctions-frameworks>; Richard Nephew and David Mortlock, 'Brexit's implications for UK and European sanctions policy', Center on Global Energy Policy research project, began Oct. 2016, <https://people.climate.columbia.edu/projects/view/181>. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 3 March 2026).

of the tensions between the UK and the EU during the negotiation of the withdrawal agreement.³ Yet, after Russia's war of aggression, the EU managed to adopt its most ambitious and complex sanction measures to date and the UK was still able to play an influential role in the western response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, working closely with the EU27 to ensure a robust and ambitious policy response. The question is, how was this post-Brexit cooperation possible?

While the severity of the war and the shared interests between the UK and EU27 certainly played a role, informality was key. Some informal arrangements predated Brexit and had already played a key role in sanctions-building in 2014 (for example, the G7 contact group on sanctions), but many more were created after 2022 in the aftermath of Russia's war of aggression. However, the presence of informal channels does not mean that the nature of the cooperation between the UK and the EU was unchanged. Informal channels cannot replicate the density, frequency and codified nature of institutionalized cooperation. Compared to the situation in 2014, since 2022 British diplomats have bemoaned their lack of access to EU Council negotiations from the very early stages of the decision-making process. Despite the presence of informal channels as well as formal IOs where European countries cooperate (for example, NATO), the role of the UK in European foreign policy decision-making has been profoundly transformed.

The findings in this article suggest that, contrary to initial expectations, Brexit has not fundamentally altered the EU's ability to impose and enforce sanctions, even though close coordination with both Washington and London is a *sine qua non* for the effectiveness of EU sanctions policy. Moreover, the article shows that formal membership in an IO is a significant source of influence, which cannot be rivalled by informal, ad hoc cooperation in less institutionalized settings. Overall, the article shows how Brexit contributed to the transformation of European security governance against the backdrop of Russia's war of aggression,⁴ while shedding light specifically on the transformed role of the UK in European security architecture.

Focusing exclusively on sanctions policy, the article holds some issue characteristics (e.g., issue salience) and decision-making rules at the EU level constant by design. While the aim of the article is to study the effects on cooperation of a voluntary withdrawal, it also covers pre-Brexit cooperation to offer a point of comparison. Without knowing how the UK worked with the rest of the EU member states before Brexit, it would be difficult to assess exactly how withdrawal really changed the nature of cooperation and the scope of

³ Indre Krivaite and Pavi Prakash Nair, 'Brexit, bridges, and barriers: where next for EU-UK relations?', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 29 Jan. 2025, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/01/brexit-bridges-and-barriers-where-next-for-eu-uk-relations>; Richard G. Whitman, 'The UK's European diplomatic strategy for Brexit and beyond', *International Affairs*, 95: 2, 2019, pp. 383–404, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiz031>.

⁴ See the introduction to this special section: Sarah Wolff, Karolina Pomorska and Richard Whitman, 'Security provision in and beyond Europe: transformed narratives and roles in times of interregnum', *International Affairs* 102: 4, 2026, pp. 1109–18, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iaag090>.

UK influence. For the two periods, the article investigates 1) the cooperation venues available to the UK; 2) the different institutional characteristics of these venues; and 3) any resulting changes in the UK's role and the EU's capabilities.

Data was gathered by means of semi-structured interviews with officials in European capitals (European executives and officials in ministries of foreign affairs) and at the EU level, as well as national delegates in Brussels, who had first-hand knowledge of the negotiations under discussion. The interview evidence is complemented by the analysis of primary documents and secondary literature. Due to the evolving situation of the peace talks under the Trump administration, the analysis extends to the end of the Biden presidency (December 2024).

The article makes several key contributions to the scholarship on IOs, global governance and EU foreign policy. In particular, it directly speaks to the International Relations literature on the effects of voluntary exits from IOs on future cooperation among states,⁵ in that it provides insights into the effects of voluntary withdrawals from an IO on future cooperation between the exiting and remaining members. Both the IR scholarship on voluntary withdrawals from IOs⁶ and theories of European disintegration⁷ have accounted for the reasons why a country might leave an international or supranational organization. However, we know relatively little about the *consequences* of such a withdrawal on future cooperation.

The article shows how informality can help compensate for the negative externalities of voluntary withdrawals, while at the same time illustrating the limitations of informal arrangements. EU–UK sanction cooperation pre- and post-Brexit provides an ideal case-study to compare the respective strengths of formal and informal institutions, as it allows an examination of how informal arrangements can come to replace what was once a highly institutionalized relationship. At a time when policy-makers are considering the institutionalization of informal arrangements (for example, the G7) to shield cooperation among allies from domestic political upheaval,⁸ research on the respective added value of formal and informal institutions bears significant policy relevance beyond Europe.

⁵ Averell Schmidt, 'Damaged relations: how treaty withdrawal impacts international cooperation', *American Journal of Political Science* 69: 1, 2025, pp. 223–39, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12826>.

⁶ Inken von Borzyskowski and Felicity Vabulas, 'Hello, goodbye: when do states withdraw from international organizations?', *The Review of International Organizations*, vol. 14, 2019, pp. 335–66, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11558-019-09352-2>.

⁷ Frank Schimmelfennig, 'Rebordering Europe: external boundaries and integration in the European Union', *Journal of European Public Policy*, 28: 3, 2021, pp. 311–30, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2021.1881589>; Frank Schimmelfennig, 'Brexit: negotiating differentiated disintegration in the EU', *Journal of European Public Policy*, 25: 8, 2018, pp. 1154–73, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2018.1467954>; Douglas Webber, *European disintegration? The politics of crisis in the European Union* (London: Red Globe Press, 2018); Hans Vollaard, 'Explaining European disintegration', *Journal of Common Market Studies* 52: 5, 2014, pp. 1142–59, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12132>; Simon Bulmer and Jonathan Joseph, 'European integration in crisis? Of supranational integration, hegemonic projects and domestic politics', *European Journal of International Relations* 22: 4, 2015, pp. 725–48, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066115612558>.

⁸ John J. Hamre, Victor Cha, Emily Benson, Max Bergmann, Erin L. Murphy and Caitlin Welsh, 'Bending' the architecture: reimagining the G7, Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2024, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/bending-architecture-reimagining-g7>.

Moreover, the article challenges neo-realist views on the significance of international institutions. Far from being epiphenomenal, such institutions afford countries a degree of influence on international cooperation and policy outcomes that they would not otherwise have. At least as far as sanctions policy is concerned, the negative externalities of the UK's withdrawal seem to fall predominantly on the UK, rather than the EU bloc, which still benefits from UK expertise through informal venues. The UK, on the other hand, is no longer embedded in the EU's institutional architecture or decision-making process, which means that it can now only influence decisions in a more limited manner, and only in the later stages of negotiations.

The article starts by examining how existing literature has studied the effects of voluntary withdrawals on international cooperation. The article then presents a framework of analysis to study the role of informality in sustaining cooperation between the exiting state and the remaining member states after a withdrawal. The empirical section explores this framework by exploring informal cooperation on sanctions policy between the UK and the EU27 after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The conclusion elaborates on the article's findings and their policy relevance in and beyond Europe.

How voluntary withdrawals affect international cooperation

Different theories of international relations provide diverging expectations as to the effect of a voluntary withdrawal on future cooperation. Neo-realist theories and rational choice approaches do not see institutions as having an independent effect on cooperation, which is instead attributed to the distribution of power⁹ or domestic politics.¹⁰ From this perspective, actors establish and act through institutions for reasons of self-interest. To the extent that cooperative action can help maximize or optimize actors' interests (for example, by overcoming collective action problems, reducing uncertainty or lowering the costs of cooperation), then states will use institutions to coordinate their behaviour with other countries. Institutional cooperation is therefore instrumental: actors enter interactions with predetermined power resources and interests, navigating institutional constraints and opportunities strategically.¹¹ Any changes in cooperation, if they occur, are not the result of a withdrawal. Rather, both the country's exit and any change in cooperation are the consequence of new political preferences or variations in the distribution of power. In other words, neo-realists argue, unilateral exits from IOs do not have an independent effect on cooperation. Observers and scholars of Brexit, however,

⁹ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of international politics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979).

¹⁰ Andrew Moravcsik, 'Preferences and power in the European Community: a liberal intergovernmentalist approach', *Journal of Common Market Studies* 31: 4, 1993, pp. 473–524, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5965.1993.tb00477.x>.

¹¹ John J. Mearsheimer, 'The false promise of international institutions', *International Security* 19: 3, 1994–5, pp. 5–49, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2539078>.

were quick to challenge this view.¹² Even before the actual entry into effect of the withdrawal agreement, the UK was no longer an active participant in—nor was able to influence—negotiations of the EU's Foreign Affairs Council.¹³ Moreover, the UK's reputation was tarnished¹⁴ and relations with the institutions and many of the remaining members of the EU became rather strained.

Reputational theories of international cooperation take very seriously the effect of a country's voluntary withdrawal on its future reputation.¹⁵ Reputation refers to others' perception of a country based on its past behaviour. Other countries are more likely to believe in the credibility of a country's commitment if it has a track record of keeping its word. From this perspective, unilaterally withdrawing from an IO damages the exiting country's reputation and will discourage other countries from future cooperation. Similarly, positive withdrawal experiences tend to encourage support for exit from IOs in other countries, while negative withdrawal experiences have the opposite effect.¹⁶

Nuancing the reputational argument, experiential theory holds that states will respond differently to a voluntary withdrawal depending on whether they belong to the organization the country is exiting.¹⁷ Future cooperation with IO members will likely suffer as a result of the withdrawal, which is viewed as a betrayal of shared obligations and commitments. Non-members, on the other hand, will likely continue their cooperation with the withdrawing state, as they 'neither experience the breaking of shared commitments nor are implicated in the political and legal fallout of withdrawal'.¹⁸ A breakdown in cooperation with the remaining members seems to occur across both distributional (e.g., economic or security policy) and diffuse issues (such as human rights or environmental policy).¹⁹

¹² Anne Applebaum, 'Brexit has devastated Britain's international reputation—and respect for its democracy', *Washington Post*, 12 March 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/03/13/brexit-has-devastated-britains-international-reputation-respect-its-democracy/>; Benjamin Martill and Monika Sus, 'Post-Brexit EU/UK security cooperation: NATO, CSDP+, or "French connection"?', *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 20: 4, 2018, pp. 846–63, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1369148118796979>.

¹³ Marianna Lovato, 'From the core to the periphery of EU foreign policy: Brexit as a case of internal re-bordering of the EU', *Geopolitics*, publ. online 27 Mar 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2025.2480313>.

¹⁴ Tobias Wille and Benjamin Martill, 'Trust and calculation in international negotiations: how trust was lost after Brexit', *International Affairs* 99: 6, 2023, pp. 2405–22, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiaad243>; Hortense Goulard, 'Brexit vote damaged UK's reputation in Europe: survey', *Politico*, 16 Dec. 2016, <https://www.politico.eu/article/britains-reputation-tarnished-by-brexit-in-europe>.

¹⁵ Mark J. C. Crescenzi, *Of friends and foes: reputation and learning in international politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). Mark J. C. Crescenzi, Jacob D. Kathman, Katja B. Kleinberg and Reed M. Wood, 'Reliability, reputation, and alliance formation', *International Studies Quarterly* 56: 2, 2012, pp. 259–74, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2478.2011.00711.x>; Allan Dafoe, Jonathan Renshon and Paul Huth, 'Reputation and status as motives for war', *Annual Review of Political Science* 17: 1, 2014, pp. 371–93, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-071112-213421>.

¹⁶ Stefanie Walter, 'Brexit domino? The political contagion effects of voter-endorsed withdrawals from international institutions', *Comparative Political Studies* 54: 13, 2021, pp. 2382–415, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414021997169>; On the importance of precedent in influencing public opinion on withdrawals, see also Ignacio Jurado, Sandra León and Stefanie Walter, 'Brexit dilemmas: shaping postwithdrawal relations with a leaving state', *International Organization* 76: 2, 2022, pp. 273–304, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818321000412>.

¹⁷ Schmidt, 'Damaged relations'.

¹⁸ Schmidt, 'Damaged relations', p. 4.

¹⁹ Schmidt, 'Damaged relations'.

Crucially, all current theories on the effect of withdrawals on international cooperation limit themselves to *formal* cooperation. That is, they measure cooperation as the entry into a treaty. However, examining only public written agreements gives a limited understanding of the effects that withdrawals have on international cooperation as a whole.²⁰ International cooperation is wide-ranging, spanning from international treaties to informal governance, ad hoc coalitions and non-codified cooperation venues.²¹ Existing theories either do not expect a withdrawal to affect cooperation or they solely focus on *formal* cooperation. As such, they might fail to capture the role of more informal and secretive—yet no less significant—instances of cooperation.

Additionally, despite the reputational damage of a unilateral exit, mutual interest, geopolitical imperatives and even path dependency impose the need to sustain cooperation even after a country's exit from an IO.²² Russia's war of aggression presents precisely such a predicament. What is more, existing accounts seem to ignore that countries tend to be members of several organizations, so a country's exit from one of them might not have as severe an impact on their overall level of cooperation, at least in some policy areas. This is particularly true in the case of the European/North Atlantic cooperation space, where several states are members of overlapping organizations, including the EU, NATO and the G-groupings. Therefore, rather than just measuring changes in cooperation as the increase or decrease in the number of treaties countries sign with one another, it may be worthwhile to look at the density, frequency and scope of cooperation through (in)formal arrangements that both predate the withdrawal or were created in its wake.

Informal cooperation in the shadow of a voluntary withdrawal: a framework of analysis

Taking a sociological institutionalist perspective on the effects of voluntary withdrawals, this article contends, firstly, that influence does not only come in the form of material threats or rewards (or even diffuse soft power), but is also predicated on social dynamics; and, secondly, that international institutions provide critical channels for the exercise of social influence. Previous scholarship has defined social influence as 'a class of microprocesses that elicit pro-norm behaviour through the distribution of social rewards and punishments'.²³ For the purposes of this study, I understand social influence as *the*

²⁰ Schmidt does acknowledge that cooperation extends to informal channels, but notes that it is outside the scope of his study to include those types of cooperation. Instead, he understands cooperation as the number of treaties a (non-)member of an international organization ratifies each year to which the withdrawing state is already a member (Schmidt, 'Damaged relations', p. 6)

²¹ Felicity Vabulas and Duncan Snidal, 'Organization without delegation: informal intergovernmental organizations (IIGOs) and the spectrum of intergovernmental arrangements', *The Review of International Organizations*, vol. 8, 2013, pp. 193–220, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11558-012-9161-x>.

²² See, for example, Jonas J. Driedger, 'Bilateral defence and security cooperation despite disintegration: does the Brexit process divide the United Kingdom and Germany on Russia?', *European Journal of International Security* 6: 1, 2021, pp. 86–108, <https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2020.18>.

²³ Alastair Iain Johnston, 'Treating international institutions as social environments', *International Studies*

ability to change preferences through social dynamics based on non-material incentives. 'Preferences' refers here to the negotiators' underlying priorities or interests, as opposed to specific positions (stated goals of a particular negotiation). Social dynamics that can shape preferences include, among others, 'back-patting', brokerage and status maximization. 'Back-patting' occurs when an actor receives recognition or praise for its involvement in a process. Brokerage refers to the ability to connect and bring closer two (or more) otherwise separate parties to a negotiation. 'Status maximization' refers to actions taken to improve or reaffirm one's standing in a social setting (for instance, by taking the initiative, playing an active and constructive role in the negotiations or leading by example).²⁴ Crucially, these social markers have weight because they come from a reference group with which an actor believes it shares some level of identification. This sense of shared identity is fostered, among other things, by the intensity and frequency of interaction, which in turn depends on institutional settings. Following sociological institutionalism, I expect different types of institutional settings to afford different opportunities for social influence.

First, when meetings are frequent, sustained over time and cover a vast range of issues, social influence should play a greater role, as group identity is stronger. Second, the more institutions provide confidential venues that isolate negotiators from domestic pressures, the more actors can exercise social influence over the decision-making process.²⁵ Insulation from domestic scrutiny decreases the tendency to posture and pander to domestic audiences,²⁶ which opens up space for social dynamics and increases the likelihood of agreement. It also means that the negotiators in the room tend to have greater autonomy from their 'principals' back in the capitals, which is conducive to greater socialization.²⁷ Additionally, there is more room for social influence, the lower the level of rotation among diplomats²⁸ and the smaller the membership within the institution.²⁹

Beyond institutional characteristics, the role of the actors cooperating is relevant to the degree of influence one can exercise. One of the most important considerations pertains to participants' level of experience and expertise.³⁰ We should expect diplomats to be more likely to listen to a counterpart if the

Quarterly 45: 4, 2001, pp. 487–515 at p. 499, <https://doi.org/10.1111/0020-8833.00212>.

²⁴ Johnston, 'Treating international institutions as social environments', p. 494.

²⁵ Jeffrey Lewis, 'The Janus face of Brussels: socialization and everyday decision making in the European Union', *International Organization* 59: 4, 2005, pp. 937–71, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818305050320>; Alexandra Gheciu, 'Security institutions as agents of socialization? NATO and the "New Europe"', *International Organization* 59: 4, 2005, pp. 973–1012, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818305050332>; Jeffrey T. Checkel, 'International institutions and socialization in Europe: introduction and framework', *International Organization* 59: 4, 2005, pp. 801–26, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818305050289>.

²⁶ James P. Cross, 'Striking a pose: transparency and position taking in the Council of the European Union', *European Journal of Political Research*, 52: 3, 2013, pp. 291–315, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12000>; David Stasavage, 'Open-door or closed-door? Transparency in domestic and international bargaining', *International Organization* 58: 4, 2004, pp. 667–703, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818304040214>.

²⁷ Johnston, 'Treating international institutions as social environments'.

²⁸ Checkel, 'International institutions and socialization in Europe'.

²⁹ Johnston, 'Treating international institutions as social environments'.

³⁰ Johnston, 'Treating international institutions as social environments', p. 495.

former possess little knowledge on the issue on which they seek guidance.³¹ Conversely, a particular diplomat is more likely to be effective when he/she is believed ‘to be knowledgeable about an issue and that [their] intentions are trustworthy’.³² Moreover, social influence is more likely to be effective when the diplomat is an authoritative member of the in-group.³³

Ample research shows that the EU’s institutional characteristics are highly conducive to socialization.³⁴ Informal groupings, for their part, present distinct institutional characteristics and thus offer different opportunities for social influence. These informal venues include (though are not limited to) informal groupings within existing international organizations,³⁵ short-lived ad hoc coalitions³⁶ and more long-lasting informal intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), such as the G7 or G20.³⁷ These informal arrangements are convened between three or more states, do not have a permanent secretariat, are characterized by loose membership criteria and do not rest on a legally binding international treaty, but rather on shared expectations or a tacit agreement.³⁸ While these are common characteristics of informal groupings, they can vary from highly informal transgovernmental networks (such as the Five Eyes intelligence network) to more institutionalized groups (e.g., informal groupings that can emerge within a formal IO, such as the Quint group within NATO—comprising the US, France, Germany, Italy and the UK—or the Friends of the Secretary-General informal coalitions within the UN). Figure 1 below showcases the spectrum of (in)formal arenas that can be found in international cooperation. This is not intended to provide a comprehensive summary, but it rather aims to show that there is considerable variation in institutional characteristics across different types of cooperation venues.

³¹ Johnston, ‘Treating international institutions as social environments’, p. 497. See also Jeffrey T. Checkel, ‘Why comply? Social learning and European identity change’, *International Organization*, 55: 3, 2001, pp. 553–88, <https://doi.org/10.1162/00208180152507551>.

³² Johnston, ‘Treating international institutions as social environments’, p. 498.

³³ Jeffrey T. Checkel, ‘“Going native” in Europe? Theorizing social interaction in European institutions’, *Comparative Political Studies*, 36: 1–2, 2003, pp. 209–31, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414002239377>. See also Johnston, ‘Treating international institutions as social environments’, p. 497.

³⁴ Ana E. Juncos and Karolina Pomorska, ‘Playing the Brussels game: strategic socialisation in CFSP Council Working Groups’, European Integration online Papers, vol. 10, 2006, <https://eiop.or.at/eiop/pdf/2006-011.pdf>; Checkel, ‘“Going native” in Europe?’; Lewis, ‘The Janus face of Brussels’.

³⁵ Marianna Lovato, ‘How informality keeps multilateralism going: the role of informal groupings in EU foreign policy negotiations’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 30: 4, 2024, pp. 972–96, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13540661241269782>; Jochen Prantl, *The UN Security Council and informal groups of states: complementing or competing for governance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

³⁶ Yf Reykers and Pernille Rieker, ‘Ad hoc coalitions in European security and defence: symptoms of short-term pragmatism, no more?’, *Journal of European Integration* 46: 6, 2024, pp. 861–79, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2024.2349608>; Yf Reykers, John Karlsrud, Malte Brosig, Stephanie C. Hofmann, Cristiana Maglia and Pernille Rieker, ‘Ad hoc coalitions in global governance: short-notice, task- and time-specific cooperation’, *International Affairs* 99: 2, 2023, pp. 727–45, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iia319>.

³⁷ Vabulas and Snidal, ‘Organization without delegation’.

³⁸ Barbara Koremenos, Charles Lipson and Duncan Snidal, ‘The rational design of international institutions’, *International Organization* 55: 4, 2001, pp. 761–99, <http://doi.org/10.1162/002081801317193592>; Charles B. Roger, *The origins of informality: why the legal foundations of global governance are shifting, and why it matters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); Felicity Vabulas and Duncan Snidal, ‘Cooperation under autonomy: building and analyzing the Informal Intergovernmental Organizations 2.0 dataset’, *Journal of Peace Research*, 58: 4, 2021, pp. 859–69, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343320943920>; Vabulas and Snidal, ‘Organization without delegation’.

Figure 1: Spectrum of (in)formal arenas in international cooperation and their institutional/functional characteristics

	More informal			More formal		
Type of institutional arrangement	Transgovernmental networks	Ad hoc coalitions	Informal inter-governmental organizations	Informal groupings within formal IGOs	Formal IGOs	Supranational organizations
Membership criteria	Loose membership	Voluntary membership based on specific issue-area/crisis	Explicitly shared membership	Subgroup of formal IGO members	Formal membership	Formal membership
Level of institutionalization	Spontaneous organization	No permanent secretariat	No formal institutionalization, but established practices (e.g., rotating chair)	No formal institutionalization, but may rely on/report to permanent secretariat/institutional actors	Regular meetings Permanent secretariat	Supranational institutions with autonomous powers and centralized enforcement
Legal basis	Tacitly shared expectations	Oral agreement, communique, informal dialogue	Explicitly shared expectations	Shared focus/interest around issue area/crisis	Legally binding treaty	Legally binding treaty
Frequency of meetings	Neither frequent nor regularly scheduled	Frequent but for a short period of time	Regular, scheduled in advance and carrying on over time	Ad hoc meetings, may vary in frequency/duration depending how issue-specific the grouping is	Regular (in)formal meetings	Regular (in) formal meetings, often chaired by supranational actors
Level of insulation	High	High	High	Medium to high	Low	Low
Level of rotation	High	Low to medium (depending on life-span of coalition)	Medium to high	Medium	Low	Low

Against this background, the question is: *Can informal venues, if they are set up, still allow a state exiting an IO to cooperate with the remaining members? How does this type of informal cooperation compare against the formal institutionalized cooperation these countries previously enjoyed?*

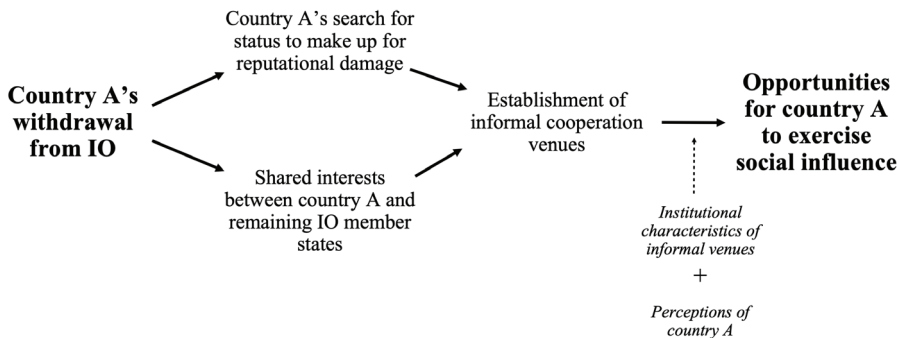
Somewhat paradoxically, the UK's decision to leave the EU triggered 'a series of actions aimed at "offsetting" the damaging consequences of Brexit',³⁹ including the reputational damage that the UK suffered among many remaining members of the EU. The UK's well-documented status-seeking efforts only fuelled the willingness to cooperate through informal channels, particularly on an issue, like Ukraine, where British and EU27 positions were closely aligned. As we will see, status-seeking and shared interests fuelled the reliance on existing informal formats and the creation of new ones to respond to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

By leaving the EU, the UK did not completely exit all types of institutionalized cooperation with the EU27, since many EU member states are also NATO and UN members. However, there is no doubt that the institutional characteristics of UK–EU cooperation have profoundly changed. Therefore, we might expect to find differences in the nature of UK–EU cooperation on sanctions between 2014 and 2022, and post-2022, notably in terms of their institutionalization (i.e., the frequency and intensity of contact), with noticeable effects on the UK's ability to exercise influence over EU decision-making (figure 2). Cooperation is understood here as an avenue for participation in decision-making and social interaction. While it does not automatically lead to influence over preferences, it is a *sine qua non* for the exercise of social influence.

There is reason to believe that the UK remained an authoritative member of the in-group, not only because it still is one of most knowledgeable European countries on sanctions policy, but, more broadly, because Russia's invasion of Ukraine vindicated the warnings given by the governments of the United States and the UK about an imminent attack, which had largely been dismissed. The following section explores these expectations by studying the nature of EU–UK cooperation dynamics over sanctions policy before and after Brexit.

³⁹ Mark Webber, 'Identity, status and role in UK foreign policy: Brexit and beyond', *International Politics*, publ. online 16 July 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-023-00482-4>. See also Cornelia-Adriana Baciú and John Doyle, eds, *Peace, security and defence cooperation in post-Brexit Europe: risks and opportunities* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2019); Amelia Hadfield, "'Carry on, Global Britain": recrafting post-Brexit security and foreign affairs', *Politique européenne* 70: 4, 2021, pp. 166–91, <https://doi.org/10.3917/poeu.070.0166>; Lorenzo Cladi, 'Doing more for less? Status insecurity and the UK's contribution to European security after Brexit', *International Politics*, vol. 58, 2021, pp. 919–36, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-021-00292-6>.

Figure 2: Effects of a country's unilateral withdrawal on its social influence



The EU's response to Russia's annexation of Crimea

Following Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in early 2014, the EU28 (then including the UK) adopted a three-stage sanction regime that involved diplomatic, political and economic measures. Sanctions were not a foregone conclusion, however. Many member states were reluctant to take this step and agreed to economic sanctions only after the shooting down over eastern Ukraine of Malaysian Airlines Flight 17 by Russian-backed forces in July 2014. The UK was a strong proponent of sanctions and navigated both informal and formal cooperation venues to push for as ambitious a sanction regime as possible. The UK was an authoritative member of the in-group, boasting significant expertise on sanctions—especially financial sanctions—compared to other EU capitals (status maximization). It also exercised significant social influence, working closely with Germany to act as intermediary between the US and the EU28, and mediating between the more reluctant EU member states and those advocating for sanctions (brokerage).

The UK's influence was assured by its characteristics as a negotiator on sanctions policy. The UK's reputation was already somewhat tarnished by the Eurosceptic domestic political discourse.⁴⁰ Nonetheless, British diplomats were a highly authoritative voice at the negotiating table because of their country's expertise, capabilities and resources on sanctions policy. Beyond other European capitals, Americans also viewed the UK as a critical partner on financial sanctions.⁴¹ Discussing the UK's added value to EU sanctions negotiations, one British diplomat noted that:

Both in Brussels and in London there were extremely talented people on [sanctions], who were also plugged into the private sector. And we had this incredible competitive advantage of being so close to the City of London and investment banks, which is a very different world from the diplomatic one. The UK Treasury, the Foreign Office,

⁴⁰ Lovato, 'From the core to the periphery of EU foreign policy'.

⁴¹ Interview with a former national diplomat, online, 27 Jan. 2022.

the Bank of England were all extremely skilled at how you make a sanction regime work. The experts on financial markets had extremely sophisticated knowledge.⁴²

British negotiators put their expertise, capabilities and resources to good use both in formal and informal channels. Informal cooperation arenas were key in coordinating the EU's response to Russia's annexation of Crimea.⁴³ Most notably, coordination through the G7 Plus (particularly the contact group on sanctions) played an especially critical role.⁴⁴ This highly informal contact group allowed some EU member states (France, Germany, Italy and the UK) to coordinate with the US and among themselves. After discussions with their American counterparts, negotiators from these four governments would formulate a detailed plan to present to the European Council.⁴⁵ As one diplomat put it, 'the informal group was helpful in securing the broadest common denominator and in doing so quickly. [It] really was astonishingly helpful, even though we were a bit doubtful at the beginning'.⁴⁶ The UK was especially skilled in navigating this informal venue. Leveraging the coordination and preliminary agreements found with the US and Germany in the contact group, they worked with the German federal government to work out a compromise in the European Council. This British–German tandem, embodied by the incumbent heads of government, respectively Prime Minister David Cameron and Chancellor Angela Merkel, proved very effective: 'If a debate got stuck, they'd come up with alternatives that would get them over bumps ... Merkel was good at framing the politics and Cameron at offering language, so it was a good double act'.⁴⁷

The UK was also highly skilful in how it navigated social dynamics in the European Council. It was able to play the central and eastern European and the more moderate French and Italian positions off against each another to extract as ambitious a compromise as possible on sanctions, while remaining in lockstep with Germany. If Poland and Lithuania asked for far more than the other capitals were ready to agree to, British negotiators would be sure to support the German position while trying to persuade their central and eastern European colleagues to reach a compromise solution.⁴⁸ The UK thus presented itself as a moderating influence on those member states which were advocating for more aggressive measures. As one official recalled, British diplomats 'spent just as much time coordinating with the Nordics and the eastern Europeans as [they] did with France and Germany'.⁴⁹ These brokerage and status-maximiza-

⁴² Interview with a former national diplomat, online, 29 Nov. 2021.

⁴³ Lovato, 'How informality keeps multilateralism going'.

⁴⁴ Discussions in the G7 Plus group included, among others, EU representatives, Poland and Australia (interview with a national diplomat, online, 18 Feb. 2022).

⁴⁵ Interview with a national diplomat, online, 6 Dec. 2021; interview with a former national diplomat, online, 27 Jan. 2022; interview with a national diplomat, online, 18 Feb. 2022.

⁴⁶ Interview with a national diplomat, telephone, 20 April 2022.

⁴⁷ Interview with a former national diplomat, online, 29 Nov. 2021; also interview with a national diplomat, Tallinn, 3 March 2026.

⁴⁸ Interview with a former national diplomat, online, 29 Nov. 2021.

⁴⁹ Interview with a former national diplomat, online, 29 Nov. 2021.

tion strategies not only helped British diplomats appear as ‘level-headed’ interlocutors—especially when compared to their supposedly more ‘unreasonable’ central and eastern European counterparts—but it also made it harder for other capitals to accuse London of being a ‘proxy of the US’.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, the UK still leveraged its role as ‘America’s whisperer’ to mediate between the US and the various positions of the EU27.⁵¹ Lastly, the UK coupled these efforts with approaching member states individually, often joining forces with Scandinavian or central and eastern European countries. For instance, the UK and Sweden together heavily lobbied Ireland to adopt strong measures.⁵²

Ultimately, the 2014 sanctions negotiations were characterized by dense and frequent cooperation, which allowed the UK to exercise considerable social influence (in the form of brokerage and status maximization). Informal channels, both within and outside the EU, ensured insulation, flexibility and swift coordination, while formal EU channels afforded dense and sustained cooperation at the highest political levels. The UK played a key role in all these settings, leveraging its expertise and skilfully navigating social dynamics within and outside the European Council.

EU–UK informal cooperation after Brexit

Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 prompted the EU to adopt the most sweeping set of sanctions in its history, which has progressively been expanded in scope since then (figure 3).

The urgent, all-encompassing and unprecedented nature of the war demanded even more ad hoc, informal coordination venues beyond established institutions. To be effective, the response to the war also needed to be global in scale—particularly with respect to coordination on sanctions enforcement. Therefore, it was necessary to orchestrate cooperation among several non-EU and/or non-NATO members, including Canada, Japan, New Zealand, Norway and South Korea, which was enabled by informal extra-EU coordination arenas. The UK was able to count on many of these same venues to continue to exercise some degree of social influence over the EU27 (and to be influenced by EU policies in return).

Since 2022, the UK has been relying on regular, informal engagement through its attaché network of sanctions professionals based in G7 and EU posts, including the UK Mission to the European Union in Brussels.⁵³ Despite some tensions during and after the negotiations of the Brexit withdrawal agreement, bilateral relationships with other European capitals, including Paris and

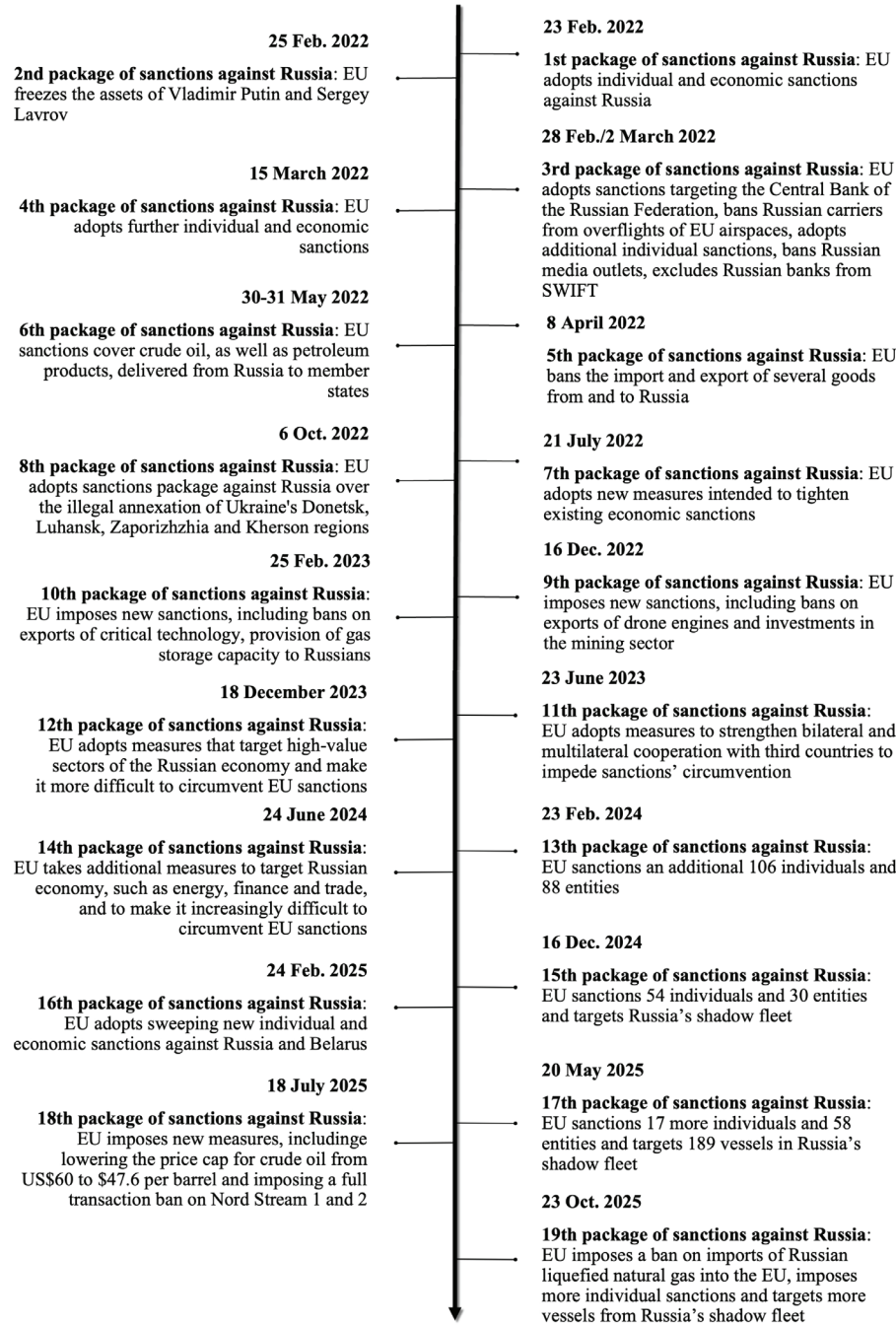
⁵⁰ Interview with a former national diplomat, online, 29 Nov. 2021.

⁵¹ Interview with a former national diplomat, online, 27 Jan. 2022.

⁵² Interview with a former national diplomat, Brussels, 17 July 2021.

⁵³ UK House of Lords, European Affairs Committee, *The Ukraine effect: the impact of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine on the UK–EU relationship*, 1st report of session 2023–24 (London: The Stationery Office, 2024); UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, *UK Government—written evidence (RU10012)*, <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/126301/pdf>, paras 21–24.

Figure 3: Timeline of EU sanction packages against Russia since February 2022



Berlin, remain solid.⁵⁴ Informal engagement among British and European diplomats on a bilateral or minilateral basis has been supplemented by quarterly meetings of senior officials that occur as part of the Sanctions Coordinators Forum, the Russian Elites, Proxies and Oligarchs Taskforce and the G7 Enforcement Mechanism. The UK and the EU27 are also members of the Global Export Control Coalition, which is made up of 39 countries and which works in close coordination with the G7 (particularly its Enforcement Coordination Mechanism and associated sub-working groups). Existing multilateral export control regimes, such as the Wassenaar Arrangement, provide additional cooperation frameworks for the UK to work closely with the G7 countries and the EU27. The UK government also discusses trade sanctions with the EU, the US and Japan. Together, the EU, the US and the UK engaged in joint diplomatic outreach to the United Arab Emirates, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Georgia and Armenia, with the goal of preventing sanctioned goods from reaching Russia.⁵⁵

Among these arenas, the G7 Plus—and especially the Enforcement Coordination Mechanism—continues to play a fundamental role. Commenting on UK–EU cooperation after Brexit in 2024, one diplomat underscored that:

The G7 is key, the EU has a very important part in those discussions, it is not merely an observer. It is a big difference to talk to the EU, as opposed to Germany, France and Italy. It was key to have the EU there for negotiations on sanctions, but also on the military facility financed through the [European Peace Facility]. You have directors all the way up to country leaders, the G7 is the place where things happen, it is a key coordination forum. Also, G7 coordination in Ukraine has been key. The G7 was the only real way in which you could do sanctions—you needed Canada and Japan too as well as the EU for that—as well as humanitarian assistance and military aid.⁵⁶

Since the start of the war, the density and frequency of cooperation through these informal venues has increased exponentially, which has partly allowed the UK (and the US) to make up for the lack of formal institutions to coordinate with the EU27 (though NATO is of course a critical formal IO for coordinating the military response to the war). One American diplomat stressed the significant change in frequency of cooperation between the US and the Europeans (including the UK):

Our principal director here keeps close track of the number of times our office is preparing our assistant secretary, undersecretary and secretary to meet with European counterparts and just the number of times they've met since 2021/early 2022 through today [in 2024] is staggering. It's really ... I wouldn't say night and day, but really a tenfold increase in the number of meetings.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Interview with a national diplomat serving in Permanent Representation, Brussels, 13 Feb. 2024. On the importance of personal networks in sustaining UK–EU cooperation, see also Lucia Frigo, “‘There is only so much you can do from the outside’: EU–UK intelligence-sharing through Brexit and the war in Ukraine”, *International Affairs* 102: 4, 2026, pp. 1203–21, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiago47>.

⁵⁵ House of Lords, European Affairs Committee, *The Ukraine effect*, UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, *UK Government—written evidence (RU10012)*, paras 20–22.

⁵⁶ Interview with a national diplomat serving in Permanent Representation, Brussels, 13 Feb. 2024.

⁵⁷ Interview with a national official, online, 29 March 2024.

Aside from the great number of venues allowing for insulated, frequent and flexible cooperation on Ukraine, the UK's standing and reputation have remained relatively untarnished. This seems to be an exception restricted to Ukraine, however. One diplomat recalled that in the months after Brexit, there were directives circulating within the Commission discouraging exchange with the UK except for specific files—of which one was Ukraine.⁵⁸ An official at the European External Action Service (EEAS) noted that 'with the UK post-Brexit it has been difficult. But for [the Ukraine file] we've had an informal, organic way of creatively working together'.⁵⁹

The UK (and US) were also vindicated by Russia's full-scale invasion. London and Washington had both shared information about Russia's impending military offensive, but their warnings had been dismissed by the EU27 as too improbable. The fact that Russia's actions confirmed British and American suspicions afforded the UK a great deal of authority (back-patting):

The UK has a sense of vindication about what happened (along the lines of 'we told you so') ... Before the invasion [the UK was] putting out declassified intelligence to warn partners, but they didn't take [them] seriously. The fact that [the UK was] right meant that there was a massive shift in terms of how UK information is now received.⁶⁰

As in 2014, the UK's authority was also assured by its officials' level of expertise and capabilities on sanctions policy. The 2020 sanctions against Belarus only sharpened the UK's (and EU's) expertise,⁶¹ setting 'a model' that the UK carried over into 2022.⁶² Aside from its technical know-how on restrictive measures, the UK has tried to accrue its authority by cultivating a close relationship with Ukraine and presenting itself as Kyiv's closest partner. As one diplomat was keen to underscore: '[The UK has] a world-leading relationship with Ukraine, [they] have a great level of access, trust, information on military strategy'.⁶³

Leveraging its expertise and close relationship with Kyiv, the UK has been navigating informal cooperation venues to assert itself as a trendsetter in the response to the war. 'We do what we can fast', said one British diplomat, 'so that others can follow us. We did that with sanctions, tank delivery, our Security Agreement with Ukraine from January 2024'.⁶⁴ The UK also understands its relationship with the EU27 as one between like-minded partners, who 'can help each other do the right thing, and take the type of action we can each take' (status maximization).⁶⁵

⁵⁸ Interview with a national diplomat serving in Permanent Representation, Brussels, 13 Feb. 2024.

⁵⁹ Interview with an official of the European External Action Service, Brussels, 16 Nov. 2023.

⁶⁰ Interview with a national diplomat serving in Permanent Representation, Brussels, 13 Feb. 2024.

⁶¹ The regime of Aliaksandr Lukashenka was sanctioned for carrying out fraudulent elections and mass repression thereafter (see European Council, *EU sanctions against Belarus*, 24 Feb. 2025, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions-against-belarus>).

⁶² Interview with a national diplomat serving in Permanent Representation, Brussels, 13 Feb. 2024.

⁶³ Interview with a national diplomat serving in Permanent Representation, Brussels, 13 Feb. 2024.

⁶⁴ Interview with a national diplomat serving in Permanent Representation, Brussels, 13 Feb. 2024.

⁶⁵ Interview with a national diplomat serving in Permanent Representation, Brussels, 13 Feb. 2024.

Central and eastern European EU member states, as well as countries that have traditionally had a close relationship with London (the Netherlands, Nordic countries), still seem to want the UK to act as a counterbalance against France and Germany. While no longer a member state, the UK is still able to play into social dynamics within the Council (though only indirectly). As one diplomat noted:

The Baltics, [central and eastern Europe], the Netherlands, Nordics, Czech Republic are all very like-minded with the UK and want [them] to be an influencing voice against France and Germany. They ask [them] to share more information, more information on sanctions, talk more about what [they're] doing in Ukraine. They see the UK as still an influential global player, one of the P5 at the [UN Security Council]. Malta, Cyprus and Italy don't like to be pressured, but they like working with the UK. Malta and Cyprus are also looking at the UK in dealing with the problem of Russian money, they see the Baltics as too radical, too far removed from their own position.⁶⁶

These insights are confirmed by initiatives such as the 2023 Tallinn Pledge.⁶⁷ While strictly not pertaining to sanctions policy, this initiative is indicative of the kind of informal partnerships that the UK cultivates with remaining EU member states. With the pledge, the UK, together with a subset of central and eastern European member states, the Netherlands and Denmark, decided to collectively donate an additional set of lethal weapons to the war effort in Ukraine. The Tallinn Pledge suggests not only that the UK is still a sought-after partner on Ukraine, but that it is spearheading diplomatic efforts to put pressure on other countries who are part of the Ukraine Defense Contact Group. The recognition it has from EU member states, including the central and eastern European states, provides clear evidence of back-patting.

All in all, the scope and depth of UK–EU cooperation on ‘the Ukraine file’, and on sanctions policy more specifically, has been significant. Informal cooperation has ensured continuity in sanctions policy after Brexit and has not diminished EU security capabilities. It has allowed the UK to exercise social influence by setting the agenda, providing an ambitious precedent for the EU27 to follow and by acting as a broker (or, at least, a supporting act) in some of the negotiation dynamics between different groups of EU member states.

The limitations of informality in sustaining post-withdrawal cooperation

Informal channels might be the next best thing to formal institutionalized cooperation. However, they cannot provide the same type of direct influence, nor the same level, density or frequency of interaction. Notably, sustained cooperation between the UK and the EU27 after Brexit seems to be solely restricted to the Ukraine file. Indeed, in no other areas of foreign and security policy does UK–EU cooperation appear quite as dense, frequent or constructive.

⁶⁶ Interview with a national diplomat serving in Permanent Representation, Brussels, 13 Feb. 2024.

⁶⁷ UK Ministry of Defence, *Joint statement—the Tallinn Pledge*, 19 Jan. 2023, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/joint-statement-the-tallinn-pledge>.

Not only is the effectiveness of informality predicated on issue characteristics, but it is also highly dependent on political circumstances and leaders' personalities. Should those change, there is no telling how the nature of cooperation—and the exiting country's influence over the remaining members—will evolve as a result. Formal institutions, on the other hand, are more resilient—though by no means immune—to changes in political leadership and policy decisions can be locked in more effectively than in informal channels.

Further, as critical as informal venues are in sustaining cooperation with the EU27, informal influence does not compare to the formal decision-making power the UK used to have before Brexit. As a member state, London could play arbiter between various capitals and offer a counterpoint to France and/or Germany in a way it can no longer do from outside the Council and EU institutions. One British diplomat noted that:

The entire relationship is so different that it is almost unfathomable. We had decision-making influence all the way, we could veto decisions at any point. We have no such formal access any more. We are no longer involved in negotiating the minutiae, we just hope that the EU ultimately lands somewhere close to where we would like them. You try and identify people/member states that matter and target those. Can you coordinate with your capital in a smart way so they can also lobby a member state bilaterally? You have no power, only influence.⁶⁸

As the same diplomat noted, as influential as the UK can be in extra-EU forums like the G7, there is still no guarantee how that will shape EU policy (if at all): 'The G7 was a useful forum ... to coordinate a reaction. But you cannot guarantee that whatever Europeans in the G7 agree on will become EU policy.'⁶⁹ Additionally, since Brexit the UK is no longer able to play the role of intermediary between the US and the EU27, not just on sanctions policy but on foreign policy cooperation more broadly. As one American diplomat put it, 'Things are different post-Brexit, the UK used to make this very easy for us. Now we have to do our own homework more.'⁷⁰

Before Brexit, far from being the only cooperation venue, informal arenas were used to bolster the UK's social influence at the EU level and to push for an agreement in the European Council. This 'double act' is of course no longer available to the UK, which can only rely on its social influence in informal channels and on whatever informal personal networks its diplomats can build:

Among UK diplomats, we are very much aware of the importance and need to work on personal relationships, at three levels: member states and the Council, the EEAS and the [European Commission] (especially DG NEAR for political matters, but also DG Justice, FISMA, Trade, ECHO, etc. depending on the issue). We had to quickly build a network *but all of this is informal*.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Interview with a national diplomat serving in Permanent Representation, Brussels, 13 Feb. 2024.

⁶⁹ Interview with a former national official, online, 26 Jan. 2022.

⁷⁰ Interview with a national diplomat, Brussels, 12 Oct. 2023.

⁷¹ Interview with a national diplomat serving in Permanent Representation, Brussels, 13 Feb, 2024 (emphasis added).

Lastly, the frequency of informal cooperation between the UK and the EU27 is still significantly lower than it used to be within EU institutions. Before Brexit, UK delegates would participate in formal committee or working group meetings on a (bi)weekly basis and have daily contacts with their colleagues. As for political leaders, they (and their staff) would have the chance to build rapport with one another in European Council meetings, which occur more frequently than either G7 or NATO leaders' summits. One diplomat made this very point when recalling the fruitful collaboration between Prime Minister Cameron and Chancellor Merkel back in 2014:

Cameron started to realize that the European Council was his best forum to try and nudge things (the G7 meets only once a year, same with NATO). It is within the Council that you can build rapport and get stuff done. It's a shame that he came to this understanding too late.⁷²

Conclusions

There is no doubt that the established liberal international order is being challenged.⁷³ One of these challenges includes the contestation, delegitimation and general crisis of international institutions. Voluntary withdrawals, while rarely resulting in the death of an IO,⁷⁴ often end up discouraging future cooperation between the exiting country and the remaining members.⁷⁵ Yet, as this article has shown, informality can play a critical role in ensuring continuity in areas where the exiting state and the remaining members have a shared interest. This was the case when it came to the UK and EU27's response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Following Brexit, many anticipated that the EU might have to adjust its level of ambition in foreign policy, having lost a member state with substantial conventional military capabilities as well as a vast diplomatic network.⁷⁶ Yet, when it came to the war in Ukraine, these prognostications did not come to pass: the UK and the EU27 were able to cooperate on a wide range of issues, including sanctions against Russia. This happened for several reasons. First, the scope and magnitude of the war changed virtually all capitals' positions, including on sanctions.⁷⁷ Second, other member states—most notably central

⁷² Interview with a national diplomat, online, 6 Dec. 2021.

⁷³ Julia C. Morse and Robert O. Keohane, 'Contested multilateralism', *The Review of International Organizations*, vol. 9, 2014, pp. 385–412, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11558-014-9188-2>; G. John Ikenberry, 'The end of liberal international order?', *International Affairs* 94: 1, 2018, pp. 7–23, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix241>; David H. Bearce and Brandy J. Joliff Scott Bearce, 'Popular non-support for international organizations: how extensive and what does this represent?' *The Review of International Organizations*, vol. 14, 2019, pp. 187–216, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11558-019-09351-3>.

⁷⁴ Inken von Borzyskowski and Felicity Vabulas, 'When do member state withdrawals lead to the death of international organizations?', *European Journal of International Relations*, 30: 3, 2024, pp. 756–86, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13540661241256951>.

⁷⁵ Schmidt, 'Damaged relations'.

⁷⁶ Richard G. Whitman, 'Brexit or Bremain: what future for the UK's European diplomatic strategy?', *International Affairs* 92: 3, 2016, pp. 509–29, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12607>.

⁷⁷ Ana E. Juncos, Marianna Lovato and Karolina Pomorska, 'Coordinative Europeanization and Russia's war

and eastern European countries—and EU institutions stepped in to take on the UK's leadership and agenda-setting roles.⁷⁸ Last, and the most important in the context of this article, ever since 2014 there was already a US-led framework in the form of the G7 Plus, which both the EU27 and the UK could tap into to continue cooperation on sanctions (not to mention NATO and the many other institutions of which several EU countries and the UK are still members). Although the article has focused on UK–EU cooperation on sanctions policy, similar dynamics are observable across the entire 'Ukraine file'. UK–EU informal cooperation on Ukraine includes defence (e.g., the Ukraine Defense Contact Group or the Joint Expeditionary Force), humanitarian aid (e.g., the Ukraine Donor Platform, formerly the Multi-agency Donor Coordination Platform for Ukraine), energy policy (the G7 Plus energy group) and human rights (e.g., the Atrocity Crimes Advisory Group for Ukraine).⁷⁹ The radical shift in the US position on Ukraine under the second Trump administration will likely only further encourage informal dynamics between the EU27 and the UK, as institutionalized cooperation through NATO or even the G7 will become harder to achieve. Such informal initiatives have already taken place. Shortly after the 2025 Munich Security Conference, Germany, France, Poland, Italy, Denmark, Spain and the UK met in Paris at the behest of French President Emmanuel Macron to discuss support to Ukraine.⁸⁰ The group has since expanded to 19 countries, including Canada, Norway and Iceland as well as the heads of NATO, the European Commission and the EU Council.⁸¹

With its focus on the role and added value of informal channels, the article has shown how European security cooperation can continue despite 'institutional and normative disintegration' post-Brexit.⁸² Following the UK's withdrawal from the EU, the governance structure around sanctions has largely rested on informality to ensure cooperation between the UK and the EU27. Thanks to informal cooperation channels, the EU's sanctions capabilities were not significantly harmed by the loss of the UK. If anything, it is the UK that is suffering from the loss of access to institutionalized decision-making at the EU level. Brexit does not seem to have tarnished the reputation of the UK as an authoritative actor at the negotiation table, though this appears to be restricted to sanctions policy and cooperation on Ukraine⁸³—and there is

of aggression: how crises shape Europeanization dynamics in EU foreign policy', *Comparative European Politics*, vol. 23, 2025, pp. 118–38, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41295-024-00390-8>; Heidi Maurer, Richard G. Whitman and Nicholas Wright, 'The EU and the invasion of Ukraine: a collective responsibility to act?', *International Affairs* 99: 1, 2023, pp. 219–38, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iia262>.

⁷⁸ Lovato, 'From the core to the periphery'; Juncos, Lovato and Pomorska, 'Coordinative Europeanization and Russia's war of aggression'.

⁷⁹ UK House of Lords, European Affairs Committee, *The Ukraine effect*; UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, *UK Government—written evidence (RU10012)*, paras 6–15.

⁸⁰ Tim Ross, 'Europe's big guns sideline the EU to get real on Ukraine', Politico, 18 Feb. 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/article/sidelines-nato-europe-ukraine-politics-war-russia-emmanuel-macron-uk>.

⁸¹ Nicholas Vinocur and Victor Goury-Laffont, 'West's "crisis" coalition grows as Trump rails against Zelenskyy', Politico, 19 Feb. 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/article/west-crisis-coalition-donald-trump-volodymyr-zelenskyy-emmanuel-macron-ukraine-war>.

⁸² Driedger, 'Bilateral defence and security cooperation'.

⁸³ UK House of Lords, European Affairs Committee, *The Ukraine effect*.

some hope that this might provide a ‘blueprint for UK–EU cooperation in other areas’.⁸⁴ Moreover, informal arrangements remain highly dependent on the political context, individual leaders’ personalities and personal relationships among diplomats.

It is of course very difficult to say whether the EU’s response would have been even stronger if the UK were still a member state. It is likely that the UK’s presence in formal institutional channels would have ensured even faster or more forceful sanctions. At the same time, highly motivated policy entrepreneurs like Estonia and the other Baltic states are making sure systematically to set an ambitious policy agenda on sanctions and beyond.⁸⁵

Informality might come to play an increasingly pivotal role as European security governance evolves to account for the fragmentation of multilateral cooperation. At a time of growing contestation of formal IOs, this article offers lessons that extend well beyond Europe as to the added value (and potential limitations) of informal cooperation channels in replacing formal institutions. In this sense, insights from EU–UK cooperation post-Brexit may offer a cautionary tale to countries contemplating withdrawals from IOs.

⁸⁴ Interview with a national diplomat serving in Permanent Representation, Brussels, 13 Feb. 2024. In another article in this special section, Lucia Frigo shows that informal networks have also been instrumental in maintaining some level of cooperation in intelligence-sharing. See Frigo, “There is only so much you can do from the outside”.

⁸⁵ Interview with a diplomat, Tallinn, 18 Feb. 2026.