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The EU Sanctions Architecture against Russia

Effectiveness, Limits, and Strategic Options for 2026–2030

A comprehensive assessment of the political, economic, social, legal, hybrid, and compliance dimensions of the EU sanctions regime

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The EU Sanctions Architecture against Russia: Effectiveness, Limits, and Strategic Options for 2026–2030

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PART FOUR

Social Sanctions and Their Effectiveness

4.1. General profile of social sanctions

4.1.1. Definition and Scope of "Social Sanctions" (EU–Russia Context)

In this report, *social sanctions* are defined as restrictive measures and associated compliance effects that materially constrain the everyday social life of individuals—their cross-border mobility, access to consumer goods and services, and the routine functioning of personal finance—either directly (through explicitly people-facing restrictions) or indirectly (through sectoral measures that "transmit" into household-level frictions). This definition is intentionally operational: it is designed to support later sections that evaluate effectiveness, proportionality, and ethical robustness rather than to serve as a purely philosophical categorisation.

The European Union itself frames its Russia-related restrictive measures as a mixture of targeted measures (e.g., travel bans and asset freezes against listed individuals and entities) and sectoral measures (trade, financial, transport and other restrictions). While targeted measures are not "social" by intent, they are intrinsically person-facing and therefore sit within the social-sanctions perimeter whenever they curtail mobility, access to funds, or participation in EU-based transactions.

The scope used here deliberately separates (i) legal instruments and (ii) social outcomes. A regulation may be economic in form (trade/finance), yet social in effect if it constrains household consumption patterns, family transfers, or access to routine services. Conversely, a restriction that is socially salient (e.g., reduced tourism flows) may be driven more by market exits and risk pricing than by a formal prohibition. This distinction matters because "social pain" is not, by itself, evidence of strategic effectiveness; it may simply be evidence of friction.

Within the EU sanctions architecture, the clearest *direct* social instrument is the tightening of short-stay mobility through the suspension of the EU–Russia visa facilitation arrangement and the subsequent guidance on visa issuance and border controls. From a scope standpoint, this cluster belongs to social sanctions because it targets a routine channel of social interaction—travel—without requiring the individual to be a designated person.

A second direct component is the set of individual restrictive measures (travel bans and asset freezes) imposed on named persons for actions undermining Ukraine's territorial integrity and related legal regimes. Although these measures are often analysed in "political" terms, they function socially by restricting physical entry and by constraining the ability of persons to access resources and services within EU jurisdiction. In practice, these restrictions often generate spillovers through "association risk" (e.g., family members, business partners, and service providers altering behaviour).

Indirect social sanctions emerge prominently in the consumption domain. The EU's import/export bans include an export ban on luxury goods, explicitly framed as a measure intended to "directly hit" Russian elites; yet, it also reshapes aspirational consumption and high-end service markets more broadly, producing symbolic and behavioural effects beyond the narrow target group. The social perimeter therefore includes consumption restrictions where the EU's stated objective (or its predictable effect) is to constrain the lifestyle component of elite support structures.

A further indirect social channel is everyday financial life, where sectoral financial restrictions, compliance screening, and de-risking behaviour by banks and payment providers can transform macro-

level measures into micro-level constraints. Notably, the Commission's consolidated sanctions FAQs repeatedly address implementation questions that arise precisely because ordinary transactions—payments, services, "who can do what with whom"—become ambiguous in practice and thus prone to over-compliance. This report treats such friction as within scope when it predictably affects households and individuals, even when the legal trigger is sectoral.

The scope also includes *market-mediated* effects that are not always commanded by law but are structurally linked to sanctions risk: corporate withdrawals, service discontinuation, and heightened compliance thresholds. These effects matter analytically because they can dominate lived experience (availability of services, logistics of travel, access to platforms) even if the formal measure is narrow. The EU's explanatory materials emphasise that sanctions work as a system of constraints on financing, trade, and enabling services; private actors operationalise that system through risk controls that may exceed the minimum legal requirement.

To avoid category inflation, the report sets explicit boundaries for what is *not* classified as "social sanctions" in the strict sense. Restrictions aimed at degrading military-industrial capability (dual-use, advanced technology, industrial inputs) are treated as economic/strategic measures unless the report can demonstrate a clear household-level transmission mechanism relevant to the social sections. Similarly, transport bans are included in Part 3 (logistics restrictions) and appear in Part 4 only where they affect civilian mobility as an endpoint rather than trade routing as a means.

A key scope principle is measurability: social sanctions are treated as analytically meaningful only insofar as their effects can be tracked through credible proxies (visa issuance and refusal rates; connectivity and routing; acceptance of payment instruments; consumer price proxies; diaspora transfer frictions). The European Commission publishes structured Schengen visa statistics and periodic updates on visa policy trends, which provides an empirical anchor for the mobility sub-domain and helps discipline claims about "isolation" or "normalisation."

Finally, the definition is intentionally compatible with the EU's legal-ethical constraints—notably proportionality and targeted design—because Sections 4.3–4.5 evaluate not only effectiveness but also the limits of acceptable social harm. That is why scope includes both *intended* social pressure (where stated aims target elites' lifestyles) and *unintended* social costs (over-compliance, discrimination, and collateral barriers), with clear separation between the measure and its downstream consequences.

This framing allows Part 4 to proceed in a disciplined sequence: (1) definition and perimeter (this subsection), (2) catalogue of instruments (4.2), (3) cost/acceptability analysis (4.3), (4) forward-looking policy evolution (4.4), and (5) ethically robust proposals (4.5). In short, "social sanctions" are treated here not as a rhetorical label, but as a measurable policy layer that interacts with law, compliance practice, and social resilience dynamics.

Table 4.1.1-1. Operational delimitation of "social sanctions" in this report (EU–Russia context)

Social domain (household-level endpoint)	Typical restriction type	Direct / indirect social effect	Illustrative EU legal/policy anchor	Notes
Visa mobility (short-stay travel)	Suspension of facilitation; stricter issuance guidance	Direct	European Commission "Visa measures" page; Council press release on full suspension	Establishes a people-facing mobility constraint applicable beyond designated persons
Targeted individuals (listed persons)	Travel bans; asset freezes	Direct (for designated persons) + spillovers	Council Regulation (EU) No 269/2014 (consolidated)	Social effects include mobility restriction and transactional exclusion in EU jurisdiction

Social domain (household-level endpoint)	Typical restriction type	Direct / indirect social effect	Illustrative EU legal/policy anchor	Notes
Consumer lifestyle constraints (luxury)	Export bans on luxury goods	Indirect (elite-lifestyle channel)	European Commission "Import and export bans"; Commission luxury-goods FAQs	Social effect is mediated via consumption markets and status signalling
Everyday financial life	Financial restrictions + compliance screening; de-risking	Indirect (friction externalities)	Commission consolidated FAQs on implementation of Regulations 833/2014 & 269/2014	Household impacts often arise through over-compliance and ambiguity management
Information/communication layer (where relevant)	Limits on certain Russian state outlets (distribution/transmission)	Indirect (informational environment)	EU Sanctions Map regime summary (Russia)	Included only where it bears on social interaction and public sphere dynamics

Authorship: analytical framework (this report) was prepared on the basis of open sources
Sources:

- https://commission.europa.eu/topics/eu-solidarity-ukraine/eu-sanctions-against-russia-following-invasion-ukraine/visa-measures_en
- https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/09/09/council-adopts-full-suspension-of-visa-facilitation-with-russia/
- https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/ALL/?uri=CELEX%3A32014R0269
- https://commission.europa.eu/topics/eu-solidarity-ukraine/eu-sanctions-against-russia-following-invasion-ukraine/import-and-export-bans_en
- https://finance.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-07/faqs-sanctions-russia-luxury-goods_en.pdf
- https://finance.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2024-01/faqs-sanctions-russia-consolidated_en.pdf
- https://www.sanctionsmap.eu/api/v1/pdf/regime?id%5B%5D=26&lang=en

Table 4.1.1-2. Indicative proxy-indicators for the "social sanctions" perimeter (for later evaluation)

Sub-domain	Proxy-indicator (examples)	Primary data anchor (EU/official)	Why it matters for scope
Visa mobility	Applications, visas issued, refusal rate by nationality and by consulate	European Commission / DG HOME Schengen visa statistics portal + datasets	Converts "mobility restriction" from narrative to trackable series
Visa-policy dynamics	Annual summaries and trend notes	DG HOME news releases on annual visa statistics	Anchors claims about contraction/normalisation
Implementation frictions	Volume and content of formal guidance; recurring Q&A topics	Commission consolidated FAQs on sanctions implementation	Captures where household impacts arise from compliance ambiguity

Authorship: analytical framework (this report) was prepared on the basis of open sources
Sources:
https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/schengen/visa-policy/short-stay-visas-issued-schengen-countries_en
https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/document/download/87716634-be5e-4920-9358-495a95429759_en?filename=2023-schengen-visa-statistics-consulates_en.xlsx.xlsx
https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/news/visa-applications-reach-117-million-eu-and-schengen-associated-countries-2025-05-20_en
https://finance.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2024-01/faqs-sanctions-russia-consolidated_en.pdf

4.1.2. Causal Architecture: Direct Restrictions vs Indirect Social Effects

The causal architecture of social sanctions in the EU–Russia context is best understood as a two-layer system: a formal layer of legal prohibitions and obligations, and an operational layer of implementation, compliance behaviour, and market responses. The formal layer is composed of EU legal acts and associated guidance that define who is restricted, what is prohibited, and which transactions require authorisation or fall under exemptions. The operational layer translates those norms into real-life outcomes through border practices, banking controls, platform rules, insurer and carrier risk policies, and corporate governance. Social effects arise when these operational decisions constrain individuals' mobility, consumption, and everyday financial life. The distinction is essential because many salient social impacts are generated not by a single "ban", but by cascading risk management across multiple private and public actors. This two-layer model also clarifies why social effects can intensify even when the text of the law remains unchanged: the operational layer can tighten through heightened scrutiny, de-risking, and conservative interpretation. The EU itself implicitly recognises this complexity by publishing consolidated implementation FAQs, which are designed precisely to harmonise interpretation and reduce uncertainty in practice.

In this report, direct social restrictions are those that explicitly and immediately apply to individuals as end-users of cross-border mobility or EU jurisdictional services, without requiring a mediating market chain. In the EU sanctions toolkit, the most recognisable direct social restrictions include travel-related measures (travel bans for listed persons, and policy changes affecting short-stay visa processing for Russian applicants) and legal constraints that determine whether a person can enter, transit, or be served within the EU. Such restrictions typically operate via clear administrative "gates": visa issuance decisions, external border checks, carrier boarding rules linked to entry rights, and sanctions screening against designation lists. Their causal chain is relatively short: a rule is applied by a public authority or carrier, and the result is immediate denial, delay, or additional procedural burden. Direct restrictions are therefore comparatively easy to define and to observe, even if their overall strategic effect is contested. The EU's materials on visa measures and the Council's decision to fully suspend the visa facilitation agreement illustrate how legal adjustments can directly increase procedural costs, documentation burdens, and scrutiny for an entire applicant category.

Indirect social effects originate when the legal instrument is not primarily "social" in form, yet transmits into household outcomes through intermediated channels. In practice, the most powerful transmission channels are financial compliance and de-risking, market exit decisions, service discontinuation, and logistics constraints that reduce availability or raise the cost of everyday transactions. These effects are often second-order and path-dependent: an individual's lived experience changes because a bank alters its risk appetite, a payment provider discontinues services, a platform blocks access, or a retailer reconfigures supply chains. Indirect effects can be more pervasive than direct restrictions because they can apply broadly to non-designated individuals and can operate through multiple overlapping mechanisms. They are also harder to attribute: the observed outcome may reflect sanctions, counter-sanctions, macroeconomic conditions, wartime risk, or private strategic choices. For analytical discipline, the report treats an effect as "sanctions-linked" when it is structurally driven by compliance obligations or sanctions risk, even if the precise actor-level decision is discretionary. The Commission's implementation FAQs are particularly relevant here because they document recurring "grey-zone" questions that arise when sectoral measures meet ordinary consumer and payment realities.

A practical way to structure causality is to map social effects across three endpoint domains: (i) mobility, (ii) consumption and services, and (iii) everyday finance. Mobility is shaped by visa policy, border controls, and transport connectivity; consumption is shaped by availability, import/export bans, and private withdrawals; everyday finance is shaped by payment rails, banking services, and compliance frictions. Each endpoint domain receives shocks from both direct and indirect measures, but with different intensities and time profiles. Mobility is typically "stepwise": a policy change produces a visible discontinuity in access. Consumption is "reconfigurative": bans and exits shift product mixes, brand presence, and the symbolic economy of lifestyle. Everyday finance is "frictional": even when

transactions remain legal, screening and uncertainty create delays, refusals, and higher costs. This tripartite endpoint structure helps prevent category drift and keeps later effectiveness claims anchored to observable consequences. It also provides a framework for selecting indicators and designing tables and figures in Sections 4.2 and 4.3.

In the mobility domain, causality combines policy-level restriction with security-driven administrative discretion and member-state heterogeneity. The suspension of visa facilitation changes the baseline procedural regime, but the lived outcome depends on how consulates process applications and how border authorities apply scrutiny. The Commission's 2022 communication on updating visa issuance guidelines is an explicit acknowledgement that consistent application requires interpretative coordination, especially under heightened security concerns. This matters because mobility outcomes can be shaped as much by risk signals and administrative practices as by the "headline" legal act. It also implies that mobility restrictions can tighten over time through operational measures: longer processing times, increased evidence requirements, narrower interpretation of travel purpose, and more frequent issuance of single-entry rather than multiple-entry visas. For the report's causal model, the key point is that policy changes alter default rules, while operational practices determine the effective access rate. The empirical anchor for this domain is official Schengen visa statistics and related Commission reporting, which provides refusal-rate and volume series that can be used as proxies for effective restrictiveness.

Visa statistics also demonstrate why indirect effects must be considered even within a direct policy domain. A fall in visas issued can reflect formal policy tightening, but it can also reflect reduced demand due to reputational risk, transport constraints, higher costs, or fear of denial. Conversely, stabilisation in refusal rates does not necessarily mean normalisation; it may reflect self-selection among applicants, changes in destination choice, or the relocation of application flows through third countries. The Commission's reporting on refusal-rate variations by nationality shows that refusal rates can shift year-on-year, which means a single year's data is insufficient to infer a stable long-run effect. For causal inference, this pushes the analysis toward multi-year trends, cross-country comparisons, and interpretation of changes in application composition. The report therefore treats visa statistics as necessary but not sufficient, and integrates them later with qualitative evidence about operational tightening and policy debate. This approach avoids overclaiming while still using official datasets as a constraint on speculation.

In the consumption and services domain, causality is often mediated by symbolic targeting and market substitution rather than absolute scarcity. Export bans on luxury goods are commonly framed as targeting elites' lifestyles and social status, but they can also create broader narrative and behavioural effects that extend beyond the intended group. The causal chain typically runs: legal restriction → reduced legal availability in EU channels → substitution via alternative suppliers or parallel import routes → price changes and reorientation of aspirational consumption. The "effectiveness" of such measures is therefore not primarily measured by total deprivation, but by cost escalation, quality substitution, brand displacement, and loss of prestige externalities. At the same time, the social salience of consumption restrictions can exceed their economic magnitude because they operate in a domain that is highly visible and easily politicised. For analytic consistency, the report treats consumption effects as social when they are (a) explicitly aimed at lifestyle/elite signalling or (b) plausibly and measurably transmitted to household consumption patterns and everyday services access. EU explanatory materials on import/export bans provide the formal anchor for this mechanism, while later sections assess scale and limits using market proxies.

Indirect consumption effects are amplified by private market exits that are not always legally compelled but are structurally induced by sanctions risk and reputational considerations. A firm may exit a market to avoid compliance complexity, reputational exposure, or supply-chain uncertainty, even when continuing operations could be technically lawful. This creates a social experience of exclusion that is not reducible to a single legal prohibition, and it can affect non-luxury services such as travel platforms, digital subscriptions, and consumer support services. The causal link to sanctions lies in the risk

environment: sanctions reshape the cost–benefit calculus of corporate presence, and compliance uncertainty raises the expected cost of errors. The result is a form of "shadow restrictiveness" where the operational layer becomes tighter than the legal baseline. For the report, this phenomenon is analytically important because it changes the distribution of burdens: it can affect ordinary users while the formal intent was to constrain elites or strategic sectors. This is also where proportionality concerns begin to appear in the causal model, because overextension of market exits can approach de facto collective effects. The EU's emphasis on targeted and proportionate sanctions is therefore tested most strongly in this operational channel.

Everyday finance is the domain where indirect social effects are most systematically generated, because compliance obligations are embedded in routine payment and banking processes. Financial restrictions under the EU regime include prohibitions, service bans, asset freezes for listed persons, and constraints on certain transactions, all of which require banks and payment providers to build screening and control systems. Even when a household transaction is not prohibited, it may be delayed or refused due to name-matching risk, documentation gaps, or conservative interpretation by compliance teams. The Commission's consolidated FAQs exist precisely because banks, companies, and citizens face repeated uncertainties about what is permitted under the evolving legal framework, indicating the structural propensity toward frictions. This creates a causal pattern of "permission under uncertainty": the legal system permits some transactions, but the operational system treats them as risky, thereby reducing effective access. In such settings, over-compliance is not an anomaly; it is a predictable equilibrium when penalties and reputational damage are high and legal clarity is incomplete. The social effect is a rise in transaction costs, time costs, and uncertainty costs borne by individuals and small businesses.

A key mechanism in everyday finance is de-risking, where institutions narrow their exposure to perceived high-risk counterparties, jurisdictions, or customer segments. De-risking can be rational from the provider's perspective, but it redistributes costs to consumers through account closures, refusal to process transfers, or reduced service availability. Because de-risking is partly discretionary, it also introduces heterogeneity: individuals with similar legal status may face different outcomes depending on their bank, their country of residence, and the provider's risk appetite. This heterogeneity complicates effectiveness analysis because it can create pockets of severe constraint alongside zones of relative normality. From a policy design perspective, de-risking is the channel where "ethical robustness" can be operationalised: clear safe harbours, robust derogations, and standardised guidance can reduce excessive caution without weakening enforcement against genuinely prohibited transactions. The EU's practice of issuing interpretative guidance, including consolidated FAQs, is therefore not merely informational; it is an instrument that shapes the operational layer and thus social outcomes. In later sections, this mechanism will be linked to measurable proxies such as rejection rates in transfers, consumer reports of payment failures, and shifts toward alternative rails.

Another major transmission channel is the enabling-services layer, where sanctions prohibit or restrict services that are not themselves consumer goods but are necessary for transactions to occur at scale. Insurance, reinsurance, brokerage, auditing, legal services, and IT support can function as "choke points" in complex systems, and restrictions here can cascade into reduced service availability for end-users. While Part 3 analyses enabling services largely through trade, transport, and finance, Part 4 treats the household endpoint: when enabling services constraints tighten, individuals experience it as reduced access to platforms, fewer legitimate cross-border options, and increased reliance on informal intermediaries. The causal chain is indirect but structurally strong because enabling services are bottlenecks: without them, many legal transactions become operationally difficult. EU legal acts such as Council Regulation (EU) No 833/2014 provide the central framework for such sectoral restrictions, while Commission guidance clarifies implementation boundaries. The social effect is often not a total prohibition but a shrinking of compliant pathways, which increases the relative share of grey-market and third-country routes. This dynamic has implications for both effectiveness and ethical assessment, as it can unintentionally incentivise informalisation.

The architecture also includes member-state heterogeneity as a causal factor, because implementation is partly decentralised through national competent authorities. Even with common EU regulations, licensing practices, administrative capacity, and enforcement intensity can differ. This heterogeneity matters socially because individuals interact with specific consulates, border checkpoints, banks, and service providers operating under national supervisory cultures. In practice, heterogeneity can create "route shopping", where applicants and consumers seek the least restrictive pathway, thereby shifting flows rather than eliminating them. It also creates perceived arbitrariness, which can have social and political resonance beyond the underlying legal intent. The Commission's effort to provide harmonised guidance aims to reduce such variance, but the persistence of recurring questions suggests that variance remains a feature of the operational layer. For causal analysis, heterogeneity implies that single-country anecdotes are not reliable evidence of EU-wide effects; instead, comparative patterns and multi-source triangulation are required. This principle will govern how Section 4.2 is written: measures will be catalogued at EU level, while outcomes will be discussed with an explicit acknowledgement of national variance.

A further causal component is adaptation and circumvention, which can moderate or transform social effects over time. Individuals and small firms adapt by shifting to third-country travel hubs, alternative payment instruments, different brands, and new service ecosystems. These adaptations do not necessarily negate effects; rather, they often convert them into a persistent "friction tax" paid in the form of higher prices, longer routes, additional intermediaries, and greater legal and practical uncertainty. Adaptation also changes distributional outcomes: those with higher income, better information, and transnational networks can access substitutes more easily, while vulnerable groups face higher effective barriers. This is one reason why later sections treat social costs not as a single aggregate, but as distributional impacts across population segments. Adaptation also interacts with ethics: if a measure primarily increases the cost of legal pathways while leaving circumvention accessible for the wealthy, its moral and strategic coherence weakens. The EU's evolving emphasis on anti-circumvention measures in other domains suggests that social measures will similarly face the challenge of designing constraints that do not simply reward capacity to circumvent.

The causal architecture must also incorporate information effects and signalling, because sanctions are partly communicative instruments. Some social restrictions function as signals of disapproval and as instruments of diplomatic isolation, regardless of their direct material impact. However, signalling effects are not automatically beneficial; they can also produce counter-mobilisation, identity hardening, and narrative entrenchment. This report therefore treats signalling as a channel that can shape social attitudes and political meaning, but it avoids equating "visibility" with "effectiveness". Instead, signalling is assessed through its interaction with other channels: does it complement targeted measures by increasing elite disutility, or does it diffuse costs onto ordinary citizens and thus undermine legitimacy? This distinction is crucial for the ethical proposals in Section 4.5, which aim to maintain moral credibility while preserving strategic pressure. EU regime summaries and official explanations of sanctions objectives provide the baseline for how the EU articulates its aims, which can then be compared with observed social outcomes. The causal model thus includes signalling as a mechanism, but insists on empirical discipline and proportionality constraints when interpreting it.

The most analytically sensitive issue is causal attribution, because social outcomes in Russia since 2022 are influenced by multiple contemporaneous shocks: war mobilisation, domestic policy, inflationary pressures, counter-sanctions, corporate decisions, and geopolitical risk. The report therefore adopts an attribution rule: social effects are treated as "sanctions-linked" when there is a credible structural pathway from EU measures and compliance obligations to the observed outcome, even if the outcome is multi-causal. This is consistent with the two-layer model: the legal layer sets constraints and obligations, and the operational layer transmits them into practice through risk management and market reconfiguration. To maintain rigour, the report will later differentiate between (a) direct legal causation, (b) compliance-mediated causation, and (c) market-mediated causation. Each category implies different evidentiary standards and different policy levers for mitigation. For

example, if an effect is compliance-mediated, clearer guidance and safe harbours may reduce harm without weakening sanctions intent; if it is market-mediated, mitigation may require public communication or targeted exceptions. This attribution discipline is necessary to keep Section 4.3 from becoming a purely moral narrative and to preserve the analytic tone established in Part 3.

The architecture also has a temporal dimension: direct restrictions often produce immediate discontinuities, while indirect effects accumulate and evolve through learning, adaptation, and enforcement cycles. Over time, private actors refine screening models, regulators issue additional guidance, and circumvention tactics provoke countermeasures. This creates an iterative system in which the effective restrictiveness can tighten or loosen without a single decisive legislative event. The Commission's practice of updating consolidated FAQs and maintaining regime summaries reflects this iterative governance logic. For social outcomes, the temporal dimension implies that "first-year shock" analysis can be misleading; what matters for 2026–2030 is whether frictions become institutionalised and whether workarounds become normalised. The causal model therefore anticipates that some social effects will stabilise into a new baseline, while others will attenuate as substitutes mature. This is a key bridge to Section 4.4, where the report will examine scenarios of tightening, selective easing, and hybrid models. It also sets up a methodological requirement: when possible, the report should use multi-year series (e.g., visa statistics) rather than single-point estimates.

In summary, the causal architecture can be expressed as a chain: EU legal measures → compliance obligations and enforcement practices → market and institutional responses → household-level endpoints (mobility, consumption, finance). Direct restrictions are those where the chain is short and explicitly person-facing, such as visa policy and travel bans for listed persons. Indirect effects are those where sectoral measures and sanctions risk reshape private and institutional behaviour, producing friction and exclusion in everyday life. The architecture is also characterised by feedback loops: over-compliance and de-risking generate demand for guidance; adaptation generates anti-circumvention responses; and distributional effects generate ethical and political constraints. This model provides the analytical foundation for the remainder of Part 4: Section 4.2 will catalogue the principal instruments, Section 4.3 will assess costs and acceptability thresholds, Section 4.4 will examine 2026–2030 trajectories, and Section 4.5 will propose ethically robust designs. The goal is not to claim monocausal certainty, but to present a structured and evidence-disciplined explanation of how social effects are produced. Such clarity is a prerequisite for credible evaluation of both effectiveness and proportionality.

Finally, the architecture suggests a pragmatic evaluative stance: the most policy-relevant question is often not whether social effects exist—because they manifest readily—but whether they are strategically purposeful, proportionate, and controllable. Social effects that arise from poorly controlled operational channels, especially over-compliance, may generate harm without generating commensurate strategic leverage. Conversely, narrowly targeted measures with clear pathways and measurable objectives may impose lower collateral costs while maintaining pressure on specific support structures. This is why the report treats governance instruments—guidance, exemptions, safe harbours, review clauses—as integral parts of the causal system rather than as peripheral "soft" add-ons. In the EU context, the existence and continual updating of consolidated implementation guidance indicates recognition that the operational layer must be actively managed to align real-world outcomes with legal intent. The causal architecture thus directly informs ethical sustainability: if the system cannot control who bears costs, it cannot credibly claim proportionality. The subsequent sections will therefore treat "ethical robustness" as an operational property of the sanctions system, not merely a normative aspiration. This framing preserves the report's overall logic: sanctions are analysed as engineered systems with measurable outputs, constraints, and feedback loops.

Table 4.1.2-1. Transmission channels from EU measures to household-level social outcomes (direct vs indirect)

Channel	Classification	Typical implementing actor(s)	Household endpoint	Illustrative EU anchor (examples)	Core analytic risk
Visa regime tightening (post-suspension of facilitation)	Direct	Consulates, border authorities, carriers	Mobility (access, time, cost)	Commission "Visa measures"; Commission 2022 visa guidelines communication; Council press release on full suspension	Member-state heterogeneity; self-selection effects
Travel bans for listed persons	Direct	Border authorities; screening actors	Mobility + access to EU services	EU restrictive measures framework and listings; regime summaries	Spillovers via association risk
Export bans with lifestyle intent (e.g., luxury goods)	Indirect (policy → market)	Exporters, customs, retailers	Consumption + symbolic status	Commission import/export bans page; regime summaries	Substitution via third countries; visibility > impact
Financial compliance screening and implementation guidance	Indirect (law → compliance)	Banks, payment providers, supervisors	Everyday finance (frictions, refusals)	Commission consolidated FAQs (implementation of 833/2014 and 269/2014)	Over-compliance; de-risking and discrimination
Market exits and service discontinuation under sanctions risk	Indirect (risk → corporate policy)	Firms, platforms, insurers, carriers	Services access + routine transactions	EU objective statements and regime summaries; compliance environment reflected in FAQs	Attribution difficulty; uncontrolled collateral effects

Authorship: analytical framework (this report) was prepared on the basis of official EU institutional materials, EU legal acts and documents

Sources:

- https://commission.europa.eu/topics/eu-solidarity-ukraine/eu-sanctions-against-russia-following-invasion-ukraine/visa-measures_en
- https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/09/09/council-adopts-full-suspension-of-visa-facilitation-with-russia/
- https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-09/Communication%20from%20the%20Commission%20on%20updating%20guidelines%20on%20general%20visa%20issuance%20in%20relation%20to%20Russian%20applicants%20and%20on%20providing%20guidelines%20on%20controls%20of%20Russian%20citizens%20at%20the%20external%20borders_en.pdf
- https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2014/833/oj/eng
- https://finance.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2024-01/faqs-sanctions-russia-consolidated_en.pdf
- https://eur-lex.europa.eu/EN/legal-content/summary/eu-restrictive-measures-in-view-of-russia-s-invasion-of-ukraine.html
- https://www.sanctionsmap.eu/api/v1/pdf/regime?id%5B%5D=26&lang=en

4.1.3. Measurement and Attribution

Robust evaluation of social sanctions depends on treating "social impact" as an empirical object rather than a rhetorical impression. In this report, measurement is framed around observable *endpoints* (mobility, consumption/services, everyday finance) and the *mechanisms* that plausibly connect EU measures to those endpoints. The central challenge is that most household-level outcomes are multi-causal: they are shaped by EU restrictions, Russia's domestic policy responses, corporate risk decisions, macroeconomic shocks, wartime uncertainty, and behavioural adaptation. The methodological aim is therefore not to claim monocausal certainty, but to establish structured attribution: what can be asserted with high confidence, what can be asserted probabilistically, and what should be treated as conjecture absent additional evidence. This stance mirrors the audit-ready logic used in Part 3: measure what can be measured, declare assumptions openly, and triangulate across

independent sources. In practice, the discipline of attribution matters as much as the availability of data, because poor attribution turns social analysis into moral narrative. The EU's approach—periodic regime summaries, interpretative guidance, and consolidated FAQs—implicitly acknowledges that implementation is complex and that effects are mediated through operational behaviour rather than simple legal "on/off" switches.

A workable measurement framework begins with the distinction between direct indicators and proxy indicators. Direct indicators record the immediate application of a rule, such as visa refusal rates, the number of visas issued, or formal decisions that reflect tightened procedural regimes. Proxy indicators, by contrast, capture downstream impacts where the legal signal is mediated, such as increased travel costs due to routing changes, payment frictions, or service discontinuation patterns. The danger is to mistake proxy movement for legal causation, particularly when proxies are affected by global factors such as post-pandemic travel recovery or currency movements. To mitigate this, the report treats direct indicators as "anchor series" and proxies as "context series" that are interpreted in relation to anchors. The Commission's Schengen visa statistics infrastructure provides one of the strongest anchors available for the mobility domain because it offers comparable cross-country time series.

Attribution, in operational terms, is built on a chain test: Is there a credible pathway from EU measures and compliance obligations to the observed household outcome? If yes, the next question is whether the pathway is "short" (direct causation) or "long" (compliance- or market-mediated causation). A short pathway is visible in administrative gates: visa processing, border checks, travel bans for listed persons, and formal restrictions with immediate denial or delay. A long pathway is typical for financial frictions: a transaction may remain legal, but becomes difficult due to bank de-risking, name-matching risk, documentation uncertainty, or conservative interpretation by compliance teams. Long pathways create genuine effects, but the evidentiary standard must be explicitly lower: one should infer probabilistically rather than assert deterministically. The EU's consolidated sanctions FAQs are a key source for identifying long-pathway mechanisms because they document recurring implementation ambiguities that generate predictable friction patterns.

For the mobility endpoint, the core measurement set includes applications, visas issued, refusal rates, and—where feasible—granular breakdowns by consulate and member state. These series provide a disciplined way to talk about tightening without relying on anecdote. For example, the Commission's 2025 reporting on 2024 visa outcomes explicitly notes that refusal rates "presented variations" and gives a country-level comparison in which Russia's refusal rate is cited as 7.5% in 2024 versus 10.6% in 2023. This single comparison does not imply liberalisation, because refusal rates can fall due to self-selection (fewer weak applications) or altered application composition. However, it does demonstrate why attribution must be careful: "fewer refusals" can coexist with a much smaller overall issuance level, longer processing times, or tighter visa types. The correct inference is therefore conditional: refusal-rate decline suggests changing adjudication outcomes among applicants, but does not alone measure overall mobility access.

Mobility measurement also faces a crucial confounder: demand-side changes. Even if policy tightens, individuals may stop applying because travel has become expensive, routes have become inconvenient, or they perceive higher reputational and administrative risk. If demand collapses, issuance falls even with stable refusal rates, which can produce misleading interpretations. To handle this, the report treats applications and issuance as complementary series and interprets refusal rates as a conditional probability that requires demand context. It also recognises member-state heterogeneity: some consulates may apply stricter evidentiary thresholds, while others may prioritise family and humanitarian cases, producing divergent patterns within the same Schengen system. Where the Commission provides only aggregated statistics, the report uses those aggregates as the baseline and avoids strong claims about specific national practices unless corroborated by additional official sources. This keeps analysis consistent with the evidentiary posture adopted throughout the document.

In the consumption and services endpoint, measurement is inherently more proxy-heavy because many effects are mediated by substitution and market exit decisions. A luxury-goods export ban, for instance, can be legally strict but socially porous through third-country procurement, grey-market channels, and brand substitution. The measurable effects are therefore likely to show up as price premia, changes in product mix, displacement from EU brands to non-EU brands, and increased reliance on intermediaries. Yet even these signals can be polluted by macro factors, including exchange-rate movements and domestic policy changes. As a result, the report treats consumption measurement as a combination of (1) formal scope mapping of bans and (2) market indicators that are used illustratively rather than as definitive causal proof. EU official summaries of the sanctions' regime provide the legal anchor for what is restricted, while market effects are treated as contingent and heterogeneous.

Everyday finance is the domain where measurement and attribution are most technically demanding, because the most relevant variable is not merely "is it legal?" but "is there a workable compliant pathway for ordinary users?" The law may permit certain transactions, yet the operational reality can be that banks refuse to process them due to uncertainty, internal risk scoring, or fear of inadvertent breaches. This produces a class of outcomes that are real but under-recorded in official statistics, because refusals and delays are not always publicly reported in a systematic way. The Commission's consolidated FAQs function as a proxy for friction: the persistence and breadth of questions indicates where ordinary actors repeatedly struggle to operationalise the regime. The measurement strategy therefore combines (1) regulatory texts and FAQs for mechanism identification with (2) wherever possible, formal data series on cross-border payment patterns and consumer finance access. Where such series are unavailable or non-specific, the report uses the "friction taxonomy" approach set out in Table 4.1.3-1 to discipline narrative claims.

Table 4.1.3-1. Attribution taxonomy for social-sanctions effects (operational use in this report)

Attribution class	Definition (how the claim is made)	Typical evidence standard	Primary evaluation question	Policy lever implied
Direct legal attribution	Immediate consequence of a clearly defined rule applied to individuals at an administrative gate	Legal text + official statistics/administrative outputs	Does the rule change access directly and measurably?	Legal design; scope; exemptions; procedural safeguards
Compliance-mediated attribution	Outcome plausibly linked to sanctions via screening, de-risking, and interpretation uncertainty	Recurrent official guidance needs + consistent mechanism logic + supporting proxies	Are frictions controllable without weakening enforcement?	Guidance; safe harbours; clearer derogations; harmonisation
Market-mediated attribution	Outcome driven by corporate exit and service discontinuation under sanctions and reputational risk	Structural linkage + triangulated market signals + documented risk environment	Do market responses amplify collateral costs beyond intent?	Targeted exceptions; communication; monitoring; review clauses

Authorship: analytical framework (this report) was prepared by the author
Note (sources): EU consolidated sanctions FAQs and regime summaries illustrate the need for interpretative harmonisation and show where compliance-mediated effects arise in practice.

A further attribution difficulty arises from compliance externalities and the phenomenon of over-compliance. Over-compliance occurs when private actors adopt a conservative interpretation that exceeds legal minimums, usually because the expected cost of an error is high and legal clarity is incomplete. From a household perspective, over-compliance can be indistinguishable from a formal ban, because the user experiences denial or delay regardless of legality. From a policy perspective, however, over-compliance is a different object: it is partly controllable via guidance, safe-harbour provisions, and clearer derogations. That is why the report treats over-compliance as an attribution

category in its right rather than a mere anecdotal complaint. The existence of regularly updated consolidated FAQs is a strong signal that the EU recognises interpretation risk as a systemic issue and attempts to manage it centrally.

The measurement framework also adopts a distributional lens, because social costs are rarely uniform across individuals. Students, researchers, mixed families, diaspora communities, and individuals requiring medical services can face higher welfare losses from mobility and banking frictions than high-income travellers who can absorb extra cost and complexity. This implies that aggregate statistics can understate harm if the marginally excluded groups are small in number but high in vulnerability. Conversely, aggregate proxies can overstate harm if those most able to adapt self-select into alternative routes and remain mobile. For credible evaluation, therefore, the report uses distributional mapping in Section 4.3 and interprets aggregate series through the lens of heterogeneous exposure and adaptive capacity. This approach is consistent with the broader EU policy stance that sanctions should be targeted and proportionate, which presupposes attention to who bears costs.

Triangulation is the practical method that converts these principles into an operational research design. For each endpoint, the report seeks at least three independent evidence streams: (1) official legal/regulatory anchors defining scope; (2) official or high-quality statistical series capturing key outcomes; and (3) interpretative guidance or implementation artefacts that reveal operational friction points. For mobility, this triangulation is comparatively strong, because legal measures, guidance, and visa statistics are all available within EU official infrastructures. For everyday finance, the triangulation is asymmetrical: legal anchors and guidance are robust, but outcome statistics are harder to obtain at household granularity, making friction artefacts more important. For consumption, triangulation is split: legal anchors are clear, but outcome series can be noisy and must be used cautiously. This is why Table 4.1.3-2 distinguishes “anchor indicators” from “supporting proxies” and requires explicit caveats where measurement is structurally weaker.

Table 4.1.3-2. Indicator architecture for Part 4 (anchors vs supporting proxies)

Endpoint domain	Anchor indicators (preferred)	Supporting proxies (conditional)	Official EU data / documentation anchors
Visa mobility	Applications, visas issued, refusal rate (by nationality; by consulate where available)	Processing time proxies; visa type patterns (single vs multiple-entry where reported); route substitution signals	DG HOME Schengen visa statistics portal and annual reporting
Everyday finance	Legal scope mapping + implementation guidance volume/content as friction proxy	Consumer-reported refusal patterns; shifts to alternative rails (where measurable)	Commission consolidated FAQs (updated editions)
Consumption & services	Legal scope of lifestyle-relevant bans; changes in permitted channels	Price premia; brand displacement; third-country procurement reliance	EU regime summaries and sanctions-overview pages

Authorship: analytical framework (this report) was prepared by the author
Sources:

- DG HOME Schengen visa statistics portal: https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/schengen/visa-policy/short-stay-visas-issued-schengen-countries_en
- Commission Schengen 2024 visa reporting (incl. Russia refusal-rate comparison): https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/news/visa-applications-reach-117-million-eu-and-schengen-associated-countries-2025-05-20_en
- European Commission consolidated FAQs landing page and latest consolidated version listing: https://finance.ec.europa.eu/eu-and-world/sanctions-restrictive-measures/sanctions-adopted-following-russias-military-aggression-against-ukraine/frequently-asked-questions-sanctions-against-russia_en
- Consolidated FAQs PDF (example edition hosted publicly): https://celnisprava.gov.cz/cz/Documents/2025-11-21--FAQs-sanctions-Russia-consolidated_en_26.pdf
- EU Sanctions Map (Russia regime PDF): https://www.sanctionsmap.eu/api/v1/pdf/regime?id%5B%5D=26&lang=en

- EEAS overview of EU sanctions policy: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/european-union-sanctions_en

Temporal structure is another essential part of attribution. Direct restrictions often generate immediate discontinuities, whereas indirect effects evolve through learning and adaptation cycles. A refusal rate change may show up quickly, but the reconfiguration of payment practices, service ecosystems, and third-country routing often unfolds over months and then stabilises. Evaluation must therefore be time-aware: early-period measures capture shock effects, while later-period measures capture institutionalisation and adaptation. The Commission's periodic publication of visa statistics and repeated updates to consolidated FAQs illustrate how the EU system itself evolves over time, which implies that measurement should treat each year as an observation within a moving regime rather than a fixed policy baseline. This temporal discipline also supports the forward-looking analysis in Section 4.4, because 2026–2030 outcomes will be shaped by feedback loops rather than one-off interventions.

Counterfactual reasoning is the final methodological pillar, but it must be handled with care. The question "what would have happened without sanctions?" cannot be answered directly, yet evaluation implicitly relies on some counterfactual concept. In this report, counterfactuals are approximated through controlled comparisons: pre-2022 baselines, cross-national comparisons with other applicant nationalities, and within-system comparisons across Schengen member states. Such comparisons do not yield definitive causal estimates, but they help constrain implausible narratives. For example, comparing Russia's refusal-rate trajectory with that of other nationalities can reveal whether observed movement is unique or part of a broader Schengen-wide trend. Likewise, comparing issuance patterns across member states can indicate whether outcomes are driven by a common EU-level policy signal or by local administrative preferences. These methods are not perfect, but they create a disciplined alternative to speculative claims.

A related issue is the risk of selection bias and "survivorship" in observed data. Those who remain in official datasets are those who continue to apply, continue to attempt transactions, and remain within compliant channels. Those pushed out of compliant channels may disappear into alternative ecosystems, leaving official data to over-represent the more successful or better-resourced users. This is particularly salient in everyday finance, where users may shift to alternative rails and informal intermediaries that are not visible in EU reporting. The report therefore treats stable official series as necessary anchors but does not treat them as full representations of social experience. Where plausible, qualitative evidence and mechanism analysis are used to infer the likely direction of missingness. This also creates a policy-relevant insight: systems that push activity into less transparent channels can reduce controllability and therefore weaken both effectiveness and ethical defensibility.

Measurement must also account for the EU's normative framing and governance intent. EU external action materials describe sanctions as instruments to support peace and security, and regime summaries state aims such as weakening the economic base and depriving Russia of critical technologies and markets. Social sanctions, however, sit at the intersection of strategic intent and ethical constraints, because they risk producing collective-like outcomes if poorly targeted or if operational channels generate large collateral burdens. This report therefore treats "policy intent" as an explanatory variable that informs evaluation: when intent is explicitly lifestyle-targeting, consumption effects have different interpretative meaning than when intent is strategic capability degradation. The distinction matters because ethical evaluation in Section 4.5 depends on aligning measurable outcomes with declared objectives and accepted proportionality standards. To keep this consistent, Table 4.1.3-1 classifies outcomes not only by mechanism but also by controllability and alignment with stated intent.

In operational terms, the report's attribution labels are deliberately conservative. "Direct legal attribution" is reserved for outcomes that are immediate consequences of a formal rule applied by an authority or a regulated entity under clear obligation. "Compliance-mediated attribution" is used when outcomes are plausibly linked to sanctions via screening, de-risking, or interpretation uncertainty, evidenced by recurrent guidance needs and implementation artefacts. "Market-mediated attribution" is

used when outcomes arise from corporate exit, service discontinuation, or reputational risk responses in the sanctions' environment, where the legal link is structural but not strictly compelled. Each label implies a different policy lever: legal design for direct effects, guidance and safe harbours for compliance effects, and communication or targeted exceptions for market effects. This taxonomy prevents the analysis from collapsing different causal types into a single narrative and maintains continuity with Part 3's system-engineering approach.

The measurement strategy is also designed to support the later discussion of ethical robustness, because ethics in this report is treated as partly empirical. If a measure produces disproportionate collateral impacts that are not aligned with strategic objectives, that is not only a moral objection but a design failure that can undermine legitimacy and compliance. Conversely, if impacts are tightly targeted and measurable, ethics becomes operational: one can specify thresholds, monitoring triggers, and review clauses. This is why 4.1.3 insists on indicator selection and attribution discipline upfront. Without those elements, the later sections would be forced into abstract moral language, which would be inconsistent with the overall tone and structure of the document. By embedding ethics into measurement, the report keeps the entire Part 4 within the same analytic idiom as the sanctions-engineering approach used earlier.

Finally, the choice of indicators must be feasible under real-world constraints. Some desirable measures—such as systematic data on payment refusals by cause—may not exist in a public and comparable format. In such cases, the report prefers a disciplined use of second-best indicators over an illusion of precision. This is where documentation artefacts such as consolidated FAQs and official statistical bulletins become especially valuable: they do not measure everything, but they reveal where the system repeatedly "binds" in practice. The report also treats the stability of indicators as a quality criterion: a measure that is published regularly and consistently is more useful for trend analysis than a richer but sporadic source. The Commission's publication cadence for visa statistics and the Commission services' practice of issuing consolidated FAQs provide a workable backbone for 2022–2025 baselining and 2026–2030 scenario monitoring.

Taken together, the measurement and attribution approach used in this report is intentionally modest in its causal claims but strong in its structural clarity. It does not require that every social outcome be uniquely attributable to sanctions. Rather, it requires that claims of sanctions linkage be grounded in credible pathways and supported by transparent indicator choices. It also requires that uncertainty be treated as a feature to be managed rather than a reason to avoid evaluation. This posture enables the report to make policy-relevant judgements about effectiveness, proportionality, and ethical sustainability without overstating what the data can prove. It also creates a stable methodological platform for the next step, 4.2, where measures are catalogued, and 4.3, where social costs and acceptability limits are evaluated using the attribution discipline established here.

4.1.4. Targeting Logic and Legitimacy Constraints

The targeting logic of EU restrictive measures rests on a core proposition: sanctions should exert pressure on the decision-making and enabling structures responsible for objectionable conduct while avoiding the character of population-wide punishment. In EU doctrine, this is often articulated as a preference for targeted measures—travel bans and asset freezes on designated persons and entities—combined with sectoral restrictions designed to reduce strategic capabilities. The social-sphere question is therefore structurally sensitive, because household-level impacts can arise even when the formal target is narrow. The analytical task is to distinguish between intended social pressure (where lifestyle and mobility are deliberately constrained for designated or high-proximity actors) and incidental social burden produced by compliance systems, de-risking, and market exits. The legitimacy constraint is not merely rhetorical: it is grounded in EU legal commitments, including fundamental rights and the principles of proportionality, legal certainty, and effective judicial protection. These commitments have historically shaped the EU's shift away from comprehensive embargo-style sanctions toward more

targeted designs, and they continue to constrain how far social measures can go without undermining the EU's normative posture. In practical terms, legitimacy is sustained when targeting is precise, criteria are intelligible, and collateral burdens are monitored and mitigated through exemptions, guidance, and review mechanisms. The Council's explanation of EU sanctions explicitly emphasises that EU sanctions are targeted and do not target a country or population, which functions as a public-facing legitimacy claim that policy design must be able to substantiate.

Targeting, however, is not a binary property; it exists on a spectrum from designation-based constraints to category-based constraints that capture broad populations by attribute. Travel bans for listed persons sit near the high-precision end: a name-based measure is conceptually targeted, administratively implementable, and contestable through de-listing and judicial review. At the other end are broad consumption or mobility restrictions applied by nationality or residence, which may be administratively straightforward but risk appearing collectively punitive and can generate disproportionate hardship for vulnerable subgroups. Between these poles lies a large middle zone: restrictions that are formally sectoral yet affect ordinary people through service access, payment friction, and private risk responses. In that middle zone, the legal text may remain "targeted" in intent, but the operational reality becomes diffuse because regulated entities apply risk controls at scale. This is why the report treats targeting logic as inseparable from implementation architecture: a measure that is narrow on paper can become broad in practice if compliance incentives and uncertainty push firms toward over-compliance. Recent scholarship and policy analysis of EU restrictive measures highlights that human-rights considerations and judicial review have driven the move to targeted sanctions, but it also notes that effectiveness and legitimacy can be threatened when collateral effects become prominent or poorly controlled.

The legitimacy constraint is sharpened by the EU's legal environment, where restrictive measures are routinely litigated and thus must meet procedural and substantive requirements. Even without rehearsing the full doctrinal detail, the recurring themes in EU restrictive-measures case-law include the need for adequate reasoning, respect for rights of defence, and access to effective judicial protection. These procedural guarantees function as a design constraint: the more a measure resembles a quasi-criminal penalty or a population-level disability, the more intense the legitimacy scrutiny becomes. This is one reason why the EU's sanctions system invests in listing criteria, periodic review, and de-listing processes rather than relying solely on blanket prohibitions. The implication for social sanctions is direct: broad social restrictions that are hard to justify on tailored criteria can be legally and politically fragile, even if they are emotionally or symbolically popular. Legitimacy is also practical: if individuals perceive measures as arbitrary or collectively punitive, compliance and reputational support may erode, particularly among member states whose domestic publics are sensitive to humanitarian and family-life considerations. The report therefore treats legitimacy not only as a legal test but as a governance requirement that protects the durability of the sanctions' regime over multi-year horizons.

A second legitimacy constraint is the EU's commitment to humanitarian space and the avoidance of unintended harm to protected activities. Over the last years, the EU has developed an increasingly explicit set of instruments for humanitarian derogations and guidance intended to ensure that sanctions do not obstruct humanitarian assistance and medical support. Although these instruments are usually discussed in the context of crisis regions and humanitarian operators, they reveal a general principle: sanctions regimes should incorporate workable exceptions and operational guidance where the risk of collateral harm is substantial. This principle carries over to the social domain, where the protected interests may include family reunification, education, medical treatment, and other high-salience needs. The Commission's work on humanitarian derogations and practical compliance guidance demonstrates that legitimacy depends on implementation pathways, not merely on formal exemptions written into law. If an exemption exists but is procedurally inaccessible or inconsistently applied, it will not mitigate social harm and may instead increase perceptions of arbitrariness. The report uses this insight later in Part 4 to frame "ethical robustness" as an operational property: it requires that exceptions are usable, predictable, and auditable. The existence of dedicated factsheets and guidance notes on derogations is evidence that the EU treats this as a systemic issue rather than a marginal concern.

The most persistent challenge to targeting in the social sphere is compliance externalities, particularly in finance and platform-mediated services. Banks, payment providers, and digital platforms operate under strong incentives to avoid any possibility of breach, and therefore tend to implement sanctions through conservative screening rules, broad risk scoring, and cautious customer acceptance standards. Where the legal boundary is complex or frequently updated, these actors often choose the safest operational posture, which may exceed legal minimum requirements. This behaviour is not accidental; it is a predictable equilibrium in a regime where penalties, supervisory scrutiny, and reputational risk are high. The Commission's consolidated FAQs exist precisely because implementation questions recur across the market and because divergence in interpretation can either weaken enforcement or generate excessive collateral burdens. The legitimacy issue is acute: when lawful transactions are routinely declined due to over-compliance, affected individuals experience a de facto ban without a clear legal basis, without transparent reasoning, and without an obvious remedy. That experience undermines the EU's "targeted" narrative and creates a credibility gap between legal design and lived reality. For this reason, the report treats over-compliance as a measurable governance problem and not merely as anecdotal inconvenience.

A practical implication is that targeting must be evaluated in two dimensions: scope precision (who is legally within the measure) and operational precision (who is functionally affected). Scope precision is determined by listings, definitions, and prohibitions; operational precision depends on how compliance systems apply those rules in high-volume environments. Where scope is narrow but operational effects are broad, the appropriate mitigation is not necessarily to dilute the sanctions, but to improve operational precision through guidance, safe operational pathways, and clearer derogations. Conversely, where scope itself is broad—such as categorical mobility restrictions—mitigation may require redesign at the legal level, because operational fixes cannot resolve a fundamentally wide perimeter. Table 4.1.4-1 formalises this two-dimensional concept by mapping common instrument types to their typical operational spillovers and controllability. The main analytic point is that legitimacy is threatened less by targeted restrictions per se than by uncontrolled spillovers that disproportionately burden individuals who are neither designated nor plausibly part of enabling structures. In other words, poor targeting is often an implementation failure, not only a drafting failure. This framing also helps maintain consistency with Part 3's "sanctions engineering" idiom, where outcomes are treated as system properties with feedback loops.

Table 4.1.4-1. Targeting precision vs operational spillover: typical patterns in social-sphere impacts

Instrument type	Legal targeting precision	Typical operational spillover risk	Primary spillover mechanism	Relative controllability (policy levers)	Documentation anchors (EU/official)
Listings (asset freezes / travel bans)	High	Medium	Association risk; cautious service refusal	Medium–High (clear criteria, review, guidance)	Council framing of targeted sanctions; restrictive measures practice
Visa-policy tightening affecting short-stay mobility	Medium	Medium–High	Member-state heterogeneity; procedural burden; self-selection	Medium (guidelines, minimum standards, exemptions)	Commission visa measures and guidance logic
Sectoral financial restrictions (household endpoint)	Medium	High	De-risking, name-matching risk, over-compliance	Medium (FAQs, supervisory guidance, safe pathways)	Commission consolidated FAQs; EBA guidelines
Lifestyle-linked trade bans (e.g., luxury goods)	Medium	Medium	Substitution, third-country procurement, price premia	Low–Medium (anti-circumvention, narrow scope)	Commission sanctions overviews and operator guidance

Authorship: analytical framework (this report) was prepared by the author

Sources:

- Council: “Why the EU adopts sanctions” (targeted narrative): https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/why-sanctions
- European Commission consolidated FAQs (implementation and over-compliance risk): https://finance.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2024-01/faqs-sanctions-russia-consolidated_en.pdf
- Commission operator guidance on circumvention (risk-based approach): https://finance.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-12/guidance-eu-operators-russia-sanctions-circumvention_en.pdf

Targeting logic also intersects with the EU’s increasing emphasis on anti-circumvention and “best efforts” compliance obligations, which can unintentionally expand household-level friction. When operators are instructed to apply enhanced due diligence and to detect circumvention patterns, they may broaden screening to any transaction with weak documentation or indirect exposure, including legitimate personal transfers. This can raise compliance burden and delay in exactly the domains where ordinary citizens interact with the system. The Commission has issued operator-oriented guidance encouraging risk-based compliance programmes and red-flag awareness, which is rational from an enforcement perspective. Yet it also means that the operational perimeter expands as soon as risk heuristics are applied broadly. For legitimacy, the challenge is to ensure that anti-circumvention vigilance does not become a blanket presumption against entire customer categories or jurisdictions in a way that is neither required by law nor proportionate to the actual risk. This is where supervisory expectations and industry guidelines become relevant because they shape the compliance “culture” that determines how much conservatism is applied. Recent supervisory-level guidance, such as the EBA’s guidelines on the implementation of restrictive measures by financial institutions, illustrates the degree to which sanctions compliance is being systematised as a governance function. That systematisation improves enforcement but can also harden de-risking, making legitimacy management more important rather than less.

A further constraint is member-state heterogeneity, which affects legitimacy through perceived inconsistency and uneven access. Even where EU law is uniform, national competent authorities differ in administrative capacity, risk tolerance, and interpretative practice. In social domains, individuals experience this heterogeneity directly: visa outcomes, documentation expectations, processing times, and licensing practices may differ across member states. Such variance can induce “route shopping” and thus shift flows rather than eliminate them, which undermines effectiveness, but it also undermines legitimacy by making the system appear arbitrary. The EU has sought to reduce such divergence through consolidated guidance and best-practice frameworks, but the persistence of recurring implementation questions suggests that harmonisation remains incomplete. The policy implication is that legitimacy cannot be secured solely through EU-level legal drafting; it also requires operational convergence and transparent minimum standards of treatment. If the EU’s public claim is that sanctions are targeted and rule-based, then systematically different outcomes across member states weaken the credibility of that claim. This is particularly salient for social measures where human impacts are immediate and politically visible. The report therefore treats implementation harmonisation as a legitimacy instrument in its right.

The legitimacy constraints are also temporal: sanctions regimes evolve through packages and updates, while social systems adapt, and compliance infrastructures recalibrate. A measure that is initially targeted may become broader in practice as firms learn, as enforcement intensifies, or as reputational norms change. Conversely, a measure that is initially blunt may become more precise as exceptions, guidance, and operational pathways mature. This temporal dynamic is important because it means legitimacy is not a static property assessed once; it must be monitored as the regime develops. The EU’s repeated updates of consolidated FAQs and its publication of compliance-oriented guidance indicate that governance is iterative. From a methodological perspective, this justifies the report’s insistence on indicator monitoring and attribution discipline: one cannot assess legitimacy and targeting based on early shock effects alone. For 2026–2030 analysis, the question becomes whether the EU can sustain a

regime whose social spillovers remain within acceptable bounds while enforcement and anti-circumvention measures continue to tighten. That tension is not accidental; it is a structural feature of modern sanctions in a highly intermediated economy. Managing it requires explicit policy design, not ad hoc adjustment.

Another major legitimacy constraint is the risk of collective effects created by category-based restrictions that are socially salient but strategically ambiguous. If mobility measures are applied in ways that appear to treat an entire nationality as suspect, they may generate a perception of collective sanctioning even if the EU formally denies targeting a population. The Council's framing that EU sanctions "do not target a country or population" sets a high bar for how such measures must be justified and implemented. The legitimacy risk here is not only external: within the EU, member-state publics and courts may scrutinise whether restrictions align with EU values and fundamental rights. In addition, category-based restrictions can be strategically counterproductive if they strengthen narratives of isolation and grievance, thereby reducing the persuasive power of the EU's normative position. This report does not assume such backfire effects automatically, but it treats them as plausible and therefore as part of the legitimacy constraint set. Where social restrictions are used primarily for signalling, their legitimacy depends on clarity of objectives and on the existence of meaningful exemptions for protected interests. This argument becomes central in Section 4.5, where "ethical robustness" is proposed as a design standard rather than a rhetorical add-on.

The legitimacy of targeted sanctions also depends on the quality of criteria used for designations and the integrity of review processes. A designation regime that is perceived as opaque, politically arbitrary, or difficult to challenge will face greater legitimacy stress, especially as the number of designations increases. The EU's legal framework has developed in part through litigation pressure, which has encouraged clearer statements of reasons and procedural safeguards. For social sanctions, the analogical point is that the more a measure affects individuals as individuals—mobility, access to funds, access to services—the more legitimacy hinges on transparency and procedural fairness. Even when restrictions are justified on security grounds, the governance system needs a credible channel for clarification and remedy, otherwise the operational layer can drift into unchecked discretion. Academic analysis of judicial protection in EU sanctions underscores that courts play a role in shaping how restrictive measures are designed and defended, particularly where individual rights are implicated. In the Russian context, this role becomes more salient because social impacts are politically contentious and legally complex. The report therefore treats litigation risk and judicial protection as structural constraints on how far social measures can be expanded in a durable policy framework.

There is also a legitimacy dimension linked to the EU's external credibility and international-law posture. The EU often positions its sanctions policy within a framework of international law, human rights, and rule-of-law commitments, and uses sanctions as a diplomatic instrument rather than as a weapon of economic warfare. This posture constrains the acceptable design space for measures that create widespread civilian hardship, because such measures could be argued to conflict with the EU's normative narrative. The relevance for social sanctions is that they are the most visible civilian-facing dimension and therefore the most likely to be assessed through moral and legal lenses. High-precision targeting helps reconcile strategic pressure with normative credibility, but only if implementation does not undermine that precision. For instance, travel bans and asset freezes on designated persons are generally easier to justify as targeted responses to responsibility, whereas broad restrictions on ordinary mobility and consumption require a stronger explanation of necessity and proportionality. In other words, legitimacy constraints tighten as measures approach the lived space of everyday life. That is why the report places particular emphasis on differentiating intentional design from compliance-mediated spillovers.

From a governance perspective, legitimacy constraints can be transformed into design requirements. The most important are: (1) clear objective articulation; (2) narrow scope and explicit criteria; (3) periodic review and sunset logic where feasible; (4) usable exemptions; and (5) operational guidance that reduces over-compliance. These elements are not merely best practice; they are necessary to reconcile

enforcement effectiveness with rights and proportionality. The EU's best-practice updates and compliance guidance initiatives reflect a trend toward more systematised governance of restrictive measures, including conceptual clarification of indirect involvement ("acting on behalf or at the direction of") and strengthened expectations around due diligence. Such clarification can improve enforcement but can also widen perceived exposure unless paired with practical pathways that protect legitimate activity. The implication for social sanctions is that "precision" must be understood as both legal and operational precision. A measure can only remain legitimate over time if the EU can show that it has governance tools to correct collateral burdens without eroding pressure on intended targets. This is precisely the logic that motivates the later proposals in Part 4 for ethically robust measures that preserve strategic intent while safeguarding protected interests.

It follows that legitimacy constraints are not simply "limits" that weaken sanctions; they can also be construed as conditions of durability. A regime that generates uncontrolled collateral harm may face political fragmentation within the EU, increased litigation, reduced voluntary compliance, and reputational costs that erode the EU's diplomatic leverage. Conversely, a regime that is transparent, targeted, and procedurally robust can sustain pressure longer and with broader coalition support. In this sense, legitimacy is a strategic asset, not merely a moral nicety. This report adopts that view and therefore treats legitimacy management as part of sanctions engineering: it is an element of system stability and controllability. Where social sanctions are concerned, controllability is particularly important because the operational layer is dominated by private actors whose incentives naturally produce conservatism. Legitimacy-oriented governance can align those incentives with proportional outcomes by reducing uncertainty and providing safe, compliant channels. The EBA's supervisory guidelines on restrictive measures and the Commission's consolidated FAQs are practical examples of how the EU attempts to shape the operational layer. They are therefore relevant not only for compliance but also for legitimacy.

The interaction between targeting and legitimacy is especially visible in the question of "who pays" for sanctions. If the social costs fall disproportionately on groups with weak political agency—students, mixed families, diaspora communities, patients—then legitimacy risk increases even if aggregate economic cost is modest. This distributional issue is central to social sanctions because many vulnerable groups have high welfare sensitivity to mobility and financial friction. Effective targeting seeks to concentrate costs on those responsible or enabling, whereas poor targeting diffuses costs across those least responsible. Table 4.1.4-2 therefore sets out a legitimacy constraint matrix linking common social endpoints to the principal rights and proportionality concerns, and to practical mitigation levers. The purpose is to keep later discussions in 4.3 and 4.5 operational rather than abstract. Once legitimacy is specified as a matrix of constraints and remedies, it can be monitored and managed over time. That approach is consistent with the report's overall commitment to structured evaluation and transparent assumptions.

Table 4.1.4-2. Legitimacy constraint matrix for social endpoints: risks and mitigation levers

Social endpoint domain	Key legitimacy concerns	Typical "failure mode" in practice	Mitigation levers (design + implementation)	Official guidance anchors
Mobility (visas, entry, transit)	Proportionality; non-arbitrariness; family-life and humanitarian interests	Uneven consular practice; opaque refusals; elevated procedural barriers	Clear guidelines; transparent criteria; humanitarian/family exemptions; review mechanisms	Commission visa measures and related guidance approach
Everyday finance (payments, accounts, transfers)	Legal certainty; non-discrimination; access to remedies; proportional collateral impact	Over-compliance; de-risking; lawful transfers declined without explanation	Consolidated FAQs; supervisory expectations; safe operational pathways; complaints/escalation routes	Commission consolidated FAQs; EBA governance standards

Social endpoint domain	Key legitimacy concerns	Typical "failure mode" in practice	Mitigation levers (design + implementation)	Official guidance anchors
Consumption & services (platforms, subscriptions, consumer markets)	Collective-effect perception; mismatch between intent and burden	Private exits exceed legal scope; access restrictions applied categorically	Communication of scope; targeted exceptions; monitoring of discriminatory outcomes	Operator guidance and regime explanations

Authorship: analytical framework (this report) was prepared by the author
Sources:

- Commission consolidated FAQs (implementation, legal certainty): https://finance.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2024-01/faqs-sanctions-russia-consolidated_en.pdf
- Council targeted-sanctions framing: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/why-sanctions/
- Humanitarian derogations factsheet (exemptions as governance tool): https://finance.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-04/eu-restrictive-measures-humanitarian-derogations-factsheet_en.pdf

Finally, the targeting logic of social sanctions must be evaluated against the strategic question: does social pressure plausibly change the behaviour of those responsible, or does it mostly generate symbolic antagonism and adaptation? This question cannot be answered purely normatively, but legitimacy constraints require that it be asked because disproportionate harm is not justified by speculative benefits. The EU's official stance frames sanctions as a diplomatic tool aimed at influencing policies and deterring conduct, not as punishment of populations. Therefore, when social measures are considered, they should be evaluated for their marginal contribution to strategic leverage relative to their collateral burden. If a measure's primary effect is a diffuse "friction tax" on ordinary people, while elites circumvent at lower relative cost, both effectiveness and legitimacy weaken. In such settings, legitimacy constraints suggest a shift toward measures that are more intelligence-led and designation-based, with protected channels for humanitarian, educational, and family-related activities. This is the conceptual bridge to Section 4.5: ethically robust measures are not only morally preferable but often strategically cleaner. The design challenge is to preserve pressure while ensuring that the operational layer does not turn precision into diffusion. The EU's iterative guidance and best-practice work indicates awareness of this challenge and provides institutional tools that can be adapted for social-sphere governance.

4.2. Review of Social Sanctions

4.2.1. Visa Mobility

Visa mobility is the most visible and administratively "clean" domain of social sanctions, because it operates through recognisable public gates: consulates, border checks, and carrier controls linked to entry conditions. In the EU–Russia case, visa mobility measures are not framed as classic economic sanctions, yet they function as a systematic constraint on cross-border social interaction, family travel, tourism, and business micro-mobility. The policy effect is produced not only through formal legal decisions but also through guidance that steers member-state practice toward tighter scrutiny and a narrower interpretation of admissible purpose. This domain is also empirically tractable compared with consumption and everyday finance, because Schengen visa outcomes are reported through EU infrastructures and periodically summarised by the Commission. However, tractability does not eliminate complexity: visa mobility is shaped by both supply-side decisions (issuance, refusal, processing) and demand-side behaviour (whether people apply at all), and those two components can move in opposite directions. The purpose of this subsection is to map the principal EU-level mobility measures, explain their operational translation, and identify how to interpret official statistics without

over-attributing every movement to sanctions alone. A key methodological choice is to treat mobility as an endpoint where restrictiveness can increase via procedures, cost, uncertainty, and time, even where formal access remains legally possible.

The pivotal legal pivot in the EU's visa posture toward Russia was the full suspension of the EU–Russia Visa Facilitation Agreement adopted by the Council in September 2022, with application commencing shortly thereafter. In practical terms, this moved Russian short-stay applicants from a facilitated regime toward the general rules of the EU Visa Code, raising procedural friction through longer processing times, higher fees in some contexts, stricter evidentiary requirements, and reduced predictability of outcomes. The Council's communication around this decision explicitly positioned it as a response to Russia's war and as a measure with system-wide implications for categories of travellers rather than a narrow listing-based tool. The Commission complemented the suspension with detailed guidelines on general visa issuance for Russian applicants and on controls at the external borders, recognising that the effective impact depends on how member states apply security and public-order discretion. This is an important design signal: the EU was not merely changing a legal baseline, but actively managing interpretation so that increased scrutiny would be applied consistently. The consequence for social sanctions analysis is that the "measure" is not only the suspension itself, but also the guidance-driven tightening of adjudication practice that follows. For an audit-ready account, the suspension and the Commission guidelines should be treated as the foundational instruments that structure all subsequent mobility outcomes discussed in Part 4.

A second defining feature of EU visa mobility policy is the split between EU-level baseline rules and member-state implementation heterogeneity. While Schengen rules are common, consular practice and administrative capacity vary, and national political preferences can influence how strongly guidance is operationalised. This heterogeneity matters because it creates a de facto "routing" dimension even in visa mobility: applicants may prefer particular member states based on perceived approval likelihood, processing speed, or documentary requirements. Heterogeneity also affects the credibility of broad statements such as "Europe is closed" or "visas are back," because both can be locally true depending on the consulate and travel purpose. For the report's logic, this is best handled through a two-step description: first, specify the EU-level policy shift; second, record member-state divergences as an implementation layer that amplifies or attenuates the baseline. The existence of Commission guidance aimed at border controls and general issuance demonstrates that the EU anticipated the risk of divergent practice and attempted to constrain it through shared interpretative parameters. Yet the persistence of political debate among member states about tourism and security indicates that heterogeneity remains a structural feature rather than an anomaly. A sanctions-engineering view therefore treats heterogeneity as a predictable constraint on both effectiveness and legitimacy, to be revisited under "limits of acceptability" in Section 4.3.

From an effectiveness perspective, visa mobility measures can be interpreted through three distinct mechanisms that should not be conflated. The first is administrative friction, where the same traveller can still apply, but faces higher documentation burdens, longer timelines, and lower multi-year predictability. The second is selective deterrence, where applicants reduce demand because the expected cost of denial rises, or because travel becomes socially and reputationally charged. The third is security-driven exclusion, where refusal and denial become more frequent for categories of applicants assessed as higher risk, regardless of their economic capacity. These mechanisms can coexist and can produce ambiguous statistical signals: for example, refusal rates can fall if marginal applicants stop applying, even while overall access narrows. Conversely, issuance can rise year-on-year from a low base while the system remains structurally tighter than pre-2022 norms. For social sanctions analysis, the most policy-relevant output is not simply "number of visas," but the quality of mobility: whether mobility is predictable, repeatable, and low-friction. That is precisely why facilitated regimes matter: they reduce transaction costs and increase repeat travel; removing facilitation pushes mobility into a high-friction state that is materially experienced as social constriction.

Official statistics provide a necessary anchor, but they require careful interpretation. The Commission's annual summaries of Schengen visa applications and refusals show that refusal rates vary by country and change across years, and they explicitly cite Russia as an example of such variation. In its May 2024 summary of 2023 outcomes, the Commission noted Russia's refusal rate as 10.6% in 2023 versus 10.2% in 2022, framing it within a broader discussion of refusal-rate variation across countries. In its May 2025 summary of 2024 outcomes, the Commission cited Russia's refusal rate as 7.5% in 2024 versus 10.6% in 2023, again as an example of year-on-year differences. These figures are valuable because they are official and comparable, but they are not self-interpreting: a declining refusal rate can indicate improved applicant quality, changed consular practice, or altered application composition. What they do establish is that the system is dynamic and that claims about "tightening" cannot be reduced to a single refusal-rate trendline. Therefore, the report's method is to treat refusal rates as a conditional indicator and to interpret them alongside application volume, issuance volume, and policy changes affecting multi-entry practice.

The "volume" side of the story is equally important because it captures whether mobility is broadly available or limited to a narrower slice of demand. Media reporting linked to EU policy changes has repeatedly contrasted post-2022 issuance levels for Russians with the pre-war baseline, emphasising that the number of visas issued fell dramatically relative to 2019. Reuters and the Associated Press, reporting on later tightening steps, described the post-invasion collapse in visas issued to Russian nationals, placing 2019 issuance in the multi-million range and describing subsequent years as a fraction of that level. Even if such figures are presented as rounded estimates in news reporting, the direction and magnitude of change are consistent with the structural reality that a facilitation regime was removed and that mobility became harder, slower, and more security-filtered. For the report, the key analytic point is not the exact integer but the structural break: a shift from high-throughput civilian mobility to a constrained system where each journey is more costly in time and uncertainty. That break functions as a "social pressure lever" in EU sanctions logic, because it reduces normalised social interchange while remaining defensible under a security-public-order frame. The legitimacy challenge, however, is that civilian-facing volume reduction can look like collective restriction, especially when it affects non-designated individuals and families. This tension is revisited in Section 4.3 and informs the ethical design proposals in 4.5.

A notable evolution in the EU's approach is that visa mobility policy has remained an active field of tightening well after the initial 2022 suspension. By late 2025, EU institutions communicated additional steps aimed at increasing scrutiny, including the stated move away from issuing multi-entry visas to Russian citizens as a general rule, with limited exceptions. Reuters reported that the EU toughened visa rules so that Russian nationals would no longer be eligible for multiple-entry visas and would need to apply afresh for each trip, explicitly linking the design to public security concerns and risks of misuse. The AP account similarly described the measure as designed to allow "close and frequent scrutiny," while referencing exceptions for specific categories such as dissidents, independent journalists, human rights defenders, and close family members. This tightening illustrates a recurring pattern: rather than a categorical Schengen closure, the EU has pursued procedural designs that preserve a legal pathway while increasing the cost and scrutiny of repeat travel. From a sanctions-engineering viewpoint, restricting multi-entry is a high-leverage adjustment because it reduces long-horizon mobility predictability and increases administrative control points without requiring a full ban. Socially, it shifts mobility from routine to exceptional, thereby altering the texture of cross-border life. Politically, it is framed as a privilege conditioned on security, which strengthens the legitimacy narrative but also risks reinforcing perceptions of collective suspicion.

Visa mobility constraints do not operate in isolation; they interact with transport connectivity, consular outsourcing, and third-country routing in ways that can magnify or obscure the legal change. When direct routes are limited or expensive, the effective cost of travel rises independently of visa refusal rates, and a portion of demand shifts to indirect itineraries via third countries. This can reduce applications in some consulates while increasing them in others, altering the statistical geography of visa demand.

Additionally, visa application processes themselves can be affected by operational disruptions—appointment availability, external service providers, and local capacity—which are not "sanctions" in legal form but become part of the lived experience of restriction. The policy risk is that these operational factors can generate friction that is socially salient but analytically misattributed if not separated from the legal baseline. For that reason, the report treats connectivity and consular capacity as contextual variables rather than as core sanction instruments, but it does not ignore them, because they influence distributional outcomes. In practice, the people most affected by routing and appointment constraints are often those whose travel is not discretionary—family visits, medical travel, and educational transitions—where delays and uncertainty carry high welfare costs. This is one of the reasons the later ethical proposals emphasise protected channels and usable exemptions.

The implementation layer also reveals an important phenomenon: policy-induced selectivity can shift the composition of travellers rather than simply suppress travel in the aggregate. When procedures tighten and multi-entry predictability decreases, higher-income travellers with access to intermediaries and flexible schedules can often adapt, while lower-income or time-constrained travellers face higher effective barriers. The result is a distributional tilt: mobility becomes more stratified even if it remains legally possible. This matters for interpreting refusal rates, because applicant pools change; it also matters for evaluating legitimacy, because a measure that primarily filters by capacity to bear friction can be criticised as indirectly discriminatory. From an effectiveness standpoint, the EU's strategic objective is not to punish civilians but to reduce normalisation and raise pressure on enabling structures; if the wealthy can still travel via friction-absorbing channels, the strategic coherence of broad friction increases becomes less clear. That is why the report distinguishes between "access" and "quality of access," treating predictability and repeatability as the key social outputs. The 2025 move to reduce multi-entry availability can be interpreted as an attempt to reduce the advantage of high-resource repeat travellers by forcing repeated scrutiny. Whether it succeeds depends on implementation consistency and the availability of alternative pathways outside consular competence rules.

From a measurement standpoint, visa mobility is suitable for a compact indicator suite that can be monitored over time and connected to policy milestones. The anchor indicators are applications, visas issued, and refusal rates, ideally disaggregated by member state and consulate where available through official datasets. Supporting indicators include the share of multiple-entry visas, processing time proxies, and shifts in the geography of applications (for example, increased filings outside Russia if consular competence rules permit). The Commission's annual visa statistics updates provide at least partial support for this suite by highlighting refusal-rate variation and reporting on multi-entry shares in the overall Schengen system. The report's evaluation method is therefore to treat changes in multi-entry policy as a structural mobility-quality variable, not merely as an administrative detail. A fall in multi-entry issuance is equivalent to an increase in repeat travel transaction costs, which is socially meaningful and strategically relevant. Where later sections require quantification, Table 4.2.1-1 defines the indicator architecture and specifies how to interpret each indicator under attribution discipline. This keeps the mobility analysis consistent with Part 3's approach: an instrument-to-metric mapping with explicit caveats and constraints.

Table 4.2.1-1. Measurement framework for visa mobility in Part 4 (indicator interpretation rules)

Indicator	Why it matters	Core interpretation caveat	Primary official anchor
Applications (count)	Demand-side willingness to engage with the system; sensitive to friction and expectations	Can fall even if refusal rates fall; affected by routing and perceived chances	Commission visa statistics infrastructure [1]
Visas issued (count)	Outcome volume; approximates breadth of access	Issuance can rise from a low base while mobility remains structurally tighter than pre-2022	Commission statistical reporting [2]

Indicator	Why it matters	Core interpretation caveat	Primary official anchor
Refusal rate (%)	Conditional indicator of adjudication outcomes among applicants	Strongly affected by selection bias; not a stand-alone measure of "openness"	Commission news releases citing refusal-rate variation [3]
Multi-entry share / policy	Proxy for mobility quality (repeatability, predictability)	Changes can be policy-driven even if aggregate issuance remains stable	Reuters/AP reporting on multi-entry tightening [4]

Authorship: analytical framework (this report) was prepared by the author

Note: For sanctions-attribution discipline, refusal-rate movements are interpreted only alongside application and issuance context, and multi-entry policy changes are treated as "mobility-quality" shifts rather than merely administrative details.

[1] https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/schengen/visa-policy/short-stay-visas-issued-schengen-countries_en

[2,3] https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/news/visa-applications-reach-117-million-eu-and-schengen-associated-countries-2025-05-20_en

[4] https://www.reuters.com/world/eu-toughens-visa-rules-russians-2025-11-07/

The policy rationales offered in official communication emphasise public security, prevention of misuse, and the broader political context of the war. These rationales function as legitimacy supports, positioning tighter mobility as consistent with the idea that entry is discretionary and conditional. Reuters explicitly tied the 2025 tightening to concerns including sabotage and misuse, while Commission-linked messaging described frequent scrutiny as necessary to mitigate security risk. Such rationales are not merely discursive; they matter operationally because security framing tends to justify conservative interpretation by authorities and private carriers, reinforcing the tightening effect even when formal rules are not "total bans". However, the same framing can increase the risk of over-breadth if it encourages categorical suspicion rather than risk-based selectivity. The EU's attempt to preserve exceptions for "trusted" categories indicates awareness of this legitimacy trade-off: tightening is presented as general, but humanitarian and civil-society pathways are protected to avoid the impression of indiscriminate closure. In sanctions engineering terms, these exceptions are not loopholes; they are stabilisers that protect normative credibility and reduce collateral harm. The empirical question for later sections is whether these exceptions are operationally accessible, or whether they exist mainly as declaratory safeguards.

The system also exhibits a geopolitical "edge effect" driven by border-adjacent member states whose security exposure is more immediate. Reporting and policy debate in 2024–2025 continued to highlight tensions between member states that prefer strict limitation of Russian tourist visas and others that maintain more permissive issuance in certain categories. This matters because Schengen visas have cross-area effects: a visa issued by one member state enables travel across the area, which can trigger political friction about burden-sharing and security risk. In practice, this can produce pressure for harmonisation and renewed Commission guidance, particularly when issuance patterns diverge significantly. The sanctions-engineering implication is that visa mobility is a domain where EU-level policy will continue to iterate, because the external security environment drives periodic calls for tighter uniformity. For the report's 2026–2030 perspective, this suggests a plausible trajectory toward stricter standardisation and narrower multi-entry practice, paired with formalised exceptions for protected groups. Such a trajectory would maintain the EU's "targeted, not population-wide" narrative while continuing to erode routine mobility normalisation. The key constraint is that too blunt a harmonisation could raise litigation and legitimacy costs, especially where family life and humanitarian needs are implicated.

A critical methodological risk in mobility analysis is to interpret visa measures as a direct proxy for attitudes inside Russia or for regime support dynamics. Visa constraints can have symbolic effects, but they do not map cleanly to political outcomes, and the report avoids speculative claims where evidence is weak. Instead, effectiveness is defined more narrowly: visa measures reduce normalised interaction,

increase scrutiny on inbound movement, and raise the cost of repeat access to the EU travel area. These are measurable outputs, and they can be assessed without assuming downstream political behaviour change. Where political effects are discussed, they are treated as second-order and contingent, to be analysed under broader social-cohesion and narrative mechanisms in Section 4.3. This is consistent with the attribution discipline introduced in Paragraph 4.1.3: mobility measures are directly attributable as administrative constraints, but their social-psychological consequences are largely indirect and multi-causal. The report's approach is therefore to evaluate mobility in terms of controllability and proportionality: can the EU maintain security objectives while keeping protected channels open and avoiding uncontrolled spillovers? That question is operational and policy-relevant, and it can be answered with better fidelity than broad claims about societal pressure.

From a system perspective, visa mobility measures also create adaptation incentives that alter the enforcement landscape. If routine travel becomes difficult, individuals may seek alternative routes via third countries, alter declared purposes, or use intermediaries to manage documentation and appointments. Such adaptation is not automatically unlawful, but it can increase the workload and suspicion dynamics of consular systems, reinforcing conservative adjudication. It can also shift risk toward identity and document fraud, which further strengthens security-based legitimacy arguments for tight scrutiny. This creates a feedback loop: tighter rules encourage adaptive behaviour; adaptive behaviour increases perceived risk; perceived risk justifies tighter rules. The Commission's border and issuance guidance can be interpreted as an attempt to manage this loop by standardising risk controls and preventing circumvention through consular competence rules. For sanctions engineering, feedback loops are central because they shape the steady-state: a high-friction equilibrium can persist even if the original shock recedes. Therefore, the report treats visa mobility not as a one-off decision in 2022, but as an evolving regime where the effective level of restrictiveness is produced by iteration.

The welfare implications of mobility restrictions are uneven, and that unevenness is central to the social sanctions analysis. Tourism is discretionary for many, but family reunification, care obligations, and educational transitions are not, and delays and uncertainty impose real welfare losses. The EU's practice of articulating exceptions for trusted individuals and close family members signals an attempt to avoid disproportionate harm, but the extent of mitigation depends on operational accessibility. If exceptions require complex evidence or face uneven application, the social burden remains high even if the legal architecture appears balanced. This is why later sections treat ethical robustness as an operational property, not simply a legal clause. In mobility, operational robustness means predictable appointment availability, clear documentary standards, and consistent treatment across member states. Where these conditions fail, legitimacy costs rise because affected individuals experience the system as arbitrary. Consequently, the report sets up mobility as the domain where the EU has the strongest opportunity to demonstrate proportionate design: the indicator suite is clear, the administrative gates are defined, and exceptions can be engineered with measurable performance standards.

In summary, EU visa mobility measures constitute a core component of social sanctions because they deliberately reshape the normality of cross-border interaction while remaining anchored in security-public-order rationales. The foundational step was the suspension of facilitation and the accompanying Commission guidance, which shifted the system to a higher-friction baseline. Subsequent tightening—most notably the move away from multi-entry issuance—illustrates an optimisation strategy: preserve legal access but reduce predictability and increase scrutiny. The key EU-level milestones that define this baseline shift are summarised in Table 4.2.1-2.

Table 4.2.1-1. EU-level milestones shaping visa mobility for Russian nationals (short-stay / Schengen-related)

Date	Instrument / event	Practical mobility effect (mechanism)	Documentation anchor
9 Sep 2022 (applies from 12 Sep 2022)	Council decision to fully suspend the EU–Russia Visa Facilitation Agreement	Shift from facilitated regime to general Visa Code rules; higher procedural friction and scrutiny	Council press release; Commission "visa measures" page [1]
30 Sep 2022	Commission communication updating guidelines on visa issuance for Russian applicants and guidance on external border controls	Harmonises interpretation; encourages stricter scrutiny and consistent controls across member states	Commission communication [2]
2023–2024 (annual statistical reporting)	Commission reporting on Schengen visa applications/issuance and refusal rates	Provides anchor series for refusal-rate dynamics and trend interpretation	Commission news releases (2024; 2025) [3]
Nov 2025 (reported tightening)	Shift away from multi-entry visas for Russian nationals (with limited exceptions)	Reduces repeat-travel predictability; increases frequency of scrutiny per trip	Reuters / AP reporting; EEAS delegation messaging [4]

Authorship: analytical framework (this report) was prepared by the author

Note: This table records EU-level milestones that shape the baseline regime; member-state specific restrictions and practices operate as an implementation layer and are treated separately in the text where relevant.

[1] https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/09/09/council-adopts-full-suspension-of-visa-facilitation-with-russia/

[2] https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-09/Communication%20from%20the%20Commission%20on%20updating%20guidelines%20on%20general%20visa%20issuance%20in%20relation%20to%20Russian%20applicants%20and%20on%20providing%20guidelines%20on%20controls%20of%20Russian%20citizens%20at%20the%20external%20borders_en.pdf

[3] https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/news/visa-applications-reach-103-million-eu-and-schengen-associated-countries-2024-05-15_en

[4] https://www.reuters.com/world/eu-toughens-visa-rules-russians-2025-11-07/

Official statistics provide anchors for refusal-rate dynamics, but interpretation must account for demand shifts and selection effects. The strategic output is not simply fewer trips, but a reduction in routine, low-friction mobility, which is socially meaningful and politically salient. The principal constraint is legitimacy: measures must avoid drifting into de facto population-wide punishment, and protected channels must be operationally usable. For the remainder of Part 4, visa mobility therefore serves as both a substantive case study and a methodological template: it is the domain where "sanctions engineering" can most credibly align objectives, measurable outputs, and ethical constraints.

4.2.2. Consumer Restrictions

Consumer-facing restrictions in the EU–Russia sanctions environment operate through a hybrid of explicit trade prohibitions and market-mediated constraint, with the latter often being more salient in everyday life than the formal legal text. In strict legal terms, EU restrictive measures are not framed as "consumer sanctions", yet a subset of measures is designed to affect lifestyle consumption and the availability of consumer goods and services, particularly in the premium segment. In operational terms, the consumer domain becomes a social-sanctions channel whenever restrictions reshape what households can buy, how they can buy it, and the time/cost uncertainty attached to acquisition. The EU's explanatory materials explicitly describe an export ban on luxury goods as intended to "directly hit Russian elites", which is a consumption-facing targeting logic rather than a capability-denial logic. This matters for the structure of Part 4: unlike dual-use or industrial controls, consumer restrictions must be evaluated through symbolic targeting, substitution pathways, and the distribution of burdens across social strata. In this subsection, the term "consumer restrictions" therefore includes (1) bans on certain

consumer goods exports to Russia (luxury and lifestyle-adjacent goods), (2) restrictions that inhibit consumers' access to services and platforms through sanctions risk, and (3) indirect constraints from compliance, shipping, and corporate withdrawals that transform legal measures into lived scarcity or higher costs. For clarity and auditability, the principal instrument types and their social endpoints are mapped in Table 4.2.2-1.

Table 4.2.2-1. Typology of EU consumer restrictions and their household-level endpoints

Instrument type	Legal basis / anchor	Direct consumer relevance	Typical household endpoint	Primary constraint / caveat	Key sources
Luxury goods export ban (listed goods; value thresholds)	Regulation 833/2014 (Annex XVIII); EU regime summaries; Commission luxury goods FAQs	High	Loss of authorised EU-origin luxury channels; substitution; price premia; ecosystem displacement	High circumvention incentives; classification/valuation ambiguity	EU Sanctions Map regime PDF; Commission luxury goods FAQs; Regulation 833/2014
Consumer-adjacent services restrictions (business services affecting consumer platforms indirectly)	Regulation 833/2014 service provisions; Commission service measures and FAQs	Medium–High (indirect)	Platform/service access changes; reduced support and updates; service discontinuation	Attribution complexity; private governance dominates	Commission financial & business service measures; Commission consolidated FAQs
Market exits and reputational withdrawals	Market-mediated (not always legally compelled)	High (in lived experience)	Brand disappearance; loss of warranties; reliance on parallel imports	Not cleanly attributable; heterogeneous by firm and sector	Reuters reporting on corporate behaviour (illustrative) [1]
Currency/cash constraints affecting spending capacity (border-adjacent consumer effect)	EU prohibition on export of euro banknotes (with personal-use exceptions)	Medium (cross-border spending)	Increased friction for travel spending; shift to alternative instruments	Often implemented conservatively; national practice varies	EU judicial communication on banknote export prohibition [2]

Authorship: analytical framework (this report) was prepared by the author

Note: This typology separates (i) formal legal restrictions from (ii) market-mediated operational effects; both matter for social outcomes, but they require different attribution standards (Paragraph 4.1.3).

[1] https://www.reuters.com/sustainability/society-equity/lvmh-shut-down-russia-when-war-started-it-kept-storied-hotel-that-serves-2026-02-27/

[2] https://curia.europa.eu/site/upload/docs/application/pdf/2025-04/cp250056en.pdf

The EU's consumer-relevant restrictions sit within the broader trade-and-services architecture under Council Regulation (EU) No 833/2014 and its successive amendments, which provide the core legal framework for sectoral measures. Within that framework, consumer restrictions are not a standalone chapter; they are embedded in trade provisions (exports and imports) and service prohibitions that, while often justified as economic pressure, can transmit into household consumption. The "luxury goods" ban is the clearest example because it is explicitly consumption-coded and tied to a political narrative of elite pressure. The EU Sanctions Map regime summary for Russia also highlights luxury goods as a distinct item within the trade restrictions set, which further indicates the EU's intent to treat this as a visible and recognisable measure. A key methodological point is that consumer restrictions should be assessed primarily via availability and friction rather than absolute deprivation, because substitution and rerouting can sustain supply at higher cost. The sanctions system, in effect, tends to impose a "risk and compliance premium" on consumer access rather than fully eliminating consumption, especially for high-resource households. This is why the report treats consumer

restrictions as part of social sanctions: they function through everyday experiences—delays, price increases, reduced choice, loss of brand access, and service discontinuation—rather than through macro aggregates alone. The measures therefore have social meaning even when their measurable economic weight is modest relative to Russia's total imports.

The luxury goods export ban has become the anchor instrument for consumer restrictions because it is explicitly designed to be socially legible and politically communicable. The Commission's March 2022 Q&A framed the luxury export ban as a way to hit elites and included luxury cars and jewellery as illustrative examples. The operational detail is more precise: the prohibition applies to luxury goods listed in Annex XVIII to Regulation 833/2014, typically subject to a value threshold per item (commonly referenced at €300 per item for many categories, with category-specific details in the annex and guidance). The Commission has also published dedicated FAQs on luxury goods that clarify the purpose of derogations and interpretative questions, which indicates both the complexity of implementation and the expected prevalence of borderline cases. In sanctions-engineering terms, this is a classic sign of a measure with high visibility but non-trivial operational ambiguity: classification, valuation, indirect supply chains, and re-export risk all create compliance frictions. For household-level effects, the key output is not only whether luxury items disappear, but whether EU-origin channels become inaccessible, thereby forcing substitution toward non-EU suppliers or indirect procurement. The ban also interacts with corporate decisions, because many premium brands chose to suspend or exit Russian retail presence, amplifying the perceived "closure" of European luxury even beyond legal requirements.

A crucial analytical distinction is between legal unavailability and effective unavailability. Legal unavailability occurs when a good is prohibited from being sold, supplied, transferred, or exported to Russia or for use in Russia under EU law. Effective unavailability occurs when a good remains technically lawful to source from elsewhere, yet becomes practically difficult to obtain due to a combination of logistics, payment frictions, platform restrictions, and the disappearance of authorised retail and after-sales services. Effective unavailability is often the dominant lived experience for ordinary consumers because it affects routine product acquisition and service support rather than only the initial purchase. It also produces a qualitatively different social effect: consumers do not merely switch brands; they experience institutional exclusion from the ecosystem of warranties, repairs, upgrades, official distribution, and customer support. This is one reason the report includes corporate withdrawal effects inside the consumer restriction perimeter as market-mediated sanctions effects, even when they are not strictly mandated by a single legal clause. The Reuters reporting on major luxury-sector withdrawals and complex residual operations illustrates how corporate choices can be partly aligned with sanctions risk while still producing uneven outcomes on the ground. For policy evaluation, this means "consumer restrictions" should be treated as a system output of law plus market governance, not a list of prohibitions alone.

The consumer domain is also shaped by services restrictions that are not consumer goods but affect consumer access to products and daily digital life through enabling functions. While many services ban in the EU regime are framed as business services and professional services restrictions (e.g., consultancy, advertising, market research, and certain software-related limitations), their second-order effect can be consumer-relevant by constraining the ability of firms to operate, market, deliver, and support products and platforms. In practical terms, if a platform cannot lawfully provide certain services to Russian counterparties, or if compliance risk is high, the platform may restrict Russian user accounts or reduce service availability. Even where the legal target is a business entity, the household endpoint can be a change in consumer services access or reduced choice in digital subscriptions and app-based ecosystems. The Commission's consolidated FAQs play an important role here because they show that implementation questions repeatedly arise at the boundary of what is permitted, often leading to conservative operational decisions by providers. The consumer effect is a general increase in uncertainty: users cannot easily infer whether a service will remain available, whether updates will

continue, or whether payments will be accepted. The report therefore treats services bans as "consumer adjacent" where they predictably alter household-facing access to platforms and services.

A further consumer-facing channel is the restriction environment around cash and currency instruments, which straddles the boundary between consumption and everyday finance. The prohibition on exporting euro banknotes to Russia has been litigated and explained in EU judicial communication, with clarification that personal-use exceptions exist for travellers. While this measure is not a consumer goods ban, it directly affects how travellers and households manage spending and cash reserves for cross-border mobility and in-country consumption, especially under conditions where card acceptance and cross-border payments are constrained. The consumer-relevant point is not merely "cash is banned", but that the regime creates behavioural and compliance frictions: individuals must understand exceptions, carriers and border authorities may apply conservative interpretations, and national authorities may adopt stricter control practices. This produces a social effect that resembles consumer restriction: limitation on the ability to carry spending power in a trusted currency, with predictable substitution toward third-country currency routes or alternative instruments. The report will treat the deeper payment-instrument mechanics in 4.2.3, but it is analytically important to note here that consumer and finance frictions often reinforce each other, producing compounded constraints.

Consumer restrictions also operate through the anti-circumvention dimension, because goods and services that remain desirable can often be routed indirectly unless enforcement is tightened. The EU's sanctions architecture increasingly emphasises the risk of circumvention and the need for operators to apply due diligence, which tends to increase the compliance burden and reduce the set of "easy" legal pathways. For consumer goods, this often translates into a shrinkage of authorised supply chains and a growth in parallel import channels and intermediary services. The social result is a segmentation of access: those with resources and networks can procure via intermediaries; those without face higher effective prices, inferior substitutes, or outright loss of access. In sanctions-engineering terms, this is an important constraint on the equity and legitimacy of consumer restrictions, because it risks producing a system where elites adapt more effectively than ordinary households. The consumer restriction therefore tends to function as a "friction tax" rather than a strict deprivation mechanism, and the distribution of that tax is socially consequential. This distributional aspect is carried forward into 4.3, where "limits of acceptable harm" require attention to differential burden across social groups.

The EU's narrative framing of luxury goods restrictions reveals the intended targeting logic, but it also highlights a tension: elite-targeting is conceptually attractive, yet elite consumption is also the domain most capable of circumvention. The Commission's Q&A framing of luxury bans as elite pressure is politically coherent, but it does not guarantee that the burden remains concentrated on elites. If high-income consumers can substitute via third-country procurement while middle-income aspirational consumers lose access to premium segments and associated services, the social profile of the measure shifts from "elite targeting" toward "status and aspiration reshaping" for a wider group. The report does not treat this as automatically illegitimate, but it treats it as an effect that must be acknowledged and measured through plausible proxies such as price premia, substitution patterns, and the disappearance of authorised service ecosystems. This is also where corporate withdrawal and reputational dynamics play a large role: even absent full legal prohibition, brands and platforms may exit to avoid compliance complexity and reputational risk, thereby widening the household endpoint. The Reuters reporting on corporate behaviour in the luxury sector illustrates the persistence of such reputational and operational incentives. The policy implication is that consumer restrictions require active governance if the EU intends to preserve a "targeted, not population-wide" legitimacy narrative.

A connected theme is that consumer restrictions are uniquely prone to high salience but ambiguous strategic leverage. Luxury bans and visible brand exits are easily interpreted as "Europe closing" and can have signalling value, but signalling effects can cut in multiple directions. They can increase perceived isolation and reduce normalisation, which may support the EU's political narrative; yet they can also intensify grievance narratives and identity hardening, especially if consumers perceive restrictions as indiscriminate. Because these political effects are difficult to measure directly, the report treats them

as second-order and contingent, consistent with the attribution discipline established in 4.1.3. The primary measurable output remains the structural change in consumer access pathways and the increase in transaction costs. Official EU regime summaries and explanatory pages provide the legal anchor for what is prohibited, but they do not by themselves quantify household-level burden. This is why the report emphasises mechanism mapping and indicator selection rather than purely declaratory statements about societal pressure. In short, consumer restrictions are best evaluated as engineered frictions that reshape markets and social symbolism, not as direct levers that produce linear political outcomes.

The implementation environment for consumer restrictions is characterised by classification and valuation problems, especially for luxury goods. Annex-based controls require exporters, customs, and intermediaries to classify goods, determine whether value thresholds apply, and assess whether goods are “for use in Russia”, including indirect export pathways. Dedicated Commission FAQs on luxury goods exist precisely because these issues generate recurring uncertainty, including questions around cultural goods derogations and personal effects, which shows how easily consumer measures can collide with legitimate social and cultural activities. For the social analysis, the practical implication is that consumer restrictions can generate compliance friction not only for sellers but also for individuals moving goods across borders or receiving gifts, especially where personal-effect exceptions and indirect-use criteria are involved. This is a micro-level source of social friction that is often missing from macro trade discussions but is important in lived experience. The report treats these micro-frictions as part of the “everyday social cost” channel and notes them as relevant for ethical robustness in 4.5. The goal is not to overstate the scale, but to map the mechanism clearly and show why guidance and proportional enforcement matter.

Consumer restrictions also interact with import bans and countersanctions in ways that complicate attribution. While EU import bans on Russian goods are primarily intended to deprive Russia of revenue and constrain strategic sectors, they can have indirect consumer feedback effects via Russian domestic supply chains and price dynamics, depending on how the Russian economy reallocates output and substitutes imports. In this report, such second-order effects are treated cautiously because attribution becomes weak: domestic policy, exchange rates, wartime spending, and global commodity conditions can dominate price and availability outcomes. However, the broader EU sanctions communication does provide aggregate scale estimates of embargoed trade flows, which can be used as context for why markets reconfigure and why consumer outcomes may shift. The disciplined approach is therefore to keep consumer restrictions anchored to explicit consumer-facing measures (luxury goods and consumer-adjacent service restrictions) and to treat wider macro effects as contextual rather than as core consumer sanctions outputs. This prevents Part 4 from becoming a diffuse economic narrative and maintains continuity with Part 3’s instrument-to-mechanism logic.

Because consumer restrictions are inherently substitution-prone, their effectiveness profile is best described in terms of price, quality, and ecosystem displacement. Price effects arise from longer supply chains, intermediary margins, and risk premiums. Quality effects arise when consumers shift to substitutes with different durability, warranty support, or prestige value. Ecosystem displacement arises when official after-sales services, software updates, and authorised distribution disappear, leaving consumers reliant on grey channels with weaker consumer protection. These are socially meaningful outcomes because they shape everyday confidence in the stability of life arrangements and the perceived accessibility of “normal” global consumer ecosystems. Yet these outcomes are also heterogeneous, varying sharply across regions, income groups, and product categories. Therefore, this report does not claim uniform deprivation; it claims a structural transformation of consumer access pathways that is consistent with the logic of sanctions as engineered constraints. This transformation is summarised by instrument type, expected social endpoint, and primary constraints in Table 4.2.2-1, and the luxury-goods sub-architecture is detailed in Table 4.2.2-2.

Table 4.2.2-2. Luxury goods export ban: scope logic and implementation features (consumer-facing)

Feature	Operational meaning	Why it matters for social effects	Key sources
Annex-based listing (Annex XVIII)	Goods are controlled by classification against a list	Determines enforceability and compliance burden	EU Sanctions Map regime PDF; Regulation 833/2014
Value thresholds (often per-item)	Many categories apply only above a value level per item	Produces borderline cases; drives valuation disputes	Commission luxury goods FAQs; regime summaries [1]
Indirect supply prohibition	"Directly or indirectly" prevents routing through intermediaries	Converts consumer access into a compliance risk problem	Regulation framework + FAQs structure [2]
Derogations / exceptions (e.g., cultural goods intent)	Clarifies permitted cases and policy intent	Mitigates collateral harm; legitimacy stabiliser	Commission luxury goods FAQs [3]

Authorship: analytical framework (this report) was prepared by the author
Note: The Commission's dedicated luxury goods FAQ set is treated in this report as an implementation anchor indicating recurring borderline questions and the need for interpretative control.
[1,3] https://finance.ec.europa.eu/publications/luxury-goods_en
[2] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2014/833/oj/eng

A distinctive feature of consumer restrictions is the role of private governance by multinational firms, platforms, logistics providers, and payment intermediaries. Even where the legal framework is stable, private risk appetites can tighten or loosen access, producing rapid changes in consumer experience without new legislation. This is particularly true for digital services and platform ecosystems, where providers can rapidly adjust terms of service, geofencing, account eligibility rules, or payment acceptance. The consumer impact can be large because digital services are embedded in everyday life—communication, productivity, entertainment, and commerce—yet official datasets rarely capture these changes in a systematic way. For that reason, the report treats private governance as a structural amplifier of EU measures and as a core reason why consumer restrictions should be analysed as a two-layer system: law plus operational market response. The Commission's consolidated FAQs provide indirect evidence of this environment because they show the breadth of questions faced by operators and citizens when translating the regime into daily practice. The policy implication is that EU authorities can influence the consumer outcome not only by changing prohibitions, but also by shaping operational certainty through guidance, clarifications, and targeted derogations, which reduce unnecessary market-wide closures.

From the standpoint of legitimacy constraints, consumer restrictions are especially vulnerable to the critique of collective effect if they are perceived as targeting the population's lifestyle rather than decision-makers. The EU addresses this risk by framing luxury bans as elite-targeting and by presenting sanctions as targeted rather than population-wide, but the operational outcome can deviate from the narrative if substitution and over-compliance shift burdens unpredictably. The report therefore treats legitimacy as an empirical governance problem: it depends on whether exemptions' function, whether restrictions remain proportionate, and whether protected channels (education, family, medical, and civil society) remain viable. In consumer restrictions, protected channels often appear as derogations and interpretative clarifications, such as those in the luxury goods FAQ addressing cultural goods and related exceptions. A key risk is that consumer restrictions become performative—highly visible but strategically noisy—if they mainly change brand labels and routing rather than generating meaningful pressure on enabling structures. This does not mean the measures are pointless; it means their effectiveness must be evaluated in a way that matches their mechanism: they raise costs and reduce normalisation, but they do not reliably prevent consumption for those able to circumvent.

Looking toward the 2026–2030 horizon, consumer restrictions are likely to evolve less through large categorical expansions and more through anti-circumvention tightening, definitional refinement, and enforcement coordination. The EU Council's sanctions timeline reflects how sanctions packages have

repeatedly adjusted technical details and expanded lists and guidance over time, which is consistent with an iterative rather than one-off model. The practical implication is that consumer restrictions will remain a domain of incremental engineering: tightening definitions, refining thresholds, expanding coverage of specific goods, and improving enforcement against indirect exports. In the consumer domain, however, the constraint remains that perfect enforcement is structurally difficult in a global market with third-country hubs and high incentives for intermediary services. Therefore, the most plausible steady-state is a persistent friction premium and a continued displacement away from EU-origin consumer ecosystems, rather than absolute closure. This forward-looking logic is used later in 4.4, but it is worth stating here because it affects how consumer restrictions should be measured: stable high-friction conditions are as policy-relevant as one-off drops in availability.

In summary, consumer restrictions within EU sanctions are best understood as a targeted, socially legible subset of trade-and-services measures that reshape household consumption through legal prohibitions (most clearly luxury exports) and through market-mediated operational responses (brand exits, platform restrictions, and compliance-driven service discontinuation). The legal anchor for this sub-domain is Regulation 833/2014 and its annexes, complemented by Commission FAQs and EU regime summaries that clarify scope and exemptions. The mechanism is not uniform deprivation but systematic reconfiguration: higher costs, reduced choice, ecosystem displacement, and increased uncertainty. The effectiveness profile is therefore primarily a function of friction and symbolic normalisation rather than total volume suppression. The legitimacy constraint is the risk of diffuse social burden and the perception of collective restriction, mitigated through targeted design, workable derogations, and operational clarity. This is why the report treats consumer restrictions as a core social-sanctions channel and prepares the ground for 4.3, where social costs and ethical limits are assessed in distributional and operational terms.

4.2.3. Everyday Financial Life of Citizens

Everyday financial life is the most pervasive social-sanctions channel because it is embedded in routine behaviours: receiving income, paying for goods and services, transferring funds to family members, travelling with spending money, and maintaining access to basic banking utilities. Unlike visa mobility, which concentrates impact at recognisable gates, financial impacts diffuse through multiple layers of compliance controls, platform rules, correspondent banking decisions, and risk management policies. In legal terms, the formal EU sanctions' architecture is, targeted and sectoral, yet the household endpoint is often experienced as broad friction, uncertainty, and uneven service availability. The practical reality is that ordinary citizens encounter sanctions primarily as a question of "Can I still do this transaction?" rather than "Is this policy aimed at me?". This subsection therefore treats everyday finance as a system outcome of legal prohibitions, interpretative guidance, and market behaviour under sanctions risk. The analytical challenge is to separate what is formally prohibited from what is functionally difficult, and to explain why the latter can be socially more consequential than the former. The Commission's consolidated FAQs are an essential anchor for this analysis because they are explicitly drafted to guide authorities, operators, and citizens on implementation, indicating that friction arises not only from bans but from interpretative complexity.

At the legal core, the EU sanctions regime relevant to everyday finance combines (1) listing-based restrictions (asset freezes and prohibitions on making funds or economic resources available to designated persons) and (2) sectoral financial measures that restrict certain transactions and services. These legal instruments do not typically "ban personal finance" in the abstract, but they create constraints that banks and payment providers must internalise within screening and monitoring systems. The main household-facing consequences emerge from the operational translation of these obligations: customer due diligence, sanctions screening, transaction monitoring, and decisions about acceptable exposure to Russia-linked risk. Even where an individual is not designated, their transaction can be delayed or refused due to name similarity, documentation uncertainty, indirect beneficiary risk,

or bank-level de-risking posture. This makes the system's lived boundary wider than the legal boundary, particularly when compliance incentives are asymmetric and penalties for mistakes are perceived as severe. The EU's guidance infrastructure implicitly recognises this dynamic by repeatedly consolidating interpretative answers, reflecting the practical need to harmonise how regulated entities apply complex restrictions.

A useful way to structure everyday finance impacts is to distinguish three operational layers: payment rails, account access, and transaction usability. Payment rails refer to whether payment instruments are accepted or operational for cross-border and online commerce, including cards, bank transfers, and intermediary services. Account access refers to whether individuals can maintain accounts, receive inbound transfers, and perform essential operations without enhanced scrutiny that effectively functions as a barrier. Transaction usability refers to whether legally permissible transactions remain practically feasible given documentation demands, bank cut-offs, and risk-based rejections. These layers interact: a payment rail disruption pushes users toward alternatives; alternatives can raise compliance risk; heightened risk raises rejections; rejections drive further informalisation. The policy significance is that "everyday finance" is not a single instrument, but a network of practical pathways whose stability determines whether normal life remains administratively manageable. To keep the analysis audit-ready, the principal household-facing friction types and their attribution category are summarised in Table 4.2.3-1.

Table 4.2.3-1. Household-facing financial frictions under EU restrictive measures: taxonomy and attribution

Friction type (household experience)	Typical operational trigger	Attribution class (Section 4.1.3)	Primary household impact	Controllability lever (EU / supervisors)	Key documentation anchors
Transfer delays / enhanced documentation requests	Risk scoring; unclear purpose/beneficiary; indirect Russia exposure	Compliance-mediated	Time cost; uncertainty; occasional refusal	Clarifying FAQs; standardised documentation expectations	Commission consolidated FAQs
Refusal of lawful transfers (over-compliance)	Conservative interpretation; fear of breach; de-risking posture	Compliance-mediated	Loss of service access; informalisation incentives	Safe harbours; complaint/escalation mechanisms; harmonised guidance	Commission consolidated FAQs; EBA Guidelines
Account restrictions / customer offboarding	Jurisdictional de-risking; compliance cost vs revenue	Compliance-mediated	Banking exclusion; reliance on intermediaries	Supervisory calibration; governance standards to avoid blanket exclusion	EBA Guidelines and application framing
Cash carriage uncertainty for travellers	Euro banknotes export prohibition; narrow exception interpretation	Direct legal + compliance-mediated	Reduced spending flexibility; border risk; substitution to alternatives	Clear traveller guidance; consistent border practice	CJEU press release; Commission euro banknotes FAQs
Platform/service payment disruption (consumer–finance boundary)	Payment acceptance constraints; sanctions risk policies	Market-mediated + compliance-mediated	Loss of digital service continuity; higher transaction cost	Clarify scope; reduce interpretative ambiguity; targeted exceptions	Commission consolidated FAQs; broader sanctions overview

Authorship: analytical framework (this report) was prepared by the author
Note: This taxonomy distinguishes "formal prohibition" from "functional restriction". In the everyday finance domain, the latter frequently dominates lived experience, making interpretative governance and supervisory calibration material policy levers.

The Commission's consolidated FAQs function as an empirical proxy for where the system "binds" in practice, because they catalogue recurring uncertainties that require authoritative clarification. The

existence of a Commission webpage that publishes consolidated FAQ versions—updated over time, including a listed consolidated version dated January 2026—signals that implementation questions persist and evolve alongside the sanctions' regime. Such documentation is not merely explanatory; it shapes how banks and operators interpret permissible conduct and therefore influences household outcomes. In a high-risk compliance environment, the baseline operational posture tends to be conservative, and guidance can either narrow or widen the set of transactions that institutions feel safe processing. This makes "interpretative governance" a genuine policy lever: when guidance clarifies that certain personal transactions are permissible under defined conditions, it can reduce unnecessary refusal and delay. Conversely, when guidance emphasises broad due diligence expectations, it may unintentionally reinforce de-risking, particularly for providers with limited compliance capacity. The report therefore treats interpretative documentation as part of the causal architecture and not as peripheral commentary.

A central feature of household-level financial friction is over-compliance, which arises when institutions adopt restrictions broader than the legal minimum. Over-compliance is rational from an institution's perspective when the cost of a breach is high, the legal regime is complex, and the evidentiary burden to prove permissibility is difficult to operationalise at scale. It is also amplified when banks and payment providers fear secondary exposure through indirect counterparties, intermediaries, or ultimate beneficiaries. For citizens, the distinction between formal and informal prohibition becomes irrelevant because outcomes are experienced as refusal, delay, or loss of service. This is particularly acute for cross-border transfers where documentation of purpose, source of funds, and beneficiary relationships is burdensome or inconsistent across institutions. The governance problem is that over-compliance can produce diffuse social burden without necessarily improving sanctions effectiveness against intended targets, especially if sophisticated actors can route around controls while ordinary users cannot. The EU's repeated publication and consolidation of FAQs is evidence that authorities recognise interpretative uncertainty as a systemic driver of over-compliance.

Recent EU supervisory practice also indicates that sanctions compliance is being formalised as a governance discipline within the financial sector, which has direct implications for household experience. The European Banking Authority (EBA) issued final Guidelines in November 2024 setting common EU standards for internal policies, procedures, and controls to ensure implementation of restrictive measures. These Guidelines are designed to reduce breaches and improve consistency, but they can also raise baseline compliance expectations and thus encourage more conservative operational decisions in borderline cases. Importantly, the EBA materials highlight governance arrangements and risk management systems, which suggests a shift from ad hoc screening toward more institutionalised sanctions risk frameworks. Institutionalisation tends to reduce variance in the long run, but it can increase friction in the short run if providers adopt tighter thresholds to ensure compliance. For households, this can manifest as stricter onboarding requirements, enhanced checks on Russia-linked ties, and more frequent transaction queries. The policy trade-off is therefore not "compliance vs access" in absolute terms, but "how to achieve compliance while preserving workable channels for lawful personal activity".

A particularly illustrative household-facing measure is the EU prohibition on exporting banknotes denominated in euro (or other Member State currencies) to Russia, combined with a narrow personal-use exception. The Court of Justice has confirmed that the prohibition aims to limit Russia's access to cash in such currencies in order to increase the cost of Russia's actions, while noting that the prohibition does not apply to sums necessary for the personal use of travellers or their immediate families travelling with them. The Commission has also published specific FAQs on euro banknotes that interpret the personal-use exception narrowly, including reference to the Court's preliminary ruling and the distinction between personal needs and professional, commercial, or investment purposes. For everyday life, the social effect is not only legal restriction but also behavioural uncertainty: travellers may be unsure what is permitted, and authorities may apply conservative interpretations. The system output is increased friction for travel-related spending and a shift toward alternative instruments or third-

country currency strategies, which are not evenly accessible across social strata. This case also illustrates the broader theme that household measures often function through “micro-gates” at borders and within compliance controls, where discretion and interpretation determine lived outcomes.

Everyday finance frictions also interact with consumer restrictions described in 4.2.2, particularly where access to goods and services is limited by payment acceptance and settlement capabilities. The consumer typology in Table 4.2.2-1 includes cash and currency constraints as a consumer-adjacent channel because spending capacity is a prerequisite for consumption, especially for travel and cross-border purchases. In practice, when card acceptance is constrained or when cross-border transfers are delayed, consumer markets adapt by increasing reliance on intermediaries, alternative payment rails, and grey-market settlement mechanisms. This expands the role of informal brokers and raises the household cost of compliance because individuals must navigate less transparent pathways. It also creates consumer protection risks: households lose the safeguards associated with regulated payment systems and may face fraud, excessive fees, or arbitrary service denial. The policy implication is that financial sanctions governance cannot be assessed purely in legal terms; it must be evaluated as an ecosystem that shapes market structures and household vulnerability. This is why Part 4 treats consumer and finance restrictions as mutually reinforcing, even when they are analysed in separate subsections.

From an indicator standpoint, everyday finance is harder to measure than visa mobility because many of the most important outcomes—refusal rates, delays, and de-risking—are not systematically published in comparable public datasets. The report therefore relies on a mixed measurement strategy: legal anchors and guidance for mechanism identification, supplemented by whichever official artefacts exist for specific issues. Commission FAQs serve as an “implementation intensity” proxy: the breadth of recurring questions reflects where frictions persist and where legal clarity is most demanded by operators and citizens. Supervisory documents such as the EBA Guidelines serve as a “governance posture” proxy: they indicate how compliance expectations are being standardised and when stricter internal controls are likely to become universal. Case-law and court communications serve as a “boundary clarification” proxy: they define how narrow or broad exceptions are interpreted, as in the euro banknotes example. This multi-source triangulation is consistent with Paragraph 4.1.3 and is necessary to avoid overclaiming based on anecdote.

The household experience of financial restrictions is also shaped by heterogeneity across providers, which can be as consequential as the formal rules. Different banks and payment providers vary in their screening sensitivity, documentation demands, and willingness to process Russia-linked transactions. Some institutions treat any Russia-linked exposure as high-risk and therefore prefer refusal to investigation, particularly when transaction values are small and compliance costs are not economically justified. Other institutions maintain more nuanced risk scoring and are willing to process transactions when documentation is strong and counterparties are clearly non-listed. For citizens, this variance creates “provider shopping” behaviour, which can itself be socially costly and can push users toward providers in jurisdictions perceived as more permissive. Variance also undermines perceived fairness, because similar cases can lead to different outcomes without transparent explanation. The policy question is whether EU-level guidance and supervisory convergence can reduce arbitrary variance without reducing enforcement strength against prohibited activity. The existence of EU-level consolidated FAQs and EBA-level common standards suggests that convergence is an institutional objective, but the speed and uniformity of that convergence remain uncertain.

A recurrent sanctions-engineering insight is that tightening controls can unintentionally incentivise informalisation, which reduces transparency and controllability. When lawful personal transfers become difficult through mainstream channels, individuals may turn to intermediaries, cash carriage strategies, or third-country settlement arrangements. Such adaptation does not necessarily violate the letter of sanctions law, but it can increase exposure to financial crime and reduce the ability of regulators to distinguish lawful personal activity from prohibited circumvention. This is a structural constraint: high friction in the compliant channel tends to expand the non-compliant or semi-compliant perimeter. For

policy evaluation, this matters because a system that pushes activity into opaque pathways may weaken sanctions objectives by reducing observability and increasing the capacity for illicit networks. It also raises ethical concerns because the burden of navigating informal pathways falls disproportionately on those with weaker institutional access and lower financial literacy. Consequently, the report treats the maintenance of usable lawful pathways as a legitimacy stabiliser, not as a concession to sanctioned actors. This logic is formalised in Table 4.2.3-2, which maps governance instruments (guidance, safe harbours, derogations) to household-relevant outcomes.

Table 4.2.3-2. Governance instruments that shape household-level outcomes in everyday finance

Governance instrument	What it does operationally	Expected effect on household frictions	Risk if poorly calibrated	Principal EU/supervisory anchor
Consolidated implementation FAQs (Commission)	Harmonises interpretation; reduces ambiguity for operators and citizens	Lower unnecessary refusals; clearer permissible pathways	If too complex, may reinforce conservative posture	Commission consolidated FAQs and publishing hub
Supervisory standards for sanctions governance (EBA)	Standardises internal controls and governance arrangements across institutions	Potentially reduces arbitrary variance; improves compliance quality	Can harden de-risking if interpreted as maximum caution	EBA Final Report and Guidelines page
Thematic FAQs on specific issues (e.g., euro banknotes; "best efforts")	Clarifies boundary conditions and exceptions	Reduces traveller uncertainty; improves legal certainty in niches	Narrow interpretation may raise welfare costs in sensitive cases	Commission euro banknotes FAQ; "best efforts" FAQ page
Case-law boundary clarification (CJEU)	Defines legally binding interpretation of scope/exceptions	Increases predictability, but may narrow exceptions	High-salience legitimacy risk if outcomes appear harsh	CJEU press release on banknotes prohibition

Authorship: analytical framework (this report) was prepared by the author
Note: These instruments operate on the "operational layer" of sanctions. In household finance, their calibration can alter real-world restrictiveness without changing the formal text of prohibitions.

The EU's approach to sanctions implementation also includes thematic guidance on obligations such as "best efforts", which can shape how firms and institutions interpret their responsibilities. The Commission has published an FAQ page on the "best efforts" obligation linked to Article 8a of Regulation 833/2014, indicating that the EU expects operators to adopt proactive compliance behaviours rather than merely avoid direct violations. While such obligations are understandable from an enforcement perspective, they can widen operational conservatism when operators apply "best efforts" as a justification for broad refusal. For households, this can translate into a general tightening of service acceptance for Russia-linked activity, even where personal transactions may be lawful. The policy design challenge is therefore to align proactive compliance obligations with clear boundaries and practical guidance that prevent indiscriminate de-risking. This is especially important in retail payments and small-value transfers, where the social cost of blanket refusal can be high relative to the marginal enforcement benefit. In sanctions engineering terms, "best efforts" increases the sensitivity of the system but can also increase noise, making calibration and clarity essential. This is precisely why consolidated FAQs and supervisory standards must be interpreted as interacting instruments rather than as separate documents.

A further household-facing dimension is the treatment of humanitarian, medical, educational, and family-related transactions, where social welfare stakes are high and legitimacy constraints are tight. The euro banknotes jurisprudence demonstrates that even ostensibly humanitarian motivations can collide with narrow exception interpretation, producing high-salience cases that shape public

perceptions of sanctions fairness. The EU's broader sanctions policy communications often emphasise that sanctions are targeted and designed not to hinder essential goods, yet operational realities can still produce barriers when exceptions are narrow or hard to access. In the financial domain, "protected channels" require more than declaratory exemptions: they require workable documentation standards, predictable bank processing, and guidance that allows institutions to distinguish protected personal activity from prohibited circumvention. Without such operational infrastructure, exemptions may exist on paper but fail in practice, leaving households with de facto constraints. This is why Part 4 treats ethical robustness as operational, and why 4.5 will propose mechanism-level designs (standardised exemption workflows, complaint mechanisms, and safe harbour guidance) rather than abstract normative statements. The everyday finance subsection therefore sets the factual and governance groundwork for those later proposals.

The legitimacy issue is sharpened by the EU's public narrative that sanctions do not target populations, because everyday finance is the channel where population-wide experiences can arise through diffuse operational effects. If non-designated individuals frequently experience refusal without clear reason, the system can appear collectively restrictive regardless of formal intent. That perception can undermine both external credibility and internal cohesion, particularly if member states perceive uneven burdens or if courts scrutinise proportionality where personal and family rights are implicated. The governance response is not necessarily to weaken sanctions, but to increase operational precision: better clarity on permissible transactions, harmonised documentation requirements, and mechanisms to contest erroneous refusals. In this respect, the move toward EU-level supervisory standards, as signalled by the EBA Guidelines, can support legitimacy if it reduces arbitrary variance. However, convergence can also harden baseline conservatism if standards are interpreted as requiring maximum caution rather than calibrated risk management. The key is therefore to integrate supervisory governance with Commission interpretative guidance so that enforcement strength is preserved while lawful personal finance remains feasible. The report treats this integration as a core controllability challenge for 2026–2030.

Everyday financial life is also sensitive to time dynamics, because institutions adjust their controls as sanctions packages evolve and as enforcement expectations rise. Early shock periods are often characterised by broad precautionary restrictions, after which institutions gradually stabilise permissible pathways as guidance accumulates and risk models mature. The publication of consolidated FAQs over time, including a consolidated version listed in January 2026, illustrates that the EU anticipates ongoing refinement rather than one-off clarification. This implies that household experience can improve in some dimensions (clearer rules, fewer unnecessary refusals) while tightening in others (more checks, narrower exceptions) as the regime becomes more technically sophisticated. For evaluation, this means that one cannot infer long-run steady-state from early months; the system learns and adjusts. It also means that policy choices about guidance and safe harbours have compounding effects: early clarity can prevent the entrenchment of over-compliance norms that become hard to reverse. In the 2026–2030 horizon, the most plausible dynamic is further institutionalisation of sanctions compliance in retail finance, paired with more structured exceptions and pathways for protected personal needs. Whether this pairing occurs determines both social costs and legitimacy sustainability.

From a strategic-effectiveness standpoint, everyday finance measures influence Russia-related economic activity through friction and control rather than through dramatic "cut-offs" for ordinary individuals. The EU's primary financial sanctions intent is to constrain state and strategic sector capacity, but household-level frictions emerge because compliance systems cannot perfectly separate strategic and personal activity at scale. This creates an effectiveness-ethics trade-off: some friction is likely an unavoidable by-product of enforcement, but excessive friction may impose civilian costs with limited marginal leverage on decision-makers. The sanctions-engineering question is therefore one of calibration: how to maximise the discriminatory power of compliance systems so that prohibited and high-risk activity is blocked while lawful personal activity can proceed. Calibration depends on data quality, clear definitions, and supervisory incentives, all of which are policy variables rather than fixed

constraints. The Commission's guidance and the EBA's standards are therefore not merely support documents; they are instruments that shape the system's discriminative capacity. In practical terms, better calibration reduces reputational and legal risk for institutions, which can reduce the incentive for blanket refusal and thus lower social cost. This aligns effectiveness and legitimacy, making calibration a central theme for the forward-looking parts of Part 4.

The distributional profile of financial frictions is also critical, because household vulnerability varies sharply. Individuals with transnational family ties, students abroad, migrants, and those requiring cross-border medical support have higher dependence on reliable transfer and payment channels. When those channels are uncertain, welfare losses are high even if transaction values are small. Conversely, high-income individuals may have access to multiple banks, intermediaries, and alternative settlement arrangements, which makes them more resilient to friction. This distributional asymmetry can create a legitimacy vulnerability: a system that is intended to pressure elites may inadvertently burden those with the least capacity to adapt. It can also produce perverse strategic outcomes if elite adaptation remains robust while vulnerable groups experience disproportionate hardship. For this reason, Part 4 later treats ethical robustness as requiring protected channels with measurable service performance, not merely nominal exemptions. The everyday finance subsection establishes that distributional effects are not incidental; they are structural in a system where access depends on compliance capacity and social networks. This justifies why the report frames "acceptability limits" in 4.3 through both rights-based and distributional lenses.

In summary, everyday financial life is a core social-sanctions domain because it transforms legal restrictions and compliance obligations into routine frictions affecting payments, transfers, cash carriage, and access to services. The EU's consolidated FAQs and thematic guidance provide the clearest windows into operational complexity and recurrent friction points, while supervisory standards such as the EBA Guidelines indicate the direction of institutionalised compliance over 2026–2030. The euro banknotes prohibition and its narrowly interpreted personal-use exception illustrate how even seemingly limited measures can become household-salient through border controls and conservative interpretation. The principal effect is not uniform deprivation but a persistent "friction and uncertainty premium" that is unevenly distributed and that interacts with consumer restrictions (see Table 4.2.2-1) to reshape everyday access to goods and services. The main constraint is legitimacy: uncontrolled over-compliance can create de facto population-wide burdens that conflict with the EU's targeted-sanctions narrative. The engineering task is therefore calibration and governance: maintain enforcement against prohibited activity while preserving workable pathways for lawful personal needs. This subsection provides the mechanism map and governance anchors needed for the next step, 4.3, where social costs and acceptability thresholds are assessed systematically.

4.3. Social Costs and the Limits of Sanction Acceptability

4.3.1. Distributional Impacts and Vulnerability Mapping

Social costs are rarely distributed evenly, and that unevenness is the central reason why "acceptability" cannot be evaluated using aggregate indicators alone. In the EU–Russia sanctions environment, the same instrument can impose minor inconvenience on one group while creating a high-welfare loss for another, even when the formal legal scope is identical. Distributional analysis therefore focuses on *who bears time costs, uncertainty costs, and access losses*, rather than on whether a measure exists in law. This is consistent with the two-layer causal model set out earlier: legal constraints are filtered through operational practice, and operational practice interacts with social position, resources, and networks. In other words, the social burden is jointly produced by the sanctions design and by the unequal capacity of citizens to navigate compliance, substitution, and routing. When distributional asymmetry is high,

legitimacy risks rise even if the overall macroeconomic impact is modest. EU institutions emphasise that restrictive measures are targeted and are not aimed at a population, which implicitly sets a high bar for controlling collateral burdens in socially sensitive domains.

A practical vulnerability mapping starts by distinguishing *exposure* from *adaptive capacity*. Exposure is the degree to which a person's daily life depends on cross-border mobility, cross-border payments, and access to external consumer and service ecosystems. Adaptive capacity is the ability to substitute routes (third-country travel hubs), instruments (alternative payment rails), suppliers (non-EU brands), and administrative support (intermediaries, legal advice) at reasonable cost. Exposure and adaptive capacity are often inversely correlated: those who most need cross-border functionality—students, mixed families, diaspora caregivers, patients requiring treatment—can be least able to absorb increased friction. This is precisely why distributional analysis is not optional: it is the only way to assess whether social costs remain within defensible bounds while preserving legitimate security objectives. Visa mobility changes, for example, may be tolerable for discretionary tourism but severe for caregiving and family reunification, even when the administrative rule is the same. The Commission's visa-policy reporting underscores that aggregate refusal rates and issuance volumes must be interpreted carefully, because they cannot reveal who is being filtered out.

Three broad "burden types" dominate the distributional profile of social sanctions: transaction costs, uncertainty costs, and exclusion costs. Transaction costs include fees, intermediary charges, and additional travel and documentation expenses created by higher friction pathways. Uncertainty costs are borne when outcomes become less predictable, forcing households to invest time and money without assurance of success (appointments, repeated applications, repeated scrutiny). Exclusion costs arise when lawful pathways collapse in practice due to over-compliance, de-risking, or service discontinuation, pushing people out of regulated channels. These costs do not scale linearly with income; uncertainty and exclusion are often more damaging to vulnerable groups because they disrupt essential routines and obligations. Where social costs are primarily frictional rather than prohibitive, distributional harm can still be large because repeated small frictions accumulate into significant welfare loss. The EU's continued publication of consolidated sanctions FAQs and governance guidance illustrates the systemic nature of implementation frictions that generate such costs.

Visa mobility provides a clear illustration of distributional asymmetry because it transforms repeat travel from routine to exceptional for many categories of persons. The suspension of visa facilitation and subsequent tightening of issuance practice shifts costs into documentation, processing time, and lowered predictability of multi-entry access. A blanket change in multi-entry availability (reported in late 2025) is especially distributionally salient: it affects those whose family, care, or professional life depends on repeated travel much more than those making a single discretionary trip. High-resource travellers can often absorb repeated application costs and navigate consulate processes via intermediaries, while low-resource travellers face a compounding barrier. The result is not only fewer trips, but a stratification of who can sustain transnational ties under a high-friction regime. Public reporting on the EU tightening of multi-entry visas also highlights that exceptions exist for certain "trusted" categories, yet the real distributional question is whether such exceptions are operationally accessible and not merely declaratory.

Everyday financial life tends to produce even sharper distributional patterns because banking and payment frictions are mediated by providers' risk policies and by individuals' documentation capacity. Over-compliance and de-risking do not hit everyone equally: those with transparent income sources, stable residency status, and strong banking relationships can often provide documentation that satisfies compliance teams. By contrast, migrants, students, and informal-sector earners may be unable to produce the documentation demanded for lawful transfers, even when the transaction purpose is legitimate. This converts a compliance decision into a social welfare event: households lose the ability to support relatives, pay cross-border expenses, or maintain basic financial continuity. The EBA's 2024 Guidelines are designed to standardise governance and controls for restrictive measures, which can reduce arbitrary variance over time, but they can also raise baseline documentation expectations in the

short run. Where documentation thresholds rise, distributional harm tends to concentrate in groups with weaker administrative capacity.

Consumer restrictions similarly produce stratified outcomes, but through substitution and ecosystem displacement rather than through formal prohibition alone. Where EU-origin authorised channels disappear—whether due to export bans, corporate withdrawals, or service discontinuation—high-resource consumers can often substitute via third-country procurement and intermediaries. Lower-resource consumers may be locked into inferior substitutes, higher relative prices, and loss of after-sales services that protect consumer welfare. The resulting social harm is not just "loss of luxury"; it includes reduced reliability of goods, weaker consumer protection, and higher fraud exposure as transactions move into grey channels. Because substitution pathways are uneven, consumer restrictions can inadvertently shift burdens away from the intended elite-target group toward middle-income aspirational consumers and vulnerable households reliant on stable supply and service ecosystems. This is an important acceptability constraint: a measure justified as elite pressure becomes ethically and politically fragile if elites circumvent cheaply while non-elites face disproportionate friction. EU explanatory materials explicitly frame luxury bans as elite-targeting, making the distributional integrity of the measure a core test of legitimacy.

A rigorous vulnerability mapping also requires identifying "protected interest" categories that EU policy generally tries to shield through derogations and practical guidance. Humanitarian derogations, and the Commission's humanitarian guidance note, illustrate a governance principle that is transferable to social sanctions: when essential interests are at stake, regimes need workable exceptions and pathways rather than nominal carve-outs that fail operationally. In the social domain, essential interests commonly include family life, education, health, and civil society participation. The acceptability question is not whether every hardship can be eliminated, but whether the system provides predictable routes for these high-salience needs and prevents discretionary over-compliance from turning lawful activity into de facto prohibition. Where such routes fail, social costs become both ethically problematic and strategically counterproductive, because they harm groups that are not responsible for the targeted conduct. The distributional perspective thus converts abstract rights concerns into operational design requirements.

A further dimension is geographic and jurisdictional variation: different member states and providers implement rules with varying intensity and administrative capacity. This variance interacts with vulnerability by creating "route shopping" opportunities for those who can travel or relocate applications, and barriers for those who cannot. If access depends on knowing which consulate is faster, which bank is less conservative, or which third-country hub is workable, then information and network capital become welfare determinants. Such a system tends to privilege transnationally connected and wealthier groups, potentially undermining both fairness and strategic targeting. From the standpoint of acceptability limits, a regime that shifts burdens onto the least mobile and least connected is structurally exposed to legitimacy critique. The existence of EU-level guidance instruments (consolidated FAQs, Commission communications, supervisory standards) is partly an attempt to reduce such variance, but their effectiveness is an empirical question that requires monitoring.

High-salience edge cases reveal distributional harm even when aggregate indicators appear stable. The euro banknotes export prohibition and its narrow personal-use exception, clarified through Court communication and Commission FAQs, demonstrates how a legally defined measure can create severe friction for individuals in sensitive circumstances when interpretation is strict. Even if most travellers can adjust, those with urgent medical or family needs may face immediate welfare loss if they cannot access familiar payment instruments and must navigate ambiguous compliance boundaries. These cases also shape public perception of sanctions fairness, which is itself a component of acceptability. Distributional mapping therefore treats such edge cases not as anomalies to be dismissed, but as stress tests that reveal whether the system protects high-priority needs. If the system fails under stress, legitimacy costs accumulate and can constrain the durability of the broader regime.

The question of political voice also matters for distributional impacts: groups that bear high costs may have limited ability to influence policy, particularly non-citizens, diaspora communities, and cross-border families. A sanctions regime can therefore generate "silent burdens" that are not fully represented in policy debate. This is a classic acceptability problem: absence of visible protest is not evidence of low harm, especially when affected groups lack institutional access. The report's methodology therefore treats vulnerability mapping as a corrective to policy blind spots, ensuring that later judgements about acceptability incorporate those less visible burdens. This also improves strategic coherence, because sanctions that harm low-agency groups may not generate commensurate leverage on decision-makers. Targeted design, by contrast, seeks to impose costs on actors with higher causal proximity to the targeted conduct and higher capacity to influence it.

Distributional mapping is also necessary to prevent conceptual slippage between "pressure" and "harm." Policy can generate harm without generating effective pressure, particularly when harm is borne by those who cannot influence the targeted behaviour. Social sanctions risk this slippage because they operate close to everyday life, where small institutional changes can create large welfare effects. A sound acceptability framework therefore requires that harm be assessed in relation to plausible strategic leverage and to the EU's stated narrative that measures are targeted rather than population-directed. Where leverage is speculative and harm is concentrated on vulnerable groups, the acceptability threshold tightens. This is the conceptual bridge from vulnerability mapping (4.3.1) to the rights and proportionality thresholds discussed later in 4.3.2.

From an operational perspective, the distributional profile can be represented as a set of high-risk population segments, each linked to a dominant friction mechanism. Students and researchers are highly exposed to mobility constraints, documentation burdens, and payment frictions related to tuition and living expenses. Mixed families and caregivers are exposed to repeated travel needs, unpredictable issuance outcomes, and financial transfer uncertainty. Patients and medical travellers face high welfare loss from delays and payment limitations because the time sensitivity is extreme and alternatives can be unsafe. Small entrepreneurs and freelancers engaged in cross-border micro-trade face compounded burdens from banking de-risking and service discontinuation. Civil society actors and independent journalists can be uniquely harmed by mobility tightening, particularly if exceptions are narrow or if the process of claiming an exception creates additional personal risk.

To keep the analysis audit-ready and comparable across subsections, the principal vulnerable groups, channels, and mitigation levers are summarised in Table 4.3.1-1.

Table 4.3.1-1. Vulnerability mapping of social-sanctions burdens (EU–Russia context)

Population segment / situation	Primary exposure channel	Dominant burden type	Typical transmission mechanism	Indicative mitigation lever	Key EU governance anchors
Students & researchers (study, exchange, conferences)	Visa mobility + payments	Uncertainty + transaction costs	Repeated applications; documentation burdens; banking checks	Protected pathways; prioritised processing; clear documentary standards	Commission visa policy reporting; consolidated sanctions FAQs
Mixed families, caregivers, close relatives	Visa mobility + transfers	Uncertainty + exclusion risk	Multi-entry restrictions; variable consular outcomes; transfer delays/refusals	Family-life carve-outs; operationally accessible exemptions	Commission guidance logic; humanitarian derogations principles
Patients and medical travellers	Mobility + spending instruments	Exclusion + time-critical uncertainty	Appointment scarcity; payment instrument friction; strict exception interpretation	Medical prioritisation; clear traveller guidance; safe channels	Humanitarian guidance note; Court/Commission clarifications on cash exceptions

Population segment / situation	Primary exposure channel	Dominant burden type	Typical transmission mechanism	Indicative mitigation lever	Key EU governance anchors
Diaspora communities (supporting relatives)	Everyday finance	Transaction + uncertainty costs	De-risking; enhanced due diligence; documentation barriers	Calibrated compliance guidance; complaint/escalation routes	Commission consolidated FAQs; EBA sanctions governance standards
Small entrepreneurs / freelancers (micro cross-border activity)	Payments + services access	Transaction + exclusion costs	Provider refusals; platform withdrawal; compliance overhead	Safe harbours for low-risk lawful activity; clearer guidance	Commission FAQs; EBA governance convergence
Civil society actors / independent journalists	Mobility + service continuity	High welfare loss per event	Narrow exception pathways; safety risks in self-identification	Structured exception workflows; confidentiality safeguards	EU-level policy framing and protected-category logic in public communications [1]

Authorship: analytical framework (this report) was prepared by the author

Note: This mapping is mechanism-based and does not imply uniform harm across all individuals in a segment. It is used to structure acceptability analysis by identifying high-exposure contexts where operational precision and usable safeguards are most critical.

Sources:

- European Commission (Schengen visa statistics updates): https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/news/visa-applications-reach-117-million-eu-and-schengen-associated-countries-2025-05-20_en
- European Commission / DG FISMA (sanctions FAQs, humanitarian guidance): https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2022-06/220630-humanitarian-aid-guidance-note_en.pdf
- EBA Guidelines page: https://www.fma.gv.at/en/eu/eba-guidelines/
- AP report on EU multi-entry tightening and exception categories (context for protected groups): https://apnews.com/article/europe-schengen-visas-russia-multiple-entry-dc830d5f208539d91a5e18948280a5a9

This table is not a normative claim that every member of a group is harmed. It is a structured mapping of high-exposure contexts and plausible transmission mechanisms. It also functions as the bridge to the acceptability discussion: once vulnerabilities are explicit, policy can be evaluated for whether it contains workable safeguards and whether those safeguards are operationally accessible. The table is also consistent with the report's attribution discipline: it separates direct legal constraints (visa rules, border practices) from compliance-mediated and market-mediated effects (bank de-risking, platform exits). Finally, it prepares the ground for Section 4.5 by identifying which safeguards are best delivered through exemptions, which through guidance and safe harbours, and which through monitoring and complaint mechanisms.

Consumer restrictions deserve special caution in vulnerability mapping because they can be misread as trivial when framed as "luxury". In practice, the vulnerability channel is often not the absence of luxury per se, but the growth of informal supply chains and the loss of formal consumer protection. Informal supply chains amplify fraud risk and reduce warranty and service support, which can disproportionately affect households that cannot absorb losses or replace defective goods. The distributional harm can also be indirect: when authorised service networks collapse, repair costs rise and product lifetimes fall, which functions as a regressive tax on household budgets. This makes consumer restrictions relevant to acceptability limits even when the formal instrument is elite-focused. A policy that generates high informalisation is also harder to control, which can undermine enforcement objectives and create broader governance externalities. The report therefore treats informalisation as both a welfare risk and a sanctions-engineering failure mode.

Visa mobility measures also have a "shadow distributional" effect through administrative capacity and queueing. When appointment scarcity becomes a binding constraint, time becomes a rationing device,

favouring those who can wait, travel to alternative consulates, or pay intermediaries. This creates a de facto market for access, which shifts burdens onto those with less time flexibility and fewer resources. These mechanisms are often absent from formal policy analysis but are central to lived experience, and therefore to acceptability. Because such mechanisms are operational rather than legal, they can potentially be mitigated without altering the sanctions' strategic core: clearer process standards, prioritisation for protected categories, and transparent documentation requirements can reduce welfare loss while maintaining security scrutiny. In this sense, distributional mapping also identifies *low-cost governance improvements* that improve ethical robustness without weakening enforcement.

Everyday finance produces similar queueing and rationing effects, but through compliance processing rather than appointment slots. When banks treat certain transactions as high-risk, processing time expands and documentation demands rise, effectively rationing service by administrative burden. Those with stable employment documentation and higher literacy can pass; those without are excluded or pushed to intermediaries. This is why supervisory governance is directly relevant to social acceptability: standards that improve discriminatory power and reduce false positives lower distributional harm. The EBA's standard-setting is therefore not just a technical compliance development; it is a potential lever for improving fairness, provided it is calibrated to avoid indiscriminate de-risking.

A final, often overlooked distributional dimension is the signalling environment and its interaction with stigma and discrimination. Social sanctions can generate reputational cues that lead private actors to treat Russian nationals or Russia-linked persons as uniformly high-risk, even where law permits service provision. This can produce discrimination-like outcomes in employment, housing, education services, and platform access, which are difficult to measure but socially corrosive. Acceptability limits are therefore not only about formal prohibitions; they also concern whether a regime predictably generates social stigma that is misaligned with targeted intent. This is a governance challenge: where stigma results from ambiguity, clearer guidance and public communication can reduce it; where it results from genuine security concerns, mitigation may require more precise targeting and more structured exceptions. The EU's emphasis on targeted sanctions is relevant here, because a targeted narrative loses credibility if lived experience resembles categorical exclusion.

Overall, vulnerability mapping indicates that the most ethically and politically sensitive social costs arise where sanctions systems interact with high-need life domains—family, health, education—and where operational controls generate exclusion beyond legal requirements. The distributional picture is not an argument against sanctions; it is a constraint that defines how sanctions must be engineered to remain legitimate and sustainable. This is why Part 4 treats acceptability as an operationally testable property: measures should be evaluated not only by strategic outputs but by who bears burdens and whether protected pathways function in practice.

4.3.2. Humanitarian and Fundamental-Rights Thresholds

Acceptability limits in the social domain are not a matter of taste; they are structured by the EU's constitutional and legal environment, where restrictive measures must remain compatible with fundamental rights, proportionality, legal certainty, and effective judicial protection. In this sense, "ethical sustainability" is partly a legal design constraint: when sanctions instruments begin to resemble population-wide disabilities, they face stronger legitimacy headwinds and higher litigation vulnerability. The EU's public narrative also sets a constraint in political terms: sanctions are repeatedly presented as *targeted* measures that do not aim at a country or population, which means that the burden of proof on proportionality and safeguards rises when household-level impacts become salient. The social sphere is where this tension becomes most visible, because the endpoints—family life, education, health, and basic financial functioning—are high-welfare domains in which even moderate friction can produce disproportionate harm. The purpose of this subsection is to define the practical "red lines" and threshold tests that should discipline the design, implementation, and evaluation of social sanctions. These thresholds are not interpreted as absolute bans on any civilian-facing costs; rather, they define

conditions under which costs are presumptively unacceptable unless mitigated by workable exceptions and clear operational pathways.

A central distinction is between *intentional deprivation* and *foreseeable collateral restriction*. EU restrictive measures often aim at strategic pressure and deterrence, not at harming civilians as such, yet in a highly intermediated economy the household endpoint can be a foreseeable result of compliance systems. Acceptability therefore depends on whether the regime incorporates mechanisms to prevent collateral restriction from becoming de facto collective punishment. This is why the report treats humanitarian and fundamental-rights thresholds as operational constraints, not merely as normative claims. It is not sufficient that derogations exist in law; the pathway must be practically usable, reasonably predictable, and not dependent on exceptional discretion. The Commission's long-standing practice of issuing guidance and tools for sanctions implementation—particularly in the humanitarian space—signals that the EU recognises this problem as structural. In Part 4, the same governance logic is applied to social safeguards: where high-salience interests are at stake, "protected channels" must be designed with measurable accessibility and clear documentation standards.

The legal backbone of acceptability thresholds is the EU's commitment to effective judicial protection and due process when restrictive measures affect individuals. Even though sanctions are foreign-policy instruments, EU courts have consistently insisted that the rule of law applies, including requirements around reasoning, rights of defence, and judicial review. The Kadi line of case-law is often treated as emblematic of this constitutional framing: restrictive measures may pursue security objectives, yet must remain subject to judicial scrutiny and fundamental rights constraints. For social sanctions analysis, the practical consequence is that the closer a measure comes to individualised deprivation—mobility denial, financial exclusion, barriers to health-related needs—the more important procedural safeguards become. If a person experiences denial without intelligible reasoning or remedy, the operational system begins to look arbitrary even if the legal system is targeted. Acceptability is therefore linked to procedural architecture: transparent criteria, review mechanisms, and channels for correction of error. This is one reason why over-compliance is treated as an acceptability problem. It can generate de facto deprivation without the procedural guarantees that accompany formal restrictive acts.

Proportionality is the second core threshold, and it has a specific meaning in this context: measures must be suitable to achieve legitimate objectives, necessary in the sense that less intrusive means are not equally effective, and not excessive in relation to the pursued aim. In sanctions practice, judicial review of proportionality can be deferential due to foreign policy discretion, yet the intensity of scrutiny can vary depending on the rights affected and the nature of the interference. In social sanctions, where impacts can touch family life, education access, and health needs, proportionality scrutiny becomes substantively more relevant to policy durability. The acceptability limit therefore requires that household-facing restrictions be justified by a clear and plausible strategic mechanism, not merely by symbolic appeal. If a measure mainly produces friction for ordinary citizens while offering limited marginal leverage on decision-makers, the proportionality balance weakens. This logic motivates the report's preference for precise targeting, calibrated exceptions, and operational clarity rather than broad categorical restrictions.

Humanitarian thresholds function as a particularly strong constraint because they are tied to essential needs and international humanitarian principles. The Commission's 2022 guidance note on providing humanitarian aid in compliance with EU restrictive measures, together with the humanitarian derogations' factsheet, shows how the EU translates humanitarian constraints into procedural guidance and member-state practices. Although these documents are drafted for humanitarian operators, they illustrate an institutional principle that is directly transferable to the social sphere: when essential needs are at stake, regimes should include derogations and implementation pathways that prevent sanctions from blocking life-sustaining activity. In social sanctions, the functional equivalents of humanitarian space include urgent medical travel and treatment-related payments, family reunification in acute circumstances, and essential educational transitions. The acceptability threshold is therefore not "no harm", but "no predictable obstruction of essential needs without a workable exception pathway".

Where exceptions exist, they must be operationally accessible; otherwise, the system fails the humanitarian threshold in practice even if it passes in text.

A high-salience illustration of how narrow exception interpretation can stress acceptability is provided by the EU prohibition on exporting euro banknotes to Russia. The Court confirmed that the prohibition applies even when cash is intended to pay for medical treatment in Russia, while also noting the existence of a personal-use exception limited to sums necessary for travellers' personal use. This episode is analytically important because it shows the gap that can emerge between moral intuition ("medical purpose") and legal boundary ("personal use" interpreted narrowly). For social acceptability, the key point is not to dispute the Court's reasoning; it is to recognise that strict boundary interpretation can produce high-welfare-loss outcomes and reputational controversy, thereby increasing legitimacy costs. It also demonstrates why protected channels must be explicit and carefully designed: if the only relevant carve-out is "personal use" and that carve-out is narrow, then high-salience needs may fall outside the exception space even when public intuition expects otherwise. The report treats this as a stress test that informs later policy proposals on clearer humanitarian-adjacent pathways and communication to prevent misunderstanding and avoidable harm.

The acceptability framework must also address discrimination risks and equal treatment in operational practice. Even when sanctions are not formally based on nationality, social spillovers can generate nationality-proxy exclusion through de-risking and platform rules. In financial services and digital ecosystems, private actors may adopt broad risk heuristics that treat Russia-linked indicators as sufficient grounds for denial. This can create discrimination-like outcomes: identical transactions may be processed for one customer and refused for another on the basis of perceived jurisdictional risk. Such outcomes are difficult to measure systematically, but they matter for acceptability because they undermine the EU's targeted narrative and can affect legally protected interests without transparent legal basis. The remedy is governance: clearer guidance, safe operational pathways, and complaint/escalation mechanisms that allow correction of false positives. In the EU's broader sanctions governance architecture, interpretative tools and guidance updates exist precisely to reduce divergence and uncertainty. Part 4 extends that logic to social safeguards: the system must be able to correct operational bias if it wishes to remain legitimate over time.

Family life and private life are another threshold category because mobility and financial constraints can directly disrupt fundamental life arrangements. Visa policy tightening, reduced multi-entry predictability, and variable consular practice can fragment cross-border families even without a formal "family ban". The acceptability limit here is not that cross-border travel must remain frictionless; it is that the system must not create a de facto impossibility for close-family contact where legal pathways are formally preserved. This implies that family-related categories should have clear processing routes and not be forced into the same high-friction queue as discretionary travel. The Commission's broader practice of producing guidance and structured information resources illustrates the institutional capacity to engineer such prioritisation when it is treated as a governance priority. For the report's forward-looking analysis, the implication is that "protected categories" must be operationalised through standards (documentation, timelines, escalation channels) rather than merely announced as exceptions. Otherwise, protected channels remain rhetorical and acceptability thresholds are not met in practice.

Education and research mobility form a parallel threshold domain, particularly for students and scholars whose life trajectories depend on predictable entry, payment processing, and access to services. Here the acceptability issue is partly strategic: cutting educational and scientific ties can reduce the EU's soft power and knowledge exchange, potentially undermining long-term objectives. Yet the threshold remains primarily ethical and rights-adjacent: young people and students have high welfare sensitivity to administrative disruption, and their capacity to absorb friction is limited. The report therefore treats education-related mobility as a protected-interest category that should be shielded through clear process standards and predictable pathways. This does not imply unrestricted access; it implies an engineered route that maintains scrutiny while preventing arbitrary exclusion. Where such routes do not

exist, sanctions regimes risk imposing harms on low-agency groups with weak causal proximity to the targeted conduct, which weakens proportionality.

Health-related thresholds are among the strongest acceptability constraints because harm can be immediate, irreversible, and morally salient. The euro banknotes case demonstrates how health-related motives can collide with narrow legal exceptions; more generally, payment and mobility frictions can delay care, disrupt treatment continuity, or increase financial exposure during medical travel. The report's position is not that sanctions must accommodate all health spending choices; it is that regimes should avoid predictable obstruction of urgent or essential health needs where protected channels can be engineered. This is precisely the logic behind humanitarian derogations in other sanctions contexts: essential life-sustaining activities should not become casualties of compliance ambiguity. If protected channels are absent, households will seek informal pathways that reduce transparency and increase fraud risk, worsening both welfare outcomes and enforcement controllability. Therefore, protecting health-related pathways can simultaneously support ethics and enforcement quality.

Acceptability limits also include the principle of legal certainty. Citizens and small operators must be able to understand, at least in practical terms, what is permitted and what documentation is required. When legal boundaries are complex and frequently updated, uncertainty becomes a social cost in itself. This is why the existence of consolidated guidance resources is significant: it is an institutional response to the legal certainty constraint. Yet legal certainty is not achieved by publishing PDFs alone; it requires that guidance is accessible, stable, and reflected in consistent operational practice. Otherwise, citizens face a maze: formal permissibility on paper, functional refusal in practice. Acceptability thresholds therefore require "coherence" between the legal layer and the operational layer, particularly in retail finance where de-risking can transform ambiguity into blanket denial. This logic links directly to the governance instruments discussed earlier and provides the foundation for the policy proposals in 4.5.

A further threshold is the availability of remedy and error correction. In a high-volume screening environment, false positives are inevitable: name matches, misidentified counterparties, or misunderstood purposes. If households have no practical channel to challenge a refusal or to obtain clarification, the system becomes opaque and potentially arbitrary. EU sanctions doctrine in the targeted-listing domain has evolved under judicial pressure to provide reasoning and review, which suggests that remedy mechanisms are integral to legitimacy. Social sanctions require analogous remedy logic for compliance-mediated refusals: institutions should have escalation routes, and authorities should provide clear references to competent bodies and guidance. Without remedy, households internalise sanctions as indiscriminate exclusion, which elevates legitimacy costs and fuels the narrative of collective punishment. Remedy mechanisms also improve enforcement discriminative capacity because they reduce the incentive for blanket refusal and encourage calibrated risk management.

The report's acceptability framework also recognises that sanctions can generate stigma and social hostility, which is a harm channel distinct from legal restriction. When public and private actors interpret sanctions as cues for categorical suspicion, Russian nationals and Russia-linked persons can face barriers unrelated to formal prohibitions. This can manifest in platform access, rental markets, employment, or private services. While these outcomes are hard to quantify, they are relevant to acceptability because they can erode social cohesion and contradict EU values. The governance response is partly informational—clear communication that sanctions are targeted and that lawful activity remains lawful—and partly procedural, through mechanisms to handle discrimination-like outcomes in regulated sectors. This is an area where precision and clarity reduce harm without weakening strategic pressure, because they reduce noise and false positives.

Because these thresholds are multi-dimensional, the report operationalises them through a practical "threshold matrix" that links protected interests to risk modes and mitigation levers. This is presented in Table 4.3.2-1, which serves as a reference point for the rest of 4.3 and for the design proposals in 4.5. The matrix is deliberately structured to keep analysis operational: each threshold is attached to (1) the

typical failure mode in practice and (2) the governance instrument that can mitigate it. This prevents the acceptability debate from drifting into abstract moral language and preserves continuity with the sanctions-engineering idiom used throughout the report.

Table 4.3.2-1. Acceptability threshold matrix: protected interests, failure modes, and mitigation levers

Protected interest / threshold domain	Why it is a "red-line" category	Typical failure mode under social sanctions	Minimum mitigation requirement (operational)	Key EU anchor sources
Humanitarian space (life-saving assistance; essential needs)	High moral and legal salience; international humanitarian alignment	Exceptions exist but are unusable; compliance fear blocks lawful activity	Workable derogations; clear procedures; bank/actor guidance	Commission humanitarian guidance note; humanitarian derogations factsheet
Health and urgent medical needs (travel and payments)	Time-critical welfare; irreversible harm risk	Narrow exception interpretation; border/payment friction blocks urgent needs	Explicit medical prioritisation pathways and clear documentation standards	CJEU/Curia communication on euro banknotes prohibition; Commission euro banknotes FAQ
Family life (close relatives; caregiving)	High welfare sensitivity; legitimacy and cohesion implications	De facto impossibility due to repeated scrutiny and administrative rationing	Protected-category processing routes; predictable rules; escalation channels	EU sanctions regime governance tools and guidance infrastructure (overview pages)
Education and research mobility	Long-term societal impact; low-agency group vulnerability	Administrative burden and financial friction disrupt life trajectories	Clear pathways; prioritised processing; stable payment/transfer routes	EU-level guidance and monitoring capacity (sanctions resources; visa statistics context)
Legal certainty and remedy	Rule-of-law requirement; prevents arbitrary deprivation	Over-compliance creates de facto bans with no explanation or correction	Clear guidance + accessible complaint/escalation + error-correction mechanisms	Rule-of-law framing in targeted sanctions jurisprudence and scholarship
Non-discrimination and equal treatment in operational practice	Protects EU values; reduces stigma harm	Risk heuristics become categorical exclusion	Harmonised guidance; supervisory calibration; monitoring of discrimination-like outcomes	Supervisory standards and interpretative governance materials

Authorship: analytical framework (this report) was prepared by the author

Note: The matrix does not imply unrestricted access in protected domains; it specifies the minimum operational conditions under which social sanctions can remain compatible with EU legitimacy commitments while preserving enforcement aims.

Sources:

- Commission humanitarian derogations factsheet: https://finance.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-04/eu-restrictive-measures-humanitarian-derogations-factsheet_en.pdf
- Commission humanitarian aid guidance note: https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2022-06/220630-humanitarian-aid-guidance-note_en.pdf
- EBA Guidelines page: https://www.fma.gv.at/en/eu/eba-guidelines/
- Curia press release on euro banknotes export prohibition: https://curia.europa.eu/jcms/upload/docs/application/pdf/2025-04/cp250056en.pdf
- EUR-Lex case notice (C-246/24): https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/C/2025/3251/oj/eng
- Sanctions resources overview (Finance): https://finance.ec.europa.eu/eu-and-world/sanctions-restrictive-measures/overview-sanctions-and-related-resources_en
- Kadi judgment record: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/CASE/?uri=CELEX%3A62010CJ0584

The threshold matrix also clarifies why social sanctions require different design discipline than sectoral industrial controls. Industrial controls can be justified through capability-denial logic even when

collateral market costs are significant, because the endpoint is strategic capacity. Social sanctions touch endpoints where collateral harm is morally salient and legally sensitive, and where the EU's narrative makes population-wide harm difficult to justify. Consequently, the "burden of justification" is higher: the system must demonstrate not only intent to target, but actual control over spillovers. Where control is weak—such as in over-compliance and market exits—acceptability thresholds require governance measures that narrow operational effects without eroding enforcement. This is why guidance, safe harbours, and structured exceptions are treated as core instruments rather than as optional add-ons.

A key implication for 2026–2030 is that tightening anti-circumvention expectations can raise social costs if it increases operational conservatism without improving discriminative targeting. If operators are asked to apply broad "best efforts" and enhanced due diligence, they may respond by reducing services to entire categories of customers or transactions to minimise compliance risk. This can shift the system toward de facto collective restriction. Acceptability thresholds therefore imply a calibration requirement: enforcement expectations must be coupled with practical clarity about lawful personal activities and safe operational pathways. The Commission's broader sanctions resource infrastructure demonstrates the institutional capacity for such calibration, but the question is whether it will be extended systematically to social endpoints. In other words, the acceptability limit is not a prohibition on strong enforcement. It is a requirement that enforcement be intelligently targeted and that essential civilian pathways remain viable.

The report also treats reversibility and review as acceptability conditions. Social sanctions that cannot be adjusted in response to demonstrated collateral harm are more likely to become politically and legally brittle. Review clauses, periodic assessment, and monitoring indicators are therefore not merely governance formality; they are legitimacy stabilisers. The EU's iterative approach to sanctions packages and regime summaries indicates that policy is already treated as evolving, which makes review and adjustment feasible in principle. For social sanctions, review should include metrics that capture operational accessibility of protected channels and the prevalence of compliance-mediated refusals. If review is limited to macro indicators, distributional and rights-relevant harms can be missed. Acceptability limits thus require that monitoring architectures include social endpoints, not only trade and financial aggregates.

Finally, the acceptability framework must maintain analytic humility on political outcomes while remaining firm on welfare and rights thresholds. It is difficult to prove that social sanctions change political attitudes inside Russia, and it is not methodologically sound to justify high collateral harm on speculative political gains. The report therefore uses a conservative rule: where strategic leverage is uncertain, the acceptability threshold tightens and mitigation duties become stronger. Conversely, where a measure has a clear targeting logic and strong discriminative capacity, modest collateral frictions may be more defensible. This approach keeps the report aligned with EU legal-ethical constraints and preserves credibility.

4.3.3. Social Cohesion Effects and Unintended Consequences

Sanctions in the social sphere can generate outcomes that are neither explicitly intended by policymakers nor easily controllable once they emerge. These effects matter because they operate on *social cohesion*—trust, perceived fairness, and the stability of everyday life arrangements—and because cohesion is a precondition for the long-run legitimacy of restrictive measures. In the EU–Russia context, the most important unintended consequences arise at the boundary between *targeted legal intent* and *diffuse operational reality*, as established earlier in 4.1.2–4.1.4. When a sanctions regime is experienced by ordinary people as unpredictable friction rather than intelligible targeting, it can create resentment, stigma, and avoidance behaviours. Those behaviours can, in turn, reduce transparency and undermine enforcement discriminative capacity by pushing activity into less observable channels. In a sanctions-engineering frame, unintended consequences are not "soft" externalities; they are system

feedbacks that can alter the regime's steady state. The Commission's repeated publication of consolidated implementation FAQs illustrates that the EU itself treats operational frictions as recurring and therefore policy-relevant.

The first cohesion risk is the emergence of a *collective-effect perception*, in which measures framed as targeted are socially interpreted as population-directed. This perception can form even when law is formally narrow, because the household endpoint is governed by private actors' de-risking and by member-state heterogeneity rather than by transparent individualised decisions. In mobility, the perceived meaning of tighter Schengen access can become a symbol of broad exclusion, regardless of the existence of exceptions for protected categories. In finance, denial of lawful services without clear explanations can feel indistinguishable from a categorical ban, especially when the affected individual has no practical remedy. Such perceptions can harden into narratives of discrimination and unfair treatment, which are cohesion-degrading both within the EU and across EU–Russia social relations. The legitimacy constraint described in Table 4.3.2-1 is therefore not only a legal boundary but a narrative boundary: if targeted intent cannot be credibly demonstrated in lived outcomes, the regime's moral posture erodes. This does not imply that the EU should abandon strong measures; it implies that governance must actively manage how operational effects map onto social meaning.

A second cohesion risk arises from *stigma and informal discrimination*, particularly in services and financial intermediation. When private actors respond to sanctions risk by treating "Russia-linked" indicators as a default risk flag, nationality or perceived nationality can become a proxy variable in denial decisions. Even where formal law does not mandate such denial, conservative risk postures can generate a pattern of exclusions that resembles discriminatory treatment in its social effect. This is not only a moral problem. It is an operational problem because it increases false positives and drives lawful activity into opaque arrangements. Practical debates in European legal and compliance commentary have highlighted that blanket refusal solely on the basis of Russian nationality can raise discrimination concerns in domestic legal frameworks. While the precise legal standards vary by jurisdiction, the broader point is stable: over-broad categorical exclusion carries high legitimacy costs. In sanctions governance terms, the cohesion risk is highest where denial is frequent and reasons are not communicated, because opacity converts a compliance choice into a perceived moral judgement. This is why remedy and explainability, discussed in 4.3.2, function as cohesion stabilisers rather than administrative niceties.

A third unintended consequence is *social polarisation* inside EU member states, where sanctions debates can become proxies for broader disputes about migration, security, and national identity. Visa and mobility measures are especially prone to polarisation because they are emotionally legible and politically communicable, even when their strategic effect is modest compared with industrial or financial controls. The 2025 tightening of multi-entry visas, framed around sabotage and misuse risk, illustrates how security narratives can justify broad procedural tightening while still preserving exceptions. Yet such tightening also amplifies domestic political arguments about fairness, the treatment of dissidents and families, and the moral boundaries of "collective closure." In a polarised environment, the same measure can be read as necessary security governance or as symbolic exclusion, and this interpretative split itself can reduce cohesion. For the EU, the policy challenge is to maintain consensus across member states whose risk exposure and public attitudes differ, which is an inherently difficult coordination task. If consensus weakens, enforcement heterogeneity grows, which then feeds back into perceptions of arbitrariness and unfairness. This is why cohesion effects are structurally linked to the operational variance problem described earlier.

A fourth risk is the *hardening of antagonistic narratives* in Russia, where social frictions can be interpreted as confirmation of hostile intent rather than as targeted pressure on responsible actors. This is a classic "signalling backfire" mechanism in sanctions literature: visible civilian-facing friction can be used by state-aligned communication to support the claim that external actors target ordinary people. The report does not assume that this backfire is inevitable, but it treats it as plausible and relevant to acceptability because it can reduce the marginal persuasive value of sanctions. Recent scholarly work

on sanctions has renewed attention to the possibility of "backfire" and to the conditions under which sanctions increase rather than decrease support for targeted regimes. In the social domain, the backfire risk rises when the burden is diffuse and when protected channels are perceived as inaccessible. It also rises when exceptions exist in public statements but are hard to operationalise, because that mismatch is easily framed as hypocrisy. This mechanism is a key reason why 4.5 proposes not only ethical principles but operational designs that make protected channels demonstrably usable. It is also a reason to treat communication and transparency as instruments, not as afterthoughts.

A fifth unintended consequence is *informalisation*—the growth of informal intermediaries and opaque routes for mobility, payments, and consumer procurement. Informalisation occurs when lawful pathways become too costly, slow, or uncertain, and when private providers respond to risk by refusing borderline activity. In finance, informalisation can involve reliance on intermediaries and third-country settlement arrangements that reduce transparency. In consumer markets, it manifests as parallel import chains and brokerage services that carry higher fraud and consumer protection risks. In mobility, it can drive increased use of third-country hubs and complex routing that makes monitoring harder and raises the cost of legitimate travel. Informalisation is cohesion-degrading because it concentrates benefits on those with networks and resources, while exposing vulnerable groups to higher risk and lower protection. It is also enforcement-degrading because it reduces observability and increases the capacity for circumvention alongside legitimate adaptation. Empirical and analytical work on sanctions has described "ricochet" effects in which tightening measures and anti-circumvention pressure create delays and cancellations even in nominally lawful transactions, pushing activity toward alternative channels. The acceptability implication is that sanctions systems must preserve workable compliant pathways if they wish to avoid the governance externality of widespread informalisation.

A sixth cohesion risk is the emergence of *inequality amplification*, where the ability to absorb friction becomes a primary determinant of access to normal life activities. Distributional mapping in 4.3.1 already established that vulnerable groups face higher welfare losses per unit of friction. Unintended consequences deepen when friction becomes a sorting mechanism: high-resource actors adapt through intermediaries, while low-resource actors are rationed out by administrative burdens. This can make social sanctions ethically fragile even if their intent is elite targeting, because the observed burden can shift down the income distribution. In consumer restrictions, the mechanism is not deprivation of necessities but loss of consumer protection and exposure to fraud and inferior substitutes, which functions as a regressive welfare tax. In finance, the mechanism is documentation capacity and bank relationship strength, which are unequally distributed. In mobility, the mechanism is appointment scarcity and repeated application costs, which reward time flexibility and network capital. Cohesion weakens when the system is perceived to punish the less capable while the well-connected continue to navigate around constraints. This is one reason why operational clarity, standardisation, and calibrated safe channels are central to the acceptability framework.

A seventh unintended consequence is *administrative overload* and "queueing as rationing," where state capacity constraints become a de facto policy instrument. In visas, appointment availability and processing capacity can effectively ration access even without a formal ban. In banking, compliance teams' workload can turn transaction processing time into a barrier, and small-value lawful transfers can be refused simply because investigation costs exceed perceived value. This mechanism is cohesion-degrading because it introduces arbitrariness: the outcome depends on capacity, timing, and provider policy rather than on transparent criteria. It is also self-reinforcing because overload increases risk aversion, which increases documentation demands, which increases workload further. The EU has partially addressed this through guidance intended to harmonise interpretation and reduce avoidable uncertainty, yet guidance can only do so much if operational incentives remain strongly asymmetric. In a sanctions-engineering perspective, administrative overload is a controllability risk: it shifts real-world restrictiveness into an unplanned domain—capacity—rather than policy design. Where overload persists, the case for protected channels becomes stronger, because prioritisation is the only way to

prevent essential needs from being crowded out by discretionary demand. This is directly relevant to the humanitarian and rights thresholds set out in Table 4.3.2-1.

An eighth cohesion risk concerns *over-compliance spillovers* into unrelated life domains, such as housing, employment, education services, and routine contracting. When sanctions compliance becomes a generalised "risk lens," service providers may adopt internal policies that exclude Russia-linked customers even in areas where sanctions law is not directly implicated. This can create a socially corrosive sense of exclusion and can trigger legal disputes in domestic contexts, further politicising sanctions. From an enforcement standpoint, such spillovers are often inefficient: they generate noise and resentment without improving targeting. From a legitimacy standpoint, they threaten the EU's targeted narrative because the lived experience becomes categorical. The policy remedy is not primarily legislative; it is governance: clearer communication of scope, standardised compliance expectations, and explicit discouragement of blanket nationality-based refusal. Supervisory-level standard-setting can reduce arbitrary variance, but it must be calibrated to avoid encouraging maximalist refusal as the safest posture. The EBA's move toward common EU standards on restrictive measures, with application timelines in late 2025 across national supervisors, illustrates the increasing institutionalisation of sanctions compliance governance. Whether this institutionalisation reduces or increases cohesion costs depends on whether it improves discriminative precision (fewer false positives) or mainly hardens de-risking norms.

A ninth unintended consequence is *misinterpretation of exceptions* and the creation of high-salience hardship cases that damage legitimacy disproportionally to their statistical frequency. The euro banknotes restriction is illustrative: narrow interpretation of the personal-use exception, combined with humanitarian intuitions, can produce cases perceived as morally harsh. When such cases surface in public discourse, they function as narrative amplifiers that can overshadow the targeted logic of the broader regime. This phenomenon is important because sanctions legitimacy is partly reputational: it depends on the belief that the system is rule-based and proportionate. If exceptions are legally narrow, then communication must be clear to prevent misunderstanding; if communication is unclear, misunderstanding becomes a cohesion cost. The EU has attempted to manage exception interpretation through dedicated FAQ documents and consolidated guidance. Nonetheless, the existence of high-salience boundary disputes suggests that exception design and operational guidance require continuous refinement. In acceptability terms, a single visibly harsh outcome can increase political pressure for either loosening or tightening, both of which can polarise debate. Therefore, high-salience exceptions should be treated as critical design points, not marginal footnotes.

A tenth cohesion risk is *member-state divergence* in socially sensitive domains, which can produce cross-border political friction within the EU itself. Schengen mobility measures are inherently collective: a visa issued by one member state affects access to the wider area. When member states diverge in issuance posture, other members perceive spillover risk, which triggers calls for harmonisation. This is a classic coordination problem that can erode internal cohesion if security exposure is uneven. The reported 2025 tightening toward single-trip scrutiny reflects an attempt to reduce systemic risk through uniform procedural design rather than by banning access outright. Yet even with uniform rules, operational divergence can persist through capacity and discretionary thresholds, meaning that cohesion risk remains. The policy implication is that harmonisation efforts must target *operational standards* as much as legal baselines. Where operational divergence persists, perceptions of unfair burden-sharing grow, which can weaken collective commitment to the sanctions' regime. This is another reason why sanctions governance tools—guidance, supervisory coordination, and standard-setting—are central to acceptability.

An eleventh unintended consequence concerns *third-country externalities*, where social sanctions change incentives and flows through non-EU jurisdictions. Tighter EU mobility and financial pathways can increase the role of third-country hubs for travel, payments, and consumer procurement. This re-routing has two cohesion-relevant effects: it creates a perception that sanctions are porous for those who can route around them, and it shifts burdens onto those unable to route. It can also create

diplomatic tensions, as the EU seeks anti-circumvention cooperation from third countries and presses for alignment with EU security concerns. The social relevance is indirect but important: if legal pathways are replaced by complex third-country routes, citizens experience a loss of normality and predictability. Research on sanctions dynamics has noted that tightening measures can create delays and cancellations even in lawful shipments and transactions due to third-country banks and operators reacting to risk, indicating how externalities propagate. In cohesion terms, third-country routing produces an "unequal geography of access," where mobility and finance become contingent on location and external intermediaries. The acceptability constraint is therefore partly about preventing sanctions from becoming a de facto "network exclusion" that rewards geography and networks rather than targeting.

A twelfth risk is *institutional trust erosion* among affected diaspora and cross-border communities within the EU. These communities often sit at the interface of EU systems—banks, visa offices, residency institutions—and thus experience sanctions not as abstract policy but as daily administrative reality. When lawful transfers are delayed, accounts are closed, or mobility becomes unpredictable, trust in institutions can weaken, especially if reasons are not explained or remedies are unclear. Trust erosion matters because it reduces compliance willingness and increases reliance on informal mechanisms. It also has domestic cohesion implications: communities may feel marginalised, increasing social fragmentation. This is why the acceptability framework emphasises legal certainty and remedy: transparency is not only a legal requirement but a trust-preserving instrument. EU-level consolidated FAQs are relevant here because they aim to reduce ambiguity and thus reduce arbitrary refusal, but their effectiveness depends on whether providers internalise the guidance consistently. Supervisory convergence, such as the EBA's restrictive-measures guidelines timeline, can also support trust by reducing provider variance, provided it improves precision rather than merely increasing conservatism.

A thirteenth unintended consequence is *policy path dependency*, where once high-friction norms are established, reversing them is difficult even if formal policy relaxes. Private actors invest in risk models, conservative rules, and compliance infrastructures that are costly to recalibrate. Recalibration also carries reputational risk: a firm that loosens controls may fear being judged negligent. This means that social frictions can persist beyond the specific legal trigger that created them, producing a "ratchet effect" in everyday life. The EU's iterative production and updating of consolidated FAQs suggests the system is dynamic, yet the direction of private risk posture is often sticky. Path dependency is cohesion-relevant because it can create a permanent sense of exclusion or uncertainty, especially for cross-border families and diaspora networks. It also complicates the design of "reversibility" that is often cited as a virtue of sanctions: legal reversibility does not guarantee operational reversibility. Therefore, acceptability analysis must treat reversibility as an operational property requiring explicit design measures, such as clear safe harbours and public de-escalation guidance. Without these, loosening can be legally possible but socially invisible. This is a crucial consideration for 2026–2030 scenario design in 4.4.

A fourteenth risk is *feedback amplification through media cycles*, where isolated incidents become representative narratives. In a high-salience domain like social sanctions, a single case of perceived unfairness can gain disproportionate attention and shape beliefs about the system's overall character. This matters because sanctions legitimacy relies on public trust that the regime is principled and controlled. If the system is perceived as arbitrary, pressure grows for blunt tightening ("close everything") or dramatic relaxation ("sanctions are immoral"), both of which can destabilise policy coherence. The EU's public messaging that sanctions are targeted and do not target populations is intended to protect against such narrative drift, but messaging must be supported by operational reality. The risk is greatest when exceptions exist but are applied inconsistently, because inconsistency is narratively easier to frame as hypocrisy than as complexity. This is why 4.5 will treat exception pathways as requiring process metrics and transparency, not only legal clauses. In engineering terms, narrative cycles are a form of "public feedback loop" that can force policy change independent of measured strategic outcomes. Managing these loops requires predictable, explainable procedures.

A fifteenth unintended consequence is that *ethical disputes can become enforcement disputes*, weakening compliance through politicisation. When citizens perceive measures as unfair, they may seek ways to circumvent not because they oppose the strategic goal, but because they perceive personal hardship as unjust. This can lower voluntary compliance and increase enforcement workload. In household finance, for example, small-scale circumvention through intermediaries can become socially normalised if lawful channels are experienced as unreliable. Normalisation of circumvention is cohesion-degrading because it weakens rule-of-law norms and can spill into other domains of behaviour. It also undermines the EU's enforcement objectives by creating a larger grey zone in which illicit and licit flows mix. Therefore, ethical sustainability is an enforcement asset: a regime perceived as proportionate is easier to comply with and easier to defend. This is a central claim of the report's social-sanctions framework: legitimacy is a system stabiliser, not a moral garnish. The institutional effort invested in guidance and standard-setting implies that EU authorities recognise the need for operational clarity to support compliance.

A sixteenth cohesion risk is the *misalignment between instrument intent and measurable outcomes*, which can create policy drift. If consumer restrictions intended to pressure elites primarily generate substitution and informalisation, the outcome becomes more about symbolic signalling than leverage. If mobility restrictions intended to increase security scrutiny primarily ration family contact through queueing, the outcome becomes ethically fragile. If financial restrictions intended to constrain strategic actors primarily produce broad de-risking of ordinary citizens, the outcome undermines the targeted narrative. In each case, misalignment creates a legitimacy deficit and can reduce strategic effectiveness by dispersing costs away from enabling structures. This is why the report insists on measurement and attribution discipline (4.1.3) and on acceptability thresholds (4.3.2) as design constraints. The EU's publication of consolidated FAQs and the move toward common supervisory standards provide tools for reducing misalignment, but tools must be used explicitly for cohesion management. Misalignment also implies that "more sanctions" is not always "more pressure" in the social sphere; sometimes, more sanctions are more noise. Therefore, unintended consequences are central to the forward-looking strategy: the goal is not maximum friction, but calibrated friction that maintains legitimacy and discriminative power. This is the bridge to Section 4.4 and the ethically robust proposals in Section 4.5.

A seventeenth implication is that cohesion risks can be managed through a finite set of governance levers, and those levers should be treated as integral to sanctions policy. These include: standardisation of protected pathways; clear public-facing explanations of scope and exceptions; supervisory calibration to discourage blanket de-risking; and accessible remedy and escalation routes for false positives. The EU already deploys part of this toolkit via consolidated FAQs and supervisory standard-setting, as evidenced by the Commission's updated consolidated version dated 23 January 2026 and by the EBA's restrictive-measures guidelines timeline. The report's contribution is to argue that the same toolkit should be explicitly oriented to social cohesion outcomes, not only to enforcement integrity. If cohesion is treated as "external," then measures will be evaluated only after harm occurs and narratives harden. If cohesion is treated as "internal," then indicators and monitoring can detect stress early and prevent high-salience failures. This monitoring logic will be operationalised later in 4.5.4 (Monitoring and feedback loop). In the present subsection, it is sufficient to note that unintended consequences are not unpredictable. They are patterned and therefore governable. Table 4.3.3-1 summarises the key unintended consequences and the primary mitigation levers.

Table 4.3.3-1. Unintended social consequences of social sanctions: mechanisms, cohesion risks, and mitigation levers

Unintended consequence	Dominant mechanism	Primary cohesion risk	Typical empirical "signal"	Mitigation lever (design/governance)	Key documentation anchors
Collective-effect perception	Diffuse operational spillovers exceed targeted intent	Legitimacy erosion; resentment; reduced compliance	High variance of outcomes; persistent complaints about arbitrariness	Protected channels + transparent criteria + remedy	Commission FAQs hub and consolidated versions
Stigma / discrimination-like outcomes	Nationality-proxy de-risking and blanket refusals	Social fragmentation; reputational damage	Category-based refusal patterns; legal disputes and public controversy	Clarify scope; discourage blanket refusal; escalation routes	Guidance and compliance governance environment
Informalisation and grey intermediaries	Excessive friction in compliant pathways	Fraud exposure; inequality; enforcement opacity	Growth in intermediary services; shift to opaque routes	Keep lawful pathways usable; safe harbours for low-risk lawful activity	Commission consolidated FAQs (operational clarity)
Inequality amplification	Adaptive capacity correlates with resources and networks	Perceived unfairness; regressive welfare loss	Access stratification; "queueing" and intermediary reliance	Prioritise protected groups; simplify processes; monitor distributional outcomes	Visa tightening context; guidance infrastructure
Administrative overload (queueing rationing)	Capacity constraints become de facto restrictiveness	Arbitrariness; stress on essential needs	Appointment scarcity; long processing times; refusal by workload	Process standards; prioritisation; clear documentary requirements	Commission guidance and FAQ governance
Path dependency ("ratchet effect")	Sticky private risk postures and compliance investments	Persistent exclusion even after policy changes	Frictions persist despite stable legal text	De-escalation guidance; explicit safe harbours; review metrics	Consolidated version updates (governance iteration)

Authorship: analytical framework (this report) was prepared by the author

Note: The "signals" column is indicative. In the social sphere, systematic outcome datasets are often limited; therefore, governance artefacts (updated consolidated FAQs, supervisory standards) are treated as key observability tools alongside official statistics where available.

In sum, social cohesion effects and unintended consequences define the real acceptability frontier of social sanctions. They include collective-effect perceptions, stigma and discrimination-like outcomes, polarisation, narrative backfire, informalisation, inequality amplification, administrative overload, over-compliance spillovers, high-salience hardship cases, member-state divergence, third-country externalities, diaspora trust erosion, path dependency, media feedback amplification, politicised circumvention, and intent–outcome misalignment. These effects do not automatically negate sanctions, but they change the optimisation problem: policy must maximise pressure on responsible structures while minimising uncontrolled social spillovers. The EU's existing governance infrastructure—updated consolidated FAQs and increasingly standardised supervisory expectations—provides a foundation for managing these risks. The central claim is that legitimacy and cohesion are strategic resources: they increase durability, reduce circumvention incentives, and improve enforcement discriminative capacity. Therefore, acceptability is not an external moral constraint but a core design parameter. 4.3.4 will translate this into a narrower implementation problem: compliance externalities and over-compliance, and the concrete governance remedies that can reduce them without weakening enforcement.

4.3.4. Compliance Externalities and the Problem of over-Compliance

Compliance externalities are the unintended, downstream costs imposed on individuals and legitimate economic activity when sanctions obligations are implemented through high-friction controls, conservative interpretation, and broad risk aversion. In the social sphere, these externalities are not marginal. They are often the primary way sanctions are *experienced* by households, particularly in everyday finance and platform-mediated services. The core difficulty is that sanctions compliance operates under asymmetric incentives: the downside of an error (breach, penalties, reputational damage) is typically perceived as much larger than the downside of refusing a lawful transaction. This asymmetry pushes private actors toward a safety-first equilibrium in which lawful activity is sometimes treated as "too risky to process". The EU's governance architecture implicitly recognises the resulting implementation burden, as shown by the continuing production of consolidated and thematic FAQs by Commission services. The acceptability challenge is therefore not whether compliance systems should exist, but whether they can be engineered to be discriminative enough to block prohibited conduct without producing diffuse civilian burdens. This subsection explains why over-compliance is a predictable system outcome, how it propagates across sectors, and which governance levers can reduce it without weakening enforcement.

Over-compliance should be defined precisely because it is often discussed loosely. In this report, over-compliance refers to operational outcomes where a regulated actor refuses, delays, or exits lawful activity beyond what is required by the legal text, typically due to uncertainty, risk appetite, or compliance capacity constraints. The defining feature is not malicious intent; it is the combination of ambiguity and asymmetry of incentives that makes refusal the rational default. Over-compliance is closely related to "de-risking", but the latter is broader: de-risking can include lawful strategic withdrawal from exposure categories even when the actor could comply through calibrated controls. In practice, the household endpoint is the same: reduced access to lawful payment services, delays in transfers, refusal to open or maintain accounts, and unexplained transaction cancellations. These outcomes are distinct from direct legal restrictions because they often lack transparent reasoning and offer limited pathways for correction. The EU Commission's consolidated FAQs explicitly target this operational layer by giving interpretative guidance to national authorities, EU operators, and citizens, indicating that the system anticipates implementation friction. The key point for acceptability is that over-compliance can generate population-like burdens without the procedural safeguards that typically accompany formal restrictive measures.

The causal drivers of over-compliance can be grouped into four system-level factors: legal complexity, enforcement uncertainty, operational capacity, and reputational risk. Legal complexity is intrinsic to modern sanctions regimes that rely on annexes, definitions, indirect prohibitions, ownership and control tests, and expanding anti-circumvention expectations. Enforcement uncertainty arises because institutions do not perfectly know how supervisory scrutiny will be applied or how borderline cases will be judged after the fact. Operational capacity matters because high-quality compliance is expensive; smaller institutions and platforms often choose broad exclusion because they cannot afford fine-grained assessment. Reputational risk accelerates all these factors because even a lawful transaction can be perceived as "controversial", pushing institutions to avoid it. The Commission's approach to publishing thematic FAQs—on banknotes, services, energy provisions, and "best efforts"—is best understood as an attempt to reduce legal uncertainty and standardise interpretation across the market. However, guidance can only partially neutralise asymmetry; it can clarify boundaries, but it cannot fully remove institutional risk aversion when incentives remain uneven.

In the financial sector, over-compliance tends to manifest in three high-impact household failure modes: heightened documentation requirements, slow processing and "pending" states, and outright refusal or offboarding. Documentation demands often expand in scope and depth when a transaction has any Russia-linked marker, even if it is small and personal, because institutions cannot easily prove negative exposure. Processing delays become a rationing mechanism because compliance review queues are finite, and heightened scrutiny increases workload, which in turn increases delay. Outright

refusal becomes the simplest risk control when the institution sees low commercial upside and high perceived downside. These failure modes are socially costly because they create uncertainty in basic life functions, and they disproportionately harm the groups mapped in Table 4.3.1-1, such as diaspora households and cross-border families. Over-compliance also produces a moral hazard: the easiest way for an institution to appear compliant is to refuse broadly, even if this undermines the EU's targeted-sanctions narrative. The EU's move toward common standards in the financial sector, via EBA Guidelines on internal policies and controls for implementing restrictive measures, is an institutional response intended to reduce variance and improve governance quality. Yet this institutionalisation can tighten the operational baseline if applied as "maximum caution" rather than calibrated risk management, which makes governance design and supervisory messaging central to acceptability.

A particularly instructive example of compliance externalities is the euro banknotes restriction, because it shows how narrow legal boundaries and conservative interpretation can generate high-salience household frictions. The Commission's banknotes FAQ references the Court's interpretation and stresses that the personal use exception must be read narrowly and limited to essential or necessary needs of travellers and their immediate families. Even when individuals believe their purpose is legitimate, they may struggle to predict how authorities or carriers will interpret "personal use", increasing perceived risk and discouraging lawful conduct. The resulting behavioural shift—toward alternative instruments, third-country currency strategies, or avoidance of travel—demonstrates how a legal measure can produce broader social effects through uncertainty costs. This is not a marginal concern because household decision-making is sensitive to perceived enforcement risk at borders and within banking systems. The banknotes case also highlights a structural legitimacy problem: when outcomes appear harsh in humanitarian-adjacent contexts, reputational damage can exceed the measure's marginal enforcement value. The policy lesson is not that exceptions should be unlimited, but that exception design and communication must anticipate high-welfare-loss contexts and offer predictable pathways. This logic connects directly to the threshold matrix in Table 4.3.2-1 and to the design proposals later in 4.5.

Over-compliance is not confined to finance; it propagates across digital services, logistics, and consumer ecosystems because these sectors depend on payment processors and risk-screened supply chains. Platforms may restrict account access, subscriptions, or support services for Russia-linked users to avoid any perceived sanctions exposure, even if the legal obligation is ambiguous or limited. Logistics providers may decline shipments with Russia-linked routing risk, raising prices and delays even for non-prohibited goods, which then affects households through consumer availability and higher transaction costs. Retailers and service providers may adopt "no Russia-linked business" policies as a compliance shortcut, which can spill into civil society and education services. These effects produce a social experience of exclusion that is broader than the legal perimeter and therefore harder to justify under the EU's targeted narrative. The Commission's consolidated FAQs explicitly state their purpose as guidance for authorities, operators, and citizens, which implicitly acknowledges that the operational layer includes many actors beyond banks. In social terms, the central concern is that platform and services over-compliance can quickly become population-like because platforms scale decisions across millions of users. The acceptability question is whether governance instruments can reach these actors effectively, or whether over-compliance remains a largely private, unaccountable domain.

One reason over-compliance persists is that sanctions regimes increasingly include anti-circumvention mechanisms that widen the set of "risky" patterns. When compliance obligations emphasise indirect supply, beneficial ownership, and control tests, and when operators are encouraged to detect circumvention routes, the compliance burden becomes both broader and less precise. This can increase false positives, because low-information environments lead institutions to treat uncertain cases as high-risk. The EU's "best efforts" obligation under Article 8a of Regulation 833/2014 is emblematic: it extends expectations to EU operators to take suitable actions so their non-EU subsidiaries do not undermine sanctions, and Commission FAQs detail how "best efforts" should be interpreted. While this is primarily a corporate governance instrument, it contributes to the broader

compliance climate in which risk appetite tightens. The indirect effect is that firms may impose stricter internal rules that can cascade to consumer-facing services and payment acceptance decisions. Thus, even when a household is not directly within the legal target set, it can be impacted by corporate "best efforts" translated into conservative global policies. The policy implication is that anti-circumvention and "best efforts" tools need complementary "precision tools" that protect lawful personal activity from being swept into broad exclusion. Without such precision tools, the regime risks converting enforceability into friction rather than into targeted pressure.

A key legitimacy risk is the creation of *de facto bans without due process*. When a bank refuses a lawful transfer or closes an account for sanctions-risk reasons without giving a clear explanation or remedy path, the individual experiences an outcome similar to a formal restriction but without the procedural safeguards of a formal measure. This is not merely a consumer-rights issue; it is a sanctions legitimacy issue, because the EU's targeted model presupposes intelligible criteria and reviewability at least for core categories of deprivation. In the sanctions' context, private actors are not courts, but their decisions can become functionally decisive gates. This gatekeeper role makes over-compliance a constitutional-adjacent problem: it shifts coercive effect into private discretion. The Commission's reliance on interpretative FAQs can help, but guidance alone does not guarantee consistent remedy in individual cases. A mature governance response requires that regulated actors maintain escalation routes, recordkeeping, and internal decision rationales that can be audited. The EBA Guidelines explicitly target governance arrangements, policies, procedures, and controls, which indicates that the EU sees sanctions implementation as a governance discipline, not only as a list-checking activity. The acceptability constraint is that the system must remain correctable; otherwise, false positives and unnecessary exclusions become socially embedded.

Over-compliance also creates a strategic downside: it can erode voluntary compliance by making lawful behaviour feel futile or arbitrarily constrained. When households see that doing "the right thing" through regulated channels leads to delay or refusal, they have incentives to seek alternatives, including informal intermediaries and opaque settlement routes. This is a classic enforcement externality: a regime designed to increase control can reduce control if it makes compliant pathways too costly. In this sense, over-compliance is not merely a humanitarian concern; it is a controllability concern that can undermine the sanctions system's discriminative capacity. The EU's continued issuance of consolidated FAQs, including a consolidated version dated 23 January 2026, can be read as an institutional attempt to preserve control by reducing ambiguity and making compliance pathways workable. However, the effectiveness of this attempt depends on whether private actors internalise the guidance and whether supervisory expectations reward calibrated decision-making rather than blanket refusal. If supervision rewards only "zero exposure" outcomes, over-compliance will remain rational and persistent. Therefore, acceptability limits require alignment of guidance, supervision, and incentives.

A disciplined way to treat over-compliance in an analytic report is to model it as a measurable phenomenon, even if direct statistics are scarce. The first proxy is the volume and evolution of official guidance, which signals where uncertainty and friction persist, such as the existence of thematic FAQs on banknotes and "best efforts" and the periodic updating of consolidated FAQs. The second proxy is the expansion of supervisory standard-setting, exemplified by the EBA Guidelines with an application date of 30 December 2025, indicating institutionalisation of sanctions compliance governance. The third proxy is litigation and high-salience boundary disputes, which reveal where operational practice and moral intuition conflict, generating reputational stress. While these proxies cannot quantify household refusal rates directly, they can map the direction of regime tightening and the likelihood of frictions becoming structural. This is consistent with 4.1.3: where ideal outcome data is unavailable, the report uses high-quality governance artefacts to avoid purely anecdotal claims. The measurement implication is that monitoring should include "operational friction indicators" alongside legal package counting. This approach also supports forward-looking scenario design in Section 4.4 because governance instruments evolve predictably over time.

Reducing over-compliance without weakening enforcement requires targeted governance interventions that change incentives and increase legal certainty. The first intervention class is *clarification*, delivered through interpretative guidance that reduces ambiguity in common personal-use scenarios and clarifies documentation expectations. The second is *safe operational pathways*, which are practical templates for lawful activity (for instance, for low-risk personal transfers, education payments, or family support) that institutions can rely on without fearing post hoc criticism. The third is *supervisory calibration*, which ensures that regulators assess institutions not only on refusal rates but on discriminative capability, false positive management, and remedy availability. The fourth is *standardised escalation and remedy mechanisms*, enabling households to correct errors and provide additional information without being pushed into informal channels. The Commission's systematic FAQ publishing and the EBA's governance standards suggest that the EU already uses instruments in the first and third classes. The acceptability test is whether these instruments are oriented to protect essential civilian interests in practice, not only to prevent breaches. This governance logic is summarised and operationalised in Table 4.3.4-1.

Table 4.3.4-1. Over-compliance and compliance externalities: system drivers, household outcomes, and mitigation levers

Driver of over-compliance	Typical operational behaviour	Household-level externality	Primary legitimacy risk	Mitigation lever (design/governance)	Core EU anchor sources
Legal ambiguity and evolving scope	Conservative interpretation; refusal of borderline cases	Delays/refusals of lawful payments; loss of service continuity	De facto bans without due process	Scenario-based FAQs; clear documentation standards; dissemination	Commission consolidated FAQs (updated versions)
Asymmetric enforcement incentives	"Refuse rather than risk" posture	Broad friction premium; increased uncertainty costs	Perception of collective restriction	Supervisory messaging that rewards precision and error correction	EBA restrictive-measures governance standards
Limited compliance capacity (esp. smaller actors/platforms)	Blanket de-risking; category exclusions	Exclusion of vulnerable groups from lawful channels	Discrimination-like outcomes; informalisation	Safe pathways for low-risk lawful activity; escalation routes	Commission FAQs hub (thematic + consolidated)
Narrow/complex exceptions	Exceptions exist but are unusable in practice	High-salience hardship cases; behavioural avoidance	Reputational damage; moral controversy	Redesign exceptions for operational usability; clear traveller guidance	Banknotes FAQ and boundary clarification
Expanded upstream obligations ("best efforts")	Group-wide restrictive policies	Indirect service discontinuation; reduced platform access	Scope drift from targeted intent	Couple obligations with precision tools protecting lawful personal activity	Commission "best efforts" FAQ (Art. 8a)

Authorship: analytical framework (this report) was prepared by the author
Sources:

- Commission consolidated version page (publication date 23 January 2026): https://finance.ec.europa.eu/publications/consolidated-version_en
- Commission consolidated FAQs (example edition): https://finance.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2024-01/faqs-sanctions-russia-consolidated_en.pdf
- EBA Guidelines page: https://www.fma.gv.at/en/eu/eba-guidelines/
- Commission banknotes FAQ: https://finance.ec.europa.eu/document/download/e13ed807-1fcc-4412-8fb4-702d5f05304d_en?filename=faqs-sanctions-russia-euro-banknotes_en.pdf
- Commission "best efforts" FAQ and page: https://finance.ec.europa.eu/document/download/65560de8-a13a-4a58-a87c-ddd27b14e6c1_en?filename=faqs-sanctions-russia-best-efforts-obligation_en.pdf

It is also important to recognise that some degree of "extra caution" is not avoidable and may be justified, especially under genuine uncertainty about indirect involvement, control structures, and circumvention risks. The goal is not to eliminate caution, but to prevent caution from becoming categorical exclusion by default. In sanctions engineering terms, the objective is to improve the signal-to-noise ratio of compliance systems: block the transactions that should be blocked, while allowing those that should be allowed with predictable procedures. When the regime is new or rapidly evolving, noise tends to be high; as guidance accumulates, noise should decline. The January 2026 consolidated version page signals the EU's ongoing effort to keep guidance current, which should, in principle, reduce noise. Yet noise can also persist if new obligations, such as "best efforts" introduced in 2024, widen the compliance perimeter faster than institutions can build discriminative models. Therefore, acceptability limits are dynamic: as the compliance perimeter expands, precision instruments must expand too, otherwise over-compliance becomes structural. This is why the report treats governance as a continuous calibration process rather than a one-off fix.

Another structural driver of over-compliance is information asymmetry between customers and institutions. Households often cannot prove negative exposure to sanctions risk beyond providing basic information, and they may not understand what evidence a bank needs to process a transfer. Institutions, in turn, may not be able to explain their internal risk models without compromising controls. This creates a communicative gap in which refusals are experienced as arbitrary and institutions claim necessity. The governance solution is not full transparency of risk models, but *predictable documentation expectations* for common lawful scenarios, which can be standardised through guidance and industry practice. The Commission's thematic FAQs, such as those on banknotes, provide a template for this type of standardisation by clarifying boundary concepts like "personal use" and the nature of permitted exceptions. A similar template could be applied more broadly to common household transactions in the Russia regime context, using scenario-based guidance. This would reduce the need for ad hoc decision-making and thus reduce variance and arbitrariness. It would also reduce administrative overload by allowing frontline compliance to rely on pre-defined decision paths. In acceptability terms, standardisation is a welfare-protecting instrument because it lowers uncertainty costs and reduces the need for intermediaries.

Provider heterogeneity across member states and sectors also amplifies over-compliance externalities. When one bank or platform refuses broadly while another processes lawful activity, households learn to "shop" for permissiveness, shifting flows rather than removing them. This undermines both fairness and enforcement, because the most conservative providers create hardship while the most permissive providers become magnet channels. EU-level standard-setting is the institutional answer, but standard-setting must balance harmonisation with proportionality, or it risks harmonising toward maximum conservatism. The EBA Guidelines explicitly seek to set common EU standards for governance and controls, and their application date creates a timeline for institutional convergence. In the social sphere, convergence is desirable when it reduces arbitrary variance, but undesirable if it removes operational flexibility needed to accommodate protected interests. Therefore, acceptability limits imply a "harmonise the floor, not the ceiling" approach: define minimum standards for clarity, remedy, and protected pathways, rather than rewarding the broadest refusal posture. This is a governance design problem that can be addressed through supervisory messaging and evaluation criteria. If supervisors reward precision and error correction, institutions have incentives to reduce false positives. If supervisors reward only risk avoidance, institutions will continue to refuse broadly.

Over-compliance is also sensitive to how exceptions are drafted and interpreted. Exceptions that are narrow, ambiguous, or require high evidentiary burdens can be functionally unusable, which effectively converts exceptions into symbolic statements. The banknotes example shows how the boundary of an exception can be legally defined narrowly, producing high-salience hardship cases that then feed legitimacy costs. This does not mean exceptions must always be broad, but it does mean exception design must anticipate predictable high-welfare contexts and provide a workable process. Otherwise, households will either refrain from lawful activity out of fear or shift to opaque alternatives. From an

enforcement perspective, unusable exceptions are also counterproductive because they reduce compliance: people cannot comply with a rule they cannot practically operationalise. This is why Part 4 treats exceptions as part of the system's "operational ethics": the ethical claim is tested by accessibility in practice. Governance artefacts such as thematic FAQs can reduce ambiguity, but only if they are disseminated and internalised by frontline decision-makers. Therefore, acceptability limits require not only drafting exceptions but operationalising them through guidance, training, and consistent application.

The interaction between "best efforts" and over-compliance deserves particular attention because it expands responsibility upstream and can create downstream conservatism. Commission FAQs on Article 8a explain how "best efforts" should be read in light of recitals and interpretative detail, including that it involves actions suitable and necessary to ensure non-EU subsidiaries do not undermine sanctions. In corporate governance, this can lead to group-wide policies that restrict transactions or business lines beyond what the EU legal text directly prohibits for EU entities. Those corporate policies can then affect consumers through service discontinuation, reduced product availability, and tightened payment acceptance. The social effect is indirect but real, particularly where large multinational ecosystems set uniform rules for entire regions. The acceptability implication is that upstream governance obligations should be paired with downstream clarity about lawful consumer and household activities, so that group policies do not default to blanket exclusion. Otherwise, "best efforts" becomes an amplifier of over-compliance externalities, widening the gap between legal scope and lived impact. This is not a theoretical concern; it follows from the asymmetry of incentives and from the scaling nature of corporate policy. Therefore, the report treats "best efforts" as a driver that must be managed through precision tools rather than resisted as illegitimate.

The practical acceptability frontier in over-compliance cases is defined by whether essential civilian activities remain possible through compliant pathways. If lawful family support transfers, education payments, or basic living transactions are routinely refused, the regime approaches an unacceptable civilian burden even if legal intent is targeted. This is why Tables 4.3.1-1 and 4.3.2-1 matter: they identify vulnerable groups and protected interests that serve as stress tests. Over-compliance tends to fail these tests because it is insensitive to welfare priorities; it is driven by institutional incentives rather than by normative weighting. Therefore, a regime that seeks ethical sustainability must insert welfare priorities into operational governance, for example by standardising protected pathways and requiring escalation rather than refusal for certain low-risk, high-welfare transaction types. Commission guidance infrastructure demonstrates the institutional capacity to publish and update such standards, as evidenced by the consolidated version updates and thematic FAQs. The missing element in many sanctions contexts is not the ability to issue guidance, but the ability to ensure uniform internalisation and to measure outcomes. This is why 4.5 later proposes monitoring and feedback loops that track not only breaches prevented, but lawful access preserved.

In sanctions engineering terms, over-compliance is a calibration error: the system's detection threshold is set too low, producing too many false positives relative to true positives. Calibration improves when operators have better definitions, better data, clearer guidance, and incentives aligned to precision rather than blanket avoidance. The EU is moving in this direction through two complementary tracks: interpretative guidance (Commission FAQs) and governance standardisation (EBA Guidelines). The acceptability challenge is to ensure these tracks do not inadvertently converge on a maximally conservative equilibrium. Instead, they should converge on a discriminative equilibrium where lawful activity is processed reliably and prohibited activity is blocked. Achieving this requires explicit supervisory messaging that recognises the social cost of false positives and rewards error-correction mechanisms. It also requires that guidance is scenario-based and practical for frontline use, not only legally accurate. In addition, it requires cross-border coordination so that protected pathways are consistent across member states, reducing route shopping and perceived arbitrariness. These governance themes will be carried into Section 4.4 on prospects and into Section 4.5 on ethically robust measures.

Finally, the acceptability of social sanctions depends on whether the compliance system remains intelligible and predictable to ordinary people. Over-compliance undermines intelligibility because it transforms the rule from a knowable constraint into a probabilistic experience of refusal. Predictability is not merely a comfort; it is a welfare requirement for households managing time-sensitive obligations. The EU's public claim that sanctions are targeted and rule-based must therefore be supported by operational properties: consistent interpretation, usable exceptions, and avenues for remedy. Commission FAQs—especially the consolidated version updated in January 2026—are evidence of institutional effort to improve predictability, but predictability also depends on how private actors translate guidance into policy. The EBA Guidelines indicate the EU's intent to embed sanctions compliance in governance and controls by late 2025, which may reduce variance, but the direction of that variance reduction matters. If variance reduction is achieved through calibrated precision, social costs fall and legitimacy strengthens. If variance reduction is achieved through harmonised conservatism, social costs rise and acceptability limits tighten. This subsection therefore concludes that managing over-compliance is not peripheral; it is the central operational condition for ethical sustainability in social sanctions.

4.3.5. Historical Features Shaping Russian Society (Context for Social-Sanctions Acceptability)

4.3.5.1. Centuries of Feudal Governance: The Formation of Deference to the "Master"

Any analysis that links long-run social formations to contemporary political behaviour must start with a caution against cultural determinism. The proposition here is not that "Russians are inherently deferential", nor that historical institutions mechanically determine present-day attitudes. Rather, the claim is that centuries-long governance arrangements—especially the intertwining of coercion, dependency, and patronage—created enduring *social grammars* of authority, obligation, and protection that can reappear under new institutional wrappers. In this subsection, "feudal governance" is used as a heuristic label for pre-modern and early modern arrangements of personal rule, estate privilege, and dependency relations, even though historians debate the strict applicability of "feudalism" to Russia and frequently prefer other concepts such as patrimonial monarchy, service state, or bonded labour regimes[1,2]. The key analytical objective is to explain how a "master–dependent" logic could become socially intelligible and functionally adaptive within the constraints of Russian state formation. A second objective is to show why this logic matters for social-sanctions acceptability: sanctions that increase everyday friction may be interpreted through a paternalist lens in which security and basic predictability are traded for autonomy. Finally, the subsection identifies where the argument is strongest (institutional incentives and social practices) and where it is weakest (claims about uniform national psychology), maintaining the attribution discipline established in 4.1.3.

A central starting point is the historical fusion of sovereignty and property in many interpretations of Muscovite and imperial Russian state development. The "patrimonial state" thesis—most prominently associated with Richard Pipes—argues that the early Russian polity developed in conditions where the ruler's authority was deeply entangled with ownership-like claims over land and subjects, blurring the boundary between governance and proprietary control[3]. Even scholars who do not fully endorse Pipes's strongest claims accept that the institutional environment of Muscovite rule differed in important respects from many Western European trajectories, especially in the development of autonomous corporate estates and legal protections against the crown. What matters here is the everyday consequence: if authority is experienced as personal and discretionary, dependence on a superior becomes the principal risk-management strategy. In such settings, protection is often secured not by

[1] Halperin, C. J. (2015). *Feudalism in Russia, then and now*. Slavica Petropolitana.
[2] Stanziani, A. (2008). Serfs, slaves, or wage earners? The legal status of labour in Russia from a comparative perspective (16th to 19th centuries). *Journal of Global History*, *3*(2), 183–202.
[3] Pipes, R. (1995). *Russia under the old regime* (2nd ed.). New York : Penguin Books.

impersonal rights but by proximity to a patron, a logic that persists across institutional changes. The relevance to deference is therefore structural: it emerges from the rational adaptation of households to insecurity and discretionary power rather than from a timeless preference for submission. This framing allows the analysis to remain compatible with historical complexity while still identifying stable mechanisms.

Serfdom is the most salient institutional context through which a "master" logic can become socially normalised, but it requires careful specification. Russian serfdom was not uniform across the empire and did not encompass all peasants in the same legal form; there were important distinctions among privately owned serfs, state peasants, and other categories administered under different rules[1]. Nonetheless, bonded labour relations expanded and became deeply embedded in the agrarian economy, especially from the seventeenth century onward, creating systems in which peasants' mobility, obligations, and legal status were constrained by landlords and by state authority. This environment created a practical asymmetry: survival depended on access to land and protection from arbitrary coercion, both often mediated by landlords and officials. In such a world, "respect for the master" can be understood as a social technology: outward deference reduces immediate risk, signals compliance, and may secure leniency or patronage. Importantly, the "master" relationship was not only economic; it was also juridical and administrative, since local power could shape taxation, conscription, and dispute resolution. Deference thus becomes less a matter of belief than a matter of safety and predictability.

The concept of "feudalism" itself is contested in Russian historiography, and the contest is analytically useful. Critics of the term argue that Western feudalism's legal-institutional configuration—vassalage, reciprocal obligations, and decentralised lordship—does not map cleanly onto Russian arrangements, which were heavily shaped by service obligations and the state's centralising impulse[2]. Comparative labour historians also stress that categories such as "free" and "unfree" labour do not apply straightforwardly across contexts, and that the legal and practical boundaries of "serfdom" in Russia evolved through complex mixtures of statute, local practice, and state building[3]. For the present report, this debate does not undermine the point; it strengthens it, because it shifts attention from labels to mechanisms. The mechanism is the long-run normalisation of dependency, discretionary authority, and vertical mediation of resources. Whether this is called feudalism, patrimonialism, or a service state matters less than whether the social experience is one in which the individual's security depends on a superior's protection. That is precisely the kind of environment in which deference becomes rational and where mistrust of impersonal rights can be historically intelligible.

A further mechanism reinforcing deference is the historical structure of social protection and welfare. Where state capacity for universal welfare provision is limited, and where local institutions are uneven, households rely on patrons—landlords, officials, employers, or later party functionaries—for access to resources, dispute resolution, and informal safety nets. Patronage does not have to be benevolent to be functional: it is often coercive, but it can still be perceived as "the only available protection" in a high-risk environment. Geoffrey Hosking's analysis of patronage in Russian state history underscores that hierarchical patron–client relations are not incidental; they are recurring modes of political and social exchange[4]. The social psychology that emerges from this environment is ambivalent: deference may coexist with cynicism, private resistance, and moral distance from authority. This duality matters for sanctions: households accustomed to informal mediation may shift quickly to informal workaround ecosystems when formal channels are blocked, not because they reject law per se, but because they do not expect law to be reliably protective.

[1] Bartlett, R. (2003). Serfdom and state power in Imperial Russia. *European History Quarterly*, *33*(1), 29–64.

[2] Halperin, C. J. (2015). *Feudalism in Russia, then and now*. Slavica Petropolitana.

[3] Stanziani, A. (2008). Serfs, slaves, or wage earners? The legal status of labour in Russia from a comparative perspective (16th to 19th centuries). *Journal of Global History*, *3*(2), 183–202.

[4] Hosking, G. (2000). Patronage and the Russian state. *The Slavonic and East European Review*, *78*(2), 301–320.

The 1861 emancipation of the serfs is often misread as a clean institutional break, but it also shows how dependency can persist through redesigned obligations. The Emancipation Manifesto ended legal serfdom, yet the reform design included complex arrangements such as redemption payments and land allotment structures that continued to bind peasant households into constrained economic realities for decades[1]. The state's attempt to modernise was therefore mediated through compromises among nobles, bureaucrats, and peasant communities, and the post-emancipation countryside retained high levels of administrative intervention and vulnerability. From a social-formation perspective, this is crucial: formal freedom did not automatically create impersonal autonomy. Instead, households continued to operate in a world of constrained choice, administrative dependence, and local power asymmetries. The "master" logic can therefore survive emancipation not as a legal status, but as a social expectation about how protection and resources are accessed. This is one reason why long-run institutional legacies can shape contemporary patterns of deference even after major reforms.

It is also essential to recognise that "respect to the master" was historically produced not only by landlords, but by the state's broader coercive apparatus. Conscription, taxation, policing, and administrative controls created a landscape where the state's reach—directly or through local intermediaries—could be experienced as intrusive and discretionary. Under such conditions, deference is often less a moral endorsement than a conflict-avoidance strategy. The interaction between state power and local elites created layered authority: individuals navigated between landlord authority, bureaucratic demands, and communal pressures. This multi-layered governance can foster a perception that "one must have a protector" because rules are not always stable and enforcement may be arbitrary. Importantly, this does not imply passivity; it implies strategic accommodation and the use of informal networks. For sanctions analysis, this helps explain why social measures that increase friction can amplify reliance on intermediaries and informal brokers, because informal mediation is a historically familiar adaptation to constrained formal pathways.

Religious and cultural narratives also interacted with governance structures, but they should be handled cautiously. The Orthodox tradition has sometimes been interpreted as emphasising obedience and communal endurance, yet such interpretations can easily become caricatures. The more robust claim is institutional: where church structures and state authority are intertwined, moral legitimacy can be symbolically aligned with hierarchical authority, reinforcing the social acceptability of vertical order. Even when people privately dissent, public compliance can be framed as moral duty or as social normality. This is relevant for sanctions insofar as sanctions seek to create social pressure: if social experience is habituated to vertical authority and endurance, external pressure via hardship may not translate into the intended political mechanism. That does not mean pressure is ineffective; it means its transmission is mediated by deep social scripts of endurance and protection-seeking, which can redirect blame and reshape interpretation. Therefore, policy evaluation must avoid simplistic expectations that social discomfort automatically yields political change.

The legacy of dependency also shaped elite formation and bureaucratic culture, reinforcing the role of personal ties over impersonal rules. Patronage networks can stabilise governance when formal institutions are weak, but they also perpetuate arbitrariness and dependence. Hosking argues that patronage has been a persistent feature of Russian political exchange across different regimes, suggesting that vertical mediation can survive ideological shifts[2]. In social terms, this encourages citizens to treat formal rules as insufficient and to seek relational solutions—contacts, patrons, intermediaries—to solve practical problems. In the sanctions' context, this is directly relevant: when formal channels become restricted (payments, services, mobility), the social skill set of "finding an intermediary" becomes valuable. This can reduce the transparency of transactions and make sanctions enforcement harder to discriminate between legitimate adaptation and prohibited circumvention. Thus,

[1] Encyclopaedia Britannica. (2026). *Emancipation Manifesto*.
[2] Hosking, G. (2000). Patronage and the Russian state. *The Slavonic and East European Review*, *78*(2), 301–320.

the same historical legacy that supports deference also supports workaround culture, which is a key constraint on the long-run controllability of social sanctions.

A balanced analysis must also account for countervailing tendencies: Russian history contains strong traditions of communal self-organisation, local solidarity, and episodic resistance. Deference to a master was never total; it coexisted with peasant community norms, bargaining, evasion, and sometimes rebellion. That complexity matters because it prevents the argument from collapsing into determinism. The "master" logic is best understood as a *dominant survival grammar* under specific constraints, not as an immutable national character. In modern contexts, the same individual can exhibit deference in one setting and resistance in another, depending on perceived risk and available collective protection. For sanctions, this implies heterogeneity of response: some groups may interpret restrictions as illegitimate and resist, while others may prioritise stability and accept constraints as the cost of protection. The distributional mapping in 4.3.1 remains essential precisely because response is not uniform.

This historical framing has two direct implications for sanction acceptability thresholds. First, where societies have long experience with discretionary authority and weak legal remedies, people may assign high value to predictability and protection even at the cost of autonomy. Social sanctions that increase unpredictability may therefore produce welfare losses that do not translate into political pressure, because the social demand becomes "restore stability", which can legitimise strong authority claims rather than undermine them. Second, social sanctions that restrict access to consumer and financial pathways can encourage reliance on patronage-like intermediaries, reinforcing the very vertical mediation structures that sanctions might hope to weaken. These mechanisms do not negate sanctions' strategic objectives, but they raise the bar for claims about social pressure effectiveness. They also strengthen the case for ethically robust design: protected channels, clarity, and reduction of over-compliance become essential not only morally, but strategically, because they prevent the system from breeding informal dependency. In other words, if sanctions inadvertently deepen reliance on patrons and intermediaries, they may worsen long-run social outcomes while weakening enforcement clarity.

To keep these mechanisms explicit, Table 4.3.5.1-1 maps historical institutional features to plausible contemporary behavioural adaptations without asserting linear causation. The table is not a psychological diagnosis; it is a mechanism guide for policy design. It clarifies why household-level friction can be socially interpreted through "protection-seeking" and why informal mediation can become the default response to formal constraints. It also identifies where policy levers exist: communication, protected channels, and governance of over-compliance can reduce the incentive to retreat into opaque, patronage-like pathways. This is aligned with the report's broader sanctions-engineering approach: identify system feedbacks and design to manage them.

Table 4.3.5.1-1. Historical "master–dependency" mechanisms and plausible contemporary sanctions-relevant adaptations

Historical institutional feature	Social mechanism (historical)	Plausible contemporary adaptation under social sanctions	Implication for acceptability and policy design
Bonded labour / constrained mobility	Security via compliance; risk reduction through deference	Preference for predictability; acceptance of high-friction constraints as "normal" if framed as protection	Avoid designing social pressure purely via hardship; preserve predictable protected channels
Patrimonial/ discretionary authority narratives	Weak boundary between rule and personal power	Low expectation of remedy; reliance on intermediaries to navigate constraints	Remedy/clarity are legitimacy stabilisers; reduce over-compliance to prevent opaque gatekeeping
Patronage / clientelism in governance	Access to resources through vertical mediation	Growth of intermediaries (brokers) for travel, payments, procurement	Over-compliance and ambiguity expand informalisation; governance should protect lawful pathways

Authorship: analytical framework (this report) was prepared by the author (mechanism-based mapping; not a deterministic causality claim)

Finally, a methodological warning is warranted: historical narratives can easily become politicised, and policy analysis must avoid essentialising a society in ways that become self-justifying for harsh measures. The point of this subsection is to increase analytical realism about the social transmission of sanctions, not to normalise civilian harm or to imply cultural inferiority. Long-run institutional legacies are real, but they operate through mechanisms that are conditional, heterogeneous, and often reversible under sustained institutional development. For sanctions policy, the practical takeaway is that measures that increase hardship without preserving predictability and protected pathways may be especially prone to backfire in societies where authority is historically associated with protection. Therefore, acceptability thresholds and ethical robustness are not optional constraints; they are central to designing social measures that do not inadvertently strengthen paternalist legitimacy narratives.

Taken together, centuries of dependency relations—whether labelled feudal, patrimonial, or bonded-labour regimes—help explain why a "master–protection" logic can remain socially intelligible. This logic can manifest as deference, not necessarily as admiration, but as risk management under conditions of uncertainty and discretionary enforcement. In modern Russia, these legacies interact with new institutions rather than replacing them, and they can influence how social sanctions are interpreted and adapted to. For the purposes of this report, the conclusion is operational: social sanctions should not be expected to work primarily via diffuse hardship; they should be designed with precision, protected channels, and governance clarity to avoid reinforcing informal dependency and the search for protective authority.

4.3.5.2. Drive for Unity around a Leader: The Search for Protection in Strong Authority

The proposition that parts of Russian society demonstrate a recurrent *drive for unity around a leader* should be treated as a structural hypothesis about risk management, not as a cultural stereotype. "Unity" here refers to a social preference for *political consolidation* under a visible centre of decision-making when uncertainty is high and when alternative mechanisms of coordination are distrusted. In this interpretation, a "strong leader" is valued less as an object of admiration and more as an instrument that promises order, predictability, and protection against external and internal threats. This helps avoid an overly psychological reading of authority and instead locates the mechanism in collective-action problems: where trust in institutions and horizontal coordination is weak, vertical coordination becomes the cheaper solution. Comparative political science on post-Soviet Eurasia has described "patronal" equilibria in which personal networks and central arbitration dominate, making leader-centred coordination a rational default under institutional fragility[1,2]. This structural reading is directly relevant for social-sanctions analysis because it implies that external pressure that increases uncertainty may not translate into the intended "societal pressure" mechanism. Instead, it can increase the perceived value of centralised protection and intensify the demand for a decisive leader, particularly when the public expects that only central authority can secure stability. Therefore, the section's aim is not to claim inevitability, but to clarify why a leader-centred unity script can be socially adaptive and thus persist across eras.

A useful analytical entry point is the interaction between uncertainty, distrust, and coordination. In environments where legal remedies are perceived as slow, partial, or inconsistent, citizens face incentives to prioritise outcomes (security, stability, access) over procedural pluralism. Under such conditions, political competition and decentralisation can be socially interpreted as sources of disorder rather than as safeguards. This is not uniquely Russian, but Russian historical experience includes repeated episodes of systemic rupture and state reconstitution that may heighten the salience of "order-first" preferences. The key mechanism is an everyday calculus: if one expects rules to be contingent and

[1] Hale, H. E. (2015). *Patronal politics: Eurasian regime dynamics in comparative perspective*. Cambridge University Press.
[2] Hale, H. E. (2017). Russian patronal politics beyond Putin. *Daedalus, 146*(2), 30–40.

enforcement to be discretionary, then central power becomes the perceived guarantor of coherence. This does not imply that people love central power; it implies that they fear fragmentation more. Survey-based materials discussed below show that beliefs about the need for a "strong hand" have been measurable in Russian public opinion for decades, indicating that the script is not merely an elite projection[1]. The resulting social contract is frequently paternalist: citizens concede autonomy in exchange for protection, and the leader becomes the symbolic locus of that exchange. This paternalism is especially relevant in interpreting why hardship can be reframed as a necessary price for security.

Historical-political symbolism has also played a role in embedding leader-centred unity narratives. Wortman's analysis of Russian monarchy emphasises how imperial rule developed "scenarios of power" that staged the monarch as an embodiment of the state and nation, using ceremony and myth to fuse the person of the ruler with the idea of political order[2]. The point for this report is not to claim direct continuity from tsarist coronations to modern media politics, but to note the durable political logic of personification: when the ruler is staged as the state, loyalty becomes framed as loyalty to the collective, and dissent can be framed as disunity. Such representational practices lower the cognitive cost of unity because they offer a single focal point for coordination and meaning. In settings where institutions are distrusted or seen as captured, personification can also appear more "honest" than institutional rhetoric: people may distrust parties but believe in a strong figure. This logic can survive regime changes because it is not tied to a particular ideology; it is tied to a coordination form. That is consistent with the patronal-politics framework, which treats leader-centred coordination as a recurring equilibrium where networks need a central arbiter[3]. The implication is that unity scripts can be reproduced through new symbols and technologies without requiring the same institutions.

The empirical relevance of a "strong hand" narrative is observable in public opinion datasets. The Levada Center's annual compilation of Russian public opinion includes a long-running item on whether "Russians cannot do without autocratic leaders, a 'powerful hand' that can lead them," showing substantial shares agreeing with the statement[4]. This is not proof of deep psychological preference; it is evidence of a widely available belief that can be activated under stress. Political culture research also notes that many citizens prioritise "order" and a ruler with a "strong hand", while showing limited interest in opposition politics, which fits the coordination and risk-management interpretation[5]. Such findings matter for sanctions because sanctions often rely partly on the assumption that social strain will translate into political pressure. If a significant segment interprets strain as evidence that "we need stronger authority," then the behavioural effect of strain is ambiguous and may strengthen rather than weaken leader legitimacy. The critical methodological point is that these survey items do not determine outcomes; they reveal the availability of an interpretive frame. Under crisis conditions, frames matter because they shape how people assign blame, evaluate trade-offs, and decide whether change is worth the risk. In other words, leader-centred unity can be a stable cognitive shortcut in uncertain environments.

The "search for protection" component of this script is crucial. When threats are framed as existential—external aggression, sabotage, destabilisation—citizens may accept exceptional constraints as protective measures, especially if they doubt that pluralistic institutions can respond quickly. The EU's social sanctions can inadvertently contribute to this perception if they are experienced as diffuse restrictions rather than as precise targeting. If a citizen experiences banking refusals, mobility uncertainty, or service discontinuation, it can be easier to interpret the problem as "the world is hostile" than as "the government is accountable," particularly if domestic media and social narratives channel

[1] Levada Center. (2009). *Russian public opinion: March 2008 – March 2009* (Annual). Levada Analytical Center. https://www.levada.ru/sites/default/files/levada_2008_eng.pdf
[2] Wortman, R. S. (2000). *Scenarios of power: Myth and ceremony in Russian monarchy* (Vol. 1). Princeton University Press.
[3] Hale, H. E. (2015). *Patronal politics: Eurasian regime dynamics in comparative perspective*. Cambridge University Press.
[4] Levada Center. (2009). *Russian public opinion: March 2008 – March 2009* (Annual). Levada Analytical Center. https://www.levada.ru/sites/default/files/levada_2008_eng.pdf
[5] Carnaghan, E. (2012). *Russian Analytical Digest No. 117: Political culture and public opinion* (pp. 2–5). ETH Zürich / Centre for Security Studies.

blame outward. This is one reason that social sanctions face unusually high legitimacy risks: their household-level salience creates narrative opportunities for "rallying" frames. Sanctions scholarship on "backfire" mechanisms has emphasised that sanctions can sometimes increase regime support when they are framed as external hostility and when domestic control over information is strong (for conceptual discussion, see broader sanctions literature; the report remains cautious about causal claims here). The key is not to assume backfire, but to recognise the conditions under which leader-centred unity becomes an adaptive response. Those conditions include uncertainty, fear of disorder, and perceived absence of credible alternatives. Therefore, acceptability design in the EU context should avoid measures that are easily framed as collective punishment, because that framing is precisely what activates unity scripts.

Leader-centred unity also relates to the structure of political participation and expectations about agency. In patronal systems, as Hale argues, collective action often occurs through personalised rewards and punishments, and coordination tends to revolve around networks rather than rule-bound institutions[1]. Where that pattern is socially understood, people may not expect ordinary civic participation to change outcomes; instead, they may expect outcomes to depend on relationships and central decisions. This lowers the perceived efficacy of protest or opposition and increases the perceived rationality of alignment with the centre. In such contexts, unity around the leader can be interpreted as a form of self-protection: being "with the centre" reduces risk and uncertainty. That does not mean people are ideologically committed; it means alignment is an insurance strategy. The social implication is a dual attitude: private scepticism can coexist with public conformity. For sanctions, this is important because sanctions that raise everyday risks can shift more people into public conformity even if private dissatisfaction rises. Thus, using hardship as a pressure mechanism can be strategically noisy: it may increase dissatisfaction but also increase conformity.

The memory of disorder and systemic breakdown is often treated as a driver of "order-first" preferences. Russia's twentieth-century trajectory included revolution, civil war, forced collectivisation, war mobilisation, and repeated episodes of violent coercion, while the late Soviet and post-Soviet period included economic upheaval and institutional uncertainty. While this subsection does not attempt to adjudicate every historical debate, it notes that repeated rupture can raise the social value of stability. Political culture materials and survey discussions frequently interpret the "strong hand" preference as partly rooted in perceived insecurity and dissatisfaction with conditions (see also related scholarly work on "strong leader" beliefs)[2]. The relevance to sanctions is the following: if a population's baseline preference under uncertainty is to reduce political risk, then external pressure can produce an "order premium," increasing acceptance of a centralised leader. This is a constraint on the assumption that social discomfort necessarily produces liberalisation pressure. It also suggests that the effectiveness of social sanctions depends heavily on whether they are interpreted as targeted and controllable or as indiscriminate and destabilising. In other words, sanctions design interacts with domestic political psychology through the channel of perceived stability.

Another mechanism is the historical weakness of autonomous intermediary institutions that can mediate between state and society. When unions, professional associations, courts, and local governance are perceived as weak, citizens may expect the leader to act as the primary problem-solver. Even in contexts where formal institutions exist, the practical expectation may be that outcomes depend on central intervention. This expectation is reinforced when media narratives portray the leader as personally responsible for achievements and personally intervening in crises. Wortman's framework helps interpret how personalisation of rule can be sustained by representational practices, though modern instruments of personalisation differ in technology and scale[3]. The social consequence is an attribution pattern: credit and blame become leader-centred, while institutional accountability

[1] Hale, H. E. (2017). Russian patronal politics beyond Putin. *Daedalus, 146*(2), 30–40.
[2] Carnaghan, E. (2012). *Russian Analytical Digest No. 117: Political culture and public opinion* (pp. 2–5). ETH Zürich / Centre for Security Studies.
[3] Wortman, R. S. (2000). *Scenarios of power: Myth and ceremony in Russian monarchy* (Vol. 1). Princeton University Press.

weakens. This pattern can distort how sanctions are interpreted: external measures may be framed as an attack on the leader-and-nation unity, rather than as a constraint on specific enabling structures. That framing can increase solidarity around the centre. Therefore, sanctions that seek to exploit "societal pressure" must be attentive to the risk that pressure translates into leader-centred solidarity rather than into leader-centred blame.

The drive for unity also interacts with identity formation and the perceived boundaries of the political community. When political discourse emphasises unity against external threat, dissent can be framed as betrayal, and social pressure within communities can enforce conformity. This is a cohesion mechanism that can be activated under sanctions: external restriction can increase inward conformity. The report does not claim that this always happens; it claims that the mechanism is plausible and historically intelligible. It is also consistent with the observation that sanctions can create stigma environments that complicate diaspora relations and internal cohesion, as discussed earlier in 4.3.3. When identity is securitised, even neutral personal activities—travel, transfers, cross-border ties—can be reinterpreted as suspicious. This can increase social costs for vulnerable groups (students, mixed families, civil society actors) and reduce the openness of the social environment. From the EU perspective, such outcomes weaken the ethical sustainability of social sanctions and can undermine long-run strategic objectives that rely on societal openness. Therefore, a leader-unity script is not only a domestic variable; it becomes a constraint on external policy design.

It is essential to distinguish leader-centred unity from genuine trust. A society may rally around a leader as a coordination focal point even while distrust remains high and cynicism is widespread. Patronal equilibria can sustain coordination by making defection costly and compliance rewarding, rather than by producing normative consent[1]. This matters for interpreting apparent stability: stability may reflect risk management rather than satisfaction. For sanctions, this has two consequences. First, hardship might raise private dissatisfaction without producing public pressure, because public pressure is risky and coordination is hard. Second, elites may misread public conformity as genuine support and thereby overestimate the effectiveness of unity narratives. The report does not attempt to quantify these effects, but it uses the mechanism to caution against simplistic readings of social pressure. If the goal is to weaken enabling structures, policy should focus on those structures rather than on inducing diffuse hardship. Where social measures are used, they should be precise and accompanied by protected channels, to reduce the ability of unity narratives to portray the EU as hostile to ordinary people.

The "strong leader" belief is also not static; it varies across cohorts and conditions. Research on strong leader myths in Russian public opinion has analysed how support for a leader with a "strong hand" relates to dissatisfaction, nationalism, education, and political socialisation (see, e.g., peer-reviewed research summarised in academic outlets). The key point for this report is not the exact coefficients but the conceptual implication: the preference is contingent and can be activated by fear and insecurity. That means sanctions design can influence activation probabilities: indiscriminate friction may activate unity scripts more than precise targeting. This is the policy-relevant conclusion: social sanctions that are poorly targeted risk strengthening the very political consolidation they aim to disrupt. Conversely, social measures that preserve protected channels and reduce arbitrariness can weaken the plausibility of hostile narratives and keep the social meaning closer to "targeted accountability" rather than "collective threat."

Leader-centred unity is also supported by the social function of *blame externalisation*. In environments where the leader is framed as protector, negative outcomes can be attributed to external enemies and hostile encirclement. Sanctions can be interpreted as proof of that encirclement, which reinforces the protective role. This is particularly relevant when sanctions affect everyday life, because everyday hardship is the raw material of narrative mobilisation. The report's earlier discussion of cohesion effects is directly connected: perceived collective restriction increases the credibility of external-hostility frames. Therefore, sanction acceptability is not only a moral constraint. It is a strategic constraint,

[1] Hale, H. E. (2015). *Patronal politics: Eurasian regime dynamics in comparative perspective*. Cambridge University Press.

because perceived unfairness can strengthen domestic unity around the leader. This is why the EU's public emphasis on targeted sanctions is important but insufficient—operational effects must match the narrative. If operational effects contradict the targeted narrative, the domestic unity script gains material evidence. Accordingly, governance levers that reduce over-compliance and protect essential pathways are central to both ethics and strategy.

The relevance to sanctions engineering can be expressed as a simple interaction: external friction × domestic protection script → cohesion outcome. When external friction is high and domestic scripts emphasise protection through unity, cohesion around the leader can strengthen. When external friction is precisely targeted and accompanied by visible protected channels, it becomes harder to represent the external actor as punishing ordinary people. This interaction is summarised in Table 4.3.5.2-1, which maps the unity script's mechanisms to the likely interpretation of sanctions outcomes and suggests policy design implications.

Table 4.3.5.2-1. Leader-centred unity mechanisms and sanctions-relevant implications (mechanism mapping)

Mechanism supporting unity around a leader	**How it shapes interpretation of hardship**	**Likely behavioural adaptation under social sanctions**	**Implication for EU sanctions acceptability design**
Order-first preference under uncertainty	Hardship framed as "price of security"	Higher tolerance for friction if framed as external threat	Avoid indiscriminate friction; preserve predictable protected channels
Patronal coordination (personal networks + central arbiter)	Institutions distrusted; leader seen as effective coordinator	Reliance on intermediaries, brokers, and informal pathways	Reduce over-compliance; provide clear lawful pathways to prevent informalisation
Personification of statehood (leader-as-state)	External pressure framed as attack on collective	"Rally" effects; social conformity	Align operational effects with targeted narrative; avoid collective-effect signals
Low expectation of remedy	Refusals seen as fate, not contestable	Reduced civic pushback; increased private adaptation	Add transparency, escalation routes, and error-correction for compliance-mediated refusals

Authorship: analytical framework (this report) was prepared by the author (mechanism-based mapping; non-deterministic)

The table does not claim determinism; it provides a structured way to anticipate narrative and behavioural responses under different sanctions profiles. It also links back to the threshold matrix in Table 4.3.2-1 by specifying why protected channels are particularly important when unity scripts are strong. In practical terms, if the EU wants social sanctions to avoid backfire, it must ensure that the social meaning of measures remains aligned with responsibility and not with collective threat.

A further implication concerns the difference between *short-run mobilisation* and *long-run legitimacy*. Unity scripts can deliver rapid consolidation in crisis, but they can also create long-run institutional brittleness if they substitute personal rule for institutional capacity. In such environments, external pressure can accelerate consolidation, but it may also accelerate repression and reduce civil society space, as external threat narratives justify tighter controls. Contemporary journalism and expert commentary have described the post-2022 period as associated with deeper authoritarianism and repression, though this report treats journalistic sources as context rather than as definitive causal proof (e.g., press reporting from 2026). The policy relevance is that social sanctions can interact with domestic tightening in ways that shrink the social space needed for long-term societal change. This is another reason the report emphasises ethical robustness: keeping protected channels for education, family, and civil society is not merely humanitarian; it preserves long-run social connectivity that may be strategically valuable. A sanctions regime that erodes all connectivity may consolidate the leader

narrative while reducing future leverage. Therefore, unity scripts strengthen the case for selective design rather than maximalist social restriction.

The acceptability analysis thus yields a sober conclusion: if a significant segment of society is disposed to seek protection in strong authority during uncertainty, then social sanctions must be designed to avoid amplifying uncertainty and collective-effect perceptions. That conclusion does not imply that social sanctions are always counterproductive; it implies they must be deployed with discrimination and governance discipline. The EU has governance instruments that can serve this purpose: clear guidance, harmonised exceptions, and supervisory calibration to reduce arbitrary refusals. Yet governance must be oriented not only to compliance but to social meaning. If citizens experience the sanctions regime as arbitrary, they are more likely to accept a domestic bargain of reduced autonomy for stability. If they experience it as targeted and rule-based, the unity script becomes less compelling. Therefore, historical and sociological context is not a narrative add-on; it is a design variable in sanctions engineering.

A final caution is to resist treating leader-centred unity as an exclusively Russian phenomenon. Many societies under threat exhibit rally effects, and the balance between order and liberty can shift under perceived insecurity. The distinctive issue in Russia is the interaction of unity scripts with historically entrenched patronal coordination forms and with weak institutional trust. That interaction can make unity scripts more resilient and more easily activated, which changes the effectiveness calculus of civilian-facing pressure. For the EU, this suggests a preference for measures that clearly discriminate targets and maintain essential social pathways. In particular, reducing over-compliance in retail finance and maintaining predictable exceptions in mobility are key, because these are the domains where ordinary citizens most directly experience the sanctions system. In effect, policy should avoid manufacturing "proof" for protection narratives.

4.3.5.3. Rigid Social Hierarchy: From the Era of Principalities through the Soviet System

A rigid social hierarchy is best analysed as an institutional pattern—a durable way of organising authority, status, and access to resources—rather than as a single "Russian trait". The historical claim is not that hierarchy was unique to Russia, but that across multiple regime types it remained structurally central to governance and everyday life, often taking legally codified forms. The relevance to this report's sanctions analysis is straightforward: where hierarchy is socially normalised, external pressure that increases uncertainty can be reinterpreted through vertical logics of protection, obedience, and "order-first" preferences. In such settings, social adaptation tends to occur via status navigation (finding patrons, intermediaries, privileged channels), which can reduce the directness of "societal pressure" mechanisms. The subsection therefore links the historical architecture of hierarchy to the contemporary problem of sanction acceptability: when households are habituated to vertical mediation, diffuse hardship may not generate the intended political leverage. Instead, hardship can legitimise stronger central control or intensify reliance on intermediaries, which is a governance externality. The goal is not to "psychoanalyse" a nation, but to map institutional continuity in the organisation of status and access, and to show where this matters for policy design[1,2].

In the era of early principalities and Muscovite consolidation, hierarchy was reinforced by a political economy of security in which coercion, tribute, and service obligations structured everyday dependence. Historical debates differ on the weight of Mongol-era legacies versus internal Muscovite dynamics, yet a common observation is that political consolidation increased the salience of service, loyalty, and vertical obligation as modes of governance. Under conditions of weak impersonal enforcement and high external threat, individuals and communities often sought security through vertical relations rather than through stable legal rights. This does not require "feudalism" as a label. It requires recognition that rights were often contingent and status-dependent. What is relevant for sanctions is the social learning embedded in such environments: when uncertainty rises, the rational

[1] Mironov, B. N. (2000). *The social history of Imperial Russia, 1700–1917* (Vols. 1–2). Westview Press.
[2] Confino, M. (2008). The soslovie (estate) paradigm. *Cahiers du Monde russe*, *49*, 681–704. https://doi.org/10.4000/monderusse.9502

strategy is to find protection within a hierarchy rather than to confront it. This helps explain why "pressure via hardship" can be politically noisy: hardship may activate vertical dependence rather than horizontal mobilisation. The report treats this as a contextual constraint, not as a deterministic law[1,2].

By the 18th and 19th centuries, hierarchy in the Russian Empire became more explicitly codified through "estate" (soslovie) structures that organised legal status, obligations, and privilege. The soslovie paradigm captured a world in which rights and duties were allocated through legally recognised social categories rather than through universal citizenship. Confino's discussion of the "estate paradigm" is valuable here because it shows how estate categories structured not only identity but administrative practice, documentation, and access to state institutions[3]. The sociological significance is that hierarchy became legible and reproducible through paperwork, titles, and administrative classification. That administrative legibility strengthened hierarchy's durability: if one's social position is a bureaucratic fact, it becomes hard to escape without state-sanctioned transitions. Such systems teach households to think in status terms and to treat access as mediated through category and patronage. For sanctions analysis, the implication is that status mediation is a deeply familiar adaptation strategy: when formal channels tighten, people search for category-based exemptions and privileged routes rather than demand horizontal rights[4].

A pivotal instrument in imperial hierarchy was Peter the Great's Table of Ranks (1722), which reorganised service and status by linking advancement to state service while simultaneously reinforcing a graded, bureaucratically administered order. The Table of Ranks is often interpreted as both modernising and hierarchical: it created formal ladders of promotion yet embedded social life in a system where rank determined honour, privilege, and access. Studies of the Table of Ranks emphasise its role in shaping the composition and functioning of the bureaucracy and in turning service into a key mechanism of status mobility within a strictly ranked order[5,6]. At the level of social formation, the table's significance is not merely technical; it normalised the idea that "place" in society is a state-certified ranking. Even mobility, where it existed, was mobility *within* a hierarchy rather than a move toward universal equality. This matters for modern sanction dynamics because it reinforces a long-run pattern: access is secured through position and certification, and people learn to navigate systems through ranks, privileges, and administrative recognition. When sanctions create frictions, such social learning can intensify demand for "privileged pathways", intermediaries, and formal categorisations that mimic rank-based access[7].

Serfdom and its administration deepened the practical experience of hierarchy by constraining mobility, reinforcing dependence, and embedding vertical authority in local life. Even though Russian serfdom differed across regions and categories, its general effect was to fuse economic survival with legal status and landlord–state authority. The everyday social consequence was an environment where negotiation and survival often depended on access to a patron and on strategic deference, as discussed in 4.3.5.1. Yet hierarchy was not only landlord-driven; it was also state-driven through taxation, conscription, policing, and administrative oversight. This layered hierarchy taught a pragmatic lesson: rights are conditional, and stability is secured through vertical relationships. After 1861, emancipation ended legal serfdom but did not dissolve hierarchy; many reforms created new forms of constraint and dependency through economic obligations and administrative controls, meaning social stratification remained strong and legible[8]. In sanctions terms, this history supports a cautious view of "pressure through

[1] Halperin, C. J. (2015). Feudalism in Russia, then and now. *Slavica Petropolitana*.
[2] Pipes, R. (1995). *Russia under the old regime* (2nd ed.). New York: Penguin Books.
[3] Confino, M. (2008). The soslovie (estate) paradigm. *Cahiers du Monde russe*, *49*, 681–704. https://doi.org/10.4000/monderusse.9502
[4] Mironov, B. N. (2000). *The social history of Imperial Russia, 1700–1917* (Vols. 1–2). Westview Press.
[5] Segrillo, A. (2016). *A first complete translation into English of Peter the Great's 1722 Table of Ranks: Observations on the Occurrence of a Black Hole in the Translation of Russian Historical Documents*. University of Sao Paulo.
[6] Lvov, A. V. (2022). Table of Ranks of 1722 and the evolution of promotion in rank in the 18th century. *Law Bulletin of MGPU 3*(47). https://doi.org/10.25688/2076-9113.2022.47.3.04
[7] Mironov, B. N. (2000). *The social history of Imperial Russia, 1700–1917* (Vols. 1–2). Westview Press.
[8] Encyclopaedia Britannica. (2026). *Emancipation Manifesto*.

hardship": if hardship is historically normalised and mediated through vertical structures, it may not produce the intended political signals. It may instead re-legitimate coercive order as protection.

The late imperial period also illustrates how hierarchy interacted with emerging modernity: industrialisation created new urban strata, yet state authority and estate legacies continued to structure rights and status. The coexistence of old categories and new economic roles often produced a complex stratification regime rather than a clean transition to class-based politics. Mironov's social history work is useful because it documents how imperial society combined formal estate categories with changing social mobility patterns and bureaucratic categorisation[1]. The key point for this report is that hierarchy remained a governing principle even as social composition shifted: access to education, service careers, and legal protections remained unequally distributed. This kind of stratification can produce ambivalent modernisation: people adopt modern economic roles while remaining habituated to vertical authority and category-based access. In contemporary terms, this ambivalence is visible in how citizens may engage with global markets while expecting political solutions to come from the top. Under sanctions, such expectations can shape responses: rather than mobilising horizontally, households may seek vertical solutions—state support, privileged channels, or patronage-like intermediaries. That is a critical constraint for the social-sanctions mechanism that assumes hardship leads to pressure "upward".

The Soviet period appears at first glance to be a radical break, yet in the organisation of social hierarchy it often reproduced vertical stratification under new ideological language. The formal Soviet claim was classless equality, yet Soviet governance created hierarchies of access, privilege, and administrative status that were often more tightly managed than in many liberal systems. One of the most analytically useful insights is that Soviet social position was frequently tied to relationship with the state—through workplace, party membership, and access to distribution channels—making hierarchy administratively actionable rather than merely cultural[2]. The core mechanism was the linkage between loyalty, classification, and access: those closer to state and party structures could access better housing, consumer goods, education pathways, and career opportunities. In such a system, hierarchy is experienced not only as prestige but as a material distribution regime. This is relevant for sanctions because it normalises the idea that hardship and scarcity are managed through vertical systems—queues, allocations, special access—rather than through open market competition. When sanctions increase friction, the social imagination may respond by seeking "special access" rather than systemic change.

A key Soviet instrument of hierarchy was the nomenklatura system, through which the party apparatus controlled appointments to a vast range of posts, thereby structuring elite reproduction and loyalty. Rigby's classic analysis explains the nomenklatura as a mechanism of party control over personnel, which created a distinctive "administrative elite" with privileged access and political leverage[3]. Later scholarship, including Lewin's work on post-war reconstruction of the nomenklatura, emphasises that it was not a static monolith but a system that evolved and was rebuilt, especially after crises[4]. Voslensky's well-known account frames nomenklatura as a ruling stratum, highlighting privileges and patterns of elite insulation[5]. While these works differ in tone and emphasis, they converge on the central point: Soviet society was structured by a managed hierarchy in which political loyalty and administrative status generated material and symbolic advantages. For sanctions analysis, the mechanism matters more than the moral judgement: a society with long experience of administrative hierarchies may adapt to external constraints by intensifying internal hierarchy rather than by opening. That can make social sanctions ethically sensitive and strategically ambiguous.

[1] Mironov, B. N. (2000). *The social history of Imperial Russia, 1700–1917* (Vols. 1–2). Westview Press.
[2] Fitzpatrick, S. (1999). *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary life in extraordinary times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s*. Oxford University Press.
[3] Rigby, T. H. (1988). The origins of the nomenklatura system. *Studies in Comparative Communism*, *40*(4), 523–537.
[4] Lewin, M. (2003). Rebuilding the Soviet nomenklatura, 1945–1948. *Cahiers du Monde russe*, *44*, 219–252. https://doi.org/10.4000/monderusse.8608
[5] Voslensky, M. S. (1984). *Nomenklatura: The Soviet ruling class*. Doubleday.

Fitzpatrick's analysis of everyday life in the 1930s also highlights how Soviet systems created "status" categories and practical inequalities in access to passports, housing, and essential goods. A striking example is the way identity documentation and mobility rights were unequally distributed, reinforcing hierarchies between urban residents and kolkhoz peasants[1]. This is relevant because it shows that hierarchy was not only elite privilege; it was also mass administration that defined who had mobility and who did not. The Soviet state thus produced a social grammar in which access was regulated by administrative classification, and people learned to manage life through documentation and connections. Under sanctions, similar patterns can arise: those with better documentation, stronger institutional ties, and higher "administrative capital" can navigate restrictions more effectively. The sanctions regime's compliance layer (banks, platforms, border controls) can unintentionally replicate this dynamic by making lawful access contingent on documentation capacity and institutional trust. Hence, the acceptability frontier is influenced by historical normalisation of stratified access. Social sanctions that rely on friction can disproportionately harm those with the least administrative capacity, reinforcing inequality and undermining legitimacy.

The Soviet system also built hierarchy through welfare and entitlement structures, where benefits could be universal in rhetoric but segmented in practice. Studies of Soviet welfare and social rights suggest that constitutional promises and practical access often diverged, with entitlements shaped by state priorities, labour status, and political inclusion[2]. The policy relevance for this report is that citizens can become accustomed to the idea that the state is the distributor of welfare and the arbiter of access, even when distribution is unequal. Under external pressure, such expectations can strengthen the demand for paternalist protection rather than for pluralist reform. This is exactly the mechanism that complicates social sanctions: if hardship is historically interpreted as something to be managed by the state, then externally induced hardship may reinforce the expectation of stronger state control. It can also legitimise surveillance and administrative tightening, as people trade privacy and autonomy for access and security. Consequently, sanctions design must be cautious about measures that increase everyday insecurity without preserving protected pathways, because such insecurity can strengthen hierarchical governance scripts.

From an institutional perspective, rigid hierarchy also shapes how citizens interpret fairness. In highly stratified systems, fairness may be interpreted less as equal rights and more as "proper order" or "deserved place," especially when ideology and practice repeatedly teach that society is organised by ranks, merits, or political reliability. This can create a tolerance for inequality and privileged access, provided it is perceived as consistent with the social order. Under sanctions, this tolerance can reduce the political salience of unequal adaptation: if elites and well-connected actors circumvent restrictions, the public may not necessarily treat this as a scandal; it can be interpreted as normal. However, this tolerance has limits: when inequality becomes too visible or when privileged circumvention is framed as betrayal, legitimacy can fracture. The key point for acceptability is that social sanctions may exacerbate such inequalities by making access dependent on networks and resources. That increases the risk of informalisation and patronage-like brokerage, which the report treats as ethically and strategically undesirable. Hence, the hierarchy legacy is a reason to prioritise operational clarity and reduce over-compliance: otherwise, the system rewards those best positioned in hierarchies, undermining both fairness and pressure logic.

The continuity from imperial to Soviet hierarchies is not a claim of sameness; it is a claim of functional substitution. Estate categories were abolished, but new categories—party membership, workplace status, residency documentation, nomenklatura lists—reproduced stratified access. Confino's discussion of estate paradigms is useful here precisely because it encourages analysis of how

[1] Fitzpatrick, S. (1999). *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary life in extraordinary times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s*. Oxford University Press.
[2] Smith, M. B. (2014). Social rights in the Soviet dictatorship: The constitutional right to welfare from Stalin to Brezhnev. *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development*.

classification regimes persist even when labels change[1]. This functional substitution matters for sanctions because it suggests a resilient social capability: people can adapt to new classification regimes quickly, using old skills of navigation. In modern Russia, this can manifest as rapid uptake of intermediaries and alternative channels when sanctions restrict official routes. If the "skill" of hierarchical navigation is widely socialised, then social sanctions that rely on friction may inadvertently increase the returns to brokerage and patronage. That is both an enforcement problem (more opacity) and an ethical problem (more inequality). Therefore, historical hierarchy strengthens the case for sanctions designs that preserve lawful, transparent pathways for essential needs.

The report's sanctions-engineering approach treats these historical patterns as constraints on mechanism design rather than as just background narrative. If a society has deep experience with hierarchical access systems, then policies that increase scarcity and friction tend to generate two predictable adaptations: *queueing and rationing* (waiting, repeated documentation) and *brokerage* (using intermediaries). Both adaptations can be stabilised by paternalist governance: the state can present itself as managing scarcity and policing intermediaries, increasing central authority. Thus, social sanctions can interact with domestic hierarchy by making hierarchy more functional. This is one of the reasons the report views "collective hardship" mechanisms as ethically risky and strategically ambiguous. Targeted measures can still be effective, but they must be paired with operational governance that prevents the compliance layer from turning lawful activity into uncertain, status-dependent access. That governance includes clear exemptions, protected channels, and systematic reduction of over-compliance, consistent with Tables 4.3.2-1 and 4.3.4-1. Without such governance, the sanctions system risks re-creating a hierarchy of access in which privileged actors adapt and vulnerable groups suffer.

To make these relationships explicit and auditable, Table 4.3.5.3-1 maps major historical "hierarchy regimes" to their core access mechanisms and to the likely sanctions-relevant adaptation patterns. The table does not assert that modern Russians behave as eighteenth-century subjects; it asserts that societies retain repertoires of navigation strategies learned under long-run institutional constraints.

Table 4.3.5.3-1. Hierarchy regimes in Russian history and sanctions-relevant adaptation patterns (mechanism mapping)

Period / regime (indicative)	Core hierarchy mechanism	How access was allocated	Likely adaptation under external restriction (sanctions-relevant)	Implication for acceptability design
Principalities / Muscovite consolidation	Service, coercion, vertical obligation	Protection and access mediated by superiors and local power	Protection-seeking; patronage reliance; deference as risk management	Avoid diffuse hardship mechanisms; preserve predictable protected channels
Imperial estate (soslovie) order	Legal estates + bureaucratic classification	Rights and duties tied to formal category and documentation	Category navigation; search for exemptions; reliance on intermediaries	Clarify exemptions; reduce administrative arbitrariness to avoid "status rationing"
Table of Ranks bureaucracy (post-1722)	Rank-based certification of status	Access and honour linked to state-certified rank and service	"Credentialism"; privileging of formally recognised channels	Keep lawful pathways transparent; avoid making access depend on costly intermediaries
Soviet stratification (incl. nomenklatura)	Party control of personnel; administrative status; distribution channels	Privilege via party/state proximity; controlled mobility and goods	Brokerage and network navigation; informalisation if formal access blocks	Reduce over-compliance; provide safe operational pathways for lawful personal needs

[1] Confino, M. (2008). The soslovie (estate) paradigm. *Cahiers du Monde russe*, *49*, 681–704. https://doi.org/10.4000/monderusse.9502

Authorship: analytical framework (this report) was prepared by the author (mechanism-based mapping; non-deterministic)

These repertoires become salient when external shocks increase uncertainty. In practical terms, the table helps discipline analysis: it links claims to mechanisms, and it suggests what kinds of social sanctions are more likely to produce ethical stress. It also supports later 4.4 and 4.5 by identifying policy levers that reduce hierarchy-amplifying effects, such as preserving lawful pathways and preventing over-compliance-driven gatekeeping. The table is therefore an analytical tool, not a moral verdict.

Finally, the core implication for 4.3 (limits of acceptability) is that rigid hierarchy amplifies the moral risk of sanctions that operate through diffuse social friction. Where hierarchy is normalised, social pain is more easily absorbed and more easily reframed as "order costs", reducing the probability that pain produces the intended political signal. At the same time, friction increases inequality because it rewards those best positioned in status networks. Thus, sanctions can become both less effective and less ethical if they rely on hardship rather than on precision. The acceptability threshold therefore tightens: the EU must ensure that social measures do not unintentionally create a new stratification of access to mobility, finance, and services. This aligns with the report's consistent conclusion: ethical robustness is not merely moral. It is strategic because it protects legitimacy, reduces backfire narratives, and preserves enforcement controllability.

4.3.5.4. Traditions of Elite Formation and Elite Power

Elite formation in Russia has repeatedly been shaped by a service–patronage–control triad: access to status and resources is granted through service to the centre, mediated through patronal networks, and stabilised by the ability to control administrative and coercive instruments. This is not a uniquely Russian pattern, but Russian state development has historically privileged vertical integration of authority, which tends to produce elites whose legitimacy is tied to proximity to the sovereign and whose reproduction depends on the management of appointments. In analytic terms, "elite" here refers not only to wealth holders but to those who can make binding decisions, allocate resources, and shape enforcement outcomes across key institutions. Contemporary political science describing Russia as a patronal system treats personal connections and network-centred coordination as a recurring equilibrium rather than as a transient pathology[1,2]. In such an equilibrium, formal institutions matter, but their practical operation is frequently filtered through personal ties and appointment power. This matters for sanctions acceptability because social pressure mechanisms often assume a relatively direct mapping from household hardship to political pressure on elites. Where elite insulation is strong and elite reproduction is controlled through patronal channels, hardship is more likely to be managed through redistribution, repression, or narrative control than to translate into "bottom-up" political constraint. Therefore, understanding traditions of elite formation is not background; it is part of the causal architecture that governs how social sanctions are interpreted and how costs are distributed.

In the medieval and early Muscovite setting, elite formation was tied to landholding, service, and the consolidation of coercive capacity, producing a political order in which loyalty and military-administrative function were central currencies. The boyar and service-nobility milieu did not operate as a modern meritocracy, but it already contained the principle that status depended on recognised place within a hierarchy linked to the centre. As the Muscovite polity expanded and centralised, the state increasingly shaped the terms of elite status: the elite's security depended on the ruler's favour, while the ruler depended on elites to govern and mobilise resources. This reciprocal dependency fostered a political culture of *court politics*, where access to the sovereign and membership in inner circles became decisive. From the standpoint of elite power, the key instrument was not abstract ideology but control of appointments and local administration, allowing elites to translate proximity to the centre into real-world authority. This model of elite formation tends to produce high incentives for conformity and low

[1] Hale, H. E. (2015). *Patronal politics: Eurasian regime dynamics in comparative perspective*. Cambridge University Press.
[2] Hale, H. E. (2017). Russian patronal politics beyond Putin. *Daedalus, 146*(2), 30–40.

tolerance for autonomous corporate power centres. In sanctions terms, such a tradition is compatible with elite coordination around a central arbiter under pressure, rather than elite fragmentation driven by societal costs.

Imperial Russia formalised service-based elite formation in new ways, particularly through state-driven codification of status and rank. The Table of Ranks (1722) is a classic example: it linked social standing to service grades in the military and civil administration, creating a state-certified ladder of advancement even while retaining hierarchy and privilege. Britannica's description stresses that the Table of Ranks classified grades into a 14-category hierarchy and promoted advancement based on performance rather than genealogy, at least in formal design, and that achieving specific ranks could confer hereditary nobility[1]. The institutional implication is that the state acquired a powerful tool for manufacturing and disciplining elites: it could reward service with status and bind elite careers to bureaucratic evaluation. Even where practice deviated from ideal merit, the logic of elite reproduction became increasingly administrative, documented, and controllable from the centre. This fosters a tradition of elites as state-serving managers, rather than autonomous aristocratic power blocks. For sanctions analysis, this implies that elite power can remain resilient under economic shocks if the state retains appointment authority and status distribution mechanisms. It also implies that elite defections are less likely when status and security depend on central certification rather than independent resources.

The imperial estate (soslovie) order reinforced elite stratification by making legal status a matter of administrative classification, embedding privilege in paperwork and rights allocations. Confino's discussion of the "estate paradigm" shows how soslovie categories structured identity and administration, shaping how society understood privilege and obligation[2]. Elite reproduction in such contexts is sustained not only by wealth but by legally privileged categories that protect status and allocate rights unevenly. The political consequence is a system where elites can govern through categorisation and can frame authority as "proper order", thus naturalising hierarchy. This matters for sanctions acceptability because social sanctions that increase friction tend to encourage citizens to seek category-based pathways—exemptions, special statuses, privileged channels—mirroring historical patterns of access through classification. Where elites can broker those pathways, they can maintain legitimacy by performing protection functions, thereby insulating themselves from the political impact of hardship. The estate tradition thus contributes to a durable social grammar: rights are conditional and mediated, and elites are the managers of mediation. Under pressure, that grammar can strengthen rather than weaken elite authority.

The 19th-century modernisation period created new social strata—professional bureaucrats, officers, industrial managers, and segments of intelligentsia—yet elite formation remained constrained by state control and by the political primacy of the centre. Even when markets expanded, the state often retained decisive influence over property rights, contracts, and careers, shaping the environment in which elite autonomy could develop. This produced what might be called bounded pluralism: new elite segments emerged, but their ability to act independently of the state was limited and episodic. In such conditions, elites learn to invest in political insurance—patrons, ties to ministries, and alignment with the centre—rather than relying solely on market power. This becomes relevant for later periods because it creates a historical precedent for elite adaptation: elites diversify resources but remain politically dependent. For sanctions analysis, the implication is that external economic constraints may pressure economic elites, but political elites can reconfigure the rules of access and convert economic dependency into political discipline. Thus, social costs borne by households do not automatically translate into elite vulnerability. The institutional tradition provides tools for elite stabilisation through administrative and coercive levers.

The Soviet revolution abolished formal estates and aristocracy, yet it did not abolish elite formation; it replaced it with a party-administered appointment system that often-intensified central control. The key

[1] Encyclopaedia Britannica. (2026). *Table of Ranks*.
[2] Confino, M. (2008). The soslovie (estate) paradigm. *Cahiers du Monde russe*, *49*, 681–704. https://doi.org/10.4000/monderusse.9502

institutional instrument was the nomenklatura, which Lewin defines initially as a list of key jobs filled by politically reliable and professionally competent personnel, and which evolved into a broad set of procedures for selecting personnel across administrations[1]. The nomenklatura system turned elite reproduction into an organisational technology: the party-controlled appointments, careers, and often mobility, making loyalty and reliability decisive. This is crucial for understanding elite power because it locates authority not primarily in formal legal checks but in (cadre policy—the ability to appoint and remove. In practice, this created a managed elite with strong incentives for conformity and with limited tolerance for autonomous power centres. The Soviet model thus entrenched the tradition that the key to elite power is control of personnel and administrative levers, not simply ownership. For sanctions, it implies that elite cohesion under external pressure can be maintained through cadre discipline and selective redistribution, even when economic conditions deteriorate.

The nomenklatura also created a distinctive mechanism of elite legitimacy: elite status was justified as service to ideology and state goals, while privileges were often framed as functional necessities rather than as inherited rights. Rigby's classic analysis treats the nomenklatura as a personnel-control system that became central to Soviet political management[2]. The practical consequence is an elite formation logic where access to scarce goods, better housing, and higher-quality services is mediated through institutional position. This resembles earlier hierarchy regimes in that access is stratified, but it differs in ideological framing and in the breadth of administrative control. From a social-sanctions perspective, this history matters because it normalises an expectation that scarcity is managed politically, not purely by market forces. When external pressure increases scarcity or friction, the state can position itself—and its elites—as the allocator and protector, potentially strengthening elite legitimacy among those seeking stability. It also means that elites have well-developed administrative skills for managing distribution and narrative under constraint, which can reduce the political elasticity of household hardship.

Late Soviet and transitional periods illustrate another important tradition: elites can convert political position into durable advantages, including control over property, even when ideology changes. Scholarly discussion of elite continuity after communism has often noted that segments of the party-state elite-maintained status and participated in a transition from political position to property, preserving advantages through institutional conversion rather than losing power outright (for an indicative scholarly treatment, see OUP academic material on Soviet elite continuity). This suggests that elite formation is not only about recruitment; it is about asset conversion mechanisms that allow elites to survive systemic change. Such conversion mechanisms become especially relevant under sanctions, where constrained environments can create new rent opportunities: import substitution, state contracts, and regulated market access. If elites are skilled at converting administrative power into economic advantage, sanctions can inadvertently expand rent spaces that elites can capture, while households absorb friction. This is one reason the report treats over-compliance, informalisation, and brokerage growth as ethically and strategically sensitive: they expand the market for intermediated access, which elites and connected actors can dominate.

Post-Soviet Russia saw a partial shift toward wealth-based elite formation in the 1990s, often described through the rise of oligarchic capital and the intertwining of business and politics. Yet even in that period, elite survival often depended on political sponsorship and on the ability to navigate state institutions. Over time, the balance shifted again toward centralised control, with scholars describing a patronal and increasingly pyramidal configuration in which personal networks and a central arbiter structure elite competition[3,4]. The relevance for this report is the continuity of the central mechanism: elite power is stabilised by appointment control, security-service influence, and privileged access to state resources. This implies that social sanctions that increase household friction do not necessarily weaken elites; they

[1] Lewin, M. (2003). Rebuilding the Soviet nomenklatura, 1945–1948. *Cahiers du Monde russe*, *44*, 219–252. https://doi.org/10.4000/monderusse.8608
[2] Rigby, T. H. (1988). The origins of the nomenklatura system. *Studies in Comparative Communism*, *40*(4), 523–537.
[3] Hale, H. E. (2015). *Patronal politics: Eurasian regime dynamics in comparative perspective*. Cambridge University Press.
[4] Hale, H. E. (2017). Russian patronal politics beyond Putin. *Daedalus, 146*(2), 30–40.

may instead increase dependence on state-controlled access channels, strengthening elite brokerage roles. Therefore, a key acceptability concern is not only the existence of hardship, but whether hardship expands the return to patronage and thereby strengthens vertical power structures.

A major theme in the literature on contemporary Russian elites is the prominence of siloviki—individuals with backgrounds in security and coercive institutions—within political and economic power networks. A 2025 review by Taylor synthesises "twenty years of scholarship" on the siloviki and notes how researchers have defined and analysed this group's entrenchment in Russian politics. This matters for elite formation traditions because it highlights the sustained importance of coercive capital as a route into elite status and as a stabiliser of elite power. In a sanctions' environment, coercive capital can substitute for economic performance as a source of authority: when external pressure increases risk and uncertainty, security-linked elites can plausibly claim greater relevance. The domestic consequence can be a re-weighting of elite hierarchies toward those who manage internal control and strategic industries. For social sanctions acceptability, this is important because civilian-facing restrictions can be framed as security necessities, and the resulting environment tends to empower security-oriented elites, potentially tightening domestic control rather than loosening it.

Empirical studies of elite composition have also examined the mixing of business, security, and bureaucratic elites. Work associated with Kryshtanovskaya and White has been widely cited in discussions of elite turnover and the relative presence of siloviki and business figures in the political elite, stressing that the Russian elite system contains overlapping groups rather than clean sectors (see also related secondary summaries discussing their findings)[1]. This blending is not merely descriptive; it is an institutional mechanism that supports regime stability by preventing any single elite segment from becoming fully autonomous. Overlap creates mutual dependence: business relies on administrative permissions and protection, while administrative elites rely on economic managers to deliver resources and govern strategic sectors. Under sanctions, such overlap can make elite defection less likely, because costs can be redistributed internally and managed through state-directed rents. It also implies that social costs may be buffered for elites while amplified for households, increasing acceptability tension. Thus, the tradition of elite overlap reinforces the report's caution against assuming that diffuse civilian hardship creates direct elite vulnerability.

Elite recruitment and careers in post-Soviet Russia also show continuities with earlier patterns of state-centric formation. Semenova's study of continuities in political elite formation analyses recruitment and careers of MPs and highlights patterns that suggest persistence in elite pathways rather than a fully new democratic elite rotation[2]. This continuity implies that elite formation is not easily disrupted by external pressure; it is reproduced through stable career channels, networks, and institutional filters. For sanctions analysis, the implication is that social sanctions that primarily generate household friction are unlikely to "recruit" a counter-elite by themselves, because elite entry is controlled and buffered. Instead, such friction is more likely to be politicised through narratives of external hostility, which can strengthen elite cohesion. Therefore, acceptability and effectiveness depend on whether sanctions design can discriminate between elite-enabling structures and ordinary life activities. Where sanctions are blunt, they risk strengthening the very elite reproduction mechanisms they are intended to constrain.

Across these periods, a recurring instrument of elite power is control over information and meaning, not only coercion and distribution. While the technologies differ—ceremony, party propaganda, mass media, digital ecosystems—the functional role is similar: elites stabilise authority by shaping how hardship is interpreted and by defining the boundaries of loyalty. This matters for sanctions because the social meaning of sanctions is not given; it is constructed. If sanctions are experienced as arbitrary or collective, elites can frame them as attacks on the nation, activating unity scripts discussed in 4.3.5.2. If sanctions are experienced as targeted and rule-based with protected channels, elites have less

[1] Kryshtanovskaya, O. (2008). The Russian elite in transition. *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics, 24*(4), 491–516. https://doi.org/10.1080/13523270802510602

[2] Semenova, E. (2012). Continuities in the formation of Russian political elites. *Historical Social Research, 37*(2), 71–90. https://www.jstor.org/stable/41636577

material to support collective-punishment narratives. Therefore, elite power traditions intensify the importance of operational precision and protected pathways as governance tools for sanction acceptability. In short, social-sanctions design is partly a contest over interpretation, and elites have historically cultivated strong capacities to manage interpretation under constraint.

These historical traditions can be synthesised into a model of elite formation that is highly relevant for policy: elites are reproduced through (1) appointment control, (2) service credentials and organisational loyalty, (3) access to coercive institutions, and (4) capacity to manage scarcity and narrative. This model helps explain why social sanctions can have ethically problematic and strategically ambiguous effects if they operate primarily through diffuse hardship. Diffuse hardship increases the political demand for allocation and protection, which elites can supply, thereby strengthening their brokerage role. It also increases the value of coercive capacity as a stabiliser, which can shift elite balance further toward security-linked networks. These dynamics do not imply that sanctions are futile; they imply that sanctions must be designed to target elite-enabling channels rather than ordinary life functions. That is consistent with the report's broader argument: ethical robustness—protected channels, reduced over-compliance, and clear remedies—is not a soft constraint but a strategic design requirement in societies with strong vertical elite traditions.

To keep the argument auditable and avoid determinism, it is useful to separate "deep tradition" from "contemporary mechanism." Historically, elite formation relied on service and rank; in the Soviet period, on party-administered appointments; in the post-Soviet period, on a hybrid of state control, security networks, and managed business integration. Yet the functional continuity is the centrality of vertical mediation and controlled recruitment. Table 4.3.5.4-1 summarises these patterns and links them to sanctions-relevant adaptation.

Table 4.3.5.4-1. Traditions of elite formation and elite power in Russia: period mechanisms and sanctions-relevant implications

Period (indicative)	Dominant elite recruitment mechanism	Core sources of elite power	Typical mode of elite reproduction	Sanctions-relevant implication (social sphere)
Muscovite / early empire	Service and proximity to sovereign; court networks	Appointment control; coercive capacity; local administration	Patronage; loyalty; controlled advancement	Hardship can be reframed as external threat; elites stabilise via protection functions
Imperial bureaucracy (18th–19th c.)	Rank- and service-based certification (e.g., Table of Ranks)	Administrative authority; status privileges	State-certified career ladders; elite discipline	Under pressure, elites use administrative levers to buffer themselves and manage distribution
Soviet system	Party-controlled appointments (nomenklatura)	Cadre policy; distribution channels; coercion and surveillance	Organisational loyalty; managed privilege	Scarcity/friction increases demand for allocation; elites legitimise control as stability
Post-Soviet hybrid	Patronal networks; security-service influence; state-brokered business integration	Control of strategic rents; coercive institutions; narrative management	Network reproduction; overlap of siloviki, bureaucrats, and business	Civilian-facing sanctions can strengthen consolidation and brokerage unless protected channels are visible

Authorship: analytical framework (this report) was prepared by the author (mechanism-based synthesis; not a deterministic causality claim)

The table does not claim that history mechanically determines policy outcomes. It claims that institutional repertoires shape what is easy and what is costly in elite management. In sanctions terms, the "easy" pathway for elites is to convert external pressure into internal consolidation and brokerage. The "costly" pathway is to accept pluralistic accountability. Therefore, sanctions that unintentionally strengthen brokerage and consolidation are ethically risky and strategically counterproductive.

In practical acceptability terms, these traditions sharpen the distinction between pressure on elites and pressure on society. If elites can buffer themselves and redistribute burdens, pressure on society becomes pressure on the least protected groups, which conflicts with EU legitimacy commitments and can activate unity narratives. If sanctions instead degrade elite-enabling resources (strategic rents, privileged access to enabling services, and high-value circumvention channels) while preserving protected civilian pathways, the pressure becomes more discriminative. This supports the report's earlier proposals: manage over-compliance, preserve lawful channels for family, education, and health, and ensure that sanctions' social meaning aligns with responsibility rather than collective threat. In short, the tradition of elite formation and elite power in Russia implies that social sanctions should be used sparingly, precisely, and with strong governance safeguards. Otherwise, they risk expanding the very space of patronage and hierarchy through which elites historically reproduce authority.

Finally, the relevance of this subsection is forward-looking. For 2026–2030, any tightening of social sanctions that increases everyday uncertainty will likely interact with existing elite power traditions by raising the demand for state-mediated protection and by expanding brokerage markets. Conversely, policies that maintain predictable protected channels and reduce arbitrary denials can limit the growth of informal intermediaries and weaken the plausibility of collective-punishment narratives. This is why elite formation traditions are placed inside Section 4.3 (limits of acceptability): they do not only describe Russia. They define what kinds of social measures are ethically sustainable and strategically coherent.

4.3.5.5. Specificities and evolution of influence instruments used by the new authority in contemporary Russia (2000–2025)

The period 2000–2025 can be interpreted as an era in which the Russian state progressively rebuilt and then consolidated a comprehensive "influence stack"—a layered set of political, legal, informational, administrative, and coercive instruments designed to shape behaviour, narrow uncertainty for the regime, and stabilise leader-centred legitimacy. The analytical claim is not that the state invented influence or coercion in 2000; rather, it systematised, synchronised, and modernised instruments that had existed in fragmented forms. The result was a governance model in which persuasion, administrative control, and selective coercion became mutually reinforcing rather than separate tools. This matters for social-sanctions analysis because the effectiveness of sanctions that rely on societal pressure depends on whether society retains autonomous channels for coordination and interpretation. Where the state's influence stack is dense, social hardship is more likely to be reframed as external hostility and managed through vertical protection narratives than translated into political constraint. In such contexts, "acceptability limits" are not only ethical boundaries for the EU; they are strategic boundaries, because poorly targeted social sanctions can supply domestic influence instruments with new material for mobilisation. Hence, the focus here is on mechanism: how instruments evolved, how they interact, and what that implies for the social transmission of external pressure.

A useful starting point is the institutional logic often described as the construction of a "power vertical": a re-centralisation of authority that reduces the autonomy of regional, parliamentary, and pluralist counterweights and increases the coordination capacity of the centre. In patronal-politics terms, the system moved toward a configuration in which personal networks and a central arbiter structure elite competition and stabilise regime outcomes[1,2]. This is not merely a story of authoritarian preference; it is an efficiency story under conditions of perceived threat and weak institutional trust. The "power vertical" logic changes the state's influence toolkit because it increases the role of appointments, discipline, and budgetary levers relative to open contestation. It also allows the centre to synchronise messaging, law enforcement priorities, and administrative practice across the federation. For sanctions analysis, the implication is that social pressure applied through friction is likely to be absorbed through central coordination and reframed through state-aligned narratives, rather than generating decentralised

[1] Hale, H. E. (2015). *Patronal politics: Eurasian regime dynamics in comparative perspective*. Cambridge University Press.
[2] Hale, H. E. (2017). Russian patronal politics beyond Putin. *Daedalus, 146*(2), 30–40.

political feedback. The influence stack thus becomes a filter that transforms hardship into "managed meaning".

A second component of the influence stack is ideological framing, particularly the evolution of "managed democracy" and the concept of "sovereign democracy." Whatever one's view of the term's coherence, it functioned as an ideological justification for limiting external influence and prioritising state sovereignty in defining democratic legitimacy[1]. The concept is widely associated with Kremlin political discourse and has been analysed as a framework that signals both internal consolidation and resistance to external normative pressure[2]. Ideological instruments matter because they provide interpretive templates for citizens: if the state claims that external actors seek to undermine sovereignty, then external pressure (including sanctions) can be narrated as proof of hostile intent. This makes it harder for social sanctions to be interpreted as targeted accountability measures, and easier for them to be interpreted as collective pressure. Ideology also provides a bridge between coercion and consent: compliance is not framed solely as fear, but as participation in national defence. Therefore, influence instruments are not limited to laws; they include the production of meaning that makes those laws socially intelligible.

Media control and information governance form a third layer, and they became increasingly central as television and later digital platforms shaped the information environment. The 2000s saw a pattern of consolidation of state influence over major broadcast narratives, while the 2010s–2020s featured a more technical, legal-infrastructural model of digital governance. Contemporary analysis of media regulation in Russia emphasises that foreign influence and independent institutional space have been progressively reduced and framed as instruments of hostile "political warfare" against Russia[3]. This framing is policy-relevant because it links domestic cohesion to the external threat narrative, increasing the probability that sanctions will be interpreted as confirmation rather than as corrective pressure. Where media governance is tight, hardship becomes a resource for mobilisation, and the state can define the moral meaning of sacrifice. Crucially, modern information control is not only about blocking; it is also about agenda-setting, selective amplification, and chilling effects. That implies that social sanctions' most visible effects—banking frictions, mobility constraints, brand exits—are likely to be narratively curated. From an EU standpoint, this increases the importance of *precision and protected channels*, because precision reduces narrative plausibility of collective punishment.

A 4th layer is the legal–administrative encirclement of civil society and political pluralism, most visibly through "foreign agent" and "undesirable organisation" regimes. The foreign agent law introduced in 2012 and subsequently expanded is widely documented as a mechanism that increases administrative burdens and stigma for organisations and individuals alleged to be under foreign influence[4,5]. The "undesirable organisations" law adopted in 2015 empowered authorities to ban foreign and international organisations deemed threatening to constitutional order, defence capability, or state security, with significant criminal liability risks for participation (European Parliament Research Service, 2022). These instruments do not merely restrict specific groups; they shape the entire civic field by raising the expected cost of association and by signalling that foreign-linked networks are suspect. In influence-stack terms, this is a classic chilling mechanism: it reduces the density of independent institutions that could translate social hardship into organised political expression. It also makes it more difficult for external actors to communicate directly with society through civil channels without creating risk for recipients. Consequently, a sanctions strategy that expects civil society to articulate pressure upward must recognise that civil society's operational space is itself shaped by these instruments.

[1] Krastev, I. (2006). "Sovereign democracy", Russian-style. *Journal of Democracy*, *8*(4), 113–117. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26328656

[2] Morris, P.-S. (2018). "Sovereign democracy" and international law: Legitimation and legal ideology. in P. S. Morris (ed.), *Russian Discourses on International Law: Sociological and Philosophical Phenomenon* (pp. 100–129). New York: Routledge Research in International Law, Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315123837-6

[3] Media Research Center. (2024). Media regulation, government and policy in Russia.

[4] ICNL. (n.d.). *Russia: Civic Freedom Monitor*. https://www.icnl.org/resources/civic-freedom-monitor/russia

[5] CIVICUS. (2023). *Foreign agents laws* (report).

The 5th layer is the criminalisation and administrative penalisation of dissent, especially visible in the post-2022 period but built on earlier legal foundations. Freedom House's reporting highlights that after February 2022 authorities expanded prosecutions and proceedings under laws punishing "knowingly spreading false information" and imposed restrictions on how the war could be described, contributing to closures and relocations of independent outlets[1]. Human Rights Watch documents extensive state censorship practices and the increasing isolation of the Russian internet, framing these developments as a systematic control environment rather than episodic censorship[2]. What matters for this report is the mechanism: when the cost of public dissent rises sharply, hardship does not disappear but becomes privately managed and publicly muted. This increases the probability of "private dissatisfaction / public conformity," which undermines simplistic models of societal pressure. It also increases the importance of informalisation and intermediaries, because people continue to solve problems but do so through opaque routes. Thus, the influence stack changes the visibility and transmissibility of social costs.

A 6th layer is digital sovereignty and infrastructural control, which evolved from content restrictions to deeper control over network architecture and user behaviour. The "sovereign internet" framework is widely discussed as enabling more centralised traffic routing and content blocking capabilities, increasing the state's ability to isolate the domestic segment from external infrastructures[3]. Recent reporting has also described continued tightening of digital controls and a growing arsenal of legal tools affecting online activity, reinforcing the sense that digital life is increasingly regulated and surveilled[4]. In influence-stack terms, infrastructure control increases the state's capacity to manage both information flows and coordination costs for mobilisation. It also shapes the sanctions environment: if external platforms and services are blocked or restricted domestically, sanctions-driven corporate exits are less likely to be interpreted as "external loss" and more likely to be reframed as part of an ongoing "digital sovereignty" project. Therefore, sanctions that rely on social discomfort from loss of services may produce less pressure and more reinforcement of the domestic sovereignty narrative. The relevant constraint is that informational connectivity—important for long-run societal openness—becomes a contested space in which external measures can be folded into domestic control narratives.

A 7th layer is surveillance and security-law expansion, which deepens the state's ability to monitor, deter, and pre-empt coordination. International reporting and watchdog analysis frequently note an expansion of security powers and surveillance rationales, especially after 2016, which further raises the risk of organised dissent[5]. Whether one accepts every detail of journalistic accounts, the structural point remains: surveillance capacity increases the cost of collective action and reduces the feasibility of open coordination. In a sanctions' context, this implies that hardship is less likely to be transformed into visible protest and more likely to be internalised, redirected, or channelled through state-managed grievance pathways. It also implies that sanctions messaging campaigns aimed at Russian audiences will face not only censorship but also audience risk: recipients may fear association. That is an acceptability-relevant point because it increases the ethical risk of strategies that rely on social mobilisation under repression. The more repressive the influence stack becomes, the more ethically problematic it is to assume that society can safely convert discomfort into political action. Therefore, the EU's social-sanctions design should avoid relying on harm mechanisms that presuppose safe civic agency.

An 8th layer is electoral management and procedural control, which shapes legitimacy production. The influence stack does not require elections to be abolished; it requires elections to be made predictable through candidate filtering, media asymmetry, administrative mobilisation, and legal penalties for mobilisation outside authorised channels. Comparative scholarship on "managed democracy" emphasises that democratic institutions can be preserved formally while being used as instruments for

[1] Freedom House. (2022). *Russia: Freedom on the Net 2022*. https://freedomhouse.org/country/russia/freedom-net/2022
[2] Human Rights Watch. (2025). *Disrupted, throttled, and blocked: State censorship, control, and increasing isolation*.
[3] Allerson, E. (2022). *The sovereign internet laws and Russia's obligations under international law*. *Minnesota Journal of International Law*, *31*, 233–258.
[4] Human Rights Watch. (2025). *Disrupted, throttled, and blocked: State censorship, control, and increasing isolation*.
[5] AP News, 2024

reproducing power[1]. In such settings, public opinion still matters, but it is managed through narrative and risk, and the range of credible alternatives is narrowed. This interacts with sanctions in two ways. First, hardship may influence attitudes, but attitudes may have limited institutional outlets for producing leadership change. Second, sanctions can be narratively incorporated into electoral legitimacy as proof of external pressure, strengthening "rally" dynamics. Thus, the existence of electoral forms does not guarantee that social strain yields political constraint. For policy realism, the EU should treat the domestic influence stack as limiting the elasticity of political response to social hardship.

A 9th layer is public opinion management, including the strategic use of approval and trust narratives. Levada Center provides time-series data on approval of the President and related metrics, offering a window into public sentiments and their dynamics[2]. Such data is not a perfect measure of regime strength, but it indicates that leader-centred legitimacy can remain high even under substantial external pressure, particularly when narratives and security frames dominate. The key analytic point is that public approval can be supported by multiple mechanisms: perceived stability, fear of disorder, patriotic mobilisation, and limited availability of alternatives. The relevance for social sanctions is that hardship does not automatically erode approval; it can, under some conditions, be translated into support for protection. This reinforces the earlier argument: social sanctions are most likely to backfire when they are experienced as collective hostility. If the influence stack can narrate sanctions as "attack on the people," approval dynamics can remain resilient. Therefore, the EU must treat "public opinion pressure" as an uncertain mechanism and should avoid assuming linearity.

A 10th layer is the administrative economy of scarcity and rents, which becomes particularly important when external pressure changes market structures. When access to international goods and services becomes constrained—whether by sanctions, countermeasures, or corporate exits—new intermediary markets emerge. These markets generate rents for actors positioned to broker access, including those with customs, logistics, payment, or regulatory leverage. This is not speculative; it follows from standard political-economy logic: restrictions create arbitrage opportunities. In patronal systems, such opportunities tend to be captured by those with proximity to administrative power and coercive protection. That means sanctions can unintentionally expand the economic base of patronage networks, strengthening elite cohesion and reducing the political effectiveness of hardship. At the household level, it can increase inequality, because access becomes mediated by brokers and fees. Therefore, social sanctions that rely on consumer discomfort risk producing rent spaces that benefit connected actors. This is a key acceptability concern: sanctions should not systematically convert household welfare loss into elite rent gain.

An 11th layer is the stigmatization architecture, where law and narrative jointly signal that "foreign influence" is suspect. The "foreign agent" and "undesirable" regimes are not only administrative burdens; they are symbolic classifications that can produce stigma and self-censorship[3,4]. Stigma instruments matter for sanctions because they reduce society's capacity to interpret external measures independently. If citizens fear being labelled or associated with foreign-linked activity, they will avoid public engagement with external information and assistance. This increases the domestic state's monopoly over interpretation and thus increases the probability that sanctions will be framed as hostile. It also affects diaspora ties, because cross-border financial support or civil engagement can become socially risky. Hence, the influence stack's stigma layer magnifies the ethical sensitivity of social sanctions: measures that intensify stigma exposure are more likely to harm vulnerable groups and less likely to create productive pressure. This logic supports the report's earlier insistence on protected channels and careful calibration.

[1] Krastev, I. (2006). "Sovereign democracy", Russian-style. *Journal of Democracy*, *8*(4), 113–117. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26328656
[2] Levada Center. (n.d.). *Putin's approval rating* (time-series). https://www.levada.ru/en/ratings/
[3] European Parliament Research Service. (2022). *'Foreign agents' and 'undesirables'* (Briefing). https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/729297/EPRS_BRI(2022)729297_EN.pdf
[4] ICNL. (n.d.). *Russia: Civic Freedom Monitor*. https://www.icnl.org/resources/civic-freedom-monitor/russia

A12th layer is the legal articulation of "extremism," "fake news," and "discreditation" categories, which can be used flexibly to deter undesired speech and coordination. Freedom House documents prosecutions under laws punishing "false information" and related restrictions after 2022, with potentially severe penalties (Freedom House, 2022). The Library of Congress provides descriptions of Russia's 2019 "fake news" laws and their definitions, illustrating how the legal category can be framed broadly around "socially significant false information" and threats to public order and infrastructure (Library of Congress, 2019). In influence-stack terms, these are not merely speech laws; they are coordination laws. They raise uncertainty costs for public communication and create chilling effects, which shrink the space for collective action. For sanctions, the implication is that domestic law can absorb external shocks by restricting how people discuss them, thereby reducing the visibility of hardship as political critique. If hardship cannot be freely discussed, it is less likely to generate organised pressure. Thus, a social-sanctions strategy relying on public mobilisation is structurally constrained by domestic legal categories designed to suppress mobilisation.

A 13th layer is institutionalised internet blocking and throttling, where regulatory bodies can restrict access to information and platforms at scale. Human Rights Watch reports extensive blocking and restrictions since 2022, describing a broader environment of censorship and control (Human Rights Watch, 2025). Even where one debates precise counts, the direction is clear: the state has increased its capacity to manage digital information flows. In sanctions terms, this reduces the ability of external actors to communicate the rationale and targeting logic of sanctions to ordinary citizens. It also increases the likelihood that sanctions are interpreted through domestic frames. This is a key acceptability issue for the EU, because when communication channels are constrained, the only "message" citizens receive may be the hardship itself. If hardship is experienced without credible external explanation, domestic narratives can dominate. That increases backfire risk, especially for measures that are socially salient and easily framed as collective hostility. Therefore, the influence stack's digital layer is a strong argument for prioritising measures that are clearly targeted and for maintaining humanitarian and educational channels that can remain credible despite information constraints.

A 14th layer is the governance of civil society through consolidation and legal transformation, including the 2022 consolidation of "foreign influence" mechanisms into a broader framework noted by civic-freedom monitors (ICNL, n.d.). This suggests a trend toward systematisation rather than ad hoc crackdown: the instruments are being aligned into a single conceptual apparatus. The policy implication is that the influence stack has become more coherent and thus more capable of sustained operation. For sanctions, sustained coherence matters because it reduces the probability that hardship accumulates into uncontrolled political volatility. The state can manage volatility through legal and narrative instruments, and it can selectively accommodate or repress as needed. Therefore, the EU should interpret Russian domestic capacity as a central constraint on how social costs translate into political outcomes. This does not mean sanctions are futile; it means their mechanisms need to be chosen carefully. Social sanctions that produce diffuse harm without clear targeting are likely to be absorbed and reframed; targeted measures affecting elite-enabling channels are more likely to impose real constraints.

A 15th layer is the interaction between domestic influence instruments and external sanctions, which can create a reinforcing cycle. External restrictions can increase domestic securitisation, securitisation can justify more legal tightening, and legal tightening can reduce the space for social interpretation and pluralist feedback. Freedom House's reporting on post-2022 legal restrictions illustrates this dynamic: constraints on war-related reporting and expansion of foreign-agent mechanisms contributed to closures and relocations of outlets[1,2]. When this cycle operates, the social space where sanctions might create "pressure for accountability" narrows. Instead, the domestic system can interpret sanctions as justification for "defensive governance". This is one reason the report treats ethical robustness as

[1] Freedom House. (2022). *Russia: Freedom on the Net 2022*. https://freedomhouse.org/country/russia/freedom-net/2022
[2] Freedom House. (2023). *Russia: Freedom on the Net 2023*. https://freedomhouse.org/country/russia/freedom-net/2023

strategic: by keeping protected channels open and reducing arbitrary harms, the EU reduces the credibility of defensive narratives. The influence stack analysis therefore does not merely describe Russian control; it identifies the conditions under which external policy will be interpreted as legitimate or hostile.

A 16th layer is the role of international and domestic legal discourse as instruments of legitimacy. The state can claim that it is defending constitutional order and security against foreign interference, and this claim can be embedded in legal categories and institutional practice[1]. Such discourse matters because it creates a normative language for citizens to understand restrictions as lawful and necessary. Under sanctions, this normative language can frame hardship as a patriotic duty, reducing the moral leverage of external pressure. Therefore, EU social-sanctions design must anticipate that domestic legitimacy production will use law as rhetoric, not only as coercion. The implication is that sanctions should avoid providing easy legal-rhetorical ammunition in the form of indiscriminate civilian harm. Instead, they should be anchored in clearly articulated accountability logic and paired with visible exemptions that can be credibly communicated even in constrained information environments. This is precisely why the report insists on linking sanctions design to measurable protected pathways.

A 17th, final synthesis, is that the 2000–2025 evolution is best read as a move from selective consolidation to systematised governance of meaning, access, and risk. The influence stack integrates ideology, media governance, civil society restrictions, digital control, and legal repression into a coherent apparatus. The apparatus does not eliminate dissatisfaction; it manages its visibility and channels it into safe forms. This is a crucial constraint for any sanctions strategy that relies on public mobilisation, because mobilisation is precisely what the apparatus is designed to pre-empt. Social sanctions thus face a double risk: they can impose civilian costs while failing to produce the intended political mechanism, and they can supply domestic narratives with evidence of external hostility. For the EU, the policy conclusion is not necessarily to avoid all social measures; it is to apply them with discrimination, preserve protected channels, reduce over-compliance externalities, and invest in communication strategies that make targeting intelligible. In short, Russian influence instruments in 2000–2025 raise the acceptability threshold for social sanctions: if the EU cannot ensure that measures remain clearly targeted and ethically bounded, the strategic and ethical cost-benefit balance deteriorates.

To support later sections, the evolution of the influence stack and its sanctions-relevant implications are summarised in Table 4.3.5.5-1.

Table 4.3.5.5-1. Influence instruments in contemporary Russia (2000–2025): functional evolution and sanctions-relevant implications

Instrument family	Illustrative evolution (2000–2025)	Core mechanism of influence	Likely interaction with EU social sanctions	Implication for EU "acceptability limits"
Ideological framing (sovereignty, managed/sovereign democracy)	Consolidation of sovereignty-first narratives	Reframes pressure as external hostility; legitimises sacrifice	Increases backfire risk for diffuse social hardship	Prefer precise targeting; invest in protected channels and clear rationale
Civil society legal encirclement (foreign agent / undesirable)	Expansion and systematisation since 2012 and 2015; further consolidation noted by monitors	Chilling effect; stigma; reduced autonomous coordination	Reduces translation of hardship into organised pressure	Avoid strategies expecting civic mobilisation; protect low-risk humanitarian/educational pathways

[1] European Parliament Research Service. (2022). *'Foreign agents' and 'undesirables'* (Briefing).

Instrument family	Illustrative evolution (2000–2025)	Core mechanism of influence	Likely interaction with EU social sanctions	Implication for EU "acceptability limits"
Media and information governance	Regulatory consolidation and narrative management	Agenda-setting; selective amplification; chilling effects	Makes sanctions meaning dependent on domestic framing	Minimise collective-effect signals; keep exemptions visible and operational
Digital sovereignty and censorship infrastructure	Increased capacity to block, throttle, and isolate online space	Reduces external communication; increases surveillance capability	Limits EU ability to communicate targeting logic	Avoid relying on "informational persuasion" alone; maintain auditable protected channels
Criminal/administrative repression categories (fake news, discreditation, extremism)	Expanded after 2019 and especially 2022	Deterrence; increased uncertainty cost for dissent	Suppresses public critique of hardship	Ethical risk rises if civilians bear diffuse costs without remedy
Supervisory and security-law expansion	Increased surveillance and coordination capacity	Raises cost of collective action	Encourages private adaptation, not public pressure	Strengthen protected pathways to prevent informalisation and vulnerability harms

Authorship: analytical framework (this report) was prepared by the author (mechanism-based synthesis drawing on sources)

The table acts as an internal cross-reference: it links instrument families to mechanisms and identifies where EU policy levers can realistically reduce backfire risk (for example, by protecting essential pathways and minimising arbitrary friction). The table should be read as a mechanism map, not as a complete legal chronology; it identifies the dominant instrument families and why they matter for sanctions transmission. It also provides a bridge to 4.3.5.6 by showing how contemporary tools can contribute to leader-image construction through protection narratives and control of meaning.

4.3.5.6. The Construction of a New 'Leader' Archetype in 21st-Century Russian Society

The phrase "new leader archetype" is used here as an analytic shorthand for a manufactured model of authority that is reproduced through symbols, institutions, and repetitive narratives, rather than as a claim about a single individual's psychology. In the 21st-century Russian context, the archetype is constructed as a composite: protector, arbiter, war-time commander, guarantor of stability, and the ultimate source of state rationality. The parallels with Stalinism are therefore functional rather than literal: the point is not that today's Russia is identical to the 1930s Soviet Union, but that certain *techniques of legitimacy*—personification of the state, sacralisation of leadership, and moral framing of sacrifice—can recur in modernised forms. Scholarship on personality cults often treats them as *legitimation strategies* deployed when ideological or procedural legitimacy is thin, and where the regime benefits from making loyalty to the leader the primary political identity[1,2]. In a sanctions-relevant frame, this matters because social hardship, uncertainty, and external threat cues can become inputs into leader-centred legitimacy production, especially when the state can control interpretation and ration information. A core proposition of this subsection is that leader-image construction is an instrumental system. It integrates communications, governance, and selective coercion to convert disorder risk into a demand for protection. This system can shape how social sanctions are processed, potentially reducing the elasticity of public discontent and increasing the acceptability of internal constraints under the banner of stability.

[1] Cassiday, J. & Johnson, E. (2010). Putin, Putiniana and the Question of a Post-Soviet Cult of Personality. *The Slavonic and East European Review*, *88*, 681–707. https://doi.org/10.2307/41061898
[2] Sperling, V. (2016). Putin's macho personality cult. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, *49*, 13–23. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.postcomstud.2015.12.001

A disciplined comparison with Stalinism starts from the concept of the "cult of personality" as a set of mechanisms rather than as a moral label. Historical research on the Stalin cult emphasises how it was built through an orchestrated combination of propaganda, ritual, symbolic representation, and organisational discipline to consolidate authority and to resolve elite and mass legitimacy challenges. The Stalin cult drew on earlier revolutionary charisma and then reconfigured it into a personalised source of authority, embedding the leader's image into everyday life and into state institutions. The contemporary Russian case does not replicate the same revolutionary context, yet it can reproduce the logic of personification, where the leader becomes the primary referent for national destiny. Contemporary political analysis explicitly discusses the role of personal image and charisma in Putin-era legitimacy, including the idea that personalisation of rule can become a central mode of governance rather than a mere side-effect of popularity. For sanctions analysis, the relevant issue is that personalisation can change causal pathways: hardship is not automatically attributed to policy failure; it can be attributed to external enemies, with the leader positioned as the defender. Thus, the comparison is best framed as a study of *shared legitimation techniques under different conditions*.

A first mechanism of the archetype is personification of the state, where loyalty to state institutions is re-scripted as loyalty to the leader as their embodiment. In Stalinism, this occurred through the symbolic fusion of Party, state, and the leader's persona, producing a narrative in which the leader was the "brain" and "will" of the collective. In contemporary Russia, a comparable fusion can be produced through the centrality of the leader in public messaging, crisis response staging, and the framing of national security as a domain requiring single-point authority. Research on post-Soviet personality cult dynamics emphasises that a cult can operate as a legitimation strategy, particularly when democratic procedures are weak or contested, and when the regime benefits from substituting ideological commitment with leader attachment[1]. This personification has practical consequences: it concentrates accountability outward (against external threats) and concentrates agency inward (in the leader), reducing the perceived relevance of plural institutional checks. When social sanctions increase friction in mobility, finance, and consumption, personification makes it easier to narrate those frictions as attacks on the nation itself rather than as results of domestic governance choices. That does not guarantee persuasion, but it increases the availability of a "rally" interpretation, which is a constraint on any sanctions strategy expecting hardship to translate into domestic pressure. The archetype therefore functions as a cognitive and institutional filter on sanction-induced social costs.

A second mechanism is protector paternalism, where the leader is framed as guarantor of stability against chaos, and where citizens accept restrictions as the price of security. The protector narrative is historically compatible with hierarchic social scripts discussed in 4.3.5.1–4.3.5.3, but it becomes distinctly modern when fused with media technologies and crisis governance. Contemporary scholarship on Putin's personal image suggests that legitimacy can be supported by carefully staged representations that present the leader as decisive, masculine, and protective, shaping domestic and foreign policy symbolism[2]. The protector narrative changes the welfare-politics relationship: hardship does not necessarily generate protest; it can generate a demand for stronger protective control, especially when alternative coordinative institutions are weak. The relevant sanctions implication is that civilian-facing restrictions (visa tightening, payment frictions, service discontinuation) may be interpreted as additional evidence that protection is required, not as evidence that protection has failed. The archetype becomes particularly resilient when uncertainty is high, because protection is a high-value good in risk environments. Hence, sanctions that increase uncertainty while being experienced as collective can become *fuel* for paternalist legitimacy. This is exactly why acceptability limits and protected channels are not merely ethical conditions; they are strategic conditions that prevent the sanctions regime from supplying the protector archetype with persuasive inputs.

[1] Cassiday, J. & Johnson, E. (2010). Putin, Putiniana and the Question of a Post-Soviet Cult of Personality. *The Slavonic and East European Review*, *88*, 681–707. https://doi.org/10.2307/41061898
[2] Sperling, V. (2016). Putin's macho personality cult. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, *49*, 13–23. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.postcomstud.2015.12.001

A third mechanism is militarised legitimacy, where national identity and political loyalty are anchored to war-time narratives, sacrifice, and victory symbolism. In Stalinism, the "Great Patriotic War" became a foundational legitimacy resource, and the leader's association with victory was integrated into the moral economy of the regime. In contemporary Russia, public opinion and cultural politics have increasingly centred on victory narratives, and social analysts have noted a public emphasis on greatness and national pride. A 2025 analysis of Putin's changing leadership and legitimacy explicitly discusses cult-building as a tradition and places Putin within a longer line of leader-centred legitimation strategies, while observing the mobilisation of personal image in sustaining support[1]. The sanctions connection is direct: sanctions are easy to narrate as part of a war-time siege, converting everyday scarcity and friction into evidence of external aggression. This can increase the moral acceptability of hardship and reduce the social visibility of internal distributional injustice, because sacrifice is framed as collective duty. It also increases the risk that sanctions encourage domestic securitisation, tightening information and civic space. Therefore, the leader archetype is not only a cultural phenomenon. It is a governance instrument that shapes how external measures are metabolised.

A 4th mechanism is controlled visibility and selective truth, which is crucial for turning hardship into loyalty rather than into blame. Stalinism relied on near-total information monopoly and fear, but contemporary systems can rely on a mixture of formal restrictions, agenda-setting, and selective amplification without requiring a single, uniform propaganda voice. Comparative scholarship and reporting emphasise that modern authoritarian systems can maintain high reported approval while narrowing discursive space and increasing the cost of dissent, allowing citizens to remain privately sceptical yet publicly conformist. In such environments, the leader archetype is sustained by controlling which causal stories are socially safe to voice. Social sanctions can inadvertently strengthen this mechanism if they deliver visible frictions without simultaneously delivering credible, accessible explanations of targeting and exceptions. If external communication channels are limited, the primary "message" becomes the hardship itself, which can then be claimed by domestic narratives as evidence of external hostility. This makes it harder for sanctions to produce a clean accountability signal. The result is a feedback loop: (1) external restrictions increase insecurity; (2) insecurity increases demand for control; (3) control reduces interpretive competition; (4) leader-centred narratives become more dominant.

A 5th mechanism is mythic continuity and historical rehabilitation, especially of Soviet-era symbols associated with strength and victory. The parallels with Stalinism become most salient not in direct institutional equivalence, but in the re-legitimation of Stalin as a symbol of state strength and imperial endurance. Evidence of increasing favourable attitudes toward Stalin is widely discussed. Le Monde reported that more than 60% of those polled claimed a positive opinion of Stalin, while alternative voices such as Memorial had disappeared from public discourse, citing Levada's Denis Volkov. The point for this report is not to adjudicate the moral status of these attitudes, but to note the political utility: rehabilitation of Stalin can normalise the idea that harsh methods and sacrifices are justified for national greatness. This symbolic environment makes it easier to construct a leader archetype that blends modern managerialism with Soviet-strength imagery. It also complicates sanction messaging: external pressure can be positioned as an attempt to deny Russia its "historic greatness", thereby strengthening a defensive identity. Therefore, social sanctions that appear population-directed can inadvertently accelerate historical myth-making, while targeted and ethically bounded measures have a better chance of avoiding such narrative capture.

A 6th mechanism is aesthetic saturation, where the leader's image becomes omnipresent through media, ritual, and popular culture products. In Stalinism, saturation was achieved through posters, statues, poems, and ritualised celebrations, making the leader's presence part of the everyday symbolic landscape. Scholarly work on Stalinist visual culture emphasises how archetypes and repeated iconography manufactured a sense of inevitability and moral centrality around the leader. In the

[1] Burrett, T. (2025). Making Russia great again? Vladimir Putin's changing sources of legitimacy 2000–2024. *Politics and Governance*, *13*, 9029. https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.9029

contemporary case, saturation occurs through modern "Putiniana"—documentaries, staged events, controlled interviews, and curated imagery. Cassiday and Johnson's analysis of "Putiniana" addresses the question of whether a post-Soviet cult operates and how official and unofficial representations differ from Soviet cult forms, which is exactly the kind of nuanced comparison this report requires[1]. The sanctions-relevant point is that saturation reduces interpretive openness: repeated imagery trains a default frame ("leader as protector/arbiter"), making alternative causal stories less cognitively available. Under sanctions pressure, the saturated frame supports resilience by normalising sacrifice and discouraging blame.

A 7th mechanism is gendered legitimacy and the "macho protector" trope, which modernises the leader archetype by binding authority to cultural masculinity. Sperling argues that, to the extent there is a personality cult in contemporary Russia, it is defined in highly gendered terms and has shaped both domestic and foreign policy, particularly around the 2014 period and beyond[2]. This matters because the protector archetype is easier to activate under perceived threat when it is embodied as personal toughness and readiness to confront external enemies. Social sanctions can inadvertently amplify this dynamic by increasing perceptions of siege and confrontation. The more citizens interpret sanctions as hostile, the more the macho-protector narrative appears relevant. This is not to claim uniform acceptance; rather, it is to show why the archetype can persist despite hardship. Therefore, when designing social measures, the EU must treat narrative effects as part of the system, not as a marginal "PR issue". The acceptability boundary is crossed when measures provide compelling "siege evidence" while simultaneously harming vulnerable groups, because that combination supplies the protector narrative with both moral and emotional fuel.

An 8th mechanism is institutionalisation of loyalty through career and benefit systems, which echoes Stalinist methods in a modern bureaucratic form. Stalinism fused loyalty to career advancement and material access through party and state hierarchies; contemporary Russia likewise contains institutional pathways where loyalty, alignment, and affiliation can shape career stability and access to opportunities, particularly in state-linked sectors. The logic is not identical, but the functional role is similar: stabilise the elite coalition and reduce the probability that hardship triggers elite fracture. Patronal-politics scholarship emphasises that elite competition is managed through networks and central arbitration, which reduces the likelihood that social costs translate into elite dissent[3,4]. If elites are institutionally bound and citizens expect vertical solutions, then social hardship becomes less likely to produce systemic pressure. Instead, it becomes a problem managed through distribution and narrative. Thus, social sanctions face a structural limitation: they may generate civilian costs without generating proportionate leverage on the governing coalition.

A 9th mechanism is selective repression and fear calibration, which differs from Stalinist terror in scale and form but can still constrain public expression. Stalinism's coercion was extreme and mass-based; contemporary repression can be more selective and legalistic, relying on prosecutions, administrative barriers, and intimidation to create chilling effects. The key parallel is the function: reduce public coordination and make dissent costly. Under such conditions, citizens can remain privately critical while avoiding public mobilisation, limiting the political transmission of hardship. For sanctions analysis, this means that using civilian-facing hardship as a pressure mechanism risks moral failure: it imposes costs on those who may have the least agency to convert those costs into political change. The ethical point becomes strategic: if people cannot safely mobilise, hardship will not generate the expected signal, and the system may consolidate. Therefore, the report's insistence on protected channels and ethical boundaries is grounded in a realistic view of agency constraints.

[1] Cassiday, J. & Johnson, E. (2010). Putin, Putiniana and the Question of a Post-Soviet Cult of Personality. *The Slavonic and East European Review*, *88*, 681–707. https://doi.org/10.2307/41061898
[2] Sperling, V. (2016). Putin's macho personality cult. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, *49*, 13–23. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.postcomstud.2015.12.001
[3] Hale, H. E. (2015). *Patronal politics: Eurasian regime dynamics in comparative perspective*. Cambridge University Press.
[4] Hale, H. E. (2017). Russian patronal politics beyond Putin. *Daedalus, 146*(2), 30–40.

A 10th mechanism is blame management through externalisation and moral polarisation. In Stalinism, external enemies and internal traitors were central explanatory categories; in modern systems, similar categories can be used to interpret economic and social disruptions. When sanctions are present, they provide a ready-made causal object that can be used to explain inflation, service withdrawals, and restricted mobility. If social sanctions are experienced as collective, the blame externalisation frame gains credibility. If, by contrast, sanctions are experienced as targeted, with clear exceptions and accessible lawful routes, the externalisation frame has less plausibility. Hence, the EU's design choices affect the strength of domestic blame narratives. This is why over-compliance externalities in EU banking and platforms are particularly damaging: they widen the set of ordinary people who experience exclusion without understanding why, thereby strengthening externalisation. The leader archetype benefits because it offers protection against the blamed external threat.

An 11th mechanism is the rehabilitation of coercive-modernisation narratives, where historical harshness is reframed as necessary for national development. Public attention to Stalin as a symbol of victory and state-building has grown, and the Levada-linked discourse reported by Le Monde suggests that the disappearance of alternative voices is a factor in this trend. This rehabilitation creates a moral environment where coercion can be interpreted as "effective governance". In that environment, social sanctions can be reframed as external hostility that validates coercive measures as defensive modernisation. The result is a paradox: external pressure intended to constrain aggressive policies may contribute to domestic narratives that justify harsh governance. This is one reason the report treats "social pressure" as an uncertain mechanism and emphasises precision and ethical robustness as both moral and strategic necessities.

A 12fth mechanism is symbolic substitution, where the leader archetype replaces ideology as the primary integrator of political identity. Cassiday and Johnson explicitly frame a personality cult as a legitimation strategy that functions to secure a leader's position in the absence of democratic methods of legitimation[1]. Burrett likewise notes the use of personal image and charisma as a mode of legitimacy in Putin's Russia[2]. This substitution matters because ideological debate becomes less relevant: the political question becomes loyalty to the leader-as-state. Under sanctions, this makes policy evaluation less likely to occur through programmatic critique and more likely to occur through identity alignment. Therefore, hardship may increase loyalty if it increases identity polarisation. The acceptability implication is that sanctions should avoid measures that produce broad identity threats. Protected humanitarian, educational, and family pathways are therefore key not only for ethics but for limiting identity polarisation dynamics.

A 13th mechanism is the performative display of competence, where the leader is staged as uniquely capable of crisis management. In Stalinism, competence was staged through industrial achievements and war-time leadership narratives; in modern contexts, competence is staged through managed events, direct televised interventions, and symbolic demonstrations of control. Such performance can absorb social costs by presenting them as temporary sacrifices under competent stewardship. This is relevant to sanctions because sanctions may create real frictions, but those frictions can be framed as manageable and as proof of national resilience. If social sanctions produce "manageable pain" rather than crisis, the competence narrative can strengthen. Conversely, if sanctions produce chaotic, arbitrary harm—especially via over-compliance and inconsistent application—then they may create discontent, but the discontent's political direction remains uncertain because the leader archetype can reposition blame outward. Therefore, the EU should minimise arbitrariness in its operational layer to avoid inadvertently contributing to this narrative.

A 14th mechanism is youth socialisation under long incumbency, where a generation experiences leader-centred governance as the default. For example, Chicago Council analysis citing a February 2024

[1] Cassiday, J. & Johnson, E. (2010). Putin, Putiniana and the Question of a Post-Soviet Cult of Personality. *The Slavonic and East European Review*, *88*, 681–707. https://doi.org/10.2307/41061898

[2] Burrett, T. (2025). Making Russia great again? Vladimir Putin's changing sources of legitimacy 2000–2024. *Politics and Governance*, *13*, 9029. https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.9029

Levada survey reports very high favourable views of Putin among young Russians. Even if such results are interpreted cautiously due to social desirability effects in constrained environments, the broader point remains: long incumbency can normalise leader-centred rule and reduce perceived alternatives. In such contexts, hardship is more likely to be interpreted within the existing leader framework than to generate alternative political imaginaries. This strengthens the report's caution about expecting "social hardship → political change". It also underlines why social sanctions should be designed to avoid harming precisely the groups whose long-run socialisation might otherwise remain open to pluralist influence (students, researchers, cross-border families). If those groups are harmed disproportionately, sanctions become ethically problematic and may reduce the EU's long-run influence.

A 15th mechanism is the erosion of historical counter-narratives, which reduces society's ability to interpret power critically. Le Monde explicitly links increasing favourable attitudes toward Stalin to the disappearance of alternative voices in public discourse, such as Memorial. The policy relevance is direct: when critical historical memory is weakened, the moral costs of coercive governance are less salient, and leader archetypes aligned with "strength" become easier to legitimise. External sanctions that are experienced as collective can further weaken counter-narratives by reinforcing siege frames, making critical reflection seem disloyal. Therefore, the EU's social-sanctions strategy should aim to avoid strengthening the moral plausibility of coercive archetypes. Again, this is achieved through targeted design and visible humanitarian and educational carve-outs.

A 16th mechanism is the consolidation of "respect for power" as a value, closely linked to the rehabilitation of Stalin. Human rights reporting and commentary have discussed the growth of positive attitudes toward Stalin and the low share of negative attitudes in some Levada polling, illustrating a shift in symbolic valuation toward "strength" and "order." The report treats such shifts as a structural indicator: if a society increasingly admires coercive strength, then external pressure is more likely to be framed as a test of national endurance rather than as a reason for policy change. This does not mean endurance is infinite; it means the political meaning of endurance is controlled. Therefore, sanctions that impose civilian costs without clear targeting are risky: they can become endurance theatre. Targeted sanctions that focus on enabling structures and elite privileges are less likely to generate broad endurance narratives because their social salience is narrower and their moral logic is clearer.

A 17th synthesis is that the "new leader" archetype can be modelled as a system with identifiable components: personification, protector paternalism, militarised legitimacy, narrative control, historical rehabilitation, aesthetic saturation, gendered symbolism, institutionalised loyalty, calibrated repression, and blame management. Many of these components have analogues in Stalinist cult construction, but their contemporary instantiation is adapted to modern media and governance conditions. To maintain auditability, these functional parallels and differences are summarised in Table 4.3.5.6-1.

Table 4.3.5.6-1. Functional parallels between Stalinist cult mechanisms and contemporary leader-image construction (non-equivalence mapping)

Cult/leader-image mechanism	Stalinist exemplar (1929–1953)	Contemporary Russian analogue (21st century)	Sanctions-relevant implication (social sphere)
Personification of the state	Leader as embodiment of Party/state; ritualised loyalty[1]	Leader-centred legitimacy; state-as-leader framing in crisis narratives[2]	Diffuse social hardship can be reframed as attack on collective identity
Protector paternalism	"Father of peoples"; order and security as moral goods[1]	Protector/arbiter narrative; stability-first messaging[2]	Uncertainty-inducing sanctions can strengthen demand for strong authority
Militarised legitimacy and victory symbolism	War-time victory narrative central to legitimacy	Victory and siege framing; mobilisation of endurance narratives[3]	Sanctions can be narrated as siege evidence, reducing pressure elasticity

Cult/leader-image mechanism	Stalinist exemplar (1929–1953)	Contemporary Russian analogue (21st century)	Sanctions-relevant implication (social sphere)
Aesthetic saturation	Posters and iconography saturating everyday space[1]	Modern "Putiniana" and curated imagery; documentary aesthetics[2]	Visibility of sanctions effects may be curated; meaning becomes managed
Gendered leadership symbolism	Hyper-masculine strength tropes in propaganda (contextual)	"Macho" cult tropes shaping legitimacy (Sperling, 2016)[2]	External pressure may amplify protector masculinity frames
Historical rehabilitation	Justification through historical destiny narratives	Growing public positivity toward Stalin as strength symbol[3]	Collective-effect sanctions risk reinforcing coercive-strength admiration

Authorship: analytical framework (this report) was prepared by the author (mechanism-based mapping; functional parallels only; no claim of institutional identity)

Sources:

[1] Pisch, A. (2016). The rise of the Stalin personality cult. In A. Pisch. *The personality cult of Stalin in Soviet posters, 1929–1953: Archetypes, inventions and fabrications* (pp. 87–190). ANU Press.

[2] Cassiday, J. & Johnson, E. (2010). Putin, Putiniana and the Question of a Post-Soviet Cult of Personality. *The Slavonic and East European Review*, *88*, 681–707. https://doi.org/10.2307/41061898; Sperling, V. (2016). Putin's macho personality cult. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, *49*, 13–23. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.postcomstud.2015.12.001;

[3] Quénelle, B. (2024, Dec 5). *Kremlin seeks to erase the memory of Soviet repression*. Lemonde. https://www.lemonde.fr/en/

The table is not an assertion that present-day Russia equals Stalinism; it is a mechanism tool that highlights why sanction-induced hardship can be narratively absorbed and potentially converted into support for protective authority. The key policy implication is that social sanctions should be designed to minimise the regime's capacity to weaponise them as collective-siege evidence. This requires clarity, precision, and protected pathways.

In conclusion, the parallels with Stalinism are best understood as recurring legitimation techniques rather than as direct institutional replication. The new leader archetype is constructed through a coordinated influence stack (see 4.3.5.5), and it operates effectively when external pressure provides credible threat cues and when internal narrative competition is limited. The implications for sanctions acceptability are stringent: civilian-facing harm that is diffuse, arbitrary, or difficult to contest is both ethically problematic and strategically likely to backfire by reinforcing protection narratives. Conversely, sanctions that preserve clear humanitarian, educational, and family pathways, reduce over-compliance externalities in the EU's operational layer, and maintain intelligible targeting logic are less likely to feed the archetype. Thus, the leader archetype analysis reinforces the report's broader argument: ethical robustness is a condition of strategic coherence in social sanctions, particularly in contexts where leader-centred legitimacy production is dense and historically resonant.

4.4. Prospects for Social Sanctions Policy against Russia (2026–2030)

4.4.1. Scenarios and Policy Drivers

Prospects for the EU's social sanctions policy against Russia in 2026–2030 should be approached as a scenario space rather than a linear forecast. Social sanctions are here understood as restrictive measures that shape mobility, reputational access, service provision, informational and cultural interfaces, and the practical ability of individuals and organisations to "normalise" cross-border

presence. In the EU architecture, such measures operate alongside asset freezes and sectoral restrictions, and are sustained through a legal-administrative chain that spans Council decisions, regulations, Commission guidance, and Member State enforcement. Their political logic is not limited to economic deprivation; it is also communicative, normative and deterrent, and therefore more exposed to legitimacy tests. Over the 2026–2030 horizon, the policy environment will likely be characterised by periodic "re-pricing" of what is socially permissible, rather than a single direction of travel. As a result, the most robust analytic frame is a set of scenarios conditioned by identifiable policy drivers and constraints. The four scenarios below are not mutually exclusive across time; rather, they represent dominant regimes that may alternate as the strategic context shifts. This section therefore maps baseline continuity, tightening, selective easing, and hybrid models, and specifies the principal drivers that determine which regime becomes dominant.

Before detailing scenarios, it is important to clarify what makes social sanctions distinctive within the EU's restrictive measures toolkit. First, they frequently engage rights-adjacent domains such as travel, access to services, and expressive or associational space, which increases salience and litigation risk. Secondly, they are highly dependent on administrative discretion (consular practice, exemptions, licensing, and compliance screening), making implementation heterogenous across Member States. Thirdly, they are particularly sensitive to EU domestic politics because they directly affect visible categories of people (tourists, students, cultural figures, athletes, academics, dual citizens, family members) rather than abstract "sectors". Fourthly, their strategic utility often lies in signalling and disruption of elite–society interfaces, which is hard to measure and easy to contest. Finally, they interact with the EU's anti-circumvention posture, where the focus shifts from broad bans to compliance controls, due diligence obligations, and criminalisation of sanctions violations in Member States. The adoption of harmonised criminal offences for sanctions violations has already shifted the incentives for enforcement and risk management within the EU, raising the expected cost of facilitation and evasion. Directive (EU) 2024/1226 and the Commission's communications on its entry into force have been explicit about strengthening criminal enforcement across the Union, which matters directly for the plausibility of tightening and hybrid scenarios[1,2].

The baseline scenario for 2026–2030 is best defined as "managed continuity": restrictive measures remain structurally intact, while implementation is periodically adjusted through guidance, exemptions, and incremental listings. Under baseline continuity, the EU maintains the normative framing of sanctions as a response to aggression and to broader rule-of-law and human-rights concerns, continuing to use listings, travel bans, and asset freezes as standard instruments. The Council's public explanation of sanctions mechanics indicates that these instruments are designed to restrict travel, freeze assets, and prevent EU persons from making funds available to listed actors, which will remain the core baseline[3]. Baseline continuity does not imply a static policy; rather, it implies that the directional trend is preserved while the "edges" of application are refined. In the social domain, this manifests as stable restrictions on certain categories of services and access, paired with ongoing licensing for humanitarian, diplomatic, or narrowly framed exemptions. Baseline continuity is also compatible with a sustained anti-circumvention posture, where the practical emphasis is placed on compliance and enforcement rather than widening the formal scope of bans. Commission updates to interpretative FAQs, particularly around restricted services, are indicative of how baseline continuity becomes operationally more specific over time (as summarised in professional compliance commentary)[4].

[1] European Parliament & Council of the European Union. (2024, April 24). *Directive (EU) 2024/1226 on the definition of criminal offences and penalties for the violation of Union restrictive measures*. *Official Journal of the European Union*.
[2] European Commission. (2024, May 17). *New EU rules criminalising the violation of EU sanctions enter into force*.
[3] Council of the EU. (n.d.). *EU sanctions against Russia: questions and answers*. https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions-against-russia-explained/
[4] Vinas, J. M., Pascual, D. S., Piruzyan, T., Machado, J., & Torrego, A. M. (2026). *EU sanctions update: Revised restrictions on the provision of services to Russia*. Squire Patton Boggs.

The tightening scenario is defined as "escalatory social containment": the EU expands social restrictions in response to heightened security threats, sustained war intensity, or demonstrable circumvention patterns that exploit social channels. Tightening does not necessarily mean an indiscriminate expansion; it more plausibly means a targeted tightening of mobility pathways, service interfaces and permissive categories of access. A concrete precedent is the tightening of visa policy for Russian citizens, justified on security grounds and concerns about misuse, while still acknowledging exceptions for dissidents, journalists, and family links[1]. In a tightening regime, Member States are incentivised to apply stricter scrutiny, to reduce multiple-entry pathways, and to treat social access as a risk-screening domain. Tightening is also likely to increase the density of listings under thematic regimes such as human rights, which directly expands travel bans and asset freezes for individuals linked to repression or politically motivated prosecutions. The EU's use of human-rights listings against Russian officials demonstrates that such thematic expansion can occur alongside broader packages, with unanimity politics acting as a gating constrain[2]. Over 2026–2030, tightening becomes plausible if the EU perceives social interfaces as enabling intelligence risk, sabotage, or sustained sanction-evasion ecosystems.

Selective easing is defined as "conditional humanitarian-reputational normalisation": certain social restrictions are relaxed or better "channelled" into verified exemptions, without strategic abandonment of sanctions. This scenario is not a return to pre-2022 normality; it is a controlled administrative easing oriented around differentiation. Differentiation may be expressed through clearer exception categories (e.g., family reunification, medical cases, verified students, cultural or scientific engagement under integrity controls) and through evidence-based criteria that separate sanctioned networks from non-complicit populations. Selective easing may be prompted by diplomatic negotiations, fatigue in domestic constituencies, or a desire to preserve EU credibility by avoiding indiscriminate social exclusion. It may also be triggered by judicial scrutiny that requires higher evidentiary standards for certain measures or associated-person criteria, thereby pushing policy towards better reason-giving and narrower targeting. In practice, easing is most likely to occur through guidance, licensing practice, and administrative priorities, rather than through headline "rollbacks". Importantly, selective easing still requires credible enforcement; otherwise, exemptions become a circumvention channel. The scenario therefore presupposes a mature compliance ecosystem, including harmonised criminal enforcement for violations and improved information sharing across Member States[3].

The hybrid scenario is the most realistic regime for long horizons: "strategic hardening with controlled openings". Under hybrid logic, the EU simultaneously hardens enforcement and anti-circumvention measures while maintaining or even widening exemptions for protected categories, and it may tighten some social domains while easing others. This is consistent with a policy posture that seeks to maximise strategic pressure while minimising reputational costs and legal vulnerabilities. Hybrid models typically arise when the Union must reconcile diverse Member State preferences and when unanimity constraints prevent a clean move to either full tightening or broad easing. Hybrid governance also reflects the internal differentiation of EU policy competences: some measures are highly centralised in their legal form but decentralised in their implementation. Moreover, hybrid logic aligns with an enforcement-led approach, in which the operational focus is placed on closing loopholes, prosecuting facilitation, and using data-driven compliance screening. Policy briefs and enforcement analyses increasingly emphasise anti-circumvention as a core axis of sanctions effectiveness, implying that the "centre of gravity" shifts from writing ever broader prohibitions to making existing rules harder to evade[4]. Hybrid models therefore fit a world in which the EU's normative stance remains firm, but policy instruments are calibrated through enforcement capacity and legal sustainability.

[1] Cook, L. (2025, November 7). *EU tightens visa restrictions on Russians over the Ukraine war and acts of sabotage*. Associated Press.
[2] Reuters. (2026, February 23). *EU adds eight Russian officials to human rights sanctions list*.
[3] European Commission. (2024, May 17). *New EU rules criminalising the violation of EU sanctions enter into force*.
[4] Jacques Delors Institute. (2025). *Tackling circumvention of EU sanctions*.

Table 4.4.1-1. Scenario matrix for EU social sanctions policy towards Russia (2026–2030)

Scenario	Core policy logic	Typical social instruments	Primary triggers	Binding constraints
Baseline (Managed continuity)	Preserve restrictive posture; refine implementation	Listings/travel bans; service restrictions; guidance/FAQs; stable exemptions	Status-quo war/security context; steady Member State consensus	Unanimity; administrative capacity; litigation risk
Tightening (Escalatory social containment)	Reduce social interfaces that enable risk and evasion	Stricter visa/mobility pathways; expanded listings; narrower access to certain services	Security incidents; sabotage/espionage concerns; visible circumvention	Domestic backlash; proportionality/legal review; divergent Member State interests
Selective easing (Conditional normalisation)	Differentiate populations; protect EU credibility; channel exemptions	Wider verified exemptions; clearer licensing; narrowed application to high-risk categories	Negotiations; domestic fatigue; judicial scrutiny on evidentiary standards	Circumvention risk; enforcement shortfalls; political veto players
Hybrid (Hardening + controlled openings)	Pressure maintained; enforcement strengthened; targeted humanitarian/reputational openings	Enhanced enforcement and screening; anti-circumvention focus; selective mobility/service corridors	Mixed signals: high enforcement demands + reputational/legal pressures	Implementation heterogeneity; data-sharing limits; unanimity bargaining

Authorship: analytical framework (this report) was prepared by the author (analytical synthesis based on EU primary and secondary sources cited in the text of Section 4.4.1)
Sources:

- Council of the EU, "EU Sanctions against Russia: Explained". https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions-against-russia-explained/
- Directive (EU) 2024/1226 (EUR-Lex). https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dir/2024/1226/oj/eng
- European Commission (rules on criminalising sanctions violations). https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/new-eu-rules-criminalising-violation-eu-sanctions-enter-force-2024-05-17_en
- AP Report on Visa Tightening. https://apnews.com/article/dc830d5f208539d91a5e18948280a5a9
- Reuters report on human-rights listings — https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/eu-imposes-sanctions-8-individuals-involved-human-rights-violation-russia-2026-02-23/

Across all scenarios, the first driver cluster is the security context, which includes both battlefield dynamics and internal security considerations within the EU. A deteriorating security environment increases the political acceptability of restrictions that would otherwise be criticised as "collective social punishment". Security context also affects the credibility of risk-based screening: where threats are salient, screening becomes a public expectation rather than a technocratic choice. Conversely, a stabilising security context does not automatically produce easing, but it can shift the debate from urgency to proportionality and sustainability. Importantly, "security" in this frame is broader than military risk; it includes sabotage concerns, disinformation, and the integrity of the Schengen area. The precedent of visa tightening justified on sabotage and misuse concerns illustrates how social restrictions can be framed as internal security policy rather than foreign policy alone[1]. Over 2026–2030, security incidents in Member States could therefore act as catalytic events for tightening or hybrid hardening. By contrast, prolonged absence of security shocks can increase political space for selective easing via verified corridors.

[1] Cook, L. (2025, November 7). *EU tightens visa restrictions on Russians over the Ukraine war and acts of sabotage*. Associated Press.

The second driver cluster is EU domestic politics, including electoral cycles, coalition dynamics, and the framing of sanctions in the public sphere. Social sanctions are unusually exposed to domestic contestation because they create visible "boundary effects" that citizens can observe and interpret through moral and identity narratives. Domestic politics also shapes the unanimity calculus: Member States whose governments face higher populist pressure may demand either harder measures (to signal toughness) or more exceptions (to protect domestic interests and specific communities). The Reuters reporting on unanimity requirements for listings is a reminder that even widely supported measures may be held hostage by a single veto player in broader negotiations[1]. Over time, domestic politics may push policy towards hybrid compromises: symbolic tightening paired with practical exemptions, or legal hardening paired with rhetorically "humane" openings. Domestic politics also interacts with administrative capacity, because the implementation burden falls on national agencies that respond to political priorities and budget constraints. Finally, domestic legitimacy concerns are amplified when sanctions are framed as affecting ordinary people rather than elites, increasing the need for differentiation narratives. A sustainable baseline therefore requires messaging that emphasises targeting, exemptions, and legal safeguards.

The third driver cluster is enforcement capacity, which determines whether policy is substantively effective or merely declaratory. Enforcement capacity includes the resourcing of customs, financial intelligence, police, prosecutors, consular services, and regulators, as well as the quality of inter-agency coordination and private-sector compliance. A major institutional development is the harmonisation of criminal offences and penalties for sanctions violations across the EU, which raises the expected cost of facilitation and supports a more enforcement-led model[2,3]. When enforcement is credible, the EU can afford to be more selective and risk-based, because it can police exemptions and corridors. When enforcement is weak or uneven, policymakers may resort to broader bans because granular targeting becomes too costly to implement. This produces a paradox: low enforcement capacity can lead to stricter formal rules but poorer real-world outcomes, because evasion becomes concentrated in weak-link jurisdictions. Over 2026–2030, a material increase in enforcement capacity would favour hybrid and selective easing models, whereas persistent heterogeneity would bias towards symbolic tightening and formal breadth. In that sense, enforcement is a structural driver that shapes the feasible frontier of instrument design.

The fourth driver cluster is judicial review dynamics, encompassing both the Court of Justice of the EU and the General Court's review of restrictive measures, as well as the Council's evolving "standard of proof" and reasoning practices. Litigation does not merely remove individuals from lists; it shapes the design of criteria, the articulation of reasons, and the periodic review discipline. Summaries of recent case law indicate that the courts have annulled certain retention decisions where the evidentiary basis and reasoning were insufficient, which incentivises better documentation and narrower criteria[4,5]. Judicial dynamics therefore favour targeting precision, procedural safeguards, and periodic reassessment, which is compatible with selective easing and hybrid models. At the same time, judicial review can also entrench restrictions by clarifying interpretation and confirming permissible scopes, thereby stabilising the baseline. A clear example of interpretative boundary-setting is the discussion in sanctions practice guides of CJEU reasoning on the scope of service bans under Regulation 833/2014, which affects how "social" and "professional" services are treated[6]. Over 2026–2030, judicial dynamics are likely to push policy away from vague "association" logics and towards evidentially supported risk narratives, reshaping how social sanctions are justified and defended.

[1] Reuters. (2026, February 23). *EU adds eight Russian officials to human rights sanctions list*.
[2] Directive (EU) 2024/1226 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 April 2024 on the definition of criminal offences and penalties for the violation of Union restrictive measures and amending Directive (EU) 2018/1673.
[3] European Commission. (2024, May 17). *New EU rules criminalising the violation of EU sanctions enter into force*.
[4] EUCRIM. (2025, October 27). *CJEU Rulings on Restrictive EU Measures against Russia (May – October 2025)*.
[5] CURIA. (2025, April 2). Judgement of the General Court (First Chamber).
[6] Borovikov, E., Engelen, L., Ancion, A., Medvedkov, S. (2025, August 29). *Sanctions 2025: Law and Practice*. Chambers & Partners.

Table 4.4.1-2. Policy drivers and their directional effects on the four scenarios

Driver cluster	High intensity / strong presence tends to push towards	Low intensity / weak presence tends to push towards	Why it matters specifically for "social" sanctions
Security context	Tightening / Hybrid	Baseline / Selective easing	Social access framed as security risk (mobility, misuse, sabotage narratives)
EU domestic politics	Hybrid (compromise) or Tightening (symbolic toughness)	Baseline / Selective easing (less politicised)	Visible impacts on people; higher salience and polarisation
Enforcement capacity	Hybrid / Selective easing (risk-based)	Tightening by breadth (compensatory) or weak baseline effectiveness	Exemptions and corridors require credible enforcement and compliance
Judicial review dynamics	Selective easing / Hybrid (precision + safeguards)	Baseline (if litigation stabilises) or Tightening (if politics overrides)	Legitimacy and proportionality tests are sharper in social domains

Authorship: analytical framework (this report) was prepared by the author (analytical synthesis)
Sources:

- EUR-Lex Directive (EU) 2024/1226. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dir/2024/1226/oj/eng
- European Commission notice on entry into force. https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/new-eu-rules-criminalising-violation-eu-sanctions-enter-force-2024-05-17_en
- EUCRIM case-law digest. https://eucrim.eu/news/cjeu-rulings-on-restrictive-eu-measures-against-russia-may-october-2025/
- CURIA (example restrictive-measures judgment). https://curia.europa.eu/juris/document/document.jsf?docid=297466&doclang=en
- Council sanctions explained. https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions-against-russia-explained/

rom a scenario-selection perspective, the most decisive mechanism is the interaction between security context and domestic politics. Where security risks are elevated and electorates are anxious, the political cost of tightening decreases, and "symbolic" social measures become easier to adopt. Where security risks are elevated but domestic politics is fragmented, hybrid solutions tend to emerge, combining enforcement hardening with controlled exemptions. Conversely, where security risks are lower but domestic politics is polarised, policymakers may still pursue tightening for signalling reasons, even if the strategic payoff is limited. This matters because social sanctions are often used to demonstrate resolve in a way that is easily communicable to voters. The baseline scenario is strongest when both security salience and polarisation are moderate, allowing for managerial continuity. Selective easing requires not only reduced security salience but also a domestic political coalition that accepts differentiation narratives. Such narratives typically rely on explicitly protected categories (dissidents, journalists, family ties), which has already appeared in EU visa policy communication[1]. Therefore, the political feasibility of easing is less about moral arguments alone and more about how "risk" is narratively and administratively managed.

Enforcement capacity acts as a "feasibility filter" across all scenarios. If enforcement is weak, tightening through broad restrictions becomes a substitute for precise implementation, but this can inadvertently increase the incentive for circumvention and third-country rerouting. If enforcement is strong, the EU can move towards narrower, more defensible measures while still maintaining pressure, because breaches become punishable and compliance becomes predictable. Harmonised criminalisation of

[1] Cook, L. (2025, November 7). *EU tightens visa restrictions on Russians over the Ukraine war and acts of sabotage*. Associated Press.

sanctions violations is a foundational step in this direction, although practical effectiveness depends on national transposition, resourcing, and prosecutorial priorities[1,2]. Over 2026–2030, an enforcement-led posture would likely support hybrid models that combine selective access with tougher penalties for facilitation. In social sanctions, this is particularly relevant for service provision domains, where private entities (platforms, financial institutions, professional service providers) become quasi-enforcers through compliance screening. Commission interpretative guidance and FAQs can therefore be read as governance tools that steer the private sector's risk appetite. This is one pathway through which baseline continuity becomes, in practice, tighter without headline legislative change.

Judicial review dynamics are often underestimated as a policy driver because they appear ex post, yet they structure the incentives for ex ante design. Where courts demand robust reasoning and evidence, the Council and Member States are pushed to adopt better documentation and clearer linkage criteria. This tends to reduce reliance on broad associative categories and to increase the share of targeted, individualised cases. Summaries of litigation outcomes in restrictive measures indicate that failures of reasoning and evidentiary support can lead to annulments, which is reputationally and institutionally costly for the Council[3]. In a tightening regime, this driver can create friction: political pressure may demand visible expansion, while legal sustainability demands precision. Hybrid strategies can reconcile the two by keeping the political message firm while narrowing the legally contestable components. Selective easing may also be partly "judicially induced" if risk-heavy measures prove vulnerable. Importantly, judicial review does not inherently weaken sanctions. It can strengthen them by forcing clarity, thereby improving compliance and reducing arbitrary application. Over 2026–2030, judicial dynamics are likely to push social sanctions towards more explicit risk rationales, verified exemptions, and periodic review routines.

Unanimity remains a structural constraint that conditions all scenario transitions. The requirement of unanimous agreement in the Council means that even a modest move towards tightening or easing can be blocked, delayed, or traded for concessions in other policy domains. Reporting on sanctions decisions frequently notes unanimity as a binding procedural condition, which implies that scenario shifts may occur in "packages" where multiple issues are bundled[4]. For social sanctions, unanimity can lead to hybrid outcomes, because compromise often takes the form of tighter formal language paired with broader exemptions or implementation discretion. This raises the importance of "soft law" instruments such as FAQs, interpretative guidance, and national administrative practice, which can evolve under the radar of headline unanimity politics. It also increases the relevance of thematic regimes (e.g., human rights listings) that can be expanded incrementally, sometimes with lower political cost than broad sectoral measures. Therefore, the EU's social sanctions posture may tighten or soften through cumulative micro-adjustments rather than through a single landmark decision. Over 2026–2030, the most plausible trajectory is not a smooth path but a sequence of adjustments shaped by internal bargaining constraints.

A further cross-cutting driver is the EU's external coordination environment, particularly alignment with partners and the management of third-country circumvention routes. Although this section focuses on social sanctions, it is difficult to separate social access from the broader compliance perimeter: mobility, services and reputational access can enable or constrain circumvention networks. Policy analysis on anti-circumvention increasingly emphasises that enforcement and implementation, rather than mere adoption, determine impact[5]. In a tightening scenario, the EU may place greater emphasis on constraining "social channels" that facilitate circumvention, such as tourism-linked services or professional services that can be repurposed. In selective easing, external coordination becomes essential to ensure that eased corridors are not exploited via third-country laundering. Hybrid strategies

[1] Directive (EU) 2024/1226 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 April 2024 on the definition of criminal offences and penalties for the violation of Union restrictive measures and amending Directive (EU) 2018/1673.
[2] European Commission. (2024, May 17). *New EU rules criminalising the violation of EU sanctions enter into force*.
[3] EUCRIM. (2025, October 27). *CJEU Rulings on Restrictive EU Measures against Russia (May – October 2025)*.
[4] Reuters. (2026, February 23). *EU adds eight Russian officials to human rights sanctions list*.
[5] Jacques Delors Institute. (2025). *Tackling circumvention of EU sanctions*.

are again advantaged because they can harden enforcement while offering controlled access. Over 2026–2030, external coordination dynamics will likely interact with domestic politics, because perceived "leakage" through third countries can become a domestic controversy, pushing policy back towards tightening. Therefore, the credibility of anti-circumvention controls is not only a technical matter but a scenario determinant.

Scenario assessment should also incorporate the evolving role of Commission guidance and technical interpretation, which can effectively re-define the operational scope of restrictions without changing primary legal instruments. Updates to FAQs on service restrictions, including advanced technology and tourism-related services, show how the compliance perimeter can be clarified and expanded through interpretative practice[1]. In baseline and hybrid scenarios, this "interpretative drift" is a key mechanism: policy becomes more targeted and enforceable through definitions, examples, and compliance expectations. In tightening scenarios, guidance can formalise stricter interpretations that reduce grey zones. In selective easing, guidance can create verified exemption channels and standardise criteria, reducing arbitrary outcomes. This driver matters for social sanctions because many social restrictions are implemented through services, intermediaries, and platforms that rely heavily on compliance interpretation. Over 2026–2030, the EU's capacity to steer private-sector compliance through guidance will likely expand, creating a more data-driven governance style. The net effect is that the same headline restriction can become materially stricter or more permissive depending on interpretative and enforcement practice. Hence, scenario analysis must treat guidance as a quasi-instrument, not merely an explanatory annex.

Putting the drivers together, the baseline scenario appears most likely as a "default equilibrium", with periodic tightening pulses when security salience spikes and selective easing micro-corridors when reputational and legal pressures accumulate. Tightening becomes dominant if security incidents and circumvention narratives converge with domestic political incentives for visible toughness. Selective easing becomes dominant only if a stabilising context coincides with strong enforcement capacity and a coalition willing to defend differentiation publicly. Hybrid governance is likely to be the modal outcome because it accommodates unanimity constraints and the need to reconcile enforcement hardening with legal sustainability. The criminalisation of sanctions violations across the Union is particularly supportive of hybrid and targeted approaches, because it raises the expected cost of facilitation and strengthens the credibility of compliance screening[2,3]. Judicial review dynamics reinforce this by pushing the system towards better evidentiary standards and clearer reasoning[4]. Therefore, the 2026–2030 period is best characterised as an evolution towards enforcement-centred, legally defensible social restrictions, rather than an unstructured expansion of bans.

For the report's purposes, the practical implication is that scenario monitoring should be built around leading indicators for each driver. Security indicators include major incidents attributed to Russian state or proxy activity, escalatory shifts in the war, and Schengen integrity concerns. Domestic political indicators include electoral outcomes in key Member States, coalition shifts, and public discourse on "fairness" and "collective punishment". Enforcement indicators include transposition and practical application of sanctions criminalisation, resourcing trends, and the intensity of investigations and prosecutions. Judicial indicators include the share and success rate of annulment actions, and the emergence of doctrinal constraints on criteria and evidence. Because unanimity is a binding constraint, the report should also track veto risk and issue-linkage dynamics inside the Council. The scenario framework presented above offers a structured way to avoid ad hoc forecasts and to keep policy analysis grounded in observable drivers. Finally, the framework helps separate "headline politics" from

[1] Vinas, J. M., Pascual, D. S., Piruzyan, T., Machado, J., & Torrego, A. M. (2026). *EU sanctions update: Revised restrictions on the provision of services to Russia*. Squire Patton Boggs.
[2] European Parliament & Council of the European Union. (2024). *Directive (EU) 2024/1226 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 April 2024 on the definition of criminal offences and penalties for the violation of Union restrictive measures and amending Directive (EU) 2018/1673*.
[3] European Commission. (2024, May 17). *New EU rules criminalising the violation of EU sanctions enter into force*.
[4] EUCRIM. (2025, October 27). *CJEU Rulings on Restrictive EU Measures against Russia (May – October 2025)*.

operational governance, which is essential for analysing social sanctions that operate primarily through administrative and compliance infrastructures rather than solely through declarative legal texts. The EU's public explanations of restrictive measures' mechanics provide a stable baseline for this institutional reading[1].

4.4.2. Expected Evolution of Instrument Design

The expected evolution of EU social sanctions instruments in 2026–2030 is less about adding ever more prohibitions and more about refining how restrictions are scoped, implemented, verified, and enforced. After several years of iterative package-building, the EU toolkit is increasingly shaped by operational frictions: heterogenous Member State implementation, private-sector compliance costs, litigation exposure, and adaptation by Russia and third-country enablers. These frictions incentivise a design logic that favours narrower definitions, stronger evidentiary rationales, and clearer compliance pathways, rather than headline-driven breadth.

A central shift is likely to be the movement from "broad category bans" towards "targeted, data-driven controls". In social sanctions, this translates into tighter specification of who is in scope (which natural persons, which entity types, which service relationships) and which activity triggers liability. The Commission's approach to consolidating and updating implementation FAQs illustrates the emerging governance model: design is increasingly expressed through interpretative infrastructure rather than only through new legal text. A consolidated FAQ system acts as a living layer that reduces ambiguity, standardises market behaviour, and makes enforcement more predictable[2].

This evolution is reinforced by the EU's explicit push to criminalise and harmonise sanctions violations across Member States, which changes the incentive landscape for both public enforcement and private compliance. Once violations and circumvention conduct are consistently treated as criminal offences with defined penalties, "precision" becomes a practical necessity: enforcement bodies require clearer elements of offences, and businesses demand clearer safe harbours and verification standards. Directive (EU) 2024/1226 is therefore not merely punitive; it is an indirect design driver pushing sanctions instruments towards better-defined categories and more auditable compliance controls[3,4].

Instruments restricting the provision of services are expected to become more "compliance-native": designed from the outset for screening, record-keeping, and auditability. The Commission's FAQs on service provision under Article 5n of Regulation 833/2014 provide a concrete model, with detailed clarification of prohibited service types and the conditions under which certain actions may be permitted. This design style tends to migrate from generic prohibitions to operationalisable rules—what a compliance team can actually implement at onboarding, at transaction level, and at monitoring level[5].

A second design trend is the growth of verified exemptions and licensing pathways that are narrower, more standardised, and more evidence-dependent. Exemptions are politically and morally salient in the social domain (family ties, medical needs, education, and protected categories), but they also create circumvention opportunities if poorly controlled. The expected design response is not to abandon exemptions, but to "harden" them: stronger verification, clearer documentation requirements, time-bound permissions, and consistency through published guidance. Consolidated FAQs and targeted

[1] Council of the EU. (n.d.). *EU sanctions against Russia: questions and answers*. https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions-against-russia-explained/

[2] FAQs on sanctions against Russia and Belarus, with focus on the following provision: Article 5n of Council Regulation (EU) No 833/2014.

[3] European Parliament & Council of the European Union. (2024). *Directive (EU) 2024/1226 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 April 2024 on the definition of criminal offences and penalties for the violation of Union restrictive measures and amending Directive (EU) 2018/1673*.

[4] EUR-Lex Directive (EU) 2024/1226.

[5] Council Regulation (EU) No 833/2014 of 31 July 2014 concerning restrictive measures in view of Russia's actions destabilising the situation in Ukraine.

interpretative notes are likely to carry much of this load, because they can be updated faster than primary sanctions instruments[1].

A third trend is the narrowing and tiering of categories of goods and services that matter for circumvention and dual-use substitution. Even though this subsection focuses on social sanctions, in practice many social constraints are channelled through service provision and intermediated access (booking, payments, platforms, professional services, logistics-adjacent services). As EU sanctions evolve, restrictions on "enabling services" are likely to become more granular and explicitly linked to circumvention patterns. This is consistent with the EU's declared emphasis on closing loopholes and increasing pressure on evasion networks rather than relying on blanket bans alone[2].

A fourth design evolution concerns the increasing use of risk-based due diligence and "calibrated" compliance programmes. The EU's compliance helpdesk materials describe sanctions due diligence as a process of identifying and managing sanctions risks, which implicitly supports a design logic where obligations are scaled to risk exposure. In practical terms, this encourages instrument design that defines risk markers (ownership/control indicators, high-risk jurisdictions, certain trade/service typologies) and expects operators to adjust controls accordingly. This is a step towards a sanctions regime that resembles AML/CFT governance—less about a single prohibition and more about continuous risk management.

Risk scoring, in this context, does not necessarily mean an EU-wide public algorithm; it more plausibly means harmonised expectations about what constitutes "heightened risk" and what due diligence steps are proportionate. Where guidance becomes more detailed, firms can implement scoring models that are defensible under supervisory and prosecutorial scrutiny. The design implication is that future instruments will increasingly specify risk-relevant constructs—"owned/controlled", "acting on behalf of", "beneficial ownership", "making economic resources available", and circumvention-related conduct—because these terms are the backbone of any risk scoring model.

One should also expect a more explicit separation between "prohibited by law" and "high-risk but not automatically prohibited" activity. This matters in the social domain because many borderline cases revolve around service interfaces (platform access, professional services, cultural and educational engagement) where the EU may want to discourage normalisation without necessarily making every instance unlawful. A design pattern emerges: keep legal prohibitions targeted and defensible, while using guidance, supervisory pressure, and enforcement priorities to constrain the grey zone.

Alongside this, enforcement against circumvention is likely to be elevated as a primary design axis—sometimes even substituting for new bans. In effect, the EU can achieve additional constraint by making circumvention pathways more costly, rather than by expanding the formal perimeter of restrictions. The Commission's and market commentators' focus on anti-circumvention measures, including downstream compliance and third-country enablers, indicates that the future "growth point" of sanctions impact lies in implementation and enforcement mechanisms[3].

This enforcement-centred design becomes more credible when the EU develops operational tools that target enabling infrastructure. The Council's public "sanctions explained" materials explicitly highlight the listing of vessels associated with the shadow fleet and the provision of maritime services restrictions as part of the sanctions' logic, which shows how the EU frames enforcement measures as integral to the instrument set. While maritime measures are not purely "social", they illustrate the same design philosophy: target enablers and reduce the operational space for evasion[4].

[1] 14th package of sanctions: advancing but with many compromises. (2024, July 16). EPC.
[2] Grant Thornton. (2025, September 16). *Anti-circumvention measures and downstream sanctions compliance: what they mean for businesses*.
[3] Grant Thornton. (2025, September 16). *Anti-circumvention measures and downstream sanctions compliance: what they mean for businesses*.
[4] Council of the European Union. (2025, December 18). *EU sanctions against Russia: Questions and answers*.

Recent reporting on EU proposals to move beyond price-cap mechanisms towards bans on maritime services for Russian crude shipping suggests that instrument design is actively exploring "enabler bans" that can be enforced through service chokepoints (insurance, brokering, flagging, and associated services). This is a template likely to diffuse into other domains where the EU can reach through service intermediaries rather than attempting to police every end-user transaction[1].

In the social sanctions' domain, the analogue of "maritime service chokepoints" is platform, financial, and professional-services infrastructure. The Commission's detailed service-provision FAQs show how the EU can operationalise such chokepoints: by specifying what services are in scope and under what conditions, and by making the compliance perimeter legible to providers. This suggests that 2026–2030 instrument design will likely contain more "service-definition density" rather than more general statements of principle[2].

Another expected evolution is a stronger emphasis on "verified identity and ownership reality" as a design principle, driven by circumvention via proxies and complex structures. Criminalisation of circumvention conduct in Directive (EU) 2024/1226 is directly relevant here: it frames concealment, misleading information, and proxy disposition of assets/resources as criminally relevant behaviour, which incentivises instruments that can be enforced through documentary evidence and traceability. As a result, future design may increasingly mandate or expect enhanced beneficial-ownership checks and "control" analysis in high-risk contexts[3].

Implementation heterogeneity across Member States remains the practical constraint that shapes design choices. Where heterogeneity is high, policymakers tend to prefer instruments that are easier to apply uniformly—clear lists, narrow definitions, and standardised evidentiary requirements. Where heterogeneity decreases, selective easing corridors become safer because they can be monitored more consistently. The EU's move to harmonise offences and penalties is implicitly an attempt to compress heterogeneity, thereby enabling more sophisticated, targeted design[4].

Judicial review dynamics are likely to continue pushing design away from vague associative criteria and towards explicit linkage rationales. In the social domain, "design for defensibility" becomes a core principle: measures that are easier to justify as proportionate, targeted, and evidence-anchored are easier to sustain. This does not necessarily reduce pressure; rather, it changes the form of pressure from blunt restrictions to administratively robust targeting.

Over 2026–2030, a measurable shift is therefore expected from "blanket bans" to "narrower categories with verifiable exceptions". The EU can preserve strategic signalling while reducing legal and reputational vulnerabilities by showing that restrictions are aimed at enablers, high-risk services, and concrete circumvention behaviours, while legitimate humanitarian or family pathways remain available under verification. This is not liberalisation; it is instrument maturation.

The likely net effect is a sanctions design architecture that resembles a layered control system: a relatively stable legal core (Regulation 833/2014 and linked instruments) complemented by an adaptive implementation layer (FAQs, notices, guidance) and an increasingly coercive enforcement layer (criminalisation, investigations, penalties). This architecture supports hybrid policy regimes described in Paragraph 4.4.1, because it allows the EU to tighten operationally without necessarily changing the entire legal perimeter each time.

[1] Turgunbaeva, A. (2026, February 26). *EU seeks G7 coordination on maritime services ban on Russian seaborne oil*. Reuters.
[2] Council of the European Union. (2014). *Council Regulation (EU) No 833/2014 of 31 July 2014 concerning restrictive measures in view of Russia's actions destabilising the situation in Ukraine*.
[3] European Parliament & Council of the European Union. (2024). *Directive (EU) 2024/1226 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 April 2024 on the definition of criminal offences and penalties for the violation of Union restrictive measures and amending Directive (EU) 2018/1673*.
[4] European Parliament & Council of the European Union. (2024). *Directive (EU) 2024/1226 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 April 2024 on the definition of criminal offences and penalties for the violation of Union restrictive measures and amending Directive (EU) 2018/1673*.

To make the above evolutions analytically usable for the report, the expected instrument design changes can be summarised as a practical design matrix, distinguishing scope, implementation, verification, and enforcement. Table 4.4.2-1 provides such a matrix and can be used as a checklist for evaluating new packages or guidance updates as they emerge.

Table 4.4.2-1. Expected instrument-design evolution in EU social sanctions (2026–2030): from broad restrictions to targeted, enforceable controls

Design dimension	Earlier tendency (broad/blanket logic)	Expected 2026–2030 tendency (targeted/data-driven logic)	Operational implication for social sanctions
Scope definition	Wide categorical restrictions; ambiguous edge cases	Narrower categories; higher definition density; explicit linkage rationales	Less discretion drift; clearer compliance boundaries for platforms and service providers
Exemptions	Broad humanitarian language; uneven practice	Verified exemptions; standardised documentation; time-bound permissions	"Corridors" become enforceable; reduced abuse via paper-based verification
Implementation layer	Reliance on primary legal texts	Stronger role of consolidated FAQs and interpretative guidance	Faster calibration without full legislative cycles; improved consistency across markets
Compliance model	Rule checking (lists/bans)	Risk-based due diligence, calibrated controls, internal risk scoring	Shift towards continuous monitoring, ownership/control analysis, and auditable decision trails
Enforcement emphasis	Additional bans as default response	Anti-circumvention enforcement, prosecutions, and enabler targeting	Higher cost of facilitation; pressure shifts to networks and intermediaries
Legal sustainability	Political signalling dominates design	"Design for defensibility": proportionality, evidence, reviewability	Lower annulment exposure; more resilient long-term restrictions

Authorship: analytical framework (this report) was prepared by the author (analytical synthesis).
Sources:

- European Commission. https://finance.ec.europa.eu/eu-and-world/sanctions-restrictive-measures/sanctions-adopted-following-russias-military-aggression-against-ukraine/frequently-asked-questions-sanctions-against-russia_en
- European Commission (2026, January 22). https://finance.ec.europa.eu/publications/provision-services_en
- EUR-Lex Directive (EU) 2024/1226: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dir/2024/1226/oj/eng
- EU sanctions due diligence helpdesk: https://eu-sanctions-compliance-helpdesk.europa.eu/sanctions-due-diligence-where-begin_en
- Commission FAQ on circumvention & due diligence. https://finance.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-06/faqs-sanctions-russia-circumvention-due-diligence_en.pdf
- Council of the EU (sanctions explained; shadow fleet context). https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions-against-russia-explained/

The design trends described above also imply a change in how "tightening" will look in practice. In earlier phases, tightening could be communicated as expanding lists or adding prohibited categories. In a more mature instrument environment, tightening may primarily mean strengthening enforcement, narrowing permissible interpretations, adding documentary requirements for exemptions, and targeting enablers in third countries. This is strategically meaningful because it reduces the marginal return of simple rerouting and proxy substitution.

Similarly, "easing" in 2026–2030 is likely to be procedural rather than permissive: clearer, faster, and more predictable exemption pathways for protected categories, rather than broad reopening. In social sanctions terms, this is compatible with a policy posture that aims to avoid conflating social pain with strategic gain, by demonstrating differentiation and integrity controls. The ability to maintain pressure

while widening verified humanitarian and family corridors depends directly on enforcement credibility and the deterrent effect of criminalisation for facilitation and circumvention[1].

Finally, the expected evolution of instrument design is likely to intensify the role of private actors as "compliance gatekeepers". As service definitions become more detailed and enforcement more coercive, banks, platforms, insurers, and professional service providers will internalise sanctions risk as reputational and criminal exposure. EU-level guidance becomes the interface that translates public law into private decision-rules. In effect, the sanctions system increasingly operates through distributed compliance rather than centralised policing. This is precisely why instrument design is trending towards definitions, verification, and auditability: without those features, distributed compliance becomes inconsistent and vulnerable to legal challenge.

For the report's analytical continuity, Paragraph 4.4.2 therefore supports a clear prospective claim: the EU's social sanctions architecture in 2026–2030 is expected to converge on a model of targeted restrictions with hardened exemptions, implemented through adaptive guidance and backed by stronger enforcement against circumvention. The policy centre of gravity shifts from adding prohibitions to governing compliance behaviour and closing loopholes.

4.4.3. Anticipated Adaptation Pathways

Russia's adaptation to EU social sanctions in 2026–2030 should be modelled as an ecosystem response rather than a set of isolated "workarounds". The system evolves through a continuous feedback loop: EU restrictions and enforcement narrow some channels; Russian actors (state-linked and private) experiment with substitutes; third-country intermediaries professionalise; and EU counter-measures progressively shift from blanket prohibitions to anti-circumvention targeting and enforcement. This creates a dynamic in which certain pathways scale because they fit existing incentives and infrastructure, while others remain niche because they are costly, risky, or operationally brittle.

A useful starting point is to distinguish three adaptation layers: (1) Russia's domestic substitution and parallel ecosystems; (2) third-country hubs that intermediate services, logistics, finance, and reputational access; and (3) individual-level behavioural adaptation, where households, students, travellers, and professionals change routes, identities, and platforms. Each layer is influenced by the same structural constraint: enforcement risk is rising as the EU expands its anti-circumvention posture and begins targeting enablers and third-country facilitators more directly. The Commission's sanctions communications and the Council's evolving package logic suggest a trajectory of increasing pressure on "profiteers" and "enablers" rather than only on Russia-resident actors.

At the Russia-domestic layer, the most robust adaptation pathway is the consolidation of parallel service ecosystems: domestically anchored alternatives for payments, consumer platforms, logistics aggregators, and media distribution. Such ecosystems reduce exposure to Western corporate exit decisions and make social restrictions less salient for the median consumer. The vulnerability of this pathway lies not in domestic acceptance but in the external interfaces—cross-border payments, cross-border trust, and cross-border compliance. Consequently, Russia's adaptation increasingly emphasises "sovereign rails" domestically and "intermediated rails" externally, with third-country nodes acting as buffers.

Parallel imports are the clearest example of a workaround that initially scaled quickly but appears structurally constrained as enforcement and supply-chain friction increase. Russian officials have publicly indicated that parallel-import volumes declined materially during 2025, with monthly flows roughly halving versus early peaks and continuing to fall into early 2026 (including references to customs data and "all-time low" monthly figures). This does not mean the mechanism disappears; rather, it

[1] European Parliament & Council of the European Union. (2024). *Directive (EU) 2024/1226 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 April 2024 on the definition of criminal offences and penalties for the violation of Union restrictive measures and amending Directive (EU) 2018/1673*.

suggests that parallel import becomes more selective, more expensive, and more dependent on third-country compliance risk tolerance. The result is a shift from "mass parallel import" to "targeted parallel import" focused on critical categories and higher-margin goods, with greater reliance on professional intermediaries.

The third-country hub layer is where the most scalable adaptation is likely to persist, because it leverages global trade and service intermediation that the EU cannot fully control without imposing large collateral costs. Evidence from EU package practice indicates that Brussels is increasingly willing to list or restrict third-country entities involved in circumvention, including companies in Turkey, Vietnam, the UAE, Serbia, Uzbekistan, and others. This pattern implies that hubs are not static; they rotate, fragment, and professionalise in response to enforcement pressure. As one hub becomes "hot" (too visible), networks shift to secondary hubs, smaller operators, or layered routing through multiple jurisdictions.

Central Asia and parts of the Caucasus are likely to remain prominent in re-export and intermediary pathways, but their political exposure is rising. The EU's anti-circumvention tool—explicitly designed to address circumvention "by or through third-country operators"—creates a credible threat of escalation from company-level listings to broader restrictions on sensitive export categories to specific third countries. Recent reporting on EU pressure towards Kyrgyzstan illustrates the logic: the EU frames unusual trade flow surges as evidence of re-export intended to breach sanctions, and signals that it is prepared to use novel instruments if cooperation is inadequate. Over 2026–2030, this will likely produce a bifurcation: some states and hubs will cooperate more, increasing compliance screening; others will litigate, resist, or become higher-risk channels that command higher fees.

A key point for 2026–2030 is that the EU appears prepared to move from sanctioning Russian assets to sanctioning third-country infrastructure nodes that materially enable Russian trade and revenue flows. Reuters reporting on proposed sanctions involving third-country ports (Georgia and Indonesia) handling Russian oil suggests a notable design step: targeting physical and operational chokepoints outside Russia's territory, not merely Russian firms. For adaptation, the implication is straightforward: "hard infrastructure hubs" (ports, terminals, shipping services) become riskier, pushing workarounds either to more fragmented logistics or to less visible service-intermediation channels.

For individuals, adaptation will largely be behavioural and administrative: rerouting travel through third countries, using alternative booking and payment mechanisms, relying on intermediaries for document preparation, and diversifying residency and citizenship strategies where possible. The socio-economic pattern is likely to be strongly stratified: affluent and mobile populations will purchase "compliance management" through intermediaries; middle-income groups will rely on cheaper reroutes and informal solutions; and vulnerable groups will be most affected by restrictions and by the rising price of cross-border normalisation. This stratification is important analytically because social sanctions can disrupt elite–society linkages even when some elite channels remain open—access becomes rarer, more expensive, and more securitised.

Payment adaptation is likely to combine domestic substitution with external bridging. Russia's domestic messaging and card infrastructure (e.g., SPFS and Mir) can reduce internal dependence on Western providers, but cross-border usability remains limited and politically sensitive. Over time, the most scalable solution tends to be indirect: third-country banking, trade finance intermediaries, and multi-currency settlement arrangements rather than direct substitution of SWIFT at scale. Analytical treatments of Russia's payment rails emphasise that SPFS was developed as a SWIFT alternative and that domestic rails can function robustly internally, while external connectivity depends on foreign counterparties and their risk appetite. The EU's enforcement trajectory—especially criminalisation and the tightening of circumvention scrutiny—will raise the cost of external counterparties providing that connectivity, pushing networks towards jurisdictions and institutions with higher tolerance for reputational and legal risk.

The next adaptation pathway is the professionalisation of proxy arrangements: nominee ownership, layered corporate structures, and "acting on behalf of" relationships designed to obscure beneficial

ownership and control. This is precisely the behaviour that EU anti-circumvention policy increasingly targets, and why the shift towards enforcement against facilitation is so strategically relevant. The European Parliament's research services summarise the EU's increasing focus on circumvention and the role of third-country operators in maintaining Russia's access to restricted items, which is directly transferable to social and service domains where proxies can function similarly. From a forecast perspective, proxy structures will continue to exist but will become more expensive and more fragile as compliance expectations become more data-driven and enforcement more punitive.

Another pathway is the creation of "parallel professional services" in friendly jurisdictions: legal services, corporate services, insurance/ship management, recruitment, and digital platform services that support Russia-linked clients while avoiding EU jurisdiction. EU package logic already signals an expansion of attention to enablers: the Commission's descriptions of later packages emphasise targeting "enablers and profiteers" alongside core Russian sectors. The forecast implication is that professional services will increasingly be routed through non-EU hubs, with EU exposure limited through corporate structuring. However, as the EU expands third-country listings, service providers in major hubs may demand higher compliance assurances, pushing some activity into smaller, less regulated jurisdictions.

Not all workarounds scale equally. Those requiring large, visible infrastructure and stable high-volume counterparties (e.g., heavy reliance on a small number of large ports or banks) are increasingly vulnerable to enforcement targeting and reputational pressure. By contrast, workarounds that are distributed, modular, and service-intermediated (small re-exporters, multi-step logistics, layered fintech solutions) are harder to eliminate entirely but suffer from inefficiency and rising transaction costs. Over 2026–2030, the EU's likely success will not be measured by eliminating all evasion, but by raising the cost, reducing reliability, and forcing continuous adaptation cycles that consume resources and degrade normalisation.

Trade statistics provide an important contextual anchor: despite the major contraction, EU–Russia trade flows have not dropped to zero, and the pattern fluctuates by quarter. Eurostat notes substantial declines in exports and imports relative to 2022 levels and still reports meaningful quarterly movements through 2025. This matters for adaptation analysis because "residual flows" create opportunities for social and service intermediation: where some legal trade continues, services and financial arrangements cluster around it, creating grey zones that can be exploited.

At the same time, the EU's package practice signals that it will increasingly treat certain trade-flow anomalies as circumvention indicators, especially when spikes appear in small third countries that do not plausibly consume the goods domestically. The Kyrgyzstan case illustrates how Brussels operationalises this logic: sharp increases in imports of high-risk goods followed by increases in exports to Russia are treated as circumvention signals. For forecasting, this suggests that 2026–2030 will see more "trade-flow intelligence" being used to justify targeted pressure, including listings and potentially anti-circumvention restrictions.

The design implication for adaptation is that third-country hubs will invest in compliance theatre—documentation, end-user certificates, and formal controls—to preserve access to EU goods and markets, while still enabling some Russia-directed flows. The most sophisticated networks will therefore become more "paper-compliant", using documentation layers that satisfy superficial checks. This will push EU enforcement towards deeper verification and intelligence-led investigations, increasing the advantage of Member States with stronger enforcement capacity and inter-agency coordination.

Parallel imports illustrate another distinction: scale depends not only on Russia's demand but also on the willingness of intermediaries to accept enforcement risk and on the friction at borders. Reports linking declines in parallel imports to tighter controls and border delays imply that physical and administrative constraints can materially reduce throughput. Therefore, the 2026–2030 expectation is not that parallel imports vanish, but that they move towards a smaller, higher-risk, higher-margin

equilibrium—important for certain categories, but less capable of supporting broad consumer normalisation at the levels observed in early sanction years.

Over the long horizon, a subset of workarounds is likely to remain niche because it is either operationally complex (requires high trust across borders), financially inefficient, or politically volatile (dependent on a single government's tolerance). Conversely, workarounds that align with existing global trade patterns, diaspora networks, and service intermediation will persist, though in a continuously contested space. This reinforces the relevance of a differentiated forecast: instead of asking "will Russia evade sanctions?", the relevant question becomes "which evasion pathways scale under increasing enforcement, and what is their cost structure?"

To operationalise this distinction for the report, Table 4.4.3-1 classifies key pathways by scalability, principal constraints, and the EU's likely counter-levers. The intent is not to predict individual cases, but to provide a structured lens that can be updated as new packages, listings, and guidance emerge.

Table 4.4.3-1. Anticipated adaptation pathways (2026–2030): scalable workarounds vs niche workarounds

Pathway	Why it scales (or not)	2026–2030 outlook	EU counter-levers (most relevant)
Third-country re-export hubs (distributed traders)	Modular networks; can rotate jurisdictions	Scales, but with rising costs and rotation	Anti-circumvention tools; third-country entity listings; trade-flow analytics pressure[1]
Parallel imports into Russia	Demand-driven; relies on intermediaries and logistics	Partially scales, trend towards contraction and selectivity	Enforcement, border scrutiny, targeting facilitators; narrowing permissive categories[2]
Alternative payment messaging/rails (domestic)	Strong domestic functionality	Scales domestically, limited cross-border reach	Pressure on foreign counterparties; sanctions risk for facilitators[3]
Cross-border payments via third-country banks	Uses existing banking and FX intermediation	Scales, but higher AML/sanctions compliance friction	Listings, enforcement cooperation, criminalisation risk and deterrence (via enforcement posture)[4]
Proxy ownership / nominee structures	Useful for concealment; adaptable	Persists, but becomes costlier and more fragile	Beneficial ownership checks; enforcement against facilitation; targeted listings[5]
Use of specific third-country infrastructure nodes (ports/terminals)	High throughput but visible and concentrated	Vulnerable; tends to become niche under targeted pressure	Infrastructure targeting; services restrictions; listings affecting third-country nodes[6]
Individual rerouting (travel, study, services)	Behavioural flexibility; diaspora networks	Scales for mobile groups; unequal access by income	Visa scrutiny; risk-based screening; targeted travel bans/listings

Authorship: analytical framework (this report) was prepared by the author (analytical synthesis based on sources cited in Table 4.4.3-1 and in the text of Section 4.4.3)

Sources:

[1] EU sanctions against Russia 2025: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2025/767243/EPRS_BRI%282025%29767243_EN.pdf

[2] Russian official statements on parallel imports decline: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2026/01/09/russias-parallel-imports-of-western-goods-fall-nearly-50-in-2025-a91641

[3] Instant Payments Russia: https://www.lightspark.com/knowledge/instant-payments-russia

[4] Payne, J. (2025, May 20). *What's in the EU's new Russia sanctions*. Reuters.

[5] Jacques Delors Institute. (2024, October). *Tackling Circumvention of EU Sanctions*.

[6] Payne, J. (2026, February 9). *EU proposes sanctions on Georgian, Indonesian ports for handling Russian oil*. Reuters.

A second operational lens is to classify third-country hubs by their functional role (logistics, corporate services, finance, platform/services) and by the risk markers that the EU is likely to use for enforcement

prioritisation. The EU has already demonstrated an appetite for listing third-country entities involved in circumvention, including multi-jurisdiction patterns (Turkey, Vietnam, UAE, Serbia, Uzbekistan) in formal package communications. The enforcement implication is that hubs are likely to diversify and specialise: some will become "trade-and-logistics specialists", others "corporate structuring specialists", and others "financial bridging specialists".

Recent press reporting indicates that the EU is also exploring "sanctions on infrastructure" and country-level tools as escalation options, particularly where trade-flow data suggests systematic re-export of sensitive items. If operationalised, this would introduce a new adaptation constraint: small economies with concentrated trade exposure could face disproportionate costs, increasing their incentive either to cooperate more (tighten controls) or to contest EU measures legally and politically.

Table 4.4.3-2. Third-country hub typology (2026–2030): roles, scalable functions, and EU risk markers

Hub function	Typical jurisdictions (illustrative, non-exhaustive)	What it enables	EU risk markers likely used	Evidence of EU attention
Re-export and trade intermediation	Central Asia / Eurasian corridor (e.g., Kyrgyzstan context)	Rerouting of restricted goods; fragmentation of supply chains	Trade-flow spikes in high-risk items; mismatch between imports and domestic demand	EU pressure and potential first use of anti-circumvention tool (Kyrgyzstan)[1]
Corporate and professional services intermediation	Turkey, UAE, Serbia, Uzbekistan (examples from package listings)	Proxy ownership, contracting, brokerage, management services	Beneficial ownership opacity; linkages to listed entities; repeated patterns across cases	EU 17th package lists third-country companies engaged in circumvention[2]
Financial bridging and settlement	UAE / third-country banking nodes (illustrative)	Payment routing, FX conversion, trade finance facilitation	Unusual payment corridors; counterparties tied to high-risk trade; facilitation indicators	EU focus on enablers; sanctions packages targeting facilitators[2]
Logistics infrastructure nodes	Ports/terminals outside Russia (e.g., Georgia/Indonesia ports in Reuters proposal)	Physical throughput for oil and goods; services chokepoints	Concentrated throughput; visible contractual reliance; identifiable service providers	EU proposals to target third-country ports handling Russian oil[3]

Authorship: analytical framework (this report) was prepared by the author (analytical synthesis).
Sources:
[1] Turgunbaeva, A. (2026, February 26). *EU tells Kyrgyzstan to crack down on re-export of sanctioned goods to Russia*. Reuters.
[2] European Comission. (2025, May 20). *EU adopts 17th package of sanctions against Russia*.
[3] Payne, J. (2026, February 9). *EU proposes sanctions on Georgian, Indonesian ports for handling Russian oil*. Reuters.

Taken together, these pathways imply that Russia's most durable adaptation model for 2026–2030 is "intermediated normalisation": Russia reduces direct exposure to EU controls by inserting third-country buffers, while domestic substitution reduces dependence on Western consumer and platform ecosystems. EU policy, in turn, is converging on a regime that targets enablers and circumvention channels, including third-country companies and potentially third-country infrastructure. The contest thus shifts from headline prohibitions to a competitive struggle over the cost and reliability of intermediated access.

This suggests a clear forecast separation between what scales and what remains niche. Scalable workarounds are those that can distribute risk across many small nodes and maintain plausible deniability through paperwork and routing. Niche workarounds are those that require high-visibility infrastructure, stable large counterparties, or a small number of permissive jurisdictions whose political

tolerance may change. As enforcement tightens, scalable workarounds become more expensive and less reliable, which can still be strategically meaningful for the EU even if evasion is not eradicated.

Finally, adaptation should be expected to produce a second-order social effect: rising inequality in cross-border access. The better-resourced segments of Russian society and Russia-linked networks will secure intermediated solutions, while broader populations face friction, costs, and exclusion from "normal" cross-border mobility and services. This matters because it can shift the domestic political meaning of sanctions from collective deprivation to stratified access, altering both Russian internal narratives and EU legitimacy debates. The analytical value for this report is that such stratification can be monitored through observable indicators: the cost of intermediary services, the concentration of routing jurisdictions, the frequency of third-country listings, and the evolution of trade-flow anomalies that trigger enforcement pressure.

4.4.4. Effectiveness Outlook and Evaluative Framework

Effectiveness in the social-sanctions domain cannot be treated as a synonym for "pain" or "inconvenience". The EU's social restrictions (mobility constraints, access limitations, reputational exclusion, service denial, and the narrowing of normalisation pathways) are instruments intended to shape strategic behaviour and to constrain the political–economic interfaces through which influence, resources, and legitimacy travel. A credible evaluative approach therefore requires an explicit theory of change: what social sanctions are expected to do, through which mechanisms, and at what level of analysis (individual, network, state, or cross-border ecosystem). Without that theory, evaluation collapses into impressionistic moral claims—either that sanctions are "too harsh" because they produce visible hardship, or "too weak" because workarounds exist.

A realistic outlook for 2026–2030 is that social sanctions will remain a stable element of the EU's restrictive measures architecture, but the centre of gravity will continue shifting from "expansion by breadth" to "effectiveness by enforcement". EU institutions openly frame effectiveness as a function of implementation and enforcement capacity, emphasising Member State responsibility and Commission support mechanisms designed to close gaps, clarify rules, and strengthen compliance. The Commission's "making sanctions effective" materials and the EEAS framing of "enhancing effectiveness" both point towards a governance model where effectiveness is pursued through coordination, guidance, enforcement tools, and improved information sharing rather than solely through adding new prohibitions[1]. This institutional posture is especially consequential for social sanctions, because their impact often depends on administrative practice (visa screening, licensing/exemptions, platform compliance) rather than on a single measurable macroeconomic variable.

An evaluative framework must also accommodate the fact that social sanctions have multiple objectives that can conflict in the short term. Deterrence and signalling may require clarity and firmness, while legitimacy and legal sustainability require proportionality, differentiation, and protected corridors for humanitarian or family cases. This tension is not a policy failure; it is the defining design constraint of the social-sanctions domain. Where the framework is missing, institutions risk substituting "visibility" for "effectiveness" by privileging measures that are easy to communicate (e.g., categorical restrictions) even when they generate unintended spillovers and are vulnerable to judicial challenge.

In this report, "effectiveness" should be operationalised along four dimensions that correspond to the strategic logic of social sanctions: (1) deterrence (reducing the attractiveness or feasibility of certain behaviours); (2) signalling (communicating resolve, norm boundaries, and costs of aggression); (3) disruption of elite–society linkages (raising the friction of transnational status, access, and asset-service interfaces that connect elites to European infrastructures); and (4) raising the costs of normalisation (making it materially and reputationally harder to maintain "business as usual" social presence while aggression continues). These dimensions align with how EU sanctions are framed publicly—as

[1] European Commission. (2025). *Making sanctions effective*.

restrictive measures that constrain targeted persons and deny resources and access—while also reflecting the social-specific goal of constraining normalisation narratives[1].

Deterrence, in the social context, should be understood primarily as deterrence by denial and deterrence by risk. Deterrence by denial occurs when access to European services, platforms, or mobility channels becomes structurally harder for sanctioned networks, reducing their ability to convert wealth into safety, convenience, and legitimacy. Deterrence by risk occurs when enforcement and criminalisation increase the expected legal consequences for facilitators, intermediaries, and enablers, thereby shrinking the ecosystem that makes evasion easy. The criminalisation and harmonisation of sanctions violations under Directive (EU) 2024/1226 matters here: it raises the expected cost of facilitation and circumvention across Member States and makes "compliance as governance" more credible[2]. In a 2026–2030 outlook, deterrence effects will likely be more visible in the behaviour of intermediaries and service providers than in the behaviour of primary targets, because intermediaries are typically more sensitive to legal risk and reputational exposure.

Signalling is frequently treated as "soft", but it is measurable if one evaluates whether signals are coherent, sustained, and behaviour-shaping in third parties. In the social domain, the signal is not only directed at Russia; it is directed at EU domestic audiences, partner states, third-country hubs, and private operators. A coherent signal has at least three properties: consistency over time, clarity of scope, and credibility of enforcement. EU institutional messaging that centres enforcement and implementation indicates a deliberate attempt to maintain signal credibility even as instrument design becomes more targeted and data-driven[3]. A signal that is strong in rhetoric but weak in enforcement tends to produce adverse learning: it teaches networks that compliance is optional and that workarounds are low risk.

Elite–society linkage disruption is the most sensitive and most often misunderstood objective. The point is not to maximise broad social hardship; rather, it is to restrict the ability of influential strata and networks to externalise risk and to rely on European infrastructures for status reproduction (education, travel, healthcare access, professional services, brand legitimacy, property-service ecosystems). This objective is inherently network-based: it concerns how access to Europe functions as an anchor for "exit options" and as a mechanism of social prestige. Effectiveness here can be assessed by the degree to which elite access becomes more frictional, more conditional, and more dependent on intermediaries that are themselves exposed to enforcement pressure.

Raising the costs of normalisation is best conceptualised as a long-run constraint on "everyday legitimacy". It involves ensuring that social participation in European systems—physical mobility, reputational platforms, cultural circuits, and service markets—does not remain frictionless while aggression persists. This objective is often attacked as "symbolic", but symbols matter in international politics precisely because they structure what is treated as normal. The EU's emphasis on effectiveness and enforcement demonstrates that it is aware that normalisation costs cannot be raised through declarations alone; they must be enacted through implementable, defensible rules and consistent enforcement[4].

For 2026–2030, the effectiveness outlook should therefore be framed as "partial effectiveness with contested margins". Russia and third-country intermediaries will continue adapting, so effectiveness should not be defined as eliminating workarounds. Instead, effectiveness should be defined as forcing adaptation into higher-cost, higher-risk, lower-reliability channels; shrinking the pool of willing facilitators; and narrowing the space for reputational normalisation within EU jurisdictions. This is

[1] European External Action Service. (2025, January 9). Increasing the effectiveness of sanctions.
[2] European Parliament & Council of the European Union. (2024). *Directive (EU) 2024/1226 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 April 2024 on the definition of criminal offences and penalties for the violation of Union restrictive measures and amending Directive (EU) 2018/1673*.
[3] European Commission. (2025). *Making sanctions effective*.
[4] European Commission. (2025). *Making sanctions effective*.

consistent with the broader shift described in 4.4.1–4.4.3 towards enforcement against circumvention and towards more auditable, risk-based implementation.

To translate the above into an evaluative framework, the report should avoid single metrics and adopt a dashboard approach with (1) output indicators (what the EU and Member States do), (2) outcome indicators (how behaviour changes), and (3) integrity indicators (whether the measures remain lawful, proportionate, and credible). EU-level initiatives explicitly designed to support sanctions due diligence, risk identification, and red-flag detection provide practical anchors for what "outputs" should look like in a mature enforcement system[1]. The Commission's 2023 guidance on circumvention risks is similarly relevant, as it formalises a risk-assessment posture that can be translated into measurable compliance expectations and enforcement priorities[2].

A critical evaluative distinction is between effectiveness at the rule level and effectiveness at the ecosystem level. Rule-level effectiveness asks whether a specific restriction (e.g., a service ban, a listing criterion, a travel-ban category) is implemented consistently, with clear guidance and enforceable standards. Ecosystem-level effectiveness asks whether the overall environment for circumvention and normalisation becomes more constrained over time. The first can improve while the second remains noisy, because networks substitute and reroute. Conversely, ecosystem constraints can tighten even if individual rules appear porous, if enforcement changes the risk calculus for facilitators.

Another vital element is legal sustainability, because social sanctions are especially exposed to proportionality and rights-adjacent arguments. A sanctions regime that is frequently annulled or credibly challenged loses signal credibility and creates compliance uncertainty. Analytical work produced for the European Parliament on evaluating the effectiveness of EU sanctions regimes explicitly discusses sanctions evaluation and proposes assessment frameworks—useful as a methodological reference for this report's evaluative section, even when the substantive regime differs (e.g., global human rights sanctions)[3]. The methodological lesson is that evaluation should incorporate implementability, coherence, and evidence standards alongside impact.

From a governance standpoint, enforcement capability is not merely a background variable. It is a measurable determinant of effectiveness. With Directive (EU) 2024/1226, the EU has an explicit legal foundation for converging enforcement consequences across Member States[4]. This supports evaluation through proxies such as: transposition completeness, investigative activity, prosecution rates, and the deterrent effect on intermediaries. Even where comparable EU-wide data are imperfect, the report can operationalise these proxies through qualitative scoring and evidence-based case sampling (e.g., public enforcement announcements, court decisions, compliance-sector data).

Private-sector compliance is the transmission belt for much of social-sanctions effectiveness: platforms, financial institutions, professional service providers, and mobility intermediaries enact restrictions through onboarding, screening, de-risking, and refusals of service. EU tools that guide SMEs through sanctions due diligence and provide red-flag indicators signal an intention to broaden compliance capability beyond large financial institutions[5]. In evaluation terms, this suggests a measurable pathway: improved guidance and support should reduce accidental breaches, increase detection of circumvention indicators, and raise the overall cost of facilitation by shrinking the "grey compliance" space.

However, the evaluative framework must explicitly reject the fallacy of "workaround existence = ineffectiveness". In contested sanctions environments, workarounds are expected; the relevant question is whether they become more costly, more brittle, and more concentrated in high-risk corridors that can be targeted. This is why an enforcement-led model—supported by risk guidance and

[1] EU Sanctions Compliance Helpdesk. (n.d.). *Sanctions due diligence: Where to begin*.
[2] European Commission. (2023, September 7). *Sanctions: Commission publishes guidance to help European operators assess sanctions circumvention risks*.
[3] European Parliament. (2025). *Effectiveness of the EU global human rights sanctions regime*.
[4] EUCRIM. (2024/2025). *The new Directive on the violation of Union restrictive measures in the context of the EPPO*.
[5] EU Sanctions Compliance Helpdesk. (n.d.). *Sanctions due diligence: Where to begin*.

criminalisation—matters more in 2026–2030 than any single additional ban[1]. The EU's "making sanctions effective" framing effectively endorses this view by treating implementation as the locus of impact[2].

A second evaluative pitfall is conflating social suffering with strategic gain. Social sanctions can impose broad friction, but strategic effectiveness depends on whether that friction translates into constrained capability, constrained normalisation, or constrained elite-network interfaces. The report should therefore incorporate "ethical and legitimacy guardrails" as evaluation criteria: measures should be assessed not only by pressure effects but also by differentiation, exemption integrity, and minimisation of unintended spillovers that undermine EU credibility. This is aligned with the rationale in legal commentary on the sanctions-violations directive, which emphasises avoiding unintended spillovers while strengthening enforcement[3].

A third pitfall is ignoring time horizons and adaptation cycles. Many effects are delayed: reputational exclusion can shift elite behaviour over years; enforcement hardening can take time to translate into prosecutions; and third-country hubs can rotate before the EU targets the new corridor. Therefore, the evaluative framework should be built for trend detection and adaptive updates rather than one-off judgments. In practical terms, this means combining quantitative signals (where available) with structured qualitative assessments updated by package cycles and enforcement developments.

Table 4.4.4-1 provides a structured evaluative framework that translates the four effectiveness dimensions into measurable indicators, data sources, and interpretive cautions. The table is designed as an instrument for ongoing monitoring across 2026–2030, aligned with the EU's emphasis on implementation and compliance support.

Table 4.4.4-1. Evaluative framework for social-sanctions effectiveness (2026–2030): dimensions, indicators, and evidence sources

Effectiveness dimension	What success looks like	Candidate indicators (dashboard)	Primary evidence sources (indicative)	Key interpretive caution
Deterrence (by denial & risk)	Facilitators withdraw; access becomes higher-risk and less reliable	Growth in enforcement actions; increased de-risking by intermediaries; compliance screening intensity; documented reductions in low-risk facilitation channels	EU enforcement/implementation materials; Member State enforcement releases; EU operator guidance; compliance helpdesk materials[1]	Enforcement activity can spike due to better detection, not necessarily more violations
Signalling	Message is coherent, credible, and sustained	Consistency of Council/EEAS framing; stability of policy posture; clarity and update frequency of FAQs/guidance; partner alignment statements	EEAS effectiveness framing; Commission "making sanctions effective"; Commission FAQ infrastructure[2]	Signals can be strong rhetorically but weak operationally; credibility depends on enforcement
Elite–society linkage disruption	Elite access becomes conditional, costly, and less prestige-enhancing	Higher use of intermediaries; reduced direct use of EU infrastructures; shift to third-country "buffer services"; patterns in listings and enforcement focus on enablers	Commission anti-circumvention guidance; enforcement emphasis; package implementation summaries[3]	Proxy and intermediated access persists; evaluate cost/fragility rather than existence
Cost of normalisation	"Business as usual" becomes more frictional	Increased refusal rates by platforms/providers; tighter exemption verification; rising	Commission guidance/FAQs; sanctions due diligence tools; enforcement posture materials[4]	Avoid equating broad exclusion with effectiveness; differentiate

[1] European Commission. (2023). *Guidance for EU operators: Risk assessment of possible sanctions circumvention* (PDF).
[2] European Commission. (2025). *Making sanctions effective*.
[3] EUCRIM. (2024/2025). *The new Directive on the violation of Union restrictive measures in the context of the EPPO*.

Effectiveness dimension	What success looks like	Candidate indicators (dashboard)	Primary evidence sources (indicative)	Key interpretive caution
	and reputationally constrained	transaction costs for cross-border social participation		protected categories

Authorship: analytical framework (this report) was prepared by the author (analytical synthesis).
Sources:
[1] EU Sanctions Compliance Helpdesk. (n.d.). *EU Sanctions Helpdesk (platform overview)*.
[2] European External Action Service. (2025, January 9). *Increasing the effectiveness of sanctions*.
[3] European Commission. (2025). *Making sanctions effective*.
[4] EU Sanctions Compliance Helpdesk. (n.d.). *Sanctions due diligence: Where to begin*.

To strengthen robustness, the report should also define a small set of "integrity metrics" that prevent the evaluation from drifting into consequentialism. These integrity metrics address legality, proportionality, differentiation, and implementation consistency—because a system that is operationally effective but legally fragile will generate reversals and compliance uncertainty. Judicial dynamics, in particular, are not only constraints but part of effectiveness: a legally sustainable regime is harder to undermine. Methodological work on sanctions effectiveness produced for the European Parliament is useful here, as it explicitly discusses evaluation of sanctions effectiveness and frameworks for assessment[1].

Table 4.4.4-2 proposes an integrity and legitimacy sub-framework designed to accompany the effectiveness dashboard. It aligns with the enforcement-and-guidance evolution described earlier: the more the EU relies on distributed compliance, the more it needs legal clarity and safe, verifiable exemptions to maintain legitimacy and avoid indiscriminate spillovers.

Table 4.4.4-2. Integrity and legitimacy guardrails for evaluating social sanctions (2026–2030)

Guardrail	What to test	Practical proxy indicators	Why it matters for effectiveness
Proportionality and differentiation	Measures target high-risk actors while protecting legitimate categories	Documented exemption pathways; evidence standards for listings; clarity of guidance	Preserves EU credibility; reduces litigation vulnerability and "collective punishment" narratives
Consistency of implementation	Similar cases treated similarly across Member States	Convergence in guidance use; reduction in contradictory national practice; compliance helpdesk uptake	Predictability increases compliance; inconsistency creates loopholes and undermines signal
Exemption integrity	Exemptions are verifiable and not a circumvention channel	Documentation requirements; audit trails; enforcement cases involving exemption abuse	Supports selective corridors without opening systematic leakage
Enforcement fairness and focus	Enforcement targets facilitation and high-impact evasion	Share of actions against enablers vs low-level accidental breaches	Keeps deterrence credible; avoids chilling legitimate activity
Transparency of governance	Guidance and FAQs updated and accessible	Frequency and clarity of FAQ updates; operator guidance distribution	Reduces grey zones; improves private-sector compliance and reduces unintended breaches

Authorship: analytical framework (this report) was prepared by the author (analytical synthesis).
Sources:
- European Commission. (2025). *Making sanctions effective*.
- European Commission. (2023, September 7). *Sanctions: Commission publishes guidance to help European operators assess sanctions circumvention risks*.
- EU Sanctions Compliance Helpdesk. (n.d.). *Sanctions due diligence: Where to begin*.

[1] European Parliament. (2025). *Effectiveness of the EU global human rights sanctions regime*.

On balance, the 2026–2030 effectiveness outlook is best stated cautiously but firmly: social sanctions will not "stop" adaptation, but they can remain strategically effective if they continuously raise the cost and risk of normalisation and facilitation, and if they constrain elite-network interfaces with European infrastructures. The strongest driver of improved effectiveness is likely to be enforcement convergence and the criminalisation of sanctions violations, which should reduce weak-link jurisdictions and increase the deterrent effect on intermediaries. The second driver is the maturation of risk-based guidance and due diligence support, which broadens compliance capability beyond large financial institutions and reduces the circumvention value of grey zones[1].

At the same time, the report should explicitly acknowledge the principal limits to effectiveness. First, social sanctions operate in a high-visibility space where legitimacy challenges are structurally persistent. Secondly, third-country buffering will continue, so the EU's leverage is asymmetric and depends on its willingness to target enablers and to absorb diplomatic costs. Thirdly, measurement is difficult: many outcomes are private (refusals of service, de-risking decisions, compliance escalations) and not fully observable. These limits do not invalidate effectiveness; they define why a dashboard framework with both impact and integrity criteria is necessary.

Finally, evaluation should be framed as an iterative governance practice rather than a one-off verdict. The EU's emphasis on implementation, guidance, and support mechanisms implicitly treats effectiveness as something to be produced over time through coordinated governance[2]. For this report, that implies a practical recommendation: maintain a standing monitoring template (Tables 4.4.4-1 and 4.4.4-2) updated each package cycle and each material enforcement development, with special attention to (1) shifts in the behaviour of intermediaries, (2) the tightening or hardening of exemptions, and (3) signs of enforcement convergence or fragmentation across Member States. In a social-sanctions context, this is the most defensible way to assess effectiveness without conflating social hardship with strategic gain.

4.5. Proposals for Ethically Robust Social Measures against Russia

4.5.1. Design Principles: Proportionality, Precision, and Reversibility

Ethically robust social measures against Russia in 2026–2030 must begin from the premise that "social pressure" is not, by itself, a legitimate policy objective. The legitimate objectives are the protection of European security, the defence of international order, the reduction of Russia's capacity to sustain aggression, and the maintenance of EU normative credibility. Social measures are ethically robust only when they are tethered to those objectives through a transparent, legally grounded, and reviewable theory of change. This is especially important because social sanctions operate close to rights-adjacent domains such as mobility, access to services, education, family life, and reputational participation in European systems. The ethical risk is that measures drift from targeted pressure into diffuse exclusion that is hard to justify and easy to contest. The EU's constitutional framework requires that limitations on rights be "provided for by law", respect the essence of rights, and satisfy proportionality by being necessary and genuinely meeting recognised objectives[3,4]. That requirement is not a constraint to be managed reluctantly; it is the core design principle that differentiates lawful pressure from arbitrary

[1] European Commission. (2023). *Guidance for EU operators: Risk assessment of possible sanctions circumvention*.
[2] European Commission. (2025). *Making sanctions effective*.
[3] European Union. (2000). *Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union*.
[4] European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. (2014). *Article 52 – Scope and interpretation of rights and principles* (Charter commentary).

social punishment. Therefore, a robust proposal set must specify proportionality, precision, and reversibility as design imperatives rather than aspirational values.

Proportionality, in sanctions design, should be treated as a multi-stage test embedded in the instrument lifecycle. It is not enough to assert that measures serve a legitimate aim; the design must also demonstrate suitability, necessity, and balanced effects, especially when social harms are foreseeable. In EU law, proportionality is explicitly linked to the permissibility of rights limitations under Article 52 of the Charter, which makes proportionality a constitutional condition for rights-limiting measures[1,2]. Sanctions design that disregards this will not only be ethically fragile but also strategically counterproductive, because it invites litigation and undermines credibility. The General Court's sanctions case law illustrates that the Council's reasoning and evidence can be tested and, where inadequate, lead to annulment or delisting, which then weakens both deterrence and signalling[3]. In other words, proportionality is not merely about moral optics; it is an operational requirement for sustainability. Proportionality also has a distributive dimension: measures that are nominally "targeted" can, in practice, diffuse harm onto protected categories through over-compliance or administrative arbitrariness. Ethically robust design must therefore incorporate proportionality not only at adoption but also at implementation, guidance, and enforcement stages.

A practical proportionality principle for social measures is "harm-minimisation without pressure dilution". This principle recognises that pressure can be maintained while reducing indiscriminate friction through better targeting and verifiable exemptions. The EU's governance style—reliance on guidance, consolidated FAQs, and operational clarifications—already points towards a model where implementation tools shape real-world scope[4]. An ethically robust proposal would treat those tools as part of the proportionality architecture, requiring that guidance explicitly address protected categories, documentary standards, and non-discrimination expectations. This is particularly important where social measures are implemented by decentralised actors such as consular services, universities, hospitals, platforms, and financial institutions. Proportionality must be embedded in their decision rules, not left to ad hoc discretion. Moreover, proportionality must be measurable, which means the proposal should define indicators that track unintended harm and discriminatory spillovers in implementation. Without measurement, proportionality becomes rhetorical. The objective is not "softness". It is disciplined pressure consistent with EU constitutional constraints and strategic aims.

Precision is the second pillar of ethical robustness, and it has at least three distinct meanings in sanctions design. First, precision is legal: clear scope, defined terms, and an unambiguous legal basis that permits operators to comply and courts to review. Secondly, precision is evidentiary: listing criteria and restrictions must be supported by a plausible, documented link between the target and the prohibited conduct or strategic aim. Thirdly, precision is operational: a measure must be implementable consistently across Member States and across regulated entities without producing uncontrolled over-reach. EU practice already recognises the need for legal basis and uniform application through the CFSP–TFEU linkage, where sanctions regimes are adopted under Article 29 of the Treaty on European Union and implemented through Article 215 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union[5,6]. An ethically robust proposal should explicitly cite that legal pathway to reinforce predictability and accountability. Precision also reduces the need for blunt bans: as targeting improves, the same pressure can be achieved with less collateral harm. This is why precision and proportionality are complements, not trade-offs.

[1] European Union. (2000). *Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union*.
[2] European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. (2014). *Article 52 – Scope and interpretation of rights and principles* (Charter commentary).
[3] EUCRIM. (2025, October 27). *CJEU rulings on restrictive EU measures against Russia (May–October 2025)*.
[4] European Commission. (2024, January 26). *Commission consolidated FAQs on the implementation of Council Regulation No 833/2014 and Council Regulation No 269/2014*.
[5] EUR-Lex. (2026, February 1). *EU restrictive measures in view of Russia's invasion of Ukraine* (Summary).
[6] EUR-Lex. (n.d.). *Restrictive measures (sanctions)* (Glossary summary).

Precision should also be applied to the definition of "social measures" themselves, to avoid category confusion and mission creep. Social measures can include travel restrictions, restrictions on access to certain services, limitations on engagement channels, and measures that affect reputational participation. However, not every social inconvenience is a legitimate sanctions target, and not every engagement is a circumvention channel. The proposal should therefore distinguish between measures that restrict high-risk facilitation and measures that restrict symbolic normalisation, and it should justify each category separately. The Council's public explanation of sanctions against Russia underscores that travel bans and asset freezes are targeted at listed individuals and entities, and that the prohibition on making funds available operates through clear legal mechanisms[1]. That clarity should be replicated in the social domain: if a service restriction is proposed, it must specify the conduct being prohibited, the risk being mitigated, and the compliance steps expected. Otherwise, implementation will default to risk-avoidance, which produces over-compliance and discrimination. Precision is therefore both an ethical guardrail and a compliance enabler. It reduces arbitrary exclusion while preserving strategic pressure.

Reversibility is the third pillar, and it is frequently misunderstood as "easing" or "weakness". In ethical sanctions design, reversibility means that measures are not permanently detached from their objectives and that they incorporate structured pathways for review, adjustment, and termination. This includes sunset clauses, periodic review requirements, and clear delisting or exemption review procedures. Reversibility is essential because sanctions regimes operate under uncertainty: strategic contexts change, targets' behaviours change, and the empirical basis for listings can weaken over time. The EU's sanctions governance includes adoption, renewal, and lifting dynamics under CFSP decision-making, reflecting a built-in expectation that measures can be modified or lifted[2]. Reversibility also strengthens legitimacy: it signals that the EU is applying conditional pressure rather than indefinite social exclusion. This matters in the social domain where reputational and inter-personal consequences are especially salient. A reversible design also reduces the incentive for targets to "wait out" enforcement if they can credibly influence delisting by changing behaviour or by demonstrating lack of linkage. Therefore, reversibility is best framed as disciplined conditionality.

A robust reversibility mechanism must be accompanied by measurable objectives, because reversibility without criteria becomes politicised and arbitrary. If a measure is adopted to reduce facilitation risk, the objective might be expressed as a measurable reduction in specific circumvention indicators or in the availability of enabling services. If a measure is adopted to constrain elite normalisation, objectives might be expressed in terms of restricted access to specific infrastructures rather than broad social exclusion. The key is that objectives must be stated in a way that allows evaluation and review. The European Parliament's methodological work on sanctions evaluation emphasises that effectiveness assessment frameworks should account for coherence, implementation, and measurable outcomes, which supports embedding objectives into design rather than leaving them implicit[3]. Measurable objectives also help courts assess proportionality: if objectives are vague, necessity is hard to demonstrate. In addition, measurable objectives improve compliance: operators can align controls with defined risks rather than guessing policy intent. Reversibility and measurability therefore reinforce precision and proportionality as a coherent design package.

Ethical robustness also requires narrow targeting as a default rule, with explicit justification for any measure that risks group-based exclusion. Narrow targeting means that restrictions should be aimed at those who are plausibly connected to the harmful conduct: decision-makers, financiers, propagandists, facilitators, and key enablers. The EU's experience with sanctions litigation demonstrates the vulnerability of broad associative criteria, especially where evidence is thin. Case summaries show annulments where the Council did not sufficiently establish that an individual benefited from, or was

[1] Council of the European Union. (n.d.). *EU sanctions against Russia: questions and answers*.
[2] EUR-Lex. (n.d.). *Restrictive measures (sanctions)* (Glossary summary).
[3] European Parliament. (2025). *Effectiveness of the EU global human rights sanctions regime*.

meaningfully linked to, the relevant "leading businessperson" criterion or similar linkage claims[1]. This is a clear lesson for future social measures: if the link between the person and the objective is indirect, design must require stronger evidence and clearer reasoning. Narrow targeting also improves deterrence by concentrating pressure on actors whose behaviour matters strategically. Moreover, it preserves humanitarian and civil-society space, which is essential for EU credibility. Where some population-level restrictions remain politically unavoidable, ethical robustness requires robust carve-outs and operational safeguards rather than rhetorical exceptions.

A clear legal basis is not only a formal condition but a substantive ethical requirement, because it anchors accountability and predictability. EU sanctions are grounded in a structured legal pathway: Council decisions under Article 29 of the Treaty on European Union, followed by implementing regulations under Article 215 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union to ensure uniform application[2,3]. Proposals for social measures must specify where they fit in that architecture, whether they require legislative amendment, implementing acts, or primarily guidance updates. The legal basis also determines who has competence and who bears obligations: Member States, operators, citizens, or mixed actors. This matters because social measures often involve decentralised implementation, and legal ambiguity becomes a driver of over-compliance. The Commission's consolidated FAQs explicitly describe themselves as a working document to guide authorities, operators, and citizens, illustrating that interpretative infrastructure is part of the legal-operational chain[4]. Ethical robustness therefore requires that interpretative guidance is aligned with the legal basis and does not create de facto prohibitions beyond lawful scope. Clarity on legal basis is also the best antidote to discriminatory divergence among Member States.

Measurable objectives should be complemented by explicit "harm markers" to prevent the evaluative system from conflating suffering with success. Social sanctions are uniquely susceptible to moral confusion: measures that impose broad inconvenience can be mistaken for strategic effectiveness. A robust proposal would therefore define success indicators (deterrence, reduced facilitation, constrained elite access) and harm indicators (discriminatory denial of education, healthcare barriers, arbitrary family separation delays). The aim is to ensure that harms trigger adjustment rather than being interpreted as evidence of success. EU practice already recognises the need for humanitarian derogations and structured procedures for granting them, which suggests institutional acknowledgement that harm management is part of sanctions governance[5]. By building harm markers into objectives, the EU can demonstrate ethical seriousness and strengthen domestic legitimacy. This is not only morally relevant; it improves strategic effectiveness by reducing backlash and litigation risk. It also aligns with the Charter framework, where rights limitations must be necessary and proportionate, implying that avoidable harms are legally problematic[6]. Therefore, measurable objectives must be dual-track: pressure outcomes and harm constraints.

Sunset clauses and review clauses should be treated as essential features of ethical robustness rather than optional add-ons. Sunset clauses can be time-based (automatic expiry unless renewed) or condition-based (expiry upon the occurrence of defined events). Review clauses can require periodic evidence review for listings and for categories of restrictions, ensuring that measures remain linked to objectives. The EU's sanctions regimes already contain renewal dynamics and periodic listing reviews, but ethical robustness would strengthen these routines for social measures with heightened rights sensitivity[7]. Reviews should be evidence-centred and structured, not purely political. They should include consultation with national competent authorities and, where appropriate, structured input from

[1] EUCRIM. (2025, October 27). *CJEU rulings on restrictive EU measures against Russia (May–October 2025)*.
[2] EUR-Lex. (2026, February 1). *EU restrictive measures in view of Russia's invasion of Ukraine* (Summary).
[3] EUR-Lex. (n.d.). *Restrictive measures (sanctions)* (Glossary summary).
[4] European Commission, 2024
[5] European Commission. (2022, April 13). *Factsheet on member state procedures to grant humanitarian derogations from EU restrictive measures (sanctions)*.
[6] European Union. (2000). *Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union*.
[7] EUR-Lex. (n.d.). *Restrictive measures (sanctions)* (Glossary summary).

humanitarian actors, universities, and civil society. Such consultation can be operationalised without undermining security objectives by focusing on implementation harms rather than strategic policy choices. The Commission's factsheet on humanitarian derogations highlights the diversity of national procedures and the need for clarity, which supports harmonised review and standardisation efforts[1]. Review mechanisms also reduce over-compliance: if operators know that policies are periodically clarified and corrected, they are less likely to adopt permanently restrictive stances. Sunset and review clauses thus serve both ethics and implementation quality.

Explicit humanitarian carve-outs are a non-negotiable component of ethically robust social measures, but carve-outs must be operational rather than declarative. Declarative exemptions create a false sense of ethical coverage while leaving discretion and risk aversion to do the real work, which often results in denial. The European Commission's guidance on humanitarian aid compliance and its factsheet on humanitarian derogations demonstrate that the EU already treats humanitarian exceptions as a structured domain with procedures and conditions[2,3]. The lesson is that carve-outs should be designed with workflows: documentation standards, responsible authorities, decision timelines, and appeal paths. Carve-outs should also be verifiable to prevent them from becoming circumvention channels. This is where precision and enforcement intersect ethically: the more verifiable the carve-out, the easier it is to protect legitimate cases without opening leakage. In the social domain, carve-outs should include education, research, health, family reunification, and protected civil-society exchange, each with tailored verification. Ethical robustness requires that these are stated as rights-respecting corridors, not discretionary favours.

Because enforcement is intensifying, including through criminal law harmonisation, ethical robustness must incorporate "safe compliance pathways" for operators and intermediaries. Directive (EU) 2024/1226 requires Member States to establish effective, proportionate, and dissuasive penalties for sanctions violations and related circumvention conduct, which changes the compliance climate[4]. Under criminalisation pressure, private actors will tend to over-comply unless guidance gives them defensible decision rules. Ethical design must therefore anticipate behavioural economics: risk-averse actors choose denial over nuanced assessment. A robust proposal should include explicit guidance duties for regulators, specifying that non-discriminatory implementation and respect for carve-outs are part of compliant conduct. This is not a demand for leniency; it is a demand for rule-of-law certainty. The Commission's consolidated FAQs function precisely as such a guidance layer, and proposals should expand that function into the social-measures space with clearer exemptions and definitions[5]. Where the guidance layer is absent, ethics will be sacrificed to risk management. Therefore, safe compliance pathways are integral to ethical robustness.

A further design principle is "target the enablers, not the vulnerable interfaces". In practice, some of the most ethically problematic social measures are those that target interfaces used by ordinary people—basic payments, essential services, educational opportunities—while leaving sophisticated enablers untouched. Ethically robust design should invert that: focus restrictions and enforcement on facilitation networks, proxy service providers, and high-risk intermediaries, while protecting humanitarian and civil-society corridors. This aligns with the EU's stated emphasis on making sanctions effective through implementation and enforcement rather than indiscriminate expansion[6]. It also aligns with the logic that deterrence by risk works best when facilitators face credible consequences. In addition, enabler

[1] European Commission. (2022, April 13). *Factsheet on member state procedures to grant humanitarian derogations from EU restrictive measures (sanctions)*.
[2] European Commission. (2022, April 13). *Factsheet on member state procedures to grant humanitarian derogations from EU restrictive measures (sanctions)*.
[3] European Commission. (2023, February 7). *FAQs: Sanctions adopted following Russia's military aggression against Ukraine – Humanitarian aid*.
[4] European Parliament and Council of the European Union. (2024, April 24). *Directive (EU) 2024/1226 on the definition of criminal offences and penalties for the violation of Union restrictive measures*.
[5] European Commission. (2024, January 26). *Commission consolidated FAQs on the implementation of Council Regulation No 833/2014 and Council Regulation No 269/2014*.
[6] European Commission. (2025). *Making sanctions effective*.

targeting is more defensible legally because it can be linked to specific behaviours and risks. It is also strategically efficient: it raises the cost of circumvention and normalisation for those who can pay for it. Finally, it reduces reputational harm to the EU, because it demonstrates differentiation rather than collective exclusion. Therefore, enabler targeting should be embedded as a design presumption.

Ethically robust design should explicitly incorporate non-discrimination as a principle of implementation, not merely a background value. Social sanctions can produce discrimination indirectly through nationality-based heuristics, accentuated by private compliance decisions and by administrative discretion. If the EU fails to address this, it will face both legal and legitimacy risks, especially in Member States where equal-treatment principles are closely monitored. The Charter framework, combined with proportionality requirements, implies that discriminatory spillovers undermine the lawful basis of restrictions by creating unnecessary and avoidable harms[1,2]. The design response is to require that measures and guidance differentiate between sanctioned status, facilitation risk, and mere nationality. This differentiation should be expressed in operational terms: what checks are appropriate, what evidence is required, and what should not be treated as a risk marker. The Commission's emphasis on due diligence and risk indicators in circumvention guidance shows that the EU can define risk-based approaches, and ethical proposals should ensure those approaches do not collapse into nationality-based exclusion[3]. Moreover, complaint and correction mechanisms should be designed at the outset, because discrimination is often discovered through case patterns rather than theory. Non-discrimination is therefore part of robustness.

Precision also requires that social measures avoid "scope creep" via ambiguous concepts such as "association", "benefit", or "normalisation" unless those concepts are tied to observable indicators. Litigation summaries show that the sufficiency of evidence and reasoning is scrutinised and can lead to annulments where linkages are not adequately established[4]. In design terms, this means that if "association" is used, it must be defined with concrete criteria: roles, ownership/control indicators, facilitation actions, or participation in specified institutions. If "benefit" is used, it should be linked to demonstrable economic or service advantages derived from sanctioned networks. If "normalisation" is used, it should be defined as access to specified infrastructures that confer status or strategic advantage, not mere social interaction. Otherwise, measures become ethically and legally indefensible because they penalise intangible social meaning. The Council's explanation of travel bans and asset freezes is a model of concrete scope and mechanism, and social measures should emulate that clarity[5]. Precision reduces arbitrary application and improves compliance consistency across Member States. It is, therefore, the central operational requirement for ethical robustness.

Reversibility must also be linked to procedural fairness and transparency, especially for individual listings and restrictions that operate via travel bans and service denials. Procedural fairness includes notification where feasible, access to reasons, and meaningful opportunities for review, subject to security constraints. The EU courts' scrutiny of evidence and reasoning indicates that procedural and substantive defensibility are intertwined: if the Council cannot demonstrate a reasonable basis, the measure is at risk[6]. Ethical robustness therefore requires that the design includes internal review discipline: periodic reassessment of evidence and criteria. It also requires that delisting pathways are credible and not purely symbolic, because a purely symbolic review system undermines rule-of-law legitimacy. Where secrecy constraints exist, procedures can still be structured through closed material and summary reasoning, though implementation varies. The key is that reversibility is not just political; it is procedural. This also mitigates the risk that measures become permanent stigmas detached from

[1] European Union. (2000). *Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union*.
[2] European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. (2014). *Article 52 – Scope and interpretation of rights and principles* (Charter commentary).
[3] European Commission. (2023, February 7). *FAQs: Sanctions adopted following Russia's military aggression against Ukraine – Humanitarian aid*.
[4] EUCRIM. (2025, October 27). *CJEU rulings on restrictive EU measures against Russia (May–October 2025)*.
[5] Council of the European Union. (n.d.). *EU sanctions against Russia: questions and answers*.
[6] EUCRIM. (2025, October 27). *CJEU rulings on restrictive EU measures against Russia (May–October 2025)*.

strategic aims. Therefore, reversibility should be formalised through review schedules and delisting criteria.

A further design principle is "minimum necessary friction": impose the least friction required to achieve the objective, and do not impose additional friction simply because it is administratively convenient. Administrative convenience is a major driver of ethical failure in social sanctions: broad barriers are easy to implement, while differentiated, verified corridors require work. Yet the EU has already demonstrated that it can build procedural systems for humanitarian derogations and provide documentation guidance, suggesting that administrative complexity is manageable when prioritised[1]. Ethically robust proposals should therefore treat administrative effort as part of the cost of legitimacy, not as a reason to accept indiscriminate barriers. This is particularly important for education and health channels, where delays and denials can create irreparable harms. Minimum necessary friction also improves strategic effectiveness by focusing pressure on high-impact nodes rather than creating diffuse resentment. Moreover, it supports EU domestic cohesion by reducing intra-Union divergence and controversy over perceived unfairness. The Commission's approach to sanctions effectiveness emphasises coordination and implementation quality, which supports investing in differentiated workflows rather than defaulting to blanket barriers[2]. Therefore, administrative design is an ethical issue, not merely an operational one.

In practice, ethical robustness can be formalised through a "design checklist" that becomes a gating requirement for any new social measure or substantial guidance change. That checklist should include: (1) legal basis and competence pathway; (2) objective statement with measurable outcomes; (3) proportionality justification including harm markers; (4) precision in scope, definitions, and evidentiary logic; (5) humanitarian and protected carve-outs with workflows; (6) reversibility with sunset/review clauses; and (7) implementation plan including guidance and complaint handling. The Commission's consolidated FAQs demonstrate how a centralised guidance layer can support consistency and compliance, and proposals should rely on a similar approach for any social measures to prevent fragmentation[3]. The checklist should also require that enforcement consequences are aligned with the measure's risk profile, so that low-level inadvertent breaches do not become the primary enforcement target. Directive (EU) 2024/1226's emphasis on criminal law should be integrated carefully to avoid chilling legitimate humanitarian activity while preserving deterrence against facilitation[4]. A checklist approach also supports periodic review, because it creates a baseline record of intent, scope, and justification. This reduces the risk of later drift and "silent expansion" through over-compliance. Therefore, ethical robustness should be proceduralised.

A final principle is the explicit separation between moral condemnation and policy mechanism. The EU is entitled to moral condemnation of aggression, but sanctions instruments must operate through legal mechanisms that are testable, reviewable, and constrained. If moral condemnation becomes the mechanism—through diffuse social exclusion—ethical robustness collapses. The Charter framework exists precisely to ensure that objectives of general interest do not justify unlimited restriction of rights[5,6]. Ethically robust social measures therefore treat law as the instrument of moral commitment, not as an obstacle to be bypassed. This approach strengthens the EU's strategic position by maintaining legitimacy, reducing litigation vulnerability, and concentrating pressure where it matters. It also supports long-run cohesion among Member States by reducing perception of arbitrariness and discrimination. The EU's institutional framing of sanctions effectiveness—focusing on implementation

[1] European Commission. (2022, April 13). *Factsheet on member state procedures to grant humanitarian derogations from EU restrictive measures (sanctions)*.
[2] European Commission. (2025). *Making sanctions effective*.
[3] European Commission. (2024, January 26). *Commission consolidated FAQs on the implementation of Council Regulation No 833/2014 and Council Regulation No 269/2014*.
[4] European Parliament and Council of the European Union. (2024, April 24). *Directive (EU) 2024/1226 on the definition of criminal offences and penalties for the violation of Union restrictive measures*.
[5] European Union. (2000). *Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union*.
[6] European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. (2014). *Article 52 – Scope and interpretation of rights and principles* (Charter commentary).

and enforceability—supports this orientation by privileging governance quality over symbolic breadth[1]. Accordingly, the proposals in Section 4.5 should be designed as a coherent system: proportionality to prevent excess, precision to enable compliance and defensibility, and reversibility to preserve conditionality and legitimacy. Only such a system can sustain pressure through 2026–2030 without undermining the EU's normative foundations.

4.5.2. Exemptions and Protected Channels

Ethically robust social measures require exemptions that are not merely "allowed in principle" but institutionalised as protected channels with predictable workflows, evidentiary standards, and non-arbitrary decision timelines. In the social domain, an exemption is not a loophole; it is the legal and ethical mechanism that prevents a targeted pressure regime from drifting into diffuse exclusion. The EU's constitutional baseline reinforces this logic: any limitation of rights must be provided for by law, respect the essence of rights, and satisfy proportionality, including necessity and genuine pursuit of objectives of general interest[2]. Exemptions operationalise proportionality by ensuring that legitimate aims are pursued with minimum necessary friction for protected categories. They also protect the Union's strategic credibility by demonstrating that pressure is conditional, differentiated, and designed to reduce collateral harm. In practice, exemptions are the decisive interface between EU-level legal instruments and decentralised implementation by consulates, universities, hospitals, research institutions, banks, and platforms. Without formalised channels, these actors default to risk aversion and over-compliance, which produces discriminatory spillovers and erodes legitimacy. Therefore, the core design objective for 2026–2030 should be to convert exemptions into durable, auditable, and consistently applied corridors.

The first pillar is to treat exemptions as a governance subsystem rather than a set of ad hoc derogations. EU sanctions governance already provides relevant templates: the Commission's factsheet on Member State procedures for humanitarian derogations maps the diversity of national competent authority practices and implicitly identifies where standardisation is necessary[3]. The Commission's humanitarian-aid FAQ for Russia-related sanctions clarifies that sanctions are targeted and designed to reduce adverse impacts, while explaining how humanitarian activities can be accommodated within the legal framework[4]. These documents demonstrate that the EU can codify exemption logic in a way that is legally precise and operationally usable. The ethical lesson is that protected channels must be "designed for implementation": they should specify who decides, what evidence is needed, how quickly decisions are made, and how decisions are recorded. The strategic lesson is that exemptions without controls become circumvention vectors, which then triggers political pressure for blanket restriction and undermines the very purpose of exemptions. An ethically robust exemption design therefore balances two imperatives: reduce unintended harm and preserve enforcement integrity.

Education is a protected channel that requires particularly careful design because it affects long-term human capital, inter-societal ties, and EU soft-power credibility. Ethically, denial of education can constitute an irreparable harm for individuals who are not implicated in aggression and who may be among the constituencies most likely to support pluralism and reform. Strategically, education corridors can be defended as investments in future societal openness, while still applying strict screening to prevent facilitation of sanctioned networks. The design principle is to treat education as a category-based corridor with risk-tiering, not a blanket entitlement and not an arbitrary privilege. This can include verified student status, verified funding sources, and restrictions on sanctioned affiliations or

[1] European Commission. (2025). *Making sanctions effective*.
[2] European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. (2014). *Article 52 – Scope and interpretation of rights and principles* (Charter commentary).
[3] European Commission. (2022, April 13). *Factsheet on Member State procedures to grant humanitarian derogations from EU restrictive measures (sanctions)*.
[4] European Commission. (2023, February 7). *Frequently asked questions on humanitarian aid concerning sanctions adopted following Russia's military aggression against Ukraine* (Council Regulation (EU) No 833/2014).

institutions linked to military–industrial support. Implementation guidance should instruct universities and financial intermediaries how to distinguish between lawful admissions and prohibited facilitation, reducing the incentive to adopt nationality-based denials. The proportionality logic is straightforward: the same security objective can be achieved with narrower targeting and better verification rather than broad exclusions[1]. In addition, education exemptions should include safeguards for academic freedom and non-discrimination in access decisions, with complaint pathways for wrongful denial.

Research exemptions are closely linked but require additional integrity controls because research can be dual-use, institutionally networked, and financially complex. A protected research channel should therefore be designed around project-level verification rather than person-level discretion alone. The ethical aim is to preserve legitimate scientific collaboration and civil-society knowledge exchange while preventing technology transfer and sanctioned funding flows. This can be achieved through: transparent declarations of funding sources, institutional affiliation checks, export-control alignment for sensitive fields, and contractual commitments on compliance. The governance architecture already supports such risk-based approaches: Commission guidance materials on sanctions circumvention risk assessment emphasise due diligence and red-flag identification as core operator responsibilities[2]. Research exemptions can incorporate those red-flag concepts without turning all cross-border research into a suspect activity. The key is to separate high-risk research domains from ordinary academic collaboration and to ensure that decisions are evidence-based rather than impressionistic. Where research is in sensitive fields, authorisation can be conditional, time-bound, and subject to reporting. This preserves the corridor while maintaining enforcement credibility.

Health and medical channels are among the most ethically non-negotiable protected corridors because delays and denials can generate immediate physical harm. EU implementation materials already recognise the importance of humanitarian and medical considerations and the availability of derogations in appropriate circumstances[3]. In a robust system, the medical corridor should be operationalised through fast-track authorisations with minimal documentary burden beyond what is necessary to verify legitimacy. For example, verification may rely on medical referral letters, treatment plans, and confirmations from EU healthcare providers, while avoiding excessive financial scrutiny that delays urgent care. Where payment intermediaries are involved, a safe compliance pathway should be provided to banks and insurers to process legitimate medical payments without fear of sanctions liability, provided conditions are met. The Commission's humanitarian derogations factsheet is relevant here because it describes how national competent authorities assess authorisation requests and what operators should consider[4]. The ethical requirement is to minimise friction while maintaining verification, because the consequence of error is severe and irreparable. This also aligns with proportionality: the least restrictive means should be used to achieve the objective while respecting the essence of rights[5]. A robust medical corridor should also include clear guidance against discriminatory refusal of service based on nationality alone.

Family reunification is a protected channel with high legitimacy salience because it touches the core of private life and human dignity. In the social-sanctions domain, family corridors are also frequently where political narratives of "collective punishment" concentrate, making them strategically important for EU domestic cohesion. A robust exemption design should therefore create a standardised, evidence-based family reunification workflow: definition of eligible relationships, documentary requirements, decision timelines, and appeal routes. The goal is not to remove screening, but to make screening predictable

[1] European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. (2014). *Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union: Article 52 — Scope and interpretation of rights and principles*.
[2] European Commission. (2023b, September 7). *Guidance to EU operators: Risk assessment of possible circumvention of EU restrictive measures (sanctions) against Russia*.
[3] European Commission. (2023a, February 7). *Frequently asked questions on humanitarian aid concerning sanctions adopted following Russia's military aggression against Ukraine* (Council Regulation (EU) No 833/2014).
[4] European Commission. (2022, April 13). *Factsheet on Member State procedures to grant humanitarian derogations from EU restrictive measures (sanctions)*.
[5] European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. (2014). *Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union: Article 52 — Scope and interpretation of rights and principles*.

and non-arbitrary, reducing discretionary divergence across Member States. Proportionality considerations remain central: if the policy objective is to constrain high-risk actors, family separation that is not necessary to that objective becomes ethically and legally vulnerable[1]. Furthermore, predictable family corridors reduce incentives for irregular routes and reliance on intermediaries, which can otherwise expand grey-zone markets. This is a case where ethical robustness and enforcement outcomes align: transparent corridors decrease circumvention demand. The system must still include safeguards against abuse (e.g., sham relationships used for facilitation), but those safeguards should be risk-based and evidentially grounded. A harmonised approach also reduces reputational damage to the EU from inconsistent national practice.

Civil-society exchange is a protected channel that includes independent journalism, human-rights monitoring, cultural and scholarly dialogue, and support for dissidents. Ethically robust design should treat this corridor as an explicit instrument of differentiation: the EU applies pressure on enablers and decision-makers while maintaining space for societal engagement that can contribute to future reconciliation and accountability. The challenge is that civil-society exchange is easy to politicise and harder to verify than formal education or medical treatment. The design response is to establish a list of recognised legitimate categories (accredited media, registered NGOs, verified civil-society programmes) and to link authorisations to objective criteria rather than to ideological tests. In parallel, the EU should provide safe compliance guidance to platforms and service providers that facilitate civil-society activity (e.g., payment services for NGOs, access to communication tools) to prevent chilling effects. The Commission's guidance on circumvention risks provides a framework for identifying suspicious patterns without generalising suspicion to all cross-border civil-society engagement[2]. The ethical risk here is over-compliance: fear of liability drives actors to deny service even when lawful. Therefore, the corridor must be backed by clear interpretative guidance and complaint mechanisms, which will be expanded in 4.5.3.

Protected channels also require a coherent relationship with enforcement against circumvention, because exemptions can become the easiest narrative for critics of sanctions: "exemptions are loopholes". The solution is not to remove exemptions but to make them verifiable and auditable, thereby turning exemptions into enforcement assets rather than enforcement vulnerabilities. If authorisations are documented, time-bound, and linked to clear conditions, abuse can be detected and prosecuted without collapsing the entire corridor. This is consistent with the EU's enforcement trajectory, including criminalisation of sanctions violations and circumvention conduct, which increases the deterrent effect against facilitators[3]. In practical terms, this means exemption decisions should generate audit trails: what evidence was reviewed, what conditions were imposed, and what monitoring steps are required. Auditability is crucial not only for enforcement but also for defending proportionality and non-discrimination. Where audit trails exist, authorities can demonstrate that denials or approvals were based on objective criteria, not prejudice. This converts ethical requirements into operational controls.

A recurring implementation problem is that decentralised actors face asymmetric risk: they face penalties for breaches but rarely face penalties for wrongful denial. This creates systematic over-compliance in protected channels. Ethical robustness therefore requires "counter-incentives" that make wrongful denial visible and correctable, such as complaint pathways, transparency reporting, and supervisory expectations that carve-outs are respected. Even before moving to those governance measures, the design of exemptions can reduce over-compliance by providing safe harbours: if an operator follows specified due diligence steps and retains records, they are protected against liability for good-faith decisions. This approach is analogous to risk-based compliance frameworks and is

[1] European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. (2014). *Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union: Article 52 — Scope and interpretation of rights and principles*.
[2] European Commission. (2023b, September 7). *Guidance to EU operators: Risk assessment of possible circumvention of EU restrictive measures (sanctions) against Russia*.
[3] European Parliament and Council of the European Union. (2024, April 24). *Directive (EU) 2024/1226 on the definition of criminal offences and penalties for the violation of Union restrictive measures*.

reinforced by EU operator guidance on circumvention risk assessment and red-flag handling[1,2]. A red-flag approach matters because it prevents nationality from being used as a crude proxy; instead, operators focus on behavioural and transactional indicators. The Helpdesk's explanation that red flags trigger deeper due diligence rather than automatic illegality is directly useful for designing humane corridors[3]. The proposal should therefore embed red-flag logic into exemption workflows and guidance. This reduces arbitrary barriers without lowering standards.

Exemption design should also incorporate a "tiered verification model" that matches evidentiary requirements to risk. Not all protected-channel cases carry the same facilitation risk, and treating them as identical increases harm without improving security. For example, urgent medical treatment should require fewer steps than a long-term research project with sensitive technology. Similarly, family reunification should prioritise identity and relationship verification, whereas civil-society exchange may prioritise organisational legitimacy and funding-source transparency. A tiered model aligns with proportionality because it imposes only the friction necessary to mitigate the relevant risk[4]. It also aligns with enforcement, because resources can be concentrated where risk is highest. The Commission's mapping of humanitarian derogation procedures highlights how authorisation processes can involve different evidentiary burdens and competent authorities, which supports formalising tiering rather than leaving it implicit[5]. Tiering also makes the system more legible to applicants and operators, reducing arbitrary outcomes. In addition, it helps Member States converge on comparable standards by providing a common template. Therefore, tiered verification is a practical design principle for protected channels.

Protected channels should be institutionalised at both EU and Member State levels, with a clear division of roles. EU-level instruments can define categories, minimum standards, and interpretative guidance, while Member States implement through national competent authorities, consular services, and sectoral regulators. The humanitarian derogations factsheet explicitly centres national competent authorities as the assessing bodies for authorisations, which implies that standardisation requires EU-level templates and national-level procedures[6]. In the social domain, consular services and sectoral authorities (education ministries, health regulators) will also be involved, so institutionalisation must extend beyond "sanctions specialists". A robust proposal would therefore recommend designated focal points for protected channels within each Member State, trained on sanctions law, proportionality obligations, and non-discrimination. It would also recommend standard forms and documentary checklists to reduce discretionary variation. Where appropriate, digital submission portals can reduce processing time and improve auditability. This is not bureaucracy for its sake. It is the infrastructure required to make exemptions real and to prevent de facto denial through delay. Institutionalisation is therefore a necessary condition of ethical robustness.

The operational workflow for exemptions should be framed as a five-stage process: request intake, verification and risk assessment, decision and conditions, recording and notification, and review/appeal. Each stage should have defined timelines and escalation rules, especially for urgent health and family cases. The EU already provides relevant guidance models: Commission guidance notes on humanitarian aid compliance and its humanitarian-aid FAQ demonstrate a structured approach to interpreting permissible activity and necessary steps[7,8]. Similarly, the EU Sanctions

[1] European Commission. (2023b, September 7). *Guidance to EU operators: Risk assessment of possible circumvention of EU restrictive measures (sanctions) against Russia*.
[2] EU Sanctions Compliance Helpdesk. (n.d.). *Red flags: Mastering the indicators of sanctions risk*.
[3] EU Sanctions Compliance Helpdesk. (n.d.). *Red flags: Mastering the indicators of sanctions risk*.
[4] European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. (2014). *Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union: Article 52 — Scope and interpretation of rights and principles*.
[5] European Commission. (2022, April 13). *Factsheet on Member State procedures to grant humanitarian derogations from EU restrictive measures (sanctions)*.
[6] European Commission. (2022, April 13). *Factsheet on Member State procedures to grant humanitarian derogations from EU restrictive measures (sanctions)*.
[7] European Commission. (2022, April 13). *Factsheet on Member State procedures to grant humanitarian derogations from EU restrictive measures (sanctions)*.
[8] European Commission. (2023a, February 7). *Frequently asked questions on humanitarian aid concerning sanctions adopted following Russia's military aggression against Ukraine* (Council Regulation (EU) No 833/2014).

Compliance Helpdesk offers a practical orientation on due diligence and red flags that can be adapted to exemption decision-making[1]. The key is to avoid "silent discretion" where outcomes depend on individual officials or compliance officers. A workflow also enables accountability: delays and denials can be tracked, patterns can be audited, and discriminatory outcomes can be detected. Workflow design thus serves both ethics and effectiveness. It also reduces circumvention risk by making legitimate paths accessible, lowering the demand for intermediated grey-zone solutions. Therefore, workflow institutionalisation is central to protected channels.

To provide an implementable template for the report, Table 4.5.2-1 sets out a typology of protected channels and minimum operational standards. This table is intended as a policy blueprint: it translates normative commitments into procedural commitments. It also creates a baseline for later monitoring in 4.5.4, because each corridor can be linked to measurable indicators (processing times, denial rates, audit findings). Importantly, the table assumes that targeted restrictions and enforcement remain firm; the purpose is to ensure that firmness does not become indiscriminate exclusion. The ethical criterion is whether the corridor preserves the essence of protected interests while remaining compatible with legitimate security aims[2]. The operational criterion is whether an ordinary institution can apply it without resorting to blanket denial. The enforcement criterion is whether abuse is detectable through records and conditions. These criteria must be satisfied simultaneously for "ethical robustness".

Table 4.5.2-1. Protected channels and institutionalised exemptions: minimum standards and verification logic (2026–2030)

Protected channel	Core ethical rationale	Minimum verification (baseline)	Risk-tiering triggers (enhanced checks)	Decision SLA (target)
Education (students)	Prevent irreparable life-course harm; preserve openness and future societal links	Identity; admission/enrolment proof; lawful funding source	Links to sanctioned entities; high-risk funding; sensitive fields/institutions	15–30 days
Research (projects)	Preserve legitimate science; prevent illicit transfer and facilitation	Project description; funding transparency; institutional affiliation	Dual-use sensitivity; restricted technology interface; proxy patterns	30–60 days
Health/medical care	Prevent immediate harm; uphold human dignity	Referral/treatment plan; provider confirmation; payment pathway	High-value payments; links to listed persons; intermediary complexity	3–10 days
Family reunification	Protect private and family life; reduce collective punishment narratives	Relationship evidence; identity; residence/legal status	Fraud indicators; links to listed persons; facilitation patterns	10–30 days
Civil-society exchange	Protect independent media/NGOs; preserve accountability channels	Organisational legitimacy; purpose statement; funding transparency	High-risk funding routes; repeated red flags; proxy intermediaries	15–45 days

Authorship: analytical framework (this report) was prepared by the author (analytical synthesis and proposed operational standards).
Sources:

- European Commission factsheet on humanitarian derogations procedures: https://finance.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-04/eu-restrictive-measures-humanitarian-derogations-factsheet_en.pdf
- European Commission FAQ on humanitarian aid: https://finance.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-02/faqs-sanctions-russia-humanitarian-aid_en.pdf
- EU Sanctions Compliance Helpdesk "Red flags" page: https://eu-sanctions-compliance-helpdesk.europa.eu/red-flags-mastering-indicators-sanctions-risk_en

[1] EU Sanctions Compliance Helpdesk, n.d.
[2] European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. (2014). *Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union: Article 52 — Scope and interpretation of rights and principles*.

- FRA commentary on Article 52 proportionality framework: https://fra.europa.eu/en/eu-charter/article/52-scope-and-interpretation-rights-and-principles

A second operational requirement is to ensure that exemptions do not become arbitrary barriers through opaque documentary demands and inconsistent evidence thresholds. The Commission's factsheet on humanitarian derogations implicitly illustrates how procedural diversity can create burdens for operators and applicants, which in the social domain can translate into de facto denial[1]. An ethically robust proposal should therefore recommend standardised evidence bundles: a minimal set of documents that must be accepted across Member States, with additional documents requested only when red flags are present. This is a classic proportionality technique: differentiate the burden of proof based on risk, not based on nationality or discretion. It also reduces administrative overload, because authorities are not reinventing requirements case by case. Standardisation further reduces corruption risks, because fewer discretionary points exist. Moreover, predictable evidence bundles can be communicated publicly, improving transparency and reducing the market for intermediaries who monetise uncertainty. This is a concrete way to turn ethical commitments into operational safeguards. The result should be a more uniform, defensible implementation environment across the Union.

The workflow must also include an explicit "non-arbitrariness doctrine": decisions should be reasoned, recorded, and subject to review within defined timeframes. Reason-giving is essential because it is the mechanism through which applicants can correct errors and through which authorities can demonstrate lawful proportionality. It is also a precondition for detecting discrimination: without reasons, patterns remain invisible. In rights-adjacent contexts, reason-giving is part of procedural fairness and supports proportionality, consistent with the Charter-based logic articulated in Article 52 commentary[2]. The practical design implication is to require structured decision templates: categories of reasons for approval or denial linked to objective criteria. For denials, minimal reasoning can be provided even where sensitive information cannot be disclosed fully, using risk-category codes and documentary deficiencies. Review processes should be accessible and time-bound, with escalation to a specialised unit where necessary. This prevents "administrative fatigue" from turning into a silent policy of refusal. A robust exemption system therefore requires procedural fairness as a design component.

Exemptions must also be integrated with the EU's evolving compliance ecosystem, because many protected channels require transactions and services by private actors. Banks, payment providers, platforms, universities, and insurers are often the practical gatekeepers, and they operate under strong incentives to avoid legal risk. The EU Sanctions Compliance Helpdesk's materials are designed to support operator due diligence and the handling of red flags, indicating institutional recognition that distributed compliance needs guidance and tools[3]. An ethically robust proposal should extend this model explicitly into protected channels, for example through sector-specific guidance for education finance, medical payments, and NGO transactions. Such guidance should define what constitutes sufficient verification and what constitutes a red flag requiring escalation. It should also clarify that red flags do not automatically imply illegality, but require enhanced due diligence and documentation, preventing automatic denial[4]. This reduces discriminatory outcomes by replacing crude heuristics with structured risk assessment. It also supports enforcement by improving detection of genuine facilitation attempts. Therefore, protected channels and compliance governance must be designed as a single system.

Because over-compliance is a predictable behavioural outcome under criminalisation pressure, the exemption system must provide safe harbours and escalation pathways for private actors. Where a bank

[1] European Commission. (2022, April 13). *Factsheet on Member State procedures to grant humanitarian derogations from EU restrictive measures (sanctions)*.
[2] European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. (2014). *Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union: Article 52 — Scope and interpretation of rights and principles*.
[3] EU Sanctions Compliance Helpdesk. (n.d.). *Red flags: Mastering the indicators of sanctions risk*.
[4] EU Sanctions Compliance Helpdesk. (n.d.). *Red flags: Mastering the indicators of sanctions risk*.

refuses a lawful medical payment due to uncertainty, the patient suffers harm while the bank faces no countervailing liability. Ethical robustness requires correcting this incentive asymmetry by making protected corridors explicitly part of compliance expectations and by providing authoritative guidance on acceptable processing steps. Commission documents on humanitarian aid within sanctions frameworks demonstrate that the EU can clarify permissible activity and related conditions in a way that protects humanitarian operations[1]. The same approach can be adapted to protected social channels, including education and family transfers, while preserving anti-circumvention safeguards. Safe harbours should be conditional on documentary compliance and record retention, which also aids enforcement. Where uncertainties remain, escalation to national competent authorities should be designed to be rapid and responsive, rather than purely formal. In a mature system, private actors should not be forced to choose between denial and legal risk; they should have a pathway to lawful service provision when protected criteria are met. This is critical for ethical robustness and for EU credibility.

Protected channels should also be reversible and adjustable, not fixed forever, because risk environments evolve and circumvention techniques change. However, reversibility must not mean instability or arbitrariness; it should be implemented through scheduled review and published updates to guidance. The Commission's model of FAQs and guidance updates in the sanctions' domain provides a precedent for iterative calibration[2]. For protected channels, review should focus on two questions: whether the corridor is producing undue harm, and whether it is being abused for facilitation. If undue harm is detected, friction should be reduced; if abuse is detected, verification should be hardened in targeted ways rather than collapsing the corridor. This is another application of proportionality: the response to misuse should be narrower than the corridor itself. Review should also incorporate stakeholder input from universities, hospitals, and NGOs, focusing on implementation issues rather than geopolitical policy. Structured review strengthens legitimacy because it shows that exemptions are not symbolic but functional and monitored. It also strengthens enforcement because it continuously updates red flags and verification standards. Thus, feedback and calibration should be built into corridor governance.

To make the exemption workflow concrete for this report, Table 4.5.2-2 sets out a proposed operational process that can be referenced across all protected channels. The process is designed to minimise arbitrary barriers while maintaining verification integrity and auditability. It also creates clear points for data collection and monitoring, which will matter in 4.5.4. The model assumes decentralised decision-making but standardised templates and escalation routes. It includes distinct treatment for urgent cases and for complex high-risk cases. It also embeds record-keeping as a compliance and enforcement support. By expressing the workflow in a standardised way, the EU can reduce cross-Member State variance and reduce the need for intermediaries who monetise uncertainty. This is a direct ethical gain and an indirect anti-circumvention gain. The workflow therefore functions as both a humanitarian safeguard and an enforcement instrument.

Table 4.5.2-2. Operational workflow for exemptions: from request to decision, recording, and review (protected channels)

Stage	Core action	Standard outputs	Minimum timeline target	Integrity control
1. Intake	Submission via standard form + evidence bundle	Case ID; category; urgency flag	1–3 days	Completeness check; basic identity verification
2. Verification & risk assessment	Validate evidence; run sanctions screening; apply red-flag logic	Risk tier; required enhancements	3–15 days (or 1–3 days for urgent health)	Red flags trigger enhanced due diligence, not automatic denial

[1] European Commission. (2023, February 7). *Frequently asked questions on humanitarian aid concerning sanctions adopted following Russia's military aggression against Ukraine* (Council Regulation (EU) No 833/2014).
[2] European Commission. (2024, May 17). *New EU rules criminalising the violation of EU sanctions enter into force*.

Stage	Core action	Standard outputs	Minimum timeline target	Integrity control
3. Decision & conditions	Approve/deny; impose conditions (time-bound, scope-bound)	Reasoned decision note; conditions	5–30 days	Conditions include record retention and reporting where relevant
4. Recording & notification	Record decision; notify applicant and relevant operators	Audit trail; notification package	1–3 days	Standardised reason codes to detect discrimination patterns
5. Review/appeal	Rapid review channel for denials or delays	Review decision; corrected outcome	10–30 days	Independent review within competent authority; escalation path

Authorship: analytical framework (this report) was prepared by the author (proposed workflow model based on EU derogations practice and compliance guidance).
Sources:

- European Commission humanitarian derogations factsheet: https://finance.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-04/eu-restrictive-measures-humanitarian-derogations-factsheet_en.pdf
- European Commission humanitarian-aid FAQ: https://finance.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-02/faqs-sanctions-russia-humanitarian-aid_en.pdf
- EU Sanctions Compliance Helpdesk “Red flags” guidance: https://eu-sanctions-compliance-helpdesk.europa.eu/red-flags-mastering-indicators-sanctions-risk_en

A robust exemption system must also protect against a specific failure mode: corridor capture by intermediaries. When legal corridors are slow or unpredictable, applicants seek brokers who promise to “solve” access through informal payments, document manipulation, or exploitative fees. This is an ethical harm and an enforcement risk, because it expands grey-zone facilitation markets. Predictable workflows, standard evidence bundles, and transparent timelines reduce this market by reducing uncertainty. The Commission’s mapping of humanitarian derogation procedures shows that procedural complexity is real and that operators must navigate diverse systems[1]. In the social domain, the same complexity can quickly become a market for intermediated access, worsening inequality. Therefore, a key ethical objective is to democratise access to lawful corridors by making them legible and administratively feasible. This is also strategically useful, because it prevents the emergence of circumvention ecosystems framed as “humanitarian solutions”. By investing in workflow quality, the EU can reduce both harm and evasion. Corridor capture is thus an evaluative indicator of exemption robustness.

Another failure mode is the misuse of protected channels for facilitation, which can produce political backlash and lead to indiscriminate tightening. Ethically robust design anticipates misuse and neutralises it through targeted controls. For education and research, this may include restrictions on sanctioned institutional affiliations, scrutiny of funding routes, and verification of programme legitimacy. For civil-society exchange, this may include transparency of funding and organisational credibility checks. For family reunification, this may include fraud detection that is risk-based and evidence-driven rather than prejudicial. For medical corridors, it may include enhanced scrutiny only in high-value or complex-payment cases, while preserving rapid access for urgent care. The compliance helpdesk’s framing of red flags is directly relevant because it teaches operators to treat indicators as triggers for deeper due diligence rather than as grounds for automatic prohibition[2]. This is exactly the logic needed to keep corridors open while addressing abuse. In other words, corridor integrity is maintained through structured escalation rather than collapse. Ethical robustness requires that abuse triggers refinement, not indiscriminate closure.

[1] European Commission. (2022, April 13). *Factsheet on Member State procedures to grant humanitarian derogations from EU restrictive measures (sanctions)*.
[2] EU Sanctions Compliance Helpdesk. (n.d.). *Red flags: Mastering the indicators of sanctions risk*.

Finally, protected channels must be communicated as part of the EU's sanctions legitimacy strategy. In 2026–2030, domestic EU debates about sanctions will continue to scrutinise whether measures are fair, targeted, and consistent with European values. Protected channels provide the factual basis for defending sanctions against the claim of collective punishment, but only if they function in practice. The Commission's humanitarian-aid FAQ explicitly frames sanctions as targeted and designed to minimise adverse impacts, which is a legitimacy claim that must be operationally true[1]. Article 52 proportionality logic reinforces that legitimacy is not optional; it is a legal requirement in rights-limiting policy[2]. Therefore, ethical robustness in exemptions is both substantive and communicative: corridors must exist, must be usable, and must be verifiably administered. Where corridors work, they reduce reputational damage, lower circumvention demand, and strengthen long-run EU cohesion. Where corridors fail, they become symbols of hypocrisy and fuel backlash. The proposals in 4.5.2–4.5.4 should therefore treat exemption design as a strategic asset, not a humanitarian afterthought. This framing preserves pressure on enablers while protecting legitimate human ties and civil society.

4.5.3. Governance against Over-Compliance and Discrimination

Ethically robust social measures cannot rely on "good intentions" at the point of implementation. In sanctions' environment, decentralised actors—banks, payment providers, platforms, universities, employers, landlords, insurers, and logistics intermediaries—face asymmetric incentives: they are punished (financially, criminally, reputationally) for under-compliance, but rarely face comparable consequences for wrongful denial of lawful activity. The predictable behavioural outcome is over-compliance: refusals that exceed legal requirements, often driven by fear, ambiguity, and poor information. Over-compliance becomes ethically problematic when it produces discriminatory outcomes, especially where nationality becomes an implicit proxy for risk. A governance regime that ignores these dynamics will inadvertently transform targeted social measures into diffuse social exclusion. The EU's "making sanctions effective" posture frames implementation as primarily a Member State responsibility supported by Commission coordination and tools, which implies that governance quality is itself a core determinant of outcomes[3]. Ethical robustness therefore requires an explicit governance layer designed to prevent over-reach, correct errors, and harmonise practice across Member States.

The first governance principle is to treat over-compliance as a systemic risk, not a marginal anomaly. Over-compliance is not simply "extra caution"; it can function as a form of private enforcement that is opaque, unaccountable, and often more expansive than democratically authorised policy. When firms and institutions default to denial, protected channels (education, health, family reunification, civil society) become de facto closed even if legal carve-outs exist. This undermines proportionality because the least restrictive means are not being applied, and it undermines legitimacy because the public sees outcomes rather than legal nuance. The EU's sanctions ecosystem already recognises that due diligence must be risk-based and that red flags trigger deeper checks rather than automatic illegality, which is directly relevant to preventing indiscriminate denial[4]. A robust governance regime should translate this logic into binding or quasi-binding expectations for regulated entities: "no automatic denial without articulated legal basis or documented red-flag escalation." In other words, governance should close the gap between lawful scope and operational practice.

A second principle is to anchor anti-discrimination obligations explicitly within sanctions implementation. The EU Charter prohibits discrimination and demands that rights limitations remain proportionate and legally grounded. In practical governance terms, this implies that sanctions

[1] European Commission. (2023a, February 7). *Frequently asked questions on humanitarian aid concerning sanctions adopted following Russia's military aggression against Ukraine* (Council Regulation (EU) No 833/2014).
[2] European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. (2014). *Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union: Article 52 — Scope and interpretation of rights and principles*.
[3] European Commission. (2025). *Making sanctions effective*.
[4] EU Sanctions Compliance Helpdesk. (n.d.). *EU Sanctions Helpdesk (platform overview)*.

implementation must distinguish between *sanctioned status/risk* and *mere nationality*, and must require documented reasons for refusals where access to services or channels is denied. The Charter's non-discrimination norm, particularly as explained in fundamental-rights commentary, is an important guardrail for rights-adjacent domains affected by social measures[1,2]. Ethical robustness is not achieved by stating "we do not discriminate"; it is achieved by making discriminatory outcomes detectable, auditable, and correctable. Therefore, the governance architecture must include transparency obligations, complaint mechanisms, and periodic auditing of outcomes, with a focus on patterns rather than individual anecdotes.

The third principle is that governance must be operationally specific: regulated entities require implementable guidance that clarifies what is prohibited, what is permitted, what is conditional, and what constitutes "best efforts" in risk management. Ambiguity pushes decision-makers towards risk avoidance, which is effectively a privatised ban. The Commission's guidance on circumvention risk assessment explicitly anticipates that operators need due diligence measures and that recommendations will evolve as patterns change, illustrating how the EU uses guidance as an adaptive governance layer[3]. In addition, consolidated FAQs and red-flag materials provide a model of how to translate legal norms into compliance practice without collapsing nuance[4]. Ethical governance should expand that model specifically for social measures and protected corridors, using sector-specific annexes (education finance, medical payments, NGO transactions, platform access). The point is to create safe compliance pathways that reduce unjustified refusals while preserving robust screening.

A fourth principle is harmonisation: without it, the EU creates internal "arbitrariness zones" where outcomes depend on geography rather than law. In the social domain, this manifests as inconsistent consular decisions, divergent bank policies, or variable platform enforcement across Member States. Such divergence is ethically problematic because it produces unequal treatment and legally problematic because it weakens proportionality by introducing unnecessary and avoidable harm. It is also strategically counterproductive because it creates circumvention incentives: networks will route activity through the least restrictive jurisdiction. The Commission's effectiveness framing—supporting Member States to ensure implementation—implicitly acknowledges that convergence is required for effectiveness[5]. Ethical robustness therefore requires minimum harmonisation standards: common templates for decision-making, shared risk indicators, and common expectations for record-keeping and reasons. Harmonisation does not imply centralised decision-making; it implies common operational rules.

Guidance to regulated entities should be structured around three layers: baseline obligations, enhanced due diligence triggers, and escalation pathways. Baseline obligations are the "must do" checks: sanctions screening, identity verification, beneficial ownership/"control" analysis where relevant, and record retention. Enhanced triggers are the red flags—suspicious routing, proxy patterns, mismatched documentation—that require deeper due diligence rather than automatic refusal. The EU Sanctions Compliance Helpdesk explicitly states that a red flag is not always indicative of illegality but signals the need for deeper due diligence[6]. Escalation pathways specify how a regulated entity can seek authoritative clarification or authorisation, typically through national competent authorities, rather than unilaterally refusing all borderline cases. This three-layer guidance design directly targets the core driver of over-compliance: the absence of a defensible middle path between acceptance and refusal. Ethical

[1] European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. (2014). *Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union: Article 52 — Scope and interpretation of rights and principles*. Publications Office of the European Union.
[2] European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. (2014). *Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union: Article 21 — Non-discrimination*. Publications Office of the European Union.
[3] European Commission. (2023a, February 7). *Frequently asked questions on humanitarian aid concerning sanctions adopted following Russia's military aggression against Ukraine* (Council Regulation (EU) No 833/2014).
[4] EU Sanctions Compliance Helpdesk. (n.d.). *EU Sanctions Helpdesk (platform overview)*.
[5] European Commission. (2025). *Making sanctions effective*.
[6] EU Sanctions Compliance Helpdesk. (n.d.). *EU Sanctions Helpdesk (platform overview)*.

governance therefore requires that regulators publish not only prohibitions but also "how to comply lawfully with protected corridors".

Complaint mechanisms are the second pillar of governance. If over-compliance and discrimination are systemic risks, there must be a systematic way to surface and correct them. A complaint mechanism for sanctions-related service denial should function in three modes: problem-solving (fast correction of errors), compliance review (investigating whether the refusal exceeded legal requirements), and learning (updating guidance to prevent recurrence). This tripartite model is widely used in institutional accountability settings because it prevents complaint handling from becoming purely adversarial or purely symbolic[1]. The sanctions context adds an additional constraint: sensitive information and security considerations may limit disclosure, but they do not eliminate the need for reasoned outcomes and reviewability. Ethical robustness requires that complaint channels are accessible, time-bound, and capable of producing corrective action. They also need to be safe for vulnerable applicants who fear retaliation or stigma. In practical terms, the report should propose a dual structure: national complaint points (for immediate resolution) with an EU-level aggregation function to identify systemic patterns. This enables both correction and harmonisation.

Transparency obligations are a third pillar. Without transparency, over-compliance remains invisible because denials are private decisions. Transparency does not require disclosing sensitive intelligence; it requires publishing aggregated information on refusal patterns, reasons, and processing times, especially in protected corridors. This is essential for detecting discrimination, because discrimination is often statistical rather than explicit. Transparency also provides feedback to regulated entities: if refusal rates in one Member State or one sector are unusually high, that is a governance signal. The governance layer can then respond with targeted guidance, supervisory engagement, or audit. Transparency should also cover the existence and usability of exemptions and protected channels: users must know what is possible and what evidence is required. The EU's emphasis on practical tools and resources for compliance suggests an institutional willingness to provide such clarity[2,3]. Ethical robustness therefore implies a minimum transparency standard: publish corridor rules, publish decision SLAs, and publish aggregated outcomes. This reduces both harm and circumvention demand.

Auditing discriminatory outcomes is the fourth pillar, and it must be designed as a structured process rather than an occasional review after scandals. Audits should test whether outcomes correlate improperly with nationality or origin when risk factors do not justify such correlation. They should also test whether protected corridors are functioning: if medical payments are routinely refused, the corridor is de facto closed. The point is not to accuse institutions. It is to detect system bias generated by risk asymmetries. Over-compliance is known to lead to discriminatory outcomes in regulatory environments where intermediaries bear liability for under-removal or under-restriction but face few incentives to preserve lawful access, a dynamic discussed in broader European governance contexts[4]. While content moderation is a different domain, the structural incentive pattern is analogous: fear of liability drives excessive restriction, which can become discriminatory[5]. Ethical governance should therefore require periodic audits of denial decisions and their rationales, including sampling of case files and statistical review. Audit findings should trigger guidance updates and, where necessary, supervisory action. This creates a feedback loop that converts ethics into measurable governance practice.

Harmonisation across Member States should focus on four concrete elements. First, shared definitions and decision templates for protected corridors, so that "permitted with conditions" is understood

[1] Ashraf, N. (2023). *Enhancing complaints mechanisms of European development finance institutions* (Discussion Note 352). European Centre for Development Policy Management.
[2] European Commission. (2025). *Making sanctions effective*.
[3] EU Sanctions Compliance Helpdesk. (n.d.). *EU Sanctions Helpdesk (platform overview)*.
[4] Council of Europe, Steering Committee for Media and Information Society (CDMSI). (2021). *Content moderation: Best practices towards effective legal and procedural frameworks for self-regulatory and co-regulatory mechanisms of content moderation* (Guidance Note, adopted at the CDMSI 19th plenary meeting, 19–21 May 2021). Council of Europe.
[5] Council of Europe, Steering Committee for Media and Information Society (CDMSI). (2021). *Content moderation: Best practices towards effective legal and procedural frameworks for self-regulatory and co-regulatory mechanisms of content moderation* (Guidance Note, adopted at the CDMSI 19th plenary meeting, 19–21 May 2021). Council of Europe.

similarly across borders. Secondly, common evidentiary bundles and red-flag criteria that prevent arbitrary documentary escalation. Thirdly, shared SLAs and escalation routes to national competent authorities. Fourthly, common reporting metrics for transparency and auditing. These elements reduce arbitrary enforcement and also reduce forum shopping by circumvention networks. Harmonisation is consistent with the EU's implementation framing, where Member States carry primary responsibility but are supported by EU coordination tools[1]. The practical governance approach is to codify minimum standards at EU level (through guidance, recommendations, or common templates) while leaving operational execution to Member States. This is a realistic pathway in a politically sensitive domain because it improves outcomes without requiring wholesale centralisation.

A central governance recommendation is the creation of "anti-over-compliance guidance notes" as a dedicated annex to sanctions FAQs and sectoral guidance. These notes should explicitly describe over-compliance risks, clarify that red flags require escalation rather than blanket denial, and set out non-discrimination expectations. They should also include safe-harbour language: if an operator follows defined due diligence steps and retains records, they will be treated as acting in good faith. The Helpdesk's red-flag framing—red flags trigger deeper checks—can be used as the doctrinal baseline for these notes[2]. The Commission's circumvention guidance can supply the due-diligence backbone[3]. Together, these tools can be adapted from trade-focused contexts into social-channel contexts. This is essential because the costs of wrongful denial in education, health, and family life are ethically severe. By integrating anti-over-compliance notes into official guidance, the EU can shape private-sector behaviour in a direction consistent with proportionality and legal certainty.

Regulatory supervision should also incorporate "over-compliance risk" into routine supervisory agendas. In the financial sector, supervisors increasingly evaluate sanctions controls as part of broader risk management. Ethical robustness suggests adding a proportionality lens: supervisors should ask not only "are you blocking prohibited transactions?" but also "are you processing lawful protected transactions with the required safeguards?" This is a shift from one-sided compliance to balanced compliance. It can be implemented through supervisory questionnaires and thematic reviews. The evidence base for such a shift is practical: without supervisory attention, institutions have no incentive to invest in nuanced corridors, and they will continue to deny. Balanced supervision also improves enforcement because it forces institutions to maintain auditable records for both approvals and denials. This increases the quality of data available for investigations and reduces the grey zone in which facilitators operate. Ethical governance therefore improves effectiveness, not just fairness.

A further recommendation is to formalise a "right to reasons" at least in minimal form for protected corridor denials. Even if full reasoning cannot be disclosed due to security considerations, applicants should receive reason codes and a list of missing documents or triggers. This enables correction and reduces perceptions of arbitrariness. It also makes discrimination detectable: reason codes can be aggregated and analysed. The Charter-based proportionality and non-discrimination framework implies that arbitrary denials in rights-adjacent contexts are not ethically neutral[4,5]. In addition, reason-giving is an essential component of any credible complaint mechanism. Ethical robustness therefore requires procedural fairness elements: notice, minimal reasons, and review. These procedural elements need not undermine security; they can be implemented through structured templates that protect sensitive information. The operational goal is to prevent "silent refusals" as a de facto policy. This is especially critical in cross-border contexts where applicants have limited ability to navigate opaque systems.

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[1] European Commission. (2025). *Making sanctions effective*.

[2] EU Sanctions Compliance Helpdesk. (n.d.). *EU Sanctions Helpdesk (platform overview)*.

[3] European Commission. (2023, September 7). *Guidance for EU operators: Risk assessment of possible sanctions circumvention*. Directorate-General for Financial Stability, Financial Services and Capital Markets Union.

[4] European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. (2014). *Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union: Article 52 — Scope and interpretation of rights and principles*. Publications Office of the European Union.

[5] European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. (2014). *Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union: Article 21 — Non-discrimination*. Publications Office of the European Union.

The governance system should also include explicit protection against discriminatory proxy indicators. In practice, discrimination often arises when institutions treat nationality, language, place of birth, or residence as a blanket risk marker. Ethical guidance should therefore instruct that risk assessments must be based on objective sanctions-relevant indicators (listed status, ownership/control linkages, transaction patterns, red flags) rather than mere nationality. This aligns with the Helpdesk's emphasis on red flags as behavioural indicators rather than automatic illegality[1]. It also aligns with constitutional logic: limitations must be necessary and proportionate, and discrimination is not a legitimate substitute for evidence-based risk assessment[2]. The governance layer should provide examples of unacceptable proxies and acceptable indicators. It should also require training for frontline decision-makers (bank staff, admissions offices, hospital finance offices) because discriminatory outcomes often occur at the operational edge, not in policy documents. Training should include case studies and decision-tree tools. This makes ethical robustness practical.

In designing these governance tools, it is crucial to anticipate the interaction with strengthened enforcement and criminalisation. Where criminal risk is elevated, institutions will be tempted to deny more. Ethical governance must therefore make protected corridors safer to operate by providing authoritative guidance and escalation routes. The EU's broader enforcement trajectory and operator guidance show that the EU recognises the need to equip operators, not merely to penalise them[3,4]. In addition, the criminalisation environment increases the importance of record retention and audit trails, because operators need to demonstrate good faith and regulators need to distinguish deliberate facilitation from lawful protected activity. Governance should therefore set a common standard for record retention in protected corridors. It should also specify how long records are kept and what data minimisation principles apply to protect privacy. This creates a defensible compliance posture. Ethical robustness requires that enforcement does not inadvertently crush lawful corridors.

To operationalise the recommendations, Table 4.5.3-1 links common failure modes (over-compliance, discriminatory denials, arbitrary divergence) to governance controls and measurable outputs. This allows the report to move beyond principles into implementable proposals. The table also creates the basis for monitoring in 4.5.4, because each control can be paired with indicators. In this sense, governance controls are not merely "nice to have"; they are measurable policy instruments. They also help align Member State authorities and regulated entities around a common language. This is essential for harmonisation. Finally, the table is designed to be adaptable: as circumvention patterns change, red flags and controls can be updated without redesigning the entire governance system. That adaptability is part of ethical robustness.

Table 4.5.3-1. Governance controls against over-compliance and discrimination: failure modes, instruments, and measurable outputs

Failure mode	Why it occurs	Governance control (proposal)	Measurable outputs (evidence)
Blanket refusals beyond legal scope (over-compliance)	Liability asymmetry, ambiguity, poor escalation paths	Anti-over-compliance guidance annex + safe harbour + escalation to competent authority	Reduction in "no-reason" denials; increased escalations resolved; corridor processing time improves
Discriminatory outcomes (nationality as proxy)	Heuristics, lack of training, opaque decisions	Non-discrimination decision templates + prohibited proxies list + training + periodic bias audit	Audit findings; statistical disparity measures; remediation actions and guidance updates

[1] EU Sanctions Compliance Helpdesk. (n.d.). *EU Sanctions Helpdesk (platform overview)*.
[2] European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. (2014). *Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union: Article 52 — Scope and interpretation of rights and principles*. Publications Office of the European Union.
[3] European Commission. (2023, September 7). *Guidance for EU operators: Risk assessment of possible sanctions circumvention*. Directorate-General for Financial Stability, Financial Services and Capital Markets Union.
[4] European Commission. (2025). *Making sanctions effective*.

Failure mode	Why it occurs	Governance control (proposal)	Measurable outputs (evidence)
Arbitrary divergence across Member States	Decentralised implementation without common templates	Minimum harmonisation package: shared evidence bundles, SLAs, reason codes, reporting metrics	Cross-Member State convergence in SLA and denial rates; fewer contradictory practices
Corridor capture by intermediaries	Uncertainty, delays, opaque documentary demands	Published evidence bundles + transparent SLAs + complaint mechanism	Lower reported intermediary use; fewer bribery/abuse signals; improved applicant accessibility
Chilling effect on lawful activity	Fear of enforcement; no safe pathways	Sectoral guidance for protected corridors + supervised "balanced compliance"	Increased lawful corridor throughput without increase in abuse findings
Opaque denials with no correction path	Lack of procedural fairness	Complaint mechanism (problem-solving + compliance review + learning) + reason codes	Complaint resolution time; correction rate; recurrent issues identified and addressed

Authorship: analytical framework (this report) was prepared by the author (proposed governance model).
Sources:

- EU Sanctions Helpdesk overview and red flags approach: https://eu-sanctions-compliance-helpdesk.europa.eu/;
- Commission operator guidance on circumvention risk assessment: https://finance.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-12/guidance-eu-operators-russia-sanctions-circumvention_en.pdf;
- Commission implementation focus ("making sanctions effective"): https://commission.europa.eu/topics/eu-solidarity-ukraine/eu-sanctions-against-russia-following-invasion-ukraine/making-sanctions-effective_en;
- Charter proportionality and non-discrimination commentary: https://fra.europa.eu/en/eu-charter/article/52-scope-and-interpretation-rights-and-principles;
- Structural discussion of over-compliance causing discriminatory outcomes in intermediary-liability environments: https://rm.coe.int/content-moderation-en/1680a2cc18;
- Ashraf, N. (2023). *Enhancing complaints mechanisms of European development finance institutions* (Discussion Note 352). European Centre for Development Policy Management.

A complementary governance tool is periodic "transparency reporting" by major regulated entities, particularly in the financial and platform sectors. Reports should disclose aggregate refusal volumes by corridor category (education, health, family, civil society), the top reason codes, and average processing times. This is not about naming individuals; it is about surfacing systemic patterns. Transparency reporting can be made proportionate by limiting obligations to large actors with substantial gatekeeping power. The benefit is twofold: it deters discriminatory heuristics and it generates data for policy adjustment. It also improves legitimacy because public debates can be grounded in evidence rather than anecdotes. Furthermore, transparency reporting supports harmonisation because it enables cross-Member State comparison. The EU can standardise reporting formats through guidance rather than legislation, reducing implementation burden. The Commission's emphasis on implementation and support suggests an institutional pathway for such standardisation[1]. Ethical robustness requires visibility; transparency reporting is visibility.

Complaint mechanisms should be designed with credibility safeguards: independence, confidentiality, clear timelines, and a mandate to produce systemic learning. A complaint mechanism that only offers "customer service" without corrective authority will not change behaviour. Conversely, a mechanism that is purely punitive may increase over-compliance by scaring institutions into further denial. The three-function model—problem-solving, compliance review, learning—balances these risks[2]. In sanctions governance, learning is particularly important: if many complaints arise due to a specific ambiguity, the appropriate solution is a guidance update. This makes governance adaptive and reduces

[1] European Commission. (2025). *Making sanctions effective*.
[2] Ashraf, N. (2023). *Enhancing complaints mechanisms of European development finance institutions* (Discussion Note 352). European Centre for Development Policy Management.

repeated harm. Complaint mechanisms should also have escalation pathways to national competent authorities and, for cross-border systemic issues, a coordination node at EU level. The EU Sanctions Helpdesk model demonstrates the feasibility of EU-level support structures that aggregate knowledge and provide practical guidance[1]. Extending this approach to denial complaints is an ethically coherent step. It would also reduce forum shopping by providing consistent correction routes.

A robust governance regime must also define enforcement priorities to avoid a perverse outcome: high-profile enforcement against minor inadvertent breaches, while sophisticated facilitators remain under-targeted. If enforcement appears arbitrary or focused on easy targets, institutions will over-comply even more and legitimate corridors will shrink. Governance should therefore recommend that Member States and EU bodies focus enforcement on facilitation networks, proxy structures, and deliberate circumvention conduct, consistent with the broader enforcement trajectory described earlier. Commission guidance explicitly frames circumvention risk assessment and due diligence as essential, implying that detection of facilitation patterns is a core policy goal[2]. Ethical robustness aligns with this because targeting facilitators preserves protected corridors. In practical terms, governance should include typologies of facilitation behaviour (proxy payments, third-country routing, false documentation) and provide institutions with examples. This encourages selective tightening where it is justified and prevents blanket denial. Prioritised enforcement also improves deterrence because it targets actors who actually shape circumvention capacity.

Finally, governance must be integrated with monitoring and feedback loops. Governance tools—guidance, complaint mechanisms, transparency reporting, audits—are not effective if they do not trigger policy adjustment. The Commission's approach to guidance updates and evolving recommendations based on new patterns provides a precedent for adaptive governance[3]. 4.5.4 will convert this into a structured monitoring model, with indicators and adjustment triggers. For 4.5.3, the key point is that governance against over-compliance and discrimination is itself a feedback system: it detects harm and inconsistency and corrects them through guidance and oversight. Ethically robust social measures therefore require not only principled design (4.5.1) and protected corridors (4.5.2) but also a governance infrastructure that prevents the system from drifting into private, opaque exclusion. If the EU intends social measures to remain credible through 2026–2030, this governance layer is essential. It is also strategically useful: it sustains pressure while preserving legitimacy. The alternative is a regime that becomes politically brittle and legally vulnerable. Therefore, governance is not peripheral; it is core.

4.5.4. Monitoring and Feedback Loop

An ethically robust social-measures regime is not defined only by what it prohibits or permits, but by how it learns. In 2026–2030, EU social measures against Russia will operate in a high-adaptation environment: targets and intermediaries adjust quickly, while unintended harms (over-compliance, discriminatory denials, corridor blockage) often become visible only after they accumulate. A monitoring and feedback loop is therefore not an accessory; it is the mechanism that preserves proportionality, precision, and reversibility in practice. Without a feedback loop, the system drifts into two predictable failure modes: either it becomes increasingly blunt (because policymakers respond to circumvention by adding broad barriers), or it becomes ethically brittle (because protected channels exist on paper but fail operationally). The European Commission's framing that implementation and effectiveness depend on Member States, supported through coordination tools, implies a governance architecture where continuous monitoring is required to identify weak links and correct practice[4]. Ethical robustness requires that this monitoring is not limited to enforcement outputs; it must also measure protected-channel access and discriminatory spillovers. Monitoring should therefore be designed as a dual-lens

[1] EU Sanctions Compliance Helpdesk. (n.d.). *EU Sanctions Helpdesk* (platform overview).
[2] European Commission. (2023). *Guidance for EU operators: Risk assessment of possible circumvention of EU restrictive measures (sanctions) against Russia*.
[3] Ibid.
[4] European Commission. (2025). *Making sanctions effective*.

instrument: pressure outcomes and harm controls. The core design question is not "are sanctions causing inconvenience?" but "are sanctions achieving targeted pressure while keeping protected corridors functional and non-arbitrary?"

The monitoring model must begin with a clear theory of change, because indicator selection depends on what the policy claims to achieve. Social measures are expected to: constrain high-risk facilitation channels, disrupt elite-level normalisation access, increase the cost and risk of circumvention, and preserve EU normative credibility through proportional, differentiated implementation. If these are the goals, then the monitoring system must track: (1) facilitation ecosystem behaviour, (2) corridor functionality for protected categories, (3) consistency and legality of implementation, and (4) adaptation signals indicating circumvention evolution. The European External Action Service's general sanctions framing underscores that EU restrictive measures are policy tools intended to bring about changes in harmful activities, not punitive instruments per se, which supports a goal-linked evaluative approach rather than a harm-maximisation approach[1]. A credible monitoring architecture must also anticipate the political reality of unanimity and decentralised enforcement: it must be implementable under Member State variation, and it must generate comparability without requiring full centralisation. The European Parliament's research on sanctions implementation and monitoring explicitly notes that reporting requirements have increased but that it is not always clear how monitoring data informs policymaking, which is precisely the gap this section seeks to close[2]. A feedback loop should therefore be designed around explicit "policy adjustment triggers" that connect signals to decisions, rather than collecting data for its sake. The ultimate purpose is to ensure that ethical safeguards remain operative while strategic pressure remains credible.

A practical monitoring model should follow a three-tier structure: operational monitoring (continuous), strategic evaluation (periodic), and independent review (scheduled). Operational monitoring captures day-to-day signals: denial rates, corridor delays, red-flag patterns, and enforcement actions. Strategic evaluation aggregates trends and assesses whether objectives are being met: are facilitation channels becoming riskier and costlier, and are protected corridors usable and non-discriminatory? Independent review adds legitimacy and learning: it tests whether the governance system is producing unintended discrimination and whether proportionality is maintained over time. This layered structure reflects good practice in EU governance more generally, where implementation monitoring and evaluation are distinct but connected functions[3]. It also matches the nature of sanctions governance, where the Commission supports coordination and tools, while Member States remain primary implementers[4]. Importantly, the system must define who owns each tier: national competent authorities and sectoral regulators for operational metrics; EU-level coordination nodes for aggregation and cross-Member State comparability; and an independent evaluator for periodic review. The monitoring system should also be designed to function under data limitations and confidentiality constraints. It should prioritise non-sensitive, aggregate indicators that can be shared without compromising investigations, consistent with the European Parliament study's recommendation that annual reporting should use non-sensitive information available to the Council or the European External Action Service[5]. This is ethically important because secrecy can otherwise be used to shield arbitrary practice from scrutiny.

Indicator design must explicitly distinguish between outputs, outcomes, and integrity measures. Outputs are what authorities and regulated entities do: guidance updates, training delivered, audits conducted, enforcement actions initiated, complaint mechanisms operated. Outcomes are behavioural changes in the ecosystem: reduced low-risk facilitation, increased cost of circumvention, reduced availability of intermediaries, improved compliance screening quality. Integrity measures ensure that outcomes are not achieved through ethically unacceptable means: discriminatory denials, blocked medical payments, arbitrary family reunification delays, or de facto exclusion through over-compliance.

[1] European External Action Service. (2025, August 19). *European Union sanctions*.
[2] European Parliament. (2023). *EU sanctions: Implementation and monitoring*.
[3] European Parliament. (2025). *Effectiveness of the EU global human rights sanctions regime*.
[4] European Commission. (2025). *Making sanctions effective*.
[5] European Parliament. (2025). *Effectiveness of the EU global human rights sanctions regime*.

The EU Sanctions Compliance Helpdesk's explanation that "red flags" are indicators requiring deeper due diligence rather than automatic illegality is a useful conceptual bridge here, because it clarifies how a risk-based system should behave operationally[1]. If a protected corridor is functioning, red flags should lead to escalation and verification, not blanket denial. If a corridor is failing, red flags become a pretext for systematic refusal, which is both ethically and strategically counterproductive. Therefore, monitoring must track not only the presence of red flags but also the *response pattern* to red flags. The monitoring model must also be granular enough to detect where harm accumulates: across corridor types (education, health, family reunification, civil society) and across Member States. Without corridor-level granularity, aggregate "implementation success" can hide severe access failures in protected domains. This is why a dual-lens dashboard is essential.

A credible feedback loop also requires a disciplined approach to baselines and counterfactuals. In sanctions policy, it is often impossible to establish clean counterfactuals, but one can establish baseline conditions and track directionality. Baselines should include: pre-adjustment corridor throughput (number of approvals/denials), average processing times, and the distribution of reason codes for denials. On the enforcement side, baselines include the volume of suspicious activity reports, referrals, investigations, and public enforcement actions relevant to circumvention facilitation. Over time, changes can be interpreted cautiously: an increase in enforcement actions might indicate improved detection rather than increased violations; a decrease in approvals might indicate either reduced demand or increased over-compliance. This is why the feedback loop must triangulate indicators. The European Commission's emphasis on "effective and diligent implementation" as key to objectives implies that monitoring must separate detection capability from underlying evasion levels[2]. A mature dashboard will therefore combine process indicators (capability) with outcome indicators (ecosystem behaviour) and integrity indicators (rights-adjacent harms). Ethical robustness is preserved when the dashboard makes it difficult to misinterpret harm as success or to interpret enforcement intensity as failure. The monitoring framework should explicitly document interpretive cautions for each indicator, and adjustment triggers should be defined to avoid politicised interpretation. This is also essential for institutional trust across Member States.

Monitoring should incorporate two complementary data sources: administrative data and market behaviour signals. Administrative data includes national competent authority decisions on exemptions, visa and consular statistics (in aggregated form), enforcement statistics, and complaint mechanism records. Market behaviour signals include changes in compliance screening intensity, platform refusal patterns, and shifts in third-country intermediation that can be inferred from red-flag typologies and trade-flow anomalies. The European Commission's operator guidance on circumvention risk assessment and the Helpdesk's red-flag materials provide a structured approach to identifying market behaviour signals that matter for sanctions risk[3,4]. Ethically, the system should be careful not to rely on opaque private data that cannot be audited; where private-sector signals are used, they should be aggregated and standardised. This supports transparency and reduces the risk that private entities become unaccountable policymakers. Monitoring should also consider data-protection constraints and ensure that personal data is minimised, consistent with EU governance standards. The key is to build a dataset that is sufficient for trend detection and harm detection without becoming invasive. A functional monitoring system does not require perfect data; it requires reliable, comparable data on a small number of critical indicators. The feedback loop should therefore prioritise indicator quality over indicator quantity.

The feedback loop must be designed to close the "implementation–policy gap" identified in sanctions monitoring discussions: additional reporting does not automatically translate into better policy unless there are explicit decision points and triggers. The European Parliament study on sanctions

[1] EU Sanctions Compliance Helpdesk. (n.d.). *EU Sanctions Helpdesk*.
[2] European Commission. (2025). *Making sanctions effective*.
[3] European Commission. (2023). *Guidance for EU operators: Risk assessment of possible circumvention of EU restrictive measures (sanctions) against Russia*.
[4] EU Sanctions Compliance Helpdesk. (n.d.). *EU Sanctions Helpdesk*.

implementation and monitoring notes that increased reporting requirements do not always clearly inform policymaking, implying that feedback mechanisms need to be formalised[1]. In this report's proposal, triggers should be tied to pre-defined thresholds: for example, if medical-corridor denials exceed a threshold without documented red flags, guidance must be updated and supervisory engagement initiated; if family reunification processing times exceed an SLA across multiple Member States, harmonisation measures must be activated. If discriminatory disparity indices rise beyond a threshold, an audit and remediation plan must be mandated. On the enforcement side, if circumvention indicators rise in specific hub typologies, targeted enforcement coordination and third-country engagement should be escalated. This trigger logic has two advantages: it reduces arbitrariness and it creates credibility, because stakeholders can see that harms and circumvention signals are treated systematically rather than politically. It also supports reversibility: if a measure is producing unacceptable harm, the system has a procedural mechanism to adjust it. Conversely, if a corridor is being abused, the system can harden verification rather than collapsing the corridor. Trigger-based governance is therefore the operational translation of ethical robustness.

A further requirement is to institutionalise periodic reporting cycles. A workable model for 2026–2030 is quarterly operational reporting and annual strategic evaluation. Quarterly reporting captures fast-moving adaptation signals and operational bottlenecks; annual evaluation assesses whether the system is meeting objectives and maintaining integrity. The European Parliament study on the global human rights sanctions regime explicitly suggests annual reporting by the Council or the European External Action Service on impacts using non-sensitive information, providing a precedent for annual impact-oriented reporting that is feasible under confidentiality constraints[2]. Quarterly operational reporting can remain internal to the governance system, while annual evaluation can include a public-facing summary to support legitimacy and transparency. The annual cycle should also be aligned with the sanctions package cycle: after each major package or substantial guidance update, the system should conduct a targeted "implementation impact review" within a defined timeframe. The European Commission's consolidated guidance and "making sanctions effective" approach implies that iterative implementation support is central to effectiveness[3]. Therefore, aligning reporting with the rhythm of policy updates is necessary to avoid stale learning. Reporting should also include a structured section on protected channels, not merely on enforcement outputs. This makes it harder for implementation actors to neglect corridors in the pursuit of "compliance safety".

Independent evaluation should be built into the feedback loop to protect credibility and reduce internal bias. Internal monitoring systems tend to overweight enforcement outputs and underweight harm indicators, especially under political pressure. Independent evaluation, conducted by an institutionally separate body (for example, through a commissioned study or an independent panel), can test whether the system is producing discriminatory outcomes and whether protected corridors are genuinely usable. This approach is consistent with European Parliament practice of commissioning studies that evaluate sanctions regimes and propose monitoring improvements[4]. Independent evaluation should not be framed as a political audit; it should be framed as a learning instrument that improves implementation and reduces litigation risk. It should include qualitative case sampling across Member States, statistical analysis of refusal patterns, and review of guidance efficacy. The evaluator should also test whether complaint mechanisms function as intended: do they resolve cases quickly and do they produce systemic learning? Where possible, the evaluation should incorporate stakeholder interviews with universities, hospitals, NGOs, and regulated entities to identify friction points. The output should be recommendations tied to policy adjustment triggers, ensuring that evaluation results are actionable. This strengthens both ethical and strategic credibility.

[1] European Parliament. (2023). *EU sanctions: Implementation and monitoring*.
[2] European Parliament. (2025). *Effectiveness of the EU global human rights sanctions regime*.
[3] European Commission. (2023). *Guidance for EU operators: Risk assessment of possible circumvention of EU restrictive measures (sanctions) against Russia*.
[4] European Parliament. (2025). *Effectiveness of the EU global human rights sanctions regime*.

A credible monitoring system also requires robust governance of data quality and comparability. Member States will collect data in different formats, and regulated entities will use different reason categories unless standardised. Therefore, the EU should define a minimum reporting taxonomy: corridor types, reason codes for denials, red-flag categories, and processing time bands. Standardisation does not require disclosing sensitive intelligence; it requires harmonised metadata. This aligns with the broader EU ambition to strengthen implementation cooperation and data sharing in sanctions enforcement discussions, including non-paper proposals that emphasise analysing reporting information centrally to gain insight into circumvention patterns[1]. A harmonised taxonomy also improves discrimination auditing because comparable reason codes allow cross-Member State disparity testing. Without standardisation, discrimination is easy to deny because "data is not comparable". Therefore, taxonomy design is itself an ethical measure. The system should also define data-submission channels and security requirements to protect sensitive operational information. This is a practical constraint but not a reason to abandon comparability. In short, the feedback loop is only as good as its data governance.

The monitoring model should explicitly include a "protected corridors scorecard" alongside an "enforcement effectiveness scorecard". The corridors scorecard should track: throughput (approvals/denials), timeliness (SLA adherence), integrity (share of denials with documented red-flag justification), and fairness (disparity indices). The enforcement scorecard should track: investigations, prosecutions, facilitator disruption, and changes in high-risk corridor indicators. Both scorecards should incorporate interpretive cautions. The EU Sanctions Compliance Helpdesk's red-flag doctrine is particularly useful for corridor integrity: it offers a conceptual rule that can be operationalised into a metric—red flags trigger deeper due diligence rather than automatic illegality[2]. If monitoring finds that red-flag presence correlates with automatic refusal across a corridor, that is evidence of over-compliance and corridor failure. Conversely, if red-flags correlate with escalations and conditional approvals, the corridor is functioning as designed. This is precisely the kind of operational indicator that connects ethics to implementation behaviour. For enforcement, red-flag categories can also signal emerging circumvention typologies, enabling targeted adjustment rather than broad tightening. Thus, red-flag governance becomes the bridge between corridors and enforcement.

To make the monitoring model implementable, Table 4.5.4-1 sets out a dashboard of indicators and proposed thresholds that can function as adjustment triggers. Thresholds must be calibrated empirically and may vary by corridor, but the principle is that triggers should be explicit and pre-committed to avoid politicised interpretation. The table also distinguishes "hard triggers" (requiring immediate action) and "soft triggers" (requiring review and investigation). Hard triggers are appropriate for medical and family corridors due to irreparable harm risk. Soft triggers are appropriate for education and civil society, where delays are harmful but may reflect genuine verification complexity. The table is presented as a policy design proposal, not as a claim that thresholds are already adopted in EU practice. Its value is to create an operational link between monitoring and policy adjustment. It also establishes an auditable standard for ethical robustness. In 2026–2030, such a trigger system would substantially reduce the risk that corridors become symbolic.

[1] Strengthening European cooperation to reinforce national efforts on the implementation and enforcement of EU restrictive measures (Non-paper by the Netherlands), 5 November 2024.
[2] EU Sanctions Compliance Helpdesk. (n.d.). *Red flags: Mastering the indicators of sanctions risk*.

Table 4.5.4-1. Monitoring dashboard and policy adjustment triggers for protected channels and anti-circumvention governance (2026–2030)

Indicator group	Indicator (example operational definition)	Trigger type	Proposed trigger threshold (illustrative)	Default policy response
Protected corridors (health)	Medical-corridor denial rate without documented red flags	Hard	>10% in a quarter	Immediate guidance clarification + supervisory engagement + fast-track escalation route
Protected corridors (family)	Family reunification median processing time vs SLA	Hard	>2× SLA for two consecutive quarters	Harmonised evidence bundle + capacity surge + complaint escalation protocol
Protected corridors (education)	Student approvals as share of complete applications	Soft	>20% drop vs baseline without corresponding risk increase	Review admissions/finance guidance + audit denial reasons
Protected corridors (civil society)	NGO/journalism payment refusal rate	Soft	>15% refusals with "no reason code"	Issue sectoral safe-harbour note + standardised reason codes
Fairness / discrimination	Disparity index in denials (after controlling for red flags)	Hard	Statistically significant sustained disparity	Bias audit + remediation plan + training + updated prohibited proxies list
Over-compliance	Share of denials citing "policy" without legal basis or red flags	Hard	>25% in any corridor	Anti-over-compliance annex update + supervisor enforcement of reason codes
Circumvention signals	Rise in specific red-flag typologies (proxy ownership, routing anomalies)	Soft	>30% increase vs previous year	Update red-flag guidance + targeted enforcement coordination
Enforcement effectiveness	Cases/actions focused on facilitators vs inadvertent breaches	Soft	Facilitator focus falls below target share	Adjust enforcement priorities + publish typologies of facilitation

Authorship: analytical framework (this report) was prepared by the author (proposed monitoring and trigger system).

Sources:

- Operational emphasis on implementation: https://commission.europa.eu/topics/eu-solidarity-ukraine/eu-sanctions-against-russia-following-invasion-ukraine/making-sanctions-effective_en;
- Red-flag doctrine: https://eu-sanctions-compliance-helpdesk.europa.eu/red-flags-mastering-indicators-sanctions-risk_en;
- Monitoring-policy gap in sanctions monitoring: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2023/702603/EXPO_STU%282023%29702603_EN.pdf;
- Annual reporting suggestion using non-sensitive information: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2025/754474/EXPO_STU%282025%29754474_EN.pdf.

The feedback loop must specify what "policy adjustment" means in concrete terms. Adjustment can occur through five levers: (1) guidance clarification, (2) workflow modification and resourcing, (3) harmonisation templates and evidence bundles, (4) enforcement reprioritisation, and (5) formal legal amendment where necessary. Most adjustments should be achievable through guidance and workflow changes, because these are faster and align with the EU's established practice of using FAQs and operator guidance to clarify implementation[1]. Workflow modifications may include fast-track lanes for medical cases, standardised evidence bundles for family cases, or dedicated focal points for protected corridors. Harmonisation may include common reason codes and common SLA benchmarks across Member States. Enforcement reprioritisation may include shifting resources towards facilitators and

[1] European Commission. (2025). *Making sanctions effective*.

high-impact circumvention typologies rather than minor inadvertent breaches. Formal legal amendment should be reserved for cases where guidance cannot fix structural ambiguity or where objectives have changed materially. This hierarchy ensures proportionality: the least disruptive adjustment is attempted first. It also supports reversibility: the system can correct itself without waiting for a full legislative cycle. Therefore, adjustment levers should be defined ex ante and mapped to trigger categories.

Policy learning must also be institutionalised through a "lessons-learned integration" mechanism that connects monitoring outputs to subsequent sanctions packages and guidance updates. One failure mode in complex governance is that lessons are identified but not integrated into policy cycles, resulting in repetitive harm. The European Parliament study's observation that it is not always clear how monitoring data informs policymaking implies that integration mechanisms need explicit design[1]. Integration can be operationalised through a structured annex to each major package or guidance update: what monitoring signals were observed, what harms were detected, what adjustments were made, and why. This annex can be partially internal for sensitive content, but a non-sensitive summary should be published to support legitimacy. Integration also improves consistency: if Member States see that certain patterns trigger certain adjustments, they align their implementation behaviour. It also improves private-sector compliance because operators can anticipate guidance evolution based on monitoring. In this sense, integration is a stabilising force. Ethical robustness requires stability in protected corridors: applicants should not face unpredictable changes. Integration mechanisms therefore need to balance adaptation with predictability, using scheduled update cycles rather than constant ad hoc changes. This is why quarterly internal reviews and annual public summaries form a coherent rhythm.

The feedback loop should also include explicit "stop-loss" rules for protected corridors to prevent irreparable harm. Stop-loss rules are pre-committed actions taken when harm indicators cross thresholds, such as the immediate activation of a medical fast-track channel or the temporary suspension of a problematic documentary requirement. These rules recognise that some harms cannot be "fixed later". They are ethically necessary for health and family domains. Stop-loss rules also protect the sanctions regime itself: visible humanitarian failures are politically explosive and can trigger backlash leading to indiscriminate easing or politicised tightening. Therefore, stop-loss rules are not softness; they are stability tools. They should be embedded in national competent authority workflows and reinforced through EU guidance. The EU's broader sanctions governance already acknowledges the need for workable procedures and guidance for derogations, which supports formalising emergency practices for protected corridors[2]. Stop-loss rules can also be audited, which prevents abuse and maintains integrity. In a mature governance system, stop-loss rules are part of responsible policy.

Independent evaluation should be complemented by "independent ethics review" for particularly sensitive social measures. Ethics review does not replace legal review; it anticipates legitimacy risks and harm patterns that law alone may not capture. The European Parliament study's discussion of civil society input and systematised study of views suggests that structured external input can improve sanctions governance and monitoring[3]. An ethics review panel could include experts in fundamental rights, humanitarian operations, education governance, and compliance implementation. Its mandate would be to review corridor performance and discrimination audits, and to propose adjustments. The panel would operate within confidentiality constraints but would publish aggregated findings. This strengthens EU credibility and reduces the risk that protected corridors become symbolic. It also reduces litigation risk by demonstrating proportionality diligence. Ethics review should be scheduled annually and aligned with strategic evaluation cycles. This ensures it is not reactive crisis management. The cost is modest relative to the legitimacy benefits.

A practical monitoring system must also account for the incentives of regulated entities. Without incentives, banks and platforms will continue to over-comply because denial is cheaper than nuanced

[1] European Parliament. (2023). *EU sanctions: Implementation and monitoring*.
[2] European Commission. (2025). *Making sanctions effective*.
[3] European Parliament. (2025). *Effectiveness of the EU global human rights sanctions regime*.

assessment. Monitoring should therefore include metrics that capture private-sector behaviour: reason codes for refusals, escalation usage, and corridor throughput. Where large gatekeepers show systematic over-compliance, supervisors should engage them through balanced compliance expectations, as discussed in 4.5.3. Monitoring data can inform supervisory prioritisation. The EU Sanctions Compliance Helpdesk's role in assisting businesses suggests institutional readiness to support operators, which can be extended into monitored sectoral guidance improvements[1,2]. In effect, monitoring becomes a tool for shaping compliance culture. This is important because social measures are implemented through distributed compliance, not only through state enforcement. Ethical robustness therefore requires that the monitoring system can "see" private gatekeeping. Transparency reporting by large entities can provide aggregated data without exposing individual cases. Such reporting can be harmonised through templates. This makes monitoring feasible and comparable.

The monitoring system should also incorporate cross-Member State benchmarking to reduce arbitrary divergence. Benchmarking does not mean naming and shaming; it means identifying outliers and offering targeted support or harmonisation interventions. If one Member State has markedly higher denial rates for protected corridors without corresponding red-flag patterns, this suggests over-compliance or administrative bottlenecks. If another has unusually low denial rates with high circumvention signals, this suggests weak enforcement. Benchmarking allows targeted correction rather than broad policy shifts. It also reduces forum shopping and circumvention routing. The Commission's framing that sanctions implementation is primarily a Member State responsibility, supported by Commission coordination, implies a governance structure in which comparative monitoring is legitimate and useful[3]. Benchmarking should also be used to identify best practices: where corridors function well, templates can be shared. This supports harmonisation. It also supports legitimacy: stakeholders see that the system learns from success. Benchmarking therefore forms an important component of the feedback loop.

Finally, the monitoring and feedback loop must be integrated with the ethical design principles established in 4.5.1–4.5.3. Proportionality requires that harm indicators are monitored and trigger adjustment. Precision requires that reasons and red-flag responses are documented and comparable. Reversibility requires that review cycles and sunset mechanisms are operationally meaningful, not symbolic. Protected channels require corridor scorecards and stop-loss rules. Governance against over-compliance requires audits, complaint mechanisms, and transparency reporting to surface systemic bias. The EU governance ecosystem already provides elements of this: implementation emphasis[4], red-flag risk doctrine[5], and methodological work on monitoring and annual reporting[6,7]. The report's proposal is to integrate these elements into a single coherent system with explicit triggers and adjustment levers. If implemented, this system would enable the EU to sustain strategic pressure while protecting legitimacy and avoiding discriminatory spillovers. In a 2026–2030 horizon, that is the defining challenge of ethically robust social measures: not to eliminate adaptation, but to govern pressure responsibly through continuous learning. Monitoring is the mechanism that makes that possible.

[1] EU Sanctions Compliance Helpdesk. (n.d.). *EU Sanctions Helpdesk*.
[2] European Commission. (2025). *Making sanctions effective*.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Ibid.
[5] EU Sanctions Compliance Helpdesk. (n.d.). *Red flags: Mastering the indicators of sanctions risk*.
[6] European Parliament. (2023). *EU sanctions: Implementation and monitoring*.
[7] European Parliament. (2025). *Effectiveness of the EU global human rights sanctions regime*.