

The Sanctioned Personality

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In recent years, sanctioning prominent figures has become a favoured security strategy. For instance, the US and its allies sanctioned Russian oligarchs with close ties to the Kremlin in response to Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Freezing oligarchs' assets, preventing their international travel, and blocking their access to the SWIFT payment system treated Russia as a state defined far more by 'informal politics' than official institutions, 'surgically' targeting President Putin's inner circle (rather than the wider Russian economy), in hopes that those hit would pressure him to change his policies. Broadly speaking, such sanctions have failed; they can unintentionally consolidate the oligarchy's shared class interests, enable strongmen to seek further rents domestically, and leave oligarchs uninspired to oppose their leader or the war. If oligarch sanctions are ineffective, what does their prevalence say about a wider symbolic logic, which reconfigures the links between personality, finance and power? In the US, UK and other Western liberal democracies, this paper argues, *the sanctioned personality* is a widespread, celebratized security logic, which orients a broad range of state, platform and 'folk' practices. Many forms of state and private sanctions – from freezing oligarchs' assets, to social media platforms banning hate speech 'super-spreaders', to online 'cancel culture' – understand prominent public personalities as loci of power, which connect influence over networks, financial and/or reputational asset ownership, and the ability to shape public discourse. Sanctioning prominent personalities promises to favourably shift asset distributions, influence patterns and the appearance of 'doing something' for the anti-war effort alike, reconfiguring idealist personality rights as networked personality influence threats in the process.

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