

Why international sanctions do not always work

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Germany, Austria and Cuba have at least one thing in common: they have all experienced what it means to be 'left out in the cold' and be considered 'bad company' by Western powers. However, just as Iran and South Africa, these three countries have handled this form of stigmatization very differently. According to new research, the reason for this is that diplomatic pressure and sanctions by the international community (the 'shaming method') fail to have the intended effect because isolation and shaming may boost national pride and sense of cohesion and thus support the regime in power. This is the main finding in PhD and Associate Professor Rebecca Adler-Nissen's new scientific article.

"In the West, we have long believed that we could educate other countries to behave according to our norms, and during the past 20 years we have witnessed an increase in the use of 'shaming' in international politics. Western ideals about human rights and democracy are used to justify the use of international pressure to force other nations to adhere to our norms and values. However stigmatization and shaming often fail to work. Sometimes it actually backfires, and ends up affecting the instigator instead," says Rebecca-Adler Nissen, who goes on to highlight the fact that a country such as Cuba has made a virtue out of being excluded from the Western-dominated international society by claiming that it is a different and better model of society.

Food for thought

Rebecca Adler-Nissen emphasizes that she is not advocating to drop [sanctions](#) such as freezing financial assets, imposing travel restrictions, or breaking off diplomatic ties, but she points out that the new insights give food for thought.

"Western politicians should be more careful when using these political instruments, because they do not always work as intended. We need to have a deeper knowledge of the countries in question, and to ask ourselves if the elites aspire to share Western values in the first place. If not, sanctions and pressure may still be used, if so it is more a question of the us needing to send a signal that a global set of values, dominated by the West, still exists, rather than attempting to influence the countries in question," she says.

New world order – new values

Rebecca Adler-Nissen has identified three strategies used by countries that have been stigmatized through sanctions and pressures: acceptance of the stigma, rejection of the stigma, and counter-stigmatisation. She uses the cases of Germany, Austria and Cuba to illustrate the three strategies. She explains that Germany is a country where sanctions and stigmatisation had the intended effect. After the Second World War, the country accepted its guilt, and Germany now stands proud as a model of a deeply rooted democracy and respect for [human rights](#). By contrast, Austrian political elites rejected suggestions that they had part in the horrors of Nazism, while Cuban politicians, in the wake of the revolution, made a virtue of not giving into Western demands in spite of swingeing sanctions imposed by the United States.

"In the long term, knowledge about shame, pride and stigma may help us understand why diplomatic pressure on a country such as Iran has had limited effect, while it did influence the apartheid regime in South Africa to some extent," says Rebecca Adler-Nissen, who continues:

"Attempts to generate shared norms for state behaviour will become even more difficult in the future. The values of the Western world – and of the United States in particular – dominated international relations in the past century, and they were the standards by which other countries were measured. But now that [countries](#) including China, India and Brazil are beginning to play a more prominent role in the global world order, the West can no longer count on the predominance of our perception of right and wrong."

More information: Rebecca Adler-Nissen's findings were recently published in the article "Stigma Management in International Relations: Transgressive Identities, Norms, and Order in International Society" in the scientific journal *International Organization*.

Provided by University of Copenhagen

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