

Patryk Woszczek, MA

WSB University

e-mail: p.woszczek@outlook.com

ORCID: 0009-0003-0177-5481

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DOUBLE STANDARDS DEBUNKED: ACTIONS OF THE UNITED NATIONS IN THE FIRST 100 DAYS OF THE GAZA WAR

Abstract

This article interrogates the accusation of “double standards” in United Nations debates on the war in Gaza Strip by distinguishing between its narrative and empirical dimensions. It conceptualises „double standards” both as a politically consequential discursive resource used by states to contest Western leadership and as a testable claim about asymmetry in institutional response. Methodologically, the study employs a mixed-methods approach that combines a qualitative narrative analysis of interventions in the UN Security Council (UNSC) and the General Assembly (UNGA) with a structured comparison of the first 100 days of UN engagement in two conflicts: the Russian Federation’s full-scale aggression against Ukraine and the Gaza War following the 7 October 2023 Hamas attacks. Quantitatively, it examines indicators such as the frequency and format of UNSC meetings, draft and adopted resolutions, veto use, and UNGA emergency special sessions (ESS) and voting patterns. It also traces how the „double standards” frame is articulated across phases of the Gaza debate, by which actors, in which argumentative clusters (legality, international humanitarian law, civilian protection, ceasefire demands), and with what implications for institutional legitimacy. The findings show that deliberative intensity was broadly comparable in both cases. The article argues that legitimacy crises stem less from unequal procedural attention than from structural constraints on enforcement, which are subsequently reframed through “double standards” narratives by a broadening coalition of Global South actors accelerated by the Russian Federation.

Keywords

Double Standards, Gaza, Ukraine, UN, UNSC, UNGA

Introduction

When Artur Rubinstein's "Mazurek Dąbrowskiego" was performed during the 1945 San Francisco Conference¹, he used a symbolic gesture to draw attention to the absence of Poland among the flags of the emerging United Nations (UN)². This episode illustrates enduring tension that has accompanied the organisation from the very outset – expectations of universal principles versus the realities of power and recognition in international politics. The UN was created as the institutional core of the post-war system of collective security, based on the promise of a better world and universal rules responding to threats to peace and security³. In this sense, the UN performs not only an operational function – its authority depends largely on the conviction of member states (MS) that the norms of international law, including the rules on the use of force and international humanitarian law (IHL), are applied consistently, regardless of the identity of the parties of the conflict⁴. In practice, however, the UN's authority and effectiveness are conditioned by the distribution of power within the UN system, especially the privileged position of the five permanent members (P5) of the UN Security Council (UNSC) and their veto power⁵.

This structural tension between normative universalism and power-based politics has long been recognised in the literature on the UN legitimacy⁶. Periods of acute crisis tend to expose and magnify the gap between the member states and global public opinion expected from the UN and what the organisation can realistically deliver⁷. Since the early 2000s, debates on the UN's credibility have intensified in parallel with broader concerns about the resilience of the post-Cold War order and

1 The United Nations Conference on International Organization (UNCIO), known as the San Francisco Conference, took place from April 25 to June 26, 1945, with the participation of delegations from 50 countries. It resulted in the adoption and opening for signature of the United Nations Charter on June 26, 1945. Poland did not participate in the conference, but was included among the founding members and signed the Charter on October 15, 1945. United Nations, n.d., The San Francisco Conference, <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/history-of-the-un/san-francisco-conference> [access: 19.01.2026].

2 Artur Rubinstein (1887-1982) – Polish pianist of Jewish origin with a world-wide reputation, particularly appreciated for his interpretations of Fryderyk Chopin's music (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2025). During the events surrounding the 1945 San Francisco conference, he drew attention to the absence of a Polish flag, changed his program, and performed Polish anthem as a symbolic gesture of protest, which was met with applause from the audience. His sculpture donated by Poland now stands prominently at the UN Headquarters in New York. Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2025, Artur Rubinstein, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Artur-Rubinstein> [access: 04.02.2026]; United Nations, n.d., "The Pianist", UN Gifts, <https://www.un.org/ungifts/pianist> [access: 04.02.2026].

3 Duda A. (2020), *Speech by the President on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the UN*, The Official Website of the President of the Republic of Poland, 2020, <https://www.president.pl/archives/andrzej-duda/news/speech-by-the-president-on-the-occasion-of-the-75th-anniversary-of-the-occasion-of-the-75th-anniversary-of-the-establishment-of-the-united-nations%2C37151> [access: 04.02.2026].

4 R. Szynowski, *Prawo konfliktów zbrojnych zagadnienia podstawowe*, [w:] *Podstawy wiedzy o państwie i prawie*, red. A. Korybski, Oficyna Wydawnicza Branta, Bydgoszcz 2012, pp. 193-206.

5 United Nations, *Permanent and Non-Permanent Members*, <https://main.un.org/securitycouncil/en/content/current-members> [access: 04.02.2026].

6 R. Szynowski, *Bezpieczeństwo narodowe RP na tle rozwiązań międzynarodowych*, NATO, UE, ONZ – charakterystyka ogólna, [w:] *Podstawy wiedzy o państwie i prawie*, red. A. Korybski, Oficyna Wydawnicza Branta, Bydgoszcz 2012, pp. 170-193.

7 I. Clark, *Legitimacy in International Society*, Oxford 2005, p. 288-299; I. Hurd, *After Anarchy*, Princeton University Press 2007, pp. 221-234.

the perceived erosion of liberal multilateralism⁸. As authors such as Ryszard Zięba observe, the UN Charter (Charter) continues to function as a quasi-constitutional framework for international relations, yet contestation over the UN's performance has become a permanent feature of global politics⁹.

Between 2022 and 2024 this debate crystallised around two armed conflicts that dominated the UN agenda: (i) Russian Federation's full-scale aggression against Ukraine launched in February 2022¹⁰, and (ii) the war in the Gaza Strip that began in after 7 October Hamas attacks¹¹. For a broad group of states commonly associated with the "Global South", the juxtaposition of these two crises quickly became a central reference point for assessing credibility of Western leadership and the fairness of multilateral institutions. Within UNSC and the UN General Assembly (UNGA) debates, accusations of "double standards" emerged as a dominant interpretative frame, particularly in relation to Gaza. The term was used to criticise selective legality, unequal moral attention to civilian suffering, and asymmetries in diplomatic mobilisation¹². While initially highly emotive and centred on the immediate humanitarian emergency¹³, this discourse gradually became more structured, recasting Gaza war as a stress test of the universality of norms, institutional credibility and the distribution of decision-making power in the UN system¹⁴.

At the same time, the "double standards" narrative has been strategically useful for actors seeking to reshape international alignments and redistribute reputational costs. The Russian Federation, facing sustained diplomatic pressure due to its aggression against Ukraine, repeatedly amplified elements of this critique in UN forums, portraying Western responses to Gaza as evidence of norm selectivity and instrumental approaches to international law¹⁵. This dynamic underscores the need to treat "double standards" not merely as a moral accusation or rhetorical flourish, but as a politically consequential discursive resource in international contestation.

Against this background, the article addresses a central analytical problem: how to distinguish between (i) "double standards" as a narrative claim deployed by

8 K. Szczerski, „Wojna rosyjsko-ukraińska na forum Organizacji Narodów Zjednoczonych – debaty i działania w pierwszym okresie agresji”, *Studia Polityczne*, Warszawa 2024, pp. 14.

9 R. Zięba (ed.), *Bezpieczeństwo międzynarodowe po zimnej wojnie*, Wydawnictwa Akademickie i Profesjonalne, Warszawa 2008.

10 T. Lister, and J. Kesa, 2022, *Ukraine says it was attacked through Russian, Belarus and Crimea borders*, https://edition.cnn.com/europe/live-news/ukraine-russia-news-02-23-22#h_82bf44af2f01ad57f81c0760c6cb697c [access: 05.02.2026].

11 J. Mounier. 2023, *Hamas terrorist attacks on October 7: The deadliest day in Israel's history*, <https://www.france24.com/en/middle-east/20241007-hamas-terrorist-attacks-7-october-deadliest-day-israel-history-anniversary> [access: 05.02.2026].

12 R. Gowan, 2024, *The Double Standards Debate at the UN*, 07.03.2024, International Crisis Group, <https://www.crisis-group.org/cmt/middle-east-north-africa/israelpalestine/double-standards-debate-un> [access: 05.02.2026].

13 Inter alia: United Nations Security Council, 9439th Meeting, 16.10.2023; and United Nations General Assembly, 10th Emergency Special Session, 39th Plenary Meeting, 26.10.2023, <https://digitallibrary.un.org> [access: 27.01.2026].

14 Inter alia: United Nations General Assembly, 10th Emergency Special Session, 46th Plenary Meeting, 15.12.2023; and United Nations Security Council, 9522nd Meeting, 29.12.2023, <https://digitallibrary.un.org> [access: 27.01.2026].

15 Embassy of the Russian Federation in the Republic of Namibia, *Statement by Permanent Representative of Russia Vassily Nebenzia at the UN Security Council Meeting Following The Strikes on Tel Aviv*, 22.07.2024, https://rusemwhk.mid.ru/en/press_center/news/press_release_embassy_of_the_russian_federation_in_the_republic_of_namibia/ [access: 27.01.2026].

states in multilateral debates, and (ii) “double standards” as an empirically testable proposition about asymmetry in the UN’s institutional response. The core research question is therefore: To what extent did the UN’s institutional response in the first 100 days to the war in Gaza differ from its response to the war in Ukraine, and does this difference substantiate claims of “double standards”?

The analysis focuses on the two primary UN organs tasked with peace and security – the UNSC and the UNGA – which embody contrasting logics of authority and constraint. In the UNSC, action is conditioned by P5 veto power and great-power bargaining. In the UNGA, the logic is majoritarian, with the key challenge being the mobilisation of broad support behind non-binding resolutions that nevertheless shape perceptions of legitimacy, build coalitions and generate reputational pressure¹⁶.

To answer the research question, the author conducts a structured comparison of the first 100 days of UN engagement in each conflict, combining descriptive quantitative indicators with a targeted qualitative reading of key debates, actions and statements.. It examines, inter alia, the frequency and format of the UNSC meetings, the production of formal outcomes (resolutions and other products where applicable), veto incidence, as well as UNGA activity including Emergency Special Session (ESS), resolution output, and voting patterns. On the qualitative side, it traces how the “double standards” narrative is articulated – by which actors, in which argumentative clusters (e.g. legality, civilian protection/IHL, ceasefire demands, aggression/occupation frames), and with what implications for institutional legitimacy.

The article makes two contributions. First, it proposes an operational way to “ground” the “double standards” claim in observable institutional manner, thus avoiding both its automatic dismissal and its uncritical acceptance. Second, it clarifies how institutional design (veto politics, majoritarian dynamics) interacts with legitimacy narratives.

1.1. Methods and data

The article adopts a mixed-methods research design that combines descriptive quantitative indicators with qualitative narrative analysis. The empirical focus is on the first 100 days of UN engagement in two conflicts: the Russian Federation’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine (24 February – 5 June 2022) and the war in the Gaza Strip (7 October 2023 – 15 January 2024). The analysis covers meetings and documents of the UNSC and the UNGA, including regular and emergency special sessions, draft and adopted resolutions, voting records and selected official statements. On the quantitative side, the study maps deliberative intensity through the number and type of UNSC and UNGA meetings, the volume of and fate of draft texts, and the incidence of vetoes. These indicators are used to operationalise and compare the institutional “attention” devoted to each conflict. From the qualitative point of view, the article conducts a targeted reading of meeting records to identify when and how the “double standards” frame is invoked,

16 K. Szczerski, „Wojna rosyjsko-ukraińska na forum Organizacji Narodów Zjednoczonych – debaty i działania w pierwszym okresie agresji”, *Studia Polityczne*, Warszawa 2024, pp. 15.

by which actors, and in what argumentative clusters (legality, IHL, civilian protection, ceasefire demands, aggression/occupation narratives). The combination of these strategies allows for an assessment of whether narrative claims about “double standards” are matched by observable asymmetries in institutional behaviour, in line with standard approaches to structured and focused comparison in international relations research¹⁷.

The United Nations System and the Gaza War as a Stress Test

Maintaining international peace and security is the primary purpose of the UN, as enshrined in Article 1 of the Charter. From an institutional perspective, the war in the Gaza Strip should therefore be understood not merely as a regional crisis, but as a stress test for the credibility and performance of the UN system, particularly its core decision-making structures in the field of peace and security¹⁸. In such situations expectations that the UN will act as an impartial guardian of international law confront the political and procedural constraints embedded in its design.

Despite profound changes in the international system since the end of the Cold War, the UN's organisational architecture has remained largely unchanged. Debates on its limitations have focused above all on the representativeness and effectiveness of the UNSC, especially the formal privileges of the P5 and their veto power¹⁹. The distribution of power encoded in the Charter makes collective action highly sensitive to great-power bargaining – even when the broad majorities of member states support a given course of action, outcomes can be blocked if they clash with the vital interests of one or more P5 members²⁰. Proposals to reform the UNSC have therefore circulated for decades, but incentives for far-reaching change remain weak, since any modification of veto-related arrangements requires the consent of those who benefit from them²¹. In this context, it is worth noting that since 2022 alone the veto has been used 20 times, including 12 times by the Russian Federation (mainly in relation to the war in Ukraine) and 8 times by the United States (primarily in connection with the Gaza war), illustrating the strategic character of the UNSC's deadlock²².

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been a central arena of UN engagements for decades – from the partition debates of the late 1940s to the adoption of key UNSC

17 A. George, A. Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*, Cambridge 2025; J. Gerring, *Case Study Research: Principles and Practices*, Cambridge 2007.

18 Dz.U. 1947 nr 23 poz. 90, *Karta Narodów Zjednoczonych, Statut Międzynarodowego Trybunału Sprawiedliwości i Porozumienie ustanawiające Komisję Przygotowawczą Narodów Zjednoczonych*, Warszawa 1945, <https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/DocDetails.xsp?id=wdu19470230090> [access: 05.02.2026].

19 Cf. I. Popiuk-Rysińska, *Rada Bezpieczeństwa Narodów Zjednoczonych po zimnej wojnie*, „Stosunki Międzynarodowe” 2016, 52, no: 4, pp. 221–241.

20 For instance, S/2023/970 *Draft resolution on humanitarian ceasefire in the Gaza Strip and release of hostages* was vetoed by the United States despite the support of 102 UN MS, <https://digitallibrary.un.org> [access: 12.02.2026].

21 K. Szczerski, „Wojna rosyjsko-ukraińska na forum Organizacji Narodów Zjednoczonych – debaty i działania w pierwszym okresie agresji”, *Studia Polityczne*, Warszawa 2024, pp. 14.

22 United Nations, *Un Security Council Meetings & Outcomes Tables*, New York 2026, <https://research.un.org/en/docs/sc/quick> [access: 26.01.2026].

resolutions such as 242 (1967)²³ and 338 (1973)²⁴, which called for withdrawal from occupied territories and negotiations. In practice, however, the enforceability of these resolutions has been limited by weak enforcement mechanisms and by conflicting interests among major powers. Periodic escalations in the Gaza Strip, and the recurrent humanitarian crises they generated, have repeatedly exposed these weaknesses and fuelled accusations of bias and selectivity.

The escalation of 7 October was widely interpreted as the violent re-emergence of an unresolved, decades-long Israeli-Palestinian dispute rather than the onset of a “new” conflict. Unlike the war in Ukraine, which involved a state-on-state aggression preceded by visible military build-up and diplomatic warnings, the Gaza crisis began with an attack by a non-state actor (Hamas) against a state, launched from a territory under long-term occupation and blockade. As a result of the attacks, approximately 1,200 Israeli citizens were killed, around 250 people were abducted and 5,500 were injured. Moreover, rockets targeted densely populated areas, reports documented serious abuses, and threats from armed groups in Gaza and Lebanon led to the internal displacement of around 100,000 people in Israel²⁵. Over time though, the scale and methods of Israel’s military response became the primary focus of international criticism. While Israel framed its campaign as a legitimate effort to dismantle Hamas and secure the release of hostages, the operation produced a sharply asymmetric toll on the Palestinian civilian population and extensive destruction of civilian infrastructure, which in turn intensified scrutiny of the proportionality and legality of the response²⁶.

The magnitude of the humanitarian consequences during the first 100 days of the war was repeatedly underlined in briefing to the UNSC. According to figures cited by the UN Under Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Martin Griffiths, and Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights, Ilze Brands Kehris, by mid-January 2024 more than 23,000 people had been killed and over 58,000 injured in Gaza, with women and children constituting the majority of casualties. Approximately 1.9 million people – around 85 per cent of the Strip’s population – had been displaced, living in overcrowded shelters and facing severe shortages of drinking water, food, medical care and basic services. The health system had largely collapsed, humanitarian workers operated under extreme risk, 134 UNRWA facilities had been hit and at least 148 UN and NGO staff members had

23 United Nations Security Council, 1967, *Security Council Resolution 242 (1967) on a peaceful and accepted settlement of the Middle East situation*. S/RES/242, <https://digitallibrary.un.org> [access: 12.02.2026]

24 United Nations Security Council, 1973, *Security Council Resolution 338 (1973) on a cease-fire in the Middle East*. S/RES/338, <https://digitallibrary.un.org> [access: 12.02.2026]

25 United Nations Office at Geneva, 2024, *UN Officials remember brutal 7 October attacks, reiterate need for peace*, <https://www.ungeneva.org/en/news-media/news/2024/10/98721/un-officials-remember-brutal-7-october-attacks-reiterate-need-peace> [access: 05.02.2026].

26 J. Tan, 2024, *Charts show a stark difference in the human cost of Israeli-Palestinian conflict over the years*, <https://www.cnbc.com/2023/11/12/israel-hamas-war-data-shows-human-cost-of-conflict-through-the-years.html> [access: 05.02.2026].

been killed. The city of Rafah, with a pre-war population of roughly 280,000, became the main refuge for about one million internally displaced persons²⁷.

To better understand how the conflict was initially framed within the UN, it is useful to recall the first public UNSC meeting devoted to the situation, held on 16 October 2023²⁸. Israel's Permanent Representative, Gilad Erdan, portrayed Israel's actions as a lawful exercise of the inherent right of self-defence in response to the 7 October attacks, which he compared to the Holocaust and described as an "Israeli 9/11". He depicted Hamas as the principal driver of the conflict as directly responsible for civilian harm due to its practice of operating from densely populated areas and using civilian infrastructure, including hospitals. Drawing on the Charter, he urged UNSC members to view Hamas as a genocidal actor and argued that calls for an immediate ceasefire risked enabling the group to regroup and launch further attacks. In this framing, Israel's military objectives – dismantling Hamas' capabilities and freeing hostages – were presented as compatible with international law, provided that due distinction between combatants and civilians was maintained²⁹.

By contrast, the Permanent Observer of the State of Palestine, Riyad Mansour, depicted the situation in Gaza as a catastrophic humanitarian and protection crisis driven by disproportionate and indiscriminate Israeli military operations.. He highlighted large-scale civilian casualties, destruction of civilian infrastructure and allegations of collective punishment, situating the escalation in the context of a 17-year blockade of Gaza and repeated rounds of violence. His statement emphasized that Palestinians had been continuously urged to chose peaceful means while simultaneously facing daily violence from settlers and Israeli security forces, and argued that the denial of Palestinian rights and self-determination was integral to understanding both the outbreak and dynamics of the conflict³⁰.

Taken together, these elements explain why the Gaza war quickly came to be seen within UN debates as a critical test of the organisations capacity to uphold its own normative commitments in an intensely polarised environment. The combination of structural constraints (veto politics), long-standing regional grievances and extreme humanitarian costs created a setting in which every procedural decision – from agenda-setting to the wording of draft resolutions – was scrutinised through the lens of credibility and consistency. In this context, the accusation of "double standards" emerged not only as a moral rebuke, but as a powerful shorthand for perceived discrepancies between the universalist aspirations of the Charter and the selective, power-mediated outcomes of its institutional practice.

27 United Nations Security Council, 2023, *Security Council, 79th year, 9531st meeting*. S/PV.9531, <https://digitallibrary.un.org> [access: 05.02.2026].

28 United Nations Security Council, 2023, *Security Council, 78th year, 9439th meeting*. S/PV.9439, <https://digitallibrary.un.org> [access: 05.02.2026].

29 Ibidem.

30 Ibidem.

The “double standards” Narrative in UN debates on Gaza

The outbreak of the war in the Gaza Strip generated a distinct pattern of debate within the UN when compared to the early phase of the war in Ukraine. While the escalation in Ukraine was preceded by a period of visible military build-up and explicit diplomatic warnings³¹, the 7 October attacks were perceived by many delegations as a sudden shock. This contributed to an initially reactive and strongly moral register of statements in multilateral forums. In this context, accusations of “double standards” rapidly became one of the key interpretative frames through which the UN’s performance was assessed³².

Across the first 100 days of the Gaza war, the “double standards” charge emerged not merely as a rhetorical embellishment accompanying condemnations of violence, but as a tool for structuring contestation around three interrelated questions: (i) the universality of norms; (ii) the hierarchy of suffering; and (iii) the legitimacy of multilateral institutions. Gaza was increasingly presented as a case where standards for the protection of civilians – formally universal – were in practice subject to political gradation, depending on the preferences and alignments of powerful states. The narrative thus served a mobilising function – it was designed to increase reputational pressure on states perceived as able to determine the content and effectiveness of UN action, while simultaneously legitimising demands for immediate instruments of de-escalation, such as ceasefire calls, civilian protection measures and unhindered humanitarian access.

Over time, the “double standards” frame became embedded in a broader discourse about the crisis of an order based on universal principles and about the growing dissonance between the “Global North” and the “Global South”. It supplied a vocabulary through which diverse groups of states could articulate long-standing grievances about selectivity in the application of international law and about asymmetries in global governance. Analytically, this evolution can be traced through three overlapping phases in UN debates: (i) an initial “credibility” test phase, (ii) a subsequent consolidation phase, and (iii) a later escalation phase.

Phase One: Credibility Test

In October 2023, references to “double standards” were primarily linked to the decision-making paralysis of the UNSC, triggered above all by United States’ vetoes of early draft resolutions on the crisis³³. At this stage, the core argument advanced by many delegations was that the collective security mechanism was failing not because

31 P.B. Zwack, V. Andrusiv, O. Antonenko, M. Minakov and I. Zevelev, 2021. *The Russian Military Build-up on Ukraine’s Border | An Expert Analysis*, Washington: Wilson Center. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/russian-military-build-up-ukraines-border-expert-analysis> [access: 05.02.2026].

32 A. Aktaş, 2025, *FACTBOX – Ukraine and Gaza Wars Compared*, Anadolu Agency, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/factbox-ukraine-and-gaza-wars-compared/3709083> [access: 05.02.2026].

33 Al-Jazeera, 2023 *US Vetoes UN resolution calling for humanitarian pause in Israel-Hamas war*, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/10/18/us-vetoes-un-resolution-calling-for-humanitarian-pause-in-israel-hamas-war> [access: 02.02.2026].

of a lack of information about the scale of the humanitarian emergency, but because individual states were actively blocking UNSC's action. The accusation therefore targeted the political use of the veto rather than the institutional design as such.

From the very outset, the Russian Federation played a particularly visible role in advancing this discourse, explicitly connecting the deadlock to the “egoistic aspirations” of what it portrayed as a “Western block” and accusing the United States of “hypocrisy and double standards”. At the same time, representatives of Arab and Muslim countries framed the paralysis as a direct threat to the UNSC's long-term credibility. The Permanent Observer of the State of Palestine, Riyad Mansour, warned that inability to act in the face of large-scale civilian harm would deepen divides not only between the West and the Arab and Muslim world, but also between the North and the South more broadly: „I ask the members of the Council to think of their credibility the day after, and to think of the deepening divide between the West and the Arab and Muslim world, between North and South and between communities³⁴”.

Similar concerns were echoed by states from North Africa and the Middle East, including Libya, which invoked the contrast between long-standing Western “lectures” of human rights and international law and the perceived selectivity of responses to Gaza: „The members of the Security Council, especially Western countries, have been preaching to us and lecturing us for decades about human rights and international law. What is the message they are sending to the world today? The people of the world are not stupid. The Council must stop its double standards and its hypocrisy.³⁵

In this first phase, the “double standards” charge functioned primarily as an explanation of, and reaction to, UNSC's inaction. It linked procedural outcomes – stalled resolutions, blocked drafts, delayed meetings – to broader narratives about credibility and trust. The central claim was that repeated vetoes in the face of mounting humanitarian tragedy risked irreparably damaging the authority of a “Western-norms-based” institution that presents itself as the guardian of international peace and security.

Consolidation phase

As the crisis continued and the humanitarian toll escalated, the discourse on “double standards” stabilised and diffused between the UNSC and the UNGA. At the UN, particularly within the framework of the Tenth Emergency Special Session (ESS-10). In this consolidation phase, the concept was increasingly associated with “selective legality” – the idea that international law is not openly rejected, but unevenly activated and enforced depending on the actors involved and the interests of major powers.

34 United Nations Security Council, 2023, *Security Council, 78th year, 9439th meeting*. S/PV.9439, <https://digitallibrary.un.org> [access: 12.02.2026].

35 United Nations Security Council, 2023, *Security Council, 78th year, 9443rd meeting*, <https://digitallibrary.un.org> [access: 12.02.2026].

Delegations from the region, such as Jordan, and from outside of it, including China³⁶, underlined that the right to self-defence could not be interpreted as a license to collectively punish an entire population. Call to end “collective punishment of civilians” and to ensure strict compliance with IHL became reoccurring motive. In this way, “double standards” shifted from a general accusation of hypocrisy to a more precise legal-political argument – what was at stake was not only the presence or absence of formal condemnation, but the consistency of legal reasoning and the proportionality of measures tolerated or advocated by the Council.

Another important feature of this phase was the growing tendency to frame the selectivity as a threat to the authority of multilateral institutions more broadly. Statements by the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and the Secretary General of the League of Arab States, among others, warned that applying different standards to similar humanitarian situations generates “chaos” and undermines confidence in an international order supposedly grounded in the Charter: “Applying double standards across those issues causes chaos and undermines our international order, which must continue to be based on respect for international law and the Charter of the United Nations for the maintenance of international peace and security³⁷”. Representative of Qatar added that „The silent international community and the double standards that it applies with respect to the atrocities, massacres and crimes perpetrated by the Israeli occupation against civilians and civilian infrastructure and against teams of humanitarian workers are a stain on the conscience of humankind and could also undermine confidence in the international order and its organizations³⁸”. These statements show that the charge of “double standards” became a shorthand of a perceived gap between declaratory commitments to universality and the observed practice of differentiated responses.

At the same time, a comparative dimension gained prominence, particularly in interventions by the Russian Federation. By contrasting the frequency of UNSC meetings and initiatives on Ukraine with the alleged lack of equivalent mobilisation on Gaza, Russian representatives sought to demonstrate an uneven distribution of attention and concern. These narratives were further connected to sensitive issues such as different treatment of refugees from different regions, thereby extending the “double standards” frame beyond the immediate context of the Gaza war:

“How many times have Western delegations requested Security Council meetings on Ukraine? The answer is at least twice a month. The United States and Albania are doing everything they can to express concern about the political aspects of the crisis, while France and Ecuador are positioning themselves as fighters to overcome its humanitarian consequences. How many times have those delegations requested

36 United Nations Security Council, 2023, *Security Council, 78th year, 9472th meeting*. S/PV.9472, <https://digitallibrary.un.org> [access: 05.02.2026].

37 United Nations Security Council, 2023, *Security Council, 78th year, 9489th meeting*. S/PV.9439, <https://digitallibrary.un.org> [access: 05.02.2026].

38 Ibidem.

Security Council meetings on the Middle East? The answer is zero. (...) We have already seen those same double standards laid bear with regard to the migration crisis in the European Union, as Ukrainian refugees are given all sorts of benefits and preferences on the basis of the fact that they are allegedly accustomed to that way of life at home, whereas refugees from Africa and the countries of the Middle East are kept in camps in inhumane conditions³⁹.

Even when empirical claims were contested, the pattern reveals a deliberate strategy of linking Gaza-related grievances to a wider critique of the Western order and norms.

Escalation Phase

By December 2023, the “double standards” discourse had clearly radicalised. While retaining its institutional core – centred on vetoes, paralysis and alleged selectivity – it increasingly moved into a register in which “double standards” were presented as evidence of structural bias, dehumanisation of certain groups, and, in the view of some delegations, even racism. The Palestinian representative argued in the UNSC that 2.3 million Palestinians were “paying with their lives” for “double standards, bias and racism”, framing the issue not just as a procedural failure of the UN, but as a manifestation of a deeper hierarchy of value in the international system⁴⁰.

Other states strengthened this line of argument. China, for instance, criticised as “extreme hypocrisy” the simultaneous insistence on protecting woman and girls and the acceptance of continued fighting that disproportionately harmed them⁴¹. Cuba, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, Iran, Syria, and the Russian Federation, used the “double standards” label to connect Gaza to earlier Western-led interventions in the Middle East and North Africa, suggesting a broader pattern of selective concern and instrumental use of humanitarian rhetoric. References to Libya, Yemen and other theatres of intervention served to situate current debates in a longer history of perceived Western inconsistency and overreach. During the UNSC’s 9527th meeting Russian representative stated that:

„Under the pretext of protecting civilians, American-led NATO troops destroyed Libyan statehood. By distorting the provisions of the Council’s sanctions resolutions on Yemen, they intercepted weapons in the Arabian Sea, which were then sent to the Ukrainian Armed Forces⁴²”. North Korean representative echoed this during another meeting stating that „the United States determines justice and injustice on the basis of whether the performer of the act is pro-United States or anti-United States”⁴³. In the similar vein representative of Cuba emphasized that the end must be put to

39 Ibidem.

40 United Nations Security Council, 2023, *Security Council, 78th year, 9499th meeting*. S/PV.9499, <https://digitallibrary.un.org> [access: 05.02.2026].

41 Ibidem.

42 United Nations Security Council, 2023, *Security Council, 79th year, 9527th meeting*. S/PV.9527, <https://digitallibrary.un.org> [access: 05.02.2026].

43 United Nations General Assembly 2023, *10th emergency special session: 42nd plenary meeting*, <https://digitallibrary.un.org> [access: 05.02.2026].

“double standards, selectivity and political manipulation, which undermines international peace and security. We demand that the Government of the United States not to continue to paralyse the Security Council by using the antidemocratic and obsolete power of the veto to protect the excesses of the occupying Power⁴⁴”. Syria added: “We all saw how the repeated failure by the Security Council encouraged undeterred Israel to continue with its systemic crimes after the pause, falsely claiming that it has the right to self-defence at a time when certain Western States are shedding crocodile tears over the principles of humanity in other regions of the world⁴⁵”.

During this phase, the “double standards” narrative thus evolved into a central node in a wider coalition-building effort among states critical of Western policies. It provided a common language through which disparate grievances – about veto use, human rights selectivity, refugee treatment, sanctions and military interventions – could be articulated as facets of a single problem: the perceived subordination of universal norms to the geopolitical priorities of a few powerful actors. For observers and participants alike, the Gaza war became an illustrative case through which to question not only specific decisions in the UNSC and UNGA, but also a deeper alignment between the UN’s institutional design and the promise of equal concern for all civilian lives.

This escalation phase is crucial for understanding why the “double standards” accusation retains political traction even where basic indicators of institutional attention – number of meetings, volume of debates, adoption of resolutions – do not straightforwardly confirm a simple asymmetry in engagement.

Comparing the UN’s Responses to Ukraine and Gaza

UN Action After the Russian Federation’s Aggression Against Ukraine (24 February – 5 June 2022)

The Russian Federation’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 immediately triggered an intense cycle of meetings in the UNSC. In the first months of the conflict, the UNSC became primarily a forum for narrative confrontation, while its capacity to adopt binding decisions in the form of resolutions was sharply constrained by the direct involvement of a permanent member in the war and by the use of the veto. This dynamic has been aptly described in the literature as a manifestation of the structural tension between expectations of the UNSC and its actual agency in conflicts involving one of the P5⁴⁶.

During the 100-day period under review, at least 22 open UNSC meetings dedicated to the situation in Ukraine were held, supplemented by closed consultations and

44 United Nations General Assembly 2023, *10th emergency special session: 39th plenary meeting*, <https://digitallibrary.un.org> [access: 05.02.2026].

45 United Nations General Assembly 2023, *10th emergency special session: 45th plenary meeting*, <https://digitallibrary.un.org> [access: 05.02.2026].

46 K. Szczerski, „Wojna rosyjsko-ukraińska na forum Organizacji Narodów Zjednoczonych – debaty i działania w pierwszym okresie agresji”, *Studia Polityczne*, Warszawa 2024, pp. 15.

Arria-formula meetings⁴⁷. This pattern underscored the high deliberative intensity of the UNSC work. In parallel, three draft resolutions addressing the situation in Ukraine were tabled. a key draft condemning the aggression, put to a vote on 25 February 2022, was vetoed by the Russian Federation, effectively blocking the adoption of a legally binding resolution that would have clearly qualified the invasion as a breach of the Charter⁴⁸. The only significant UNSC outcome adopted at this early stage was Resolution 2623 (2022), a procedural decision of 27 February 2022 which initiated the UNGA's path by reconvening an Eleventh Emergency Special Session (ESS-11) on Ukraine⁴⁹. Institutionally, this move shifted the burden of norm-setting and political signalling from the UNSC – paralysed by the veto of the party to the conflict – to the UNGA, while simultaneously acknowledging that the UNSC would have very limited scope for substantive normative production as long as the divisions persisted.

The repeated obstruction of the UNSC's work by the Russian Federation reinforced the role of the UNGA as the main arena for articulating the international community's response. As several observers have noted, the war in Ukraine marked a moment in which the UNGA visibly “regained” political salience, functioning as an inclusive forum for all UN member states at a time when the UNSC was gridlocked. Most of the UNGA deliberations during this period under review took place within the framework of the ESS-11, which held 11 plenary meetings. Three resolutions adopted in this format formed the core of UN's early normative response:

1. a resolution condemning the aggression against Ukraine⁵⁰;
2. a resolution on the humanitarian consequences of the aggression against Ukraine⁵¹;
3. a resolution suspending the Russian Federation's membership rights in the Human Rights Council⁵².

These texts, while not legally binding, provided a clear political and legal framing of the conflict, signalled broad support for Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty, and imposed reputational pressure on the aggressor. They also illustrated the pattern whereby, in cases involving a P5 party, the UNGA assumes a compensatory role in articulating collective positions when the UNSC is unable to act.

47 An Arria-formula meeting is an informal, confidential, member-initiated gathering of UNSC members conducted outside of the UNSC's official meetings and rules of procedure, designed to enable a frank, private exchange of views within a flexible procedural framework with interlocutors. Security Council Report, n.d., *UN Security Council Working Methods. Arria-Formula Meetings*, <http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/un-security-council-working-methods/arria-formula-meetings> [access: 12.02.2026].

48 United Nations Security Council, 2022, *Draft resolution on aggression by the Russian Federation against Ukraine*. S/2022/155, <https://digitallibrary.un.org> [access: 05.02.2026].

49 United Nations Security Council, 2022, *Security Council Resolution 2623 (2022) on convening an emergency special session of the General Assembly on Ukraine*. S/RES/2623, <https://digitallibrary.un.org> [access: 05.02.2026].

50 United Nations General Assembly, 2022, *Aggression against Ukraine*. A/RES/ES-11/1, <https://digitallibrary.un.org> [access: 05.02.2026].

51 United Nations General Assembly, 2022, *Humanitarian consequences of the aggression against Ukraine*. A/RES/ES-11/2, <https://digitallibrary.un.org> [access: 05.02.2026].

52 A United Nations General Assembly, 2022, *Suspension of the rights of membership of the Russian Federation in the Human Rights Council*. A/RES/ES-11/3, <https://digitallibrary.un.org> [access: 05.02.2026].

UN action after the start of the war in Gaza (7 October 2023 – 15 January 2024)

The early institutional response to the war in the Gaza Strip followed a different temporal and political rhythm. Unlike the Ukraine war, whose risk of escalation had been widely discussed in strategic and diplomatic discourse, the 7 October 2023 attacks were widely perceived as a sudden rupture. In the first days of the crisis, the UNSC engaged in intense closed consultations and negotiations over possible language for public products, but the first open meeting devoted to the situation did not take place until 16 October 2023, nine days after the attacks. This delay was criticised in particular by Middle Eastern and African countries, which interpreted it as a sign of inadequate urgency.

From a political perspective, the initial phase of the crisis was characterised by relatively broad expressions of solidarity with Israel as a state subjected to mass attacks and hostage-taking. At the same time, concerns about the humanitarian consequences of Israel's military response quickly moved to the centre of debates. In the weeks that followed, this led to increasing polarisation within the UNSC and to contentious negotiations over draft resolutions, including disagreements over terminology related to a ceasefire, references to Hamas, hostages, and obligations under IHL. The failure to adopt the Russian-sponsored draft resolution calling for a humanitarian ceasefire on 16 October 2023 – rejected for lack of the required majority – was an early indication of these divisions⁵³.

During the first 100 days of the conflict, at least 18 open UNSC meetings were held on the situation in the Middle East with a specific focus on Gaza and Palestinian question, mirroring the high intensity observed in the Ukraine case. Over this period, eight draft resolutions related to the crisis were tabled by various sponsors, including Brazil, the Russian Federation, the United States, and the United Arab Emirates. Six of these drafts failed due to vetoes or insufficient support. However, in contrast to the Ukrainian case, the UNSC did succeed in adopting two substantive resolutions on the Gaza war during the period under review:

1. Resolution 2712 (2023), calling for the implementation of humanitarian pauses in the Gaza Strip and the release of hostages⁵⁴; and
2. Resolution 2720 (2023), establishing arrangements for the delivery of humanitarian aid and appointing a Senior Humanitarian Coordinator for Gaza⁵⁵.

53 United Nations Security Council, 2023, *Draft resolution on humanitarian ceasefire in the Gaza Strip and release of hostages*. S/2023/970, <https://digitallibrary.un.org> [access: 05.02.2026].

54 United Nations Security Council, 2023, *Security Council Resolution 2712 (2023) on humanitarian pauses in the Gaza Strip and release of hostages*. S/RES/2712, <https://digitallibrary.un.org> [access: 05.02.2026].

55 United Nations Security Council, 2023, *Security Council Resolution 2720 (2023) on delivery of humanitarian relief and appointment of a Senior Humanitarian Coordinator for Gaza*. S/RES/2720.

It is noteworthy that draft texts on Gaza were blocked not only by the United States vetoes⁵⁶, but also by vetoes from China and the Russian Federation⁵⁷, depending on the specific wording and perceived political implications of the respective drafts. In other words, while the UNSC again experienced a high degree of institutional paralysis, this time it was the result of multi-directional veto use rather than the direct involvement of a single P5 state as a party to the conflict. The competitive positioning of China and the Russian Federation as “advocates of the Global South” contributed to this pattern, even as it also created room for limited humanitarian compromises in the form of Resolutions 2712 and 2720 – albeit at the cost of diluted language and the postponement of more contentious issues such as accountability.

A key institutional difference between the two cases concerns the use of Article 99 of the Charter. In December 2023, the Secretary-General invoked article 99 in a letter to the President of the UNSC, drawing attention to the risk of a total collapse of the humanitarian situation in Gaza and to the potential further regional escalation. This was a rare procedural step, signalling the gravity of the crisis and the Secretary-General’s assessment that it posed a threat to the maintenance of international peace and security. No similar use of Article 99 was initiated in relation to Ukraine during the early 100-day period, even though the conflict was widely recognised as a major challenge to the European security order.

At the UNGA level, the reactivation of the Tenth Emergency Special Session (ESS-10) in October 2023 played a central role in structuring deliberations on Gaza. Over the period under review, ESS-10 held 10 plenary meetings characterised by high participation and intense debate. Within this framework, the UNGA adopted two resolutions of particular importance:

1. a resolution of 27 October 2023 on the protection of civilians and the upholding of legal and humanitarian obligations⁵⁸;
2. a resolution of 12 December 2023 on the same theme, which received the support of 153 UN member states⁵⁹.

While these resolutions, like those on Ukraine, do not have binding force, they provided a clear expression of the majority’s expectations regarding civilian protection, compliance with international law and the need for humanitarian access. They also illustrated – once again – the growing UNGA’s role as a venue for majoritarian signalling in situations where the Council is perceived as constrained or politicised.

⁵⁶ United Nations Security Council, 2023, *Draft resolution on humanitarian pauses in Israel-Gaza conflict*. S/2023/773; United Nations Security Council, 2023, *Draft resolution on humanitarian ceasefire in the Gaza Strip and release of hostages*. S/2023/970, <https://digitallibrary.un.org> [access: 05.02.2026].

⁵⁷ United Nations Security Council, 2023, *Draft resolution on humanitarian pauses in the Gaza Strip*. S/2023/792, <https://digitallibrary.un.org> [access: 05.02.2026].

⁵⁸ United Nations General Assembly, 2023, *Protection of civilians and upholding legal and humanitarian obligations*. A/RES/ES-10/21, <https://digitallibrary.un.org> [access: 05.02.2026].

⁵⁹ United Nations General Assembly, 2023, *Protection of civilians and upholding legal and humanitarian obligations*. A/RES/ES-10/22, <https://digitallibrary.un.org> [access: 05.02.2026].

Results

A structured comparison of the first 100 days of UN engagement in the wars in Ukraine and Gaza allows for several analytical conclusions relevant to the “double standards” debate.

First, at the level of deliberative intensity, the two cases appear broadly comparable. In both conflicts, the UNSC and UNGA devoted substantial time and political attention to the unfolding crises. In the Ukraine case, at least 22 open UNSC meetings and 11 ESS-11 plenary meetings were held in the initial 100-day period. In the Gaza case, at least 18 open UNSC meetings and 10 ESS-10 plenary meetings took place over an equivalent timeframe. These figures do not support the notion that the UN systematically “ignored” one conflict in favour of the other at the procedural level. Rather, they suggest that both wars were treated as high-salience items on the UN agenda.

Second, the more pronounced divergence emerges in terms of the UNSC’s normative output. In the Ukraine case, beyond the procedural decision to convene ESS-11, the UNSC did not adopt any substantive resolution in the early phase of the war. This outcome was directly linked to the status of the Russian Federation as a P5 member and its willingness to veto resolutions that framed its actions as aggression or imposed meaningful costs. In the Gaza case, by contrast, the UNSC considered a greater number of draft texts and ultimately adopted two resolutions focused on humanitarian issues and hostage-related provisions. Although these resolutions were limited in scope and did not resolve key political disputes, they nonetheless constituted binding decisions under the UNSC’s authority. From this perspective, the Gaza case does not exemplify a lower level of institutional engagement – if anything, it shows that the UNSC retained a minimal capacity to produce outcomes, even amid deep divisions.

Third, the Gaza war prompted the activation of additional institutional instruments that were not used, at least in the early 100-day period, in relation to Ukraine. The Secretary-General’s invocation of Article 99 and the appointment of a Senior Humanitarian Coordinator for Gaza are examples of such measures. These steps sent strong signals regarding the exceptional gravity of the humanitarian situation and the need for coordinated international efforts. They also complicate simplified versions of the “double standards” claim that equate concern for Gaza with neglect or downplaying of the crisis.

These observations suggest that basic indicators of institutional activity – number of meetings, adoption of resolutions, activation of Charter tools – do not straightforwardly confirm a simple asymmetry whereby Gaza receives less attention or fewer resources than Ukraine. Instead, they highlight how structural features of the UN System shape the form and content of responses in different ways. This does not mean though that perceptions of “double standards” are unfounded – rather, it indicates that they are rooted less in measurable differences in institutional engagement

and more in how the distribution of costs and protections is experienced on the ground and narrated by certain states.

From the perspective of this article, the comparison reinforces a broader analytical point. The “double standards” frame tends to conflate multiple dimensions of UN performance – attention, legal qualification, humanitarian outcomes and enforcement – into a single normative judgement. By disaggregating these dimensions and focusing on the first 100 days of each conflict, it becomes possible to distinguish between areas where the UN’s behaviour is genuinely asymmetrical and areas where structural constraints produce different, but not necessarily less intense, patterns of engagement. This distinction is crucial for evaluating the empirical basis of the “double standards” accusation and for understanding how institutional design and narrative politics interact in shaping the UN’s contested legitimacy.

Conclusion

This article examined the “double standards” accusation in UN debates on the Gaza war by distinguishing its narrative use from its empirical dimension. A comparison of the first 100 days of UN engagement in Ukraine and Gaza indicates that the claim is politically powerful but only partially supported by institutional data. Deliberative intensity in both cases was broadly similar – the UNSC and the UNGA devoted comparable numbers of meetings and significant agenda time to each conflict.

The main divergence lies in the UNSC capacity to produce binding outcomes. In the Ukraine case, beyond the procedural decision to convene ESS-11, no substantive resolution was adopted due to the aggressor’s P5 status and veto power. In the Gaza case, the UNSC ultimately adopted two resolutions focused on humanitarian issues and hostages, while the Secretary-General invoked Article 99 and a Senior Humanitarian Coordinator for Gaza was appointed. These facts complicate simplified version of the “double standards” narrative that equate Gaza with lower institutional engagement.

At the same time, the analysis shows that accusation retains political traction. The “double standards” frame aggregates concerns about selective legality, unequal valuation of civilian lives and inconsistent enforcement into a single story that resonates strongly in North-South contestation. The Russian Federation has clearly acted as a narrative accelerator, using Gaza debates to shift reputational pressure towards Western states to mobilise a broader coalition critical to liberal multilateralism⁶⁰. Treating “double standards” as both discursive resource and an empirically testable claim helps avoid automatic dismissal or acceptance and points to a deeper structural problem – the persistent gap between the UN’s deliberative performance and its constrained enforcement capacity.

60 E. Ferris, 2023. *Two Wars, One Common Denominator: Russia and the Israel-Gaza Conflict*, The Royal United Service Institute for Defence and Security Studies, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/two-wars-one-common-denominator-russia-and-israel-gaza-conflict> [access: 05.02.2026].

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About the Author

Patrik Woszczek holds master's degrees in Turkish Studies and International Relations from Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. He gained professional experience at Polish diplomatic missions in Ankara, Kuwait, New York and Tripoli, specializing in Middle Eastern affairs, international relations and international organizations. He is a polyglot with command of several foreign languages.