

# European public opinion: united in supporting Ukraine, divided on the future of NATO

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Regardless of the outcome, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has changed the European security landscape. Germany has committed to rearm, the United Kingdom is collaborating closely with the EU, and Finland and Sweden—both longstanding neutral states—are joining NATO. The United States and its European allies have maintained a united and effective front that seemed improbable after their calamitous and disorderly withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021. Western countries have supplied Ukraine with significant financial and military support while imposing economic sanctions of an unprecedented scale which can be best characterized as economic warfare on Russia.<sup>1</sup>

The existence of an active war on the continent raises the salience of European security policy, increasing the likelihood that people will form opinions in the often ignored foreign policy domain.<sup>2</sup> This, in turn, increases the need for democratic governments to respond to these views.<sup>3</sup> The notion that public opinion is too volatile and incoherent to have any impact on foreign policy<sup>4</sup> no longer holds, particularly at times when crises attract public attention and scrutiny.<sup>5</sup> Currently, most theories of foreign policy have incorporated the logic of Putnam's 'two-level games' in which actions at an international level cannot be fully understood without considering domestic political factors.<sup>6</sup> While public opinion does not translate directly into policy, it constrains foreign policy options, including the initiation

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<sup>1</sup> Catarina P. Thomson, 'Foreign policy attitudes and national alignments in times of Chinese and Russian threats: public opinion across three NATO members', *The RUSI Journal* 167: 2, 2022, pp. 24–37, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071847.2022.2088610>.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew A. Baum, *Soft news goes to war: public opinion and American foreign policy in the new media age* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Chendi Wang and Alexandru D. Moise, 'A unified autonomous Europe? Public opinion of the EU's foreign and security policy', *Journal of European Public Policy* 30: 8, 2023, pp. 1679–98, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2023.2217230>.

<sup>4</sup> Ole R. Holsti, 'Public opinion and foreign policy: challenges to the Almond-Lippmann consensus', *International Studies Quarterly* 36: 4, 1992, pp. 439–66.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew Baum and Philip B. K. Potter, 'The relationship between mass media, public opinion, and foreign policy: towards a theoretical synthesis', *Annual Review of Political Science* 11: 1, 2008, pp. 39–65, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.11.060406.214132>.

<sup>6</sup> Robert D. Putnam, 'Diplomacy and domestic politics: the logic of two-level games', *International Organization* 42: 3, 1988, pp. 427–60, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818300027697>.

of warfare. Public willingness to remain steadfast in support of Ukraine is likely to affect the outcome of the war. Officials are more likely to support Ukraine when the public favours this course of action than when the public opposes it. Critically, politicians do not always read public opinion with accuracy. Consequently, *perceptions* of public resolve may be just as important as actual resolve. We hope this article helps promote accurate perceptions of public attitudes about the war in Ukraine.

Crucially, Vladimir Putin may be choosing a path where western publics' opinions are paramount. Following the strategic and tactical blunders of the initial invasion, Russia may now be 'playing for time', hoping war-weary publics will demand a conclusion to the war (or at least an end to their governments' generous supporting of Ukraine).<sup>7</sup> There are reasons to think that such an approach on Russia's part is unlikely to work. First, research finds that the public can continue supporting a conflict even in the face of large costs.<sup>8</sup> Second, audience costs theory finds that leaders who back down after having publicly committed to participating in a militarized dispute will be punished domestically. Even citizens who are not particularly interested in foreign affairs tend to prefer consistent politicians, and political leaders know that if they break a public promise, they can pay audience costs domestically and could lose office.<sup>9</sup> Of course, the more fragile current support is, the more viable would be a Russian strategy to undermine public support for Ukraine. Europe may face the toughest of choices. If the conflict progresses without Ukrainian successes on the battlefield and the cost-of-living crisis hits broader segments of national societies, the question that takes centre stage is: which policies are domestic audiences across Europe willing to support?

Against this backdrop, we analyse public opinion data about the Ukraine war from ten major European countries. Data were collected in February 2023, and the sampling focused on four classes of countries: the 'Big Three' (France, Germany and the UK); eastern European and Baltic states (Estonia, Hungary and Poland); countries which applied for NATO membership following the Russian invasion (Finland and Sweden); and southern European countries (Italy and Spain).<sup>10</sup> We

<sup>7</sup> Some have warned that this scenario is possible in the US, which has thus far played the most important role of any nation in supporting Ukraine: in 2024, the American public might elect a president who might withdraw entirely from the conflict or even align with the Putin regime. See Anne Applebaum and Jeffrey Goldberg, 'The counteroffensive', *The Atlantic*, 1 May 2023, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2023/06/counteroffensive-ukraine-zelensky-crimea/673781>. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 29 August 2023.)

<sup>8</sup> Christopher Gelpi, Peter D. Feaver and Jason Reifler, *Paying the human costs of war: American public opinion and casualties in military conflicts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

<sup>9</sup> That said, International Relations literature has made these points focusing on direct involvement in a conflict; such costs may be different when supporting an ally rather than more directly participating in a conflict. See also Michael Tomz, 'Domestic audience costs in International Relations: an experimental approach', *International Organization* 61: 4, 2007, pp. 821–40, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818307070282>; Joshua D. Kertzer and Ryan Brutzer, 'Decomposing audience costs: bringing the audience back into audience cost theory', *American Journal of Political Science* 60: 1, 2015, pp. 234–49, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12201>.

<sup>10</sup> We fielded these surveys with Dynata and YouGov. Dynata fielded surveys in Estonia (with a national sample of 1,122), Finland (1,097), Germany (1,124), Hungary (1,091), Italy (1,147), Poland (1,051), Spain (1,150) and Sweden (1,096) between 3 February and 3 March 2023. YouGov fielded surveys in France (national sample of 1,688) and the UK (1,586) between 21 February and 8 March 2023. Quotas on age, gender, education and

deliberately include a member of both NATO and the EU whose leadership has expressed support for Putin—i.e. Hungary.<sup>11</sup> Specifically, we examine commonalities and differences across the following areas: perceptions of responsibility for the war; options regarding NATO; whether Ukraine should accept territorial losses; and whether domestic audiences think sanctions against Russia are hurting their country's economy excessively and must be lifted. Alongside cross-national comparisons, we examine potential divides within countries. Here we focus on the role of political affiliation and age. Partisanship typically influences preferences in times of conflict, and we expect generational divides to emerge between younger audiences and those who have grown up in the shadow of the Soviet Union.<sup>12</sup>

We find support for Ukraine in all countries: Europeans support policies that help the Ukrainian cause, such as imposing sanctions on Russia, and do not favour courses of action that would go against Ukrainian aims, such as pushing Ukraine to make territorial concessions. We identify specific areas of cross-national variation. Countries can be classified into three distinct groups, ranging from staunch supporters to others who are still supportive but slightly more equivocal.

## Country-level results

We find three main cross-national patterns. First, none of the countries are pro-Russian. While there is variation in terms of how completely Russia is blamed, there is a clear European consensus about who is responsible for the war. Second, we can categorize the countries into three distinct groups in terms of their levels of support towards Ukraine. Third, citizens show consistency regarding their positions, across different issues, which likely draws on long-held political postures.

In Estonia, Finland, Poland, Sweden and the UK there is a broad pro-Ukrainian majority; we label this category as 'staunch supporters'. Support for Ukraine is especially high in countries that might be future targets of Russian expansionism. Our results are consistent with other work that finds the British public to be generally supportive of military options to signal resolve (sometimes referred to as militant internationalism).<sup>13</sup> The second category, which we term 'solid

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region were used to approximate the distribution of these characteristics in the general population. For further survey details and descriptive statistics please refer to our supplementary materials available at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/L3C3GF>.

<sup>11</sup> Krisztina Than, 'Hungary's Orban treads fine line with supporters over Russia stance', Reuters, 23 March 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/hungarys-orban-treads-fine-line-with-supporters-over-russia-stance-2022-03-23>.

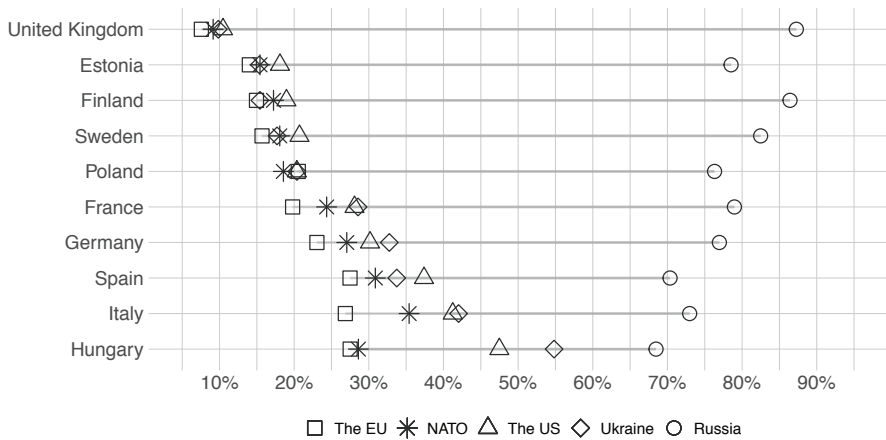
<sup>12</sup> Krastev and Leonard had previously studied the role of political affiliation in some European countries in March 2023. See Ivan Krastev and Mark Leonard, 'Fragile unity: why Europeans are coming together on Ukraine (and what might drive them apart)', European Council on Foreign Relations, 16 March 2023, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/fragile-unity-why-europeans-are-coming-together-on-ukraine>. To the best of our knowledge, we are the first to systematically examine the role played by age differences in western countries. However, see Clare Ansberry, 'How generational differences shape our views of Ukraine war', *Wall Street Journal*, 22 March 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-generational-differences-shape-our-views-of-ukraine-war-11647951788>.

<sup>13</sup> Timothy B. Gravelle, Jason Reifler and Thomas J. Scotto, 'The structure of foreign policy attitudes in trans-

supporters’, consists of Germany, France and Spain, where large majorities consistently take pro-Ukraine positions, but where pockets of sympathy towards Russia are also now discernible. Public opinion in Italy and (especially) Hungary is ‘nearer the fence’.

In terms of perceived responsibility for the war (figure 1), clear majorities in all countries attribute a certain amount of responsibility to Russia, while the proportion of respondents holding Ukraine or western actors responsible is considerably lower across all countries surveyed.

**Figure 1: Public perceptions of responsibility for the war in Ukraine**



*Note:* Responses to question: Who bears responsibility for the outbreak of the war in Ukraine? For each of the following actors, please indicate to what extent you believe they are responsible for the outbreak of the war: a) Russia, b) Ukraine, c) the United States, d) the EU and e) NATO. Figure 1 reports percentages of respondents indicating that Russia, Ukraine, the US, the EU are NATO are responsible for the war to some degree, i.e. scoring 5, 6 or 7 on a seven point scale ranging from 1 (not at all responsible) to 7 (extremely responsible).

As mentioned above, there is variation between the national samples on the degree to which publics see Russia as responsible and Ukraine (and the West) as blameless. The proportion attributing some responsibility to Ukraine, for instance, increases from 20 per cent or less in the ‘staunch supporter’ countries to 25–35 per cent among ‘solid supporters’, and surpasses 40 per cent in Italy and Hungary (with an absolute majority—55 per cent—of the Hungarian sample considering Ukraine bears some responsibility for the war). Another important pattern is an increasing differentiation in the perceived responsibility of western actors according to whether populations are more Russia-friendly. While in ‘staunch supporter’

atlantic perspective: comparing the United States, United Kingdom, France and Germany’, *European Journal of Political Research* 56: 1, 2017, pp. 757–76, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12197>. Strategic considerations that might lead British political leaders to signal a strong anti-Putin stance notwithstanding, other political leaders also benefited electorally from similar stances (such as—arguably—Emmanuel Macron during the run-up to the 2022 French presidential election).

countries the perceptions of responsibility for initiating the conflict fall within a very narrow range for the EU, NATO and US, a widening range is seen in more hesitant countries (France and Germany) and wider still in the two countries (Italy and Hungary) which are ‘nearer the fence’. Other than in Poland, the EU is consistently the least likely western actor to be considered responsible for initiating the war—even in Italy and Hungary (and Spain), just about one in four respondents perceive the EU as partly to blame. In all countries sampled, the US is more likely than NATO to be held responsible. In Spain, uniquely, Ukraine ranks just below the US in terms of its perceived responsibility, and in both Italy and Hungary some responsibility is accorded to the US by a sizeable minority of more than 40 per cent. Although countries that support Russia or have chosen to remain neutral contain the majority of the world’s population,<sup>14</sup> arguments about the West being responsible for the war, voiced not only by the Kremlin but also by western academics such as John J. Mearsheimer,<sup>15</sup> do not ring true for many across Europe.

Figure 2 depicts levels of support for two policy options vital to the outcome of the war. First, despite President Volodymyr Zelensky’s repeated claims that Ukrainians will fight until all of Ukraine (including Crimea) is under national control, some voices within Ukraine—including an adviser to Zelensky’s government—have suggested potential openness to Ukrainian territorial concessions.<sup>16</sup> How does the public feel about the issue? To answer this, we asked respondents whether Ukraine should be urged to accept territorial losses in order to end the war as quickly as possible; on this specific question, responses are illustrative of the broad patterns of support that emerge in our data. On the one hand, the tripartite division of countries (into ‘staunch’ vs ‘solid’ supporters, and populations that are ‘nearer the fence’) is evident here; on the other, even in Italy and Hungary, only minorities—albeit substantial ones—are in favour of persuading Ukraine to cede territory.

Another key policy-related issue that may affect the duration of the war is public willingness to support economic sanctions against Russia. The idea that Putin is playing for time, counting on western support for Ukraine to splinter while he engages in a drawn-out war of attrition, has been widely reported.<sup>17</sup> At the time of our survey, only small minorities in each country think economic sanctions against Russia should be lifted because they would damage the economy of their own country too much. On this issue, Europeans show great unity—only Hungarians are less categorical in their rejection of the lifting of sanctions.

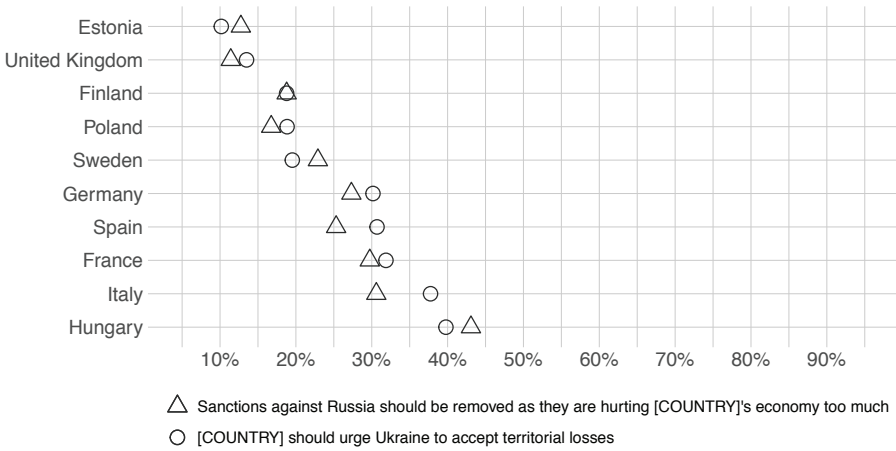
<sup>14</sup> ‘Who are Russia’s supporters?’, *The Economist*, 31 March 2023, <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2023/03/31/who-are-russias-supporters>.

<sup>15</sup> Isaac Chotiner, ‘Why John Mearsheimer blames the US for the crisis in Ukraine’, *New Yorker*, 1 March 2022, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/q-and-a/why-john-mearsheimer-blames-the-us-for-the-crisis-in-ukraine>.

<sup>16</sup> Christopher Miller and Felicia Schwartz, ‘Ukraine “ready” to talk to Russia on Crimea if counteroffensive succeeds’, *Financial Times*, 5 April 2023, <https://www.ft.com/content/d68b4007-4ddf-4320-b29a-f2eee2662d6e>.

<sup>17</sup> Applebaum and Goldberg, ‘The counteroffensive’.

**Figure 2: Views on policies vital to the outcome of the war in Ukraine**



*Note:* Responses to questions: Please say whether you agree or disagree with each of the following statements: A) Sanctions against Russia should be removed as they are hurting [COUNTRY]’s economy too much, and B) [COUNTRY] should urge Ukraine to accept territorial losses in order to end the war as soon as possible. Figure 2 reports percentages of respondents agreeing with each policy, i.e. scoring 1 (strongly agree) or 2 (agree) on a five point scale ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree).

The role that NATO should take in the conflict has been hotly debated, and care has been given to avoiding actions that could be perceived as escalatory.<sup>18</sup> Since the onset of the war, many prominent voices have argued that NATO should increase its military presence in eastern Europe. In March 2022 the secretary-general of NATO announced a doubling of alliance capabilities on the eastern flank, including the deployment of new battlegroups in Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia.<sup>19</sup> Figure 3 shows that European public opinion regarding NATO options is more divided than it was for attributing responsibility, or for wanting to lift Russian sanctions or encourage Ukraine to make territorial concessions. Starting with the question as to whether the respondent’s own country should encourage NATO to increase its presence in eastern Europe, it was notable that this is only supported by a large majority of the national sample in Estonia and Poland—both located in eastern Europe. Domestic audiences in other ‘staunch supporter’ countries (Finland, Sweden and the UK) are somewhat divided on this, with Finland and Sweden presenting narrow majorities opposing this measure. Levels of support for encouraging an increased NATO presence in eastern Europe are nevertheless higher among the ‘staunch supporters’ than in



the other two groups, so the general pattern of country variation described previously continues to hold. In ‘solid supporter’ countries the proportion in favour varies between 35 and 40 per cent, dropping to 29 per cent in Italy and to 26 per cent in Hungary.

Whether Ukraine should join NATO is a more contentious issue—indeed, this would be highly unlikely to happen until all parties declared the war to be over. Unless and until the issue of Crimea is resolved, admitting Ukraine to the alliance risks NATO entering into direct conflict against Russia. Postwar, even if Ukraine’s path to membership sidesteps the requirement for a membership action plan—such as has been followed by other former Soviet states—democratic and security reforms will still have to be implemented.<sup>20</sup> Ukraine has been steadfast in its resolve to obtain security assurances that are more reliable than the ones received in 1994 by Russia, the US and the UK when they relinquished their nuclear arsenals. Membership of the EU is another option being discussed for Ukraine; previous research finds that significant minorities in some former Soviet states would resort to the EU over NATO in cases of Russian interference in domestic affairs.<sup>21</sup> While accession to the EU is also fraught with challenges, Russia has previously signalled that a pause in hostilities might be possible if Ukraine pursues membership of the EU, so long as it abandons its push to join NATO.<sup>22</sup>

Despite the complexity of the matter, the importance of public opinion regarding accession to NATO should not be overlooked, as illustrated by shifting views in Finland and Sweden.<sup>23</sup> Former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger has famously argued that Ukraine should become a member of NATO—not just to deter further Russian aggression, but for the safety of Europe more generally.<sup>24</sup> Others highlight how destabilizing this move would be, claiming it would be analogous to allowing Mexico to enter a military alliance with Russia or China.<sup>25</sup> As we can observe from figure 3, European public opinion has no common position on whether Ukraine should become a fully-fledged member of NATO. Support for Ukraine’s admittance to the alliance varies from substantial majorities in most of the countries which are ‘staunch supporters’ to smaller minorities in countries ‘nearer the fence’. Notably, populations in France and Germany—two countries which we have termed ‘solid supporters’ in other respects—are not especially

<sup>20</sup> Patrick Daly, ‘Ukraine still has conditions to meet before it can join NATO, leaders say’, PA Media, 11 July 2023, <https://uk.news.yahoo.com/ukraine-still-conditions-meet-join-171205564.html>.

<sup>21</sup> Thomson, ‘Foreign policy attitudes and national alignments’.

<sup>22</sup> Max Seddon, Roman Olearchyk and Henry Foy, ‘Russia no longer requesting Ukraine be “denazified” as part of ceasefire talks’, *Financial Times*, 28 March 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/7f14efe8-2f4c-47a2-aa6b-9a755a39b626>.

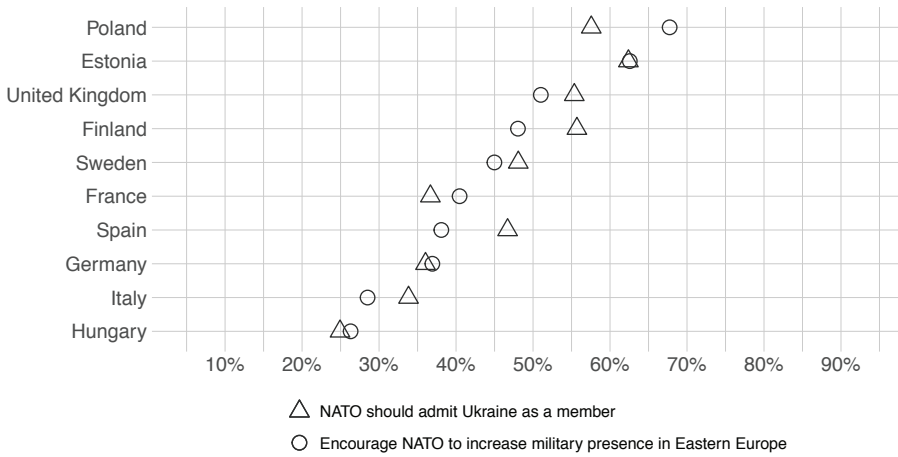
<sup>23</sup> Anne Kauranen and Johan Ahlander, ‘Explainer: What you need to know about Finland and Sweden’s path to NATO membership’, Reuters, 12 May 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/what-you-need-know-about-finlands-swedens-path-nato-membership-2022-05-03>.

<sup>24</sup> ‘Kissinger: for the safety of Europe, get Ukraine into NATO’, *The Economist*, 17 May 2023, <https://www.economist.com/kissinger-highlights>; Andriy Zagorodnyuk, ‘To protect Europe, let Ukraine join NATO—right now’, *Foreign Affairs*, 1 June 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/protect-europe-let-ukraine-join-nato-right-now>.

<sup>25</sup> Robert H. Wade, ‘A “diplomatic solution” to the war in Ukraine’, LSE Blog EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, 2 March 2022, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2022/03/02/a-diplomatic-solution-to-the-war-in-ukraine>.

convinced, with less than 40 per cent of the sample in each country expressing support for Ukraine's admittance to NATO, only just above the one-third in favour in Italy and not far in excess of the one-quarter recorded in Hungary. Support for Ukraine's admittance to NATO is not simply a reflection of whether populations have a positive view of the institution. Although members of the public with favourable views of NATO are more likely to support Ukraine's desire to join the alliance, this is not necessarily a majority position in 'solid supporter' or 'nearer the fence' countries.<sup>26</sup> As the alliance's unanimity principle provides every NATO member state with a veto when it comes to the admittance of new members, our findings suggest admitting Ukraine as a NATO member would be politically difficult.

**Figure 3: Views on NATO policy options**



*Note:* Responses to questions: Please say whether you agree or disagree with each of the following statements: A) NATO should admit Ukraine as a member, and B) [COUNTRY] should encourage NATO to increase its military presence in Eastern Europe. Figure 3 reports percentages of respondents agreeing with each policy, i.e. scoring 1 (strongly agree) or 2 (agree) on a five point scale ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree).

<sup>26</sup> In 'staunch supporter' countries, majorities of between 61% and 73% of those with warm feelings towards NATO support Ukraine joining the alliance (compared to 34–43% of those with more negative feelings towards NATO). In two of the three 'solid supporter' states, populations with generally positive views of NATO want Ukraine to join, with the exception of Germany where only 47% do. In the 'nearer the fence' group, those with more positive attitudes towards NATO are more likely to want Ukraine as a member but this does not constitute a majority. The average correlation between general attitude towards NATO and wanting Ukraine to join is 0.42. Supplementary figures at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/L3C3GF>.



## Differences within countries: political affiliation and generational divides

In addition to examining cross-national differences, we now compare preferences of those who support different political groupings within their countries,<sup>27</sup> as well as making comparisons across generational divides.<sup>28</sup> First, we consider the role of political preferences and note that there are no significant partisan divides in the ‘staunch supporter’ countries. In both the ‘solid support’ and ‘nearer the fence’ countries, however, we observe clearer differences in opinion between supporters of different parties or party camps. This pattern is best illustrated by examining perceptions of war responsibility and support for putting pressure on Ukraine to accept territorial losses.

If we compare the bottom halves of figures 4a and 4b—which depict, respectively, the national perceptions of Ukraine’s and Russia’s responsibility for initiating the war, in both cases among ‘solid support’ and ‘nearer the fence’ countries—there is comparatively less of a difference between those attributing some responsibility to Ukraine (figure 4a) and those holding Russia responsible (figure 4b) than is depicted in both figures’ top halves, which represent the views of respondents in ‘staunch supporter’ countries.<sup>29</sup> In western European countries, aside from supporters of leftist parties with a history of close relations with the Soviet Union, it is the supporters of right-wing populist parties who are clearly most Russia-friendly. The German case illustrates this particularly well: 55 per cent of those German respondents affiliated with the populist far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) attribute some responsibility for the war to Ukraine (figure 4a). This pro-Russia position reflects the views of the former AfD co-party leader, Alexander Gauland, who claims the invasion of Ukraine was the ‘result of past failures’ and blames the post-Cold War expansion of NATO for violating ‘Russia’s legitimate security interests’.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup> We classified parties according to ParlGov. ParlGov details and the dataset can be accessed at: Holger Döring, Constantin Huber, Philip Manow, Maïke Hesse and Alexandra Quaas, ‘Parliaments and governments database (ParlGov): information on parties, elections and cabinets in established democracies’, 2023, <https://www.parlgov.org/data-info>. We complemented this information with classifications from The PopuList for populist and far-right parties, as ParlGov only provides one classification for the entire history of a party, which neglects recent shifts. Matthijs Rooduijn, Stijn van Kessel, Caterina Froio, Andrea Pirro, Sarah de Lange, Daphne Halikiopoulou, Paul Lewis, Cas Mudde and Paul Taggart, ‘The PopuList: an overview of populist, far right, far left and Eurosceptic parties in Europe’, 2019, <https://popu-list.org>.

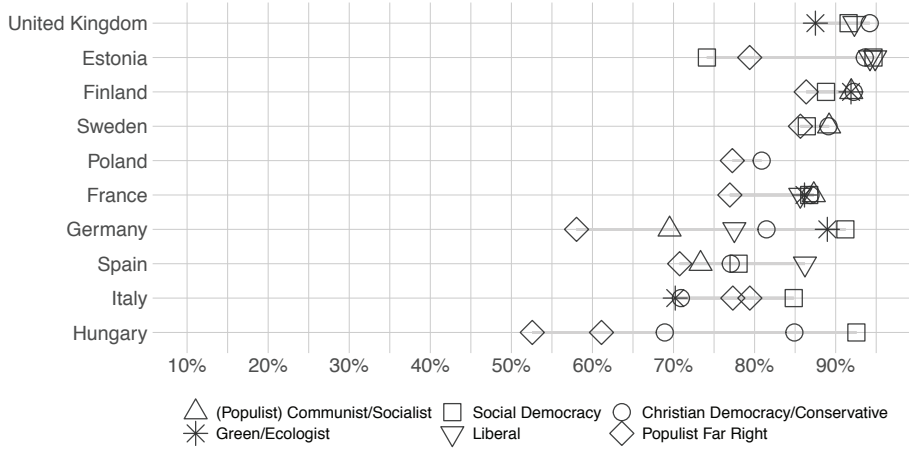
<sup>28</sup> There may be other fault-lines within countries. For example, the concept of the ‘gender gap’ has been long established in the conflict literature (see, for instance, Mary-Kate Lizotte, ‘Investigating the origins of the gender gap in support for war’, *Political Studies Review* 17: 2, 2019, pp. 124–35, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1478929917699416>). At the suggestion of one of the anonymous reviewers, we conducted an additional analysis to examine a gender gap in preferences. Interestingly, we did not find much evidence of a gender gap for most survey questions, although men are more likely to want their country to press NATO to increase its presence in eastern Europe. We suspect that the lack of an observable gender gap is rooted in two factors: broad consensus on Ukraine (as we argue here), and specific choice of survey questions. Supplementary figures at <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/L3C3GF>

<sup>29</sup> For additional information on reported parties and their relative national relevance please refer to our supplementary materials available at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/L3C3GF>

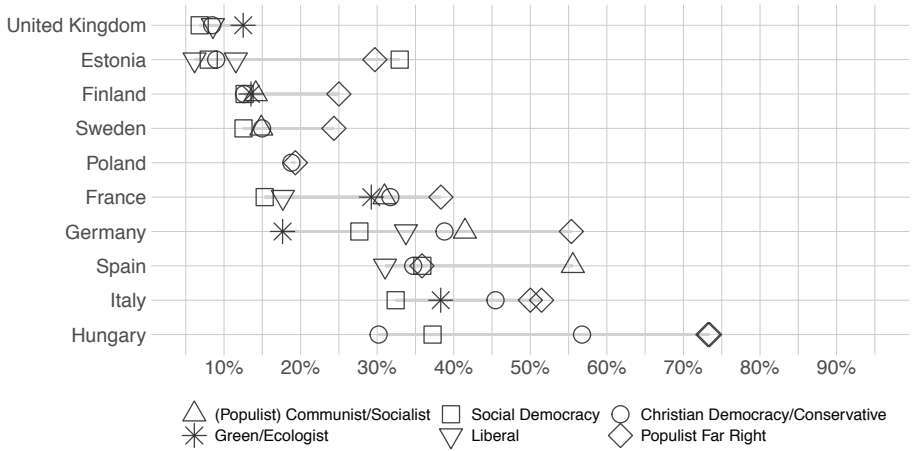
<sup>30</sup> Jason Horowitz, ‘Putin’s aggression leaves his right-wing fan club squirming’, *New York Times*, 26 Feb. 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/26/world/europe/russia-putin-matteo-salvini-marine-le-pen.html>.

**Figures 4a and 4b: Perceptions of Russia's (a) and Ukraine's (b) responsibility for initiating the war, by broad political affiliation**

a) Russia



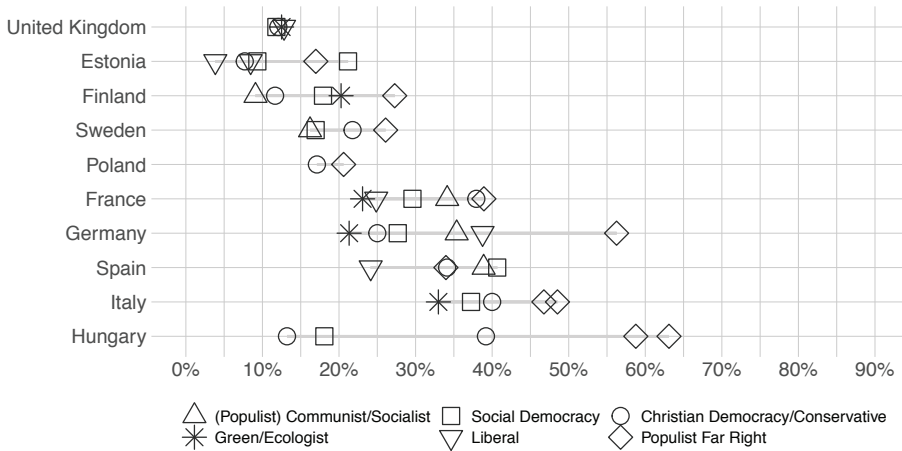
b) Ukraine



*Note:* Responses to question: Who bears responsibility for the outbreak of the war in Ukraine? These figures report percentages of respondents indicating that Russia or Ukraine, respectively, is responsible for the war to some degree, i.e. scoring 5, 6 or 7 on a seven-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all responsible) to 7 (extremely responsible). Party groupings are based on ParlGov and PopuList. We only report parties with at least 50 supporters in our sample.

Figure 5 illustrates how supporters of different political groupings feel about urging Ukraine to accept territorial losses. The top half of figure 5 shows that supporters of different political groupings in the ‘staunch supporter’ group of countries are generally not in favour of Ukraine giving up territory to appease Russia. As we move down the figure, we see more evidence of agreement with the statement—among supporters of, notably, far-right political groupings in ‘solid supporter’ and ‘nearer the fence’ countries, who are more in favour of their governments urging Ukraine to make territorial concessions to Russia. Here, it is noticeable that a majority (56 per cent) of supporters of Germany’s populist far-right AfD party—the only one represented in its broad category—would urge Ukraine to concede territory to Russia, echoing the long-held stance of the party to accept Russia’s annexation of Crimea. In the words of AfD parliamentary Roger Beckamp, ‘we do not see any Russian occupation here [in Crimea]. I met with a lot of people, who want to be with Russia, and it is not temporarily, it is permanently’.<sup>31</sup>

**Figure 5: Support for urging Ukraine to accept territorial losses, by broad political affiliation**



*Note:* Responses to question: Please say whether you agree or disagree with statement: [COUNTRY] should urge Ukraine to accept territorial losses in order to end the war as soon as possible. Figure 5 reports percentages of respondents in agreement, i.e. scoring 1 (strongly agree) or 2 (agree) on a five point scale ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree). Party groupings are based on ParlGov and PopuList. We only report parties with at least 50 supporters in our sample.

<sup>31</sup> Interfax, ‘Alternative for Germany MPs see no “Russian occupation” in Crimea’, 8 Feb. 2018, <https://interfax.com/newsroom/top-stories/24849/>.

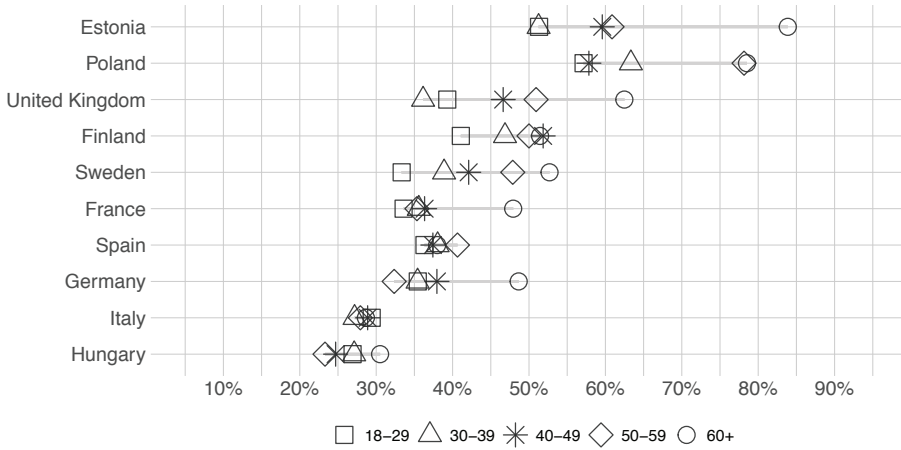
Considering the differences of views expressed among those who support different political parties is key, as it may constrain political domestic manoeuvres—particularly in states with coalition governments. We must note, however, that we find systematic cross-national differences irrespective of party affiliation. That is, the general effect of a country being classified in the ‘staunch supporter’, ‘solid supporter’, or ‘nearer the fence’ group carries more weight than political affiliation. For instance, moderate left- and right-wing parties in Germany and France are consistently more Russia-friendly than the parties belonging to their corresponding party ‘families’ in Finland, Sweden or the UK.

Given the historical significance of the Russian/Soviet state across Europe, we compare views of national populations of different age groups, focusing on our two NATO-related survey questions. The main pattern that emerges is that in all countries, older age groups are more supportive of increasing NATO’s troop presence in eastern Europe and admitting Ukraine to the alliance than are younger age groups. The extent of these differences varies between countries, however, as does the political relevance of this variation. Overall, differences between countries again prove more important than subgroup differences (as we have already seen in the case for political affiliation).

Figure 6 illustrates differentiated levels of support for respondents’ countries to encourage NATO to increase its military presence in eastern Europe. Here, different symbols are used to represent different age groups (these being 18–29 years; 30–39; 40–49; 50–59; and 60+). For countries close to the bottom of the figure, we can see that there is little variation between age groups on this issue—roughly one-quarter of respondents of all ages in the ‘nearer the fence’ countries of Italy and Hungary support an increased NATO presence in eastern Europe. For the countries appearing towards the top of figure 6, the distribution is quite different: in countries which are ‘staunch supporters’ older respondents are considerably keener on supporting a strengthening of NATO’s eastern flank. This finding is not limited to former members of the Soviet bloc, being as visible among older respondents in the UK as among their counterparts in Estonia or Poland. There is some variation by age within the ‘solid supporter’ set of nations, but this tends to be lower than in the ‘staunch supporter’ group.

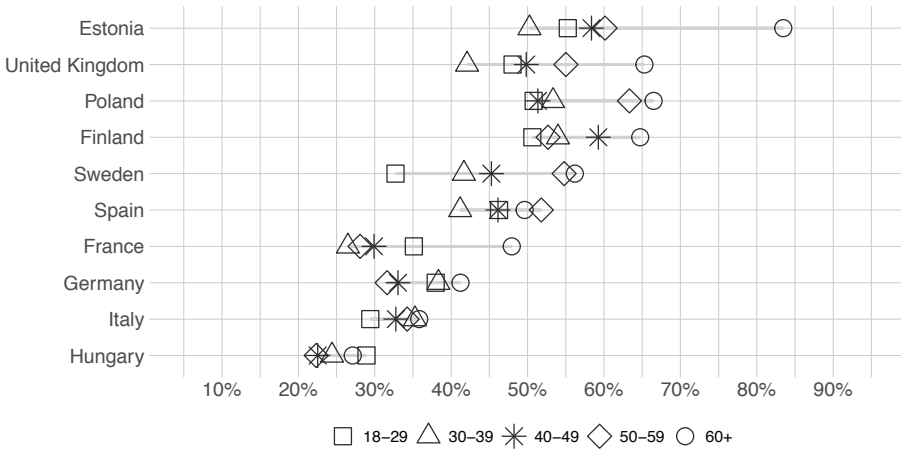
A similar trend can be observed in figure 7, which illustrates the effects of age on respondents’ views as to whether Ukraine should be admitted to NATO. Among ‘staunch supporters’ the oldest age cohort shows the strongest approval of Ukraine’s eventual admittance to the alliance: 83 per cent of those aged 60 or above in Estonia, 66 per cent in Poland, 65 per cent in both Finland and the UK, and 56 per cent in Sweden, compared to an average of 48 per cent of the 18–29 cohort in these countries. There is less variation in ‘solid supporter’ countries, and not much variation at all for those ‘nearer the fence’, where just about 28 per cent of individuals overall agree with NATO admitting Ukraine.

**Figure 6: Support for encouraging increased NATO military presence in Eastern Europe, by age group**



*Note:* Responses to question: Please say whether you agree or disagree with the following statement: [COUNTRY] should encourage NATO to increase its military presence in Eastern Europe. Figure 6 reports percentages of respondents in agreement, i.e. scoring 1 (strongly agree) or 2 (agree) on a five point scale ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree).

**Figure 7: Support for NATO admitting Ukraine as a member, by age group**



*Note:* Responses to question: Please say whether you agree or disagree with the following statement: NATO should admit Ukraine as a member. Figure 7 reports percentages of respondents in agreement, i.e. scoring 1 (strongly agree) or 2 (agree) on a five point scale ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree).

These differences suggest that if governments in the surveyed countries want to endorse either a strengthening of NATO's presence in eastern Europe or Ukraine's admittance into NATO, targeted communication for younger constituents will be needed. There could be less need to try and get older voters on board, as our data shows that, broadly, they already support these potential outcomes. In Sweden and the UK, for instance, there are majorities among respondents aged 60 and above who support both of the NATO policy options, while in the younger age groups (and in terms of the national average) this is a minority position. This difference is likely rooted in different socialization experiences before and after the end of the Cold War.

## **Policy recommendations**

While we find European publics united in wanting to assist Ukraine in the current conflict, the same cannot be said regarding support for changes within NATO. Despite the organization's secretary-general having announced an expansion of capabilities in eastern Europe, there is no widespread appetite for this except among members of the public in Poland and Estonia. Levels of support for the prospect of Ukraine joining the alliance are also low. It might therefore be wise to keep in mind that while the current conflict brings up questions about NATO's strategy and structure (including the fast-tracking of admittance for new members like Finland and Sweden), at least in the eyes of the public supporting the war in Ukraine is perceived as a goal in itself that does not necessarily translate into broader changes to existing security alliances.

Keeping a well-defined focus on the actual conflict is paramount, as time is a key factor to consider. It is not at all clear if the current levels of support that Ukraine receives from the US will continue after the next US presidential election. Furthermore, if the gap between the expectations audiences had for the Ukrainian counter-offensive and what it actually delivers is too great, we would expect public support for Ukraine in the conflict to weaken overall. Considering that current media frames are already moving in this direction, governments wishing to maintain high levels of support for Ukraine within their populations should consider targeting communications to reach groups we have found to be less supportive. This could include utilizing non-traditional media platforms to reach younger audiences, or members of populist right-wing parties or groupings.

## **Conclusion**

Our results show strong support for Ukraine, as Europeans favour policies that support the Ukrainian cause, while not supporting policies that would hinder the Ukrainian war effort, such as lifting sanctions on Russia. Publics across the continent are committed to taking a tough stance on Russia. Despite the cost-of-living crisis which is engulfing the European continent, we see only limited support for

lifting economic sanctions against Russia, or of wanting to pressure Ukraine into accepting territorial losses to shorten the duration of the war.

Majorities in states as varied as Germany, France, the UK, Estonia, Poland, Hungary, Finland, Sweden, Italy and Spain consider Russia responsible for the war. The three-tier ordering of support we find among countries of eastern, western and southern Europe can be observed consistently across different issues pertaining to the war in Ukraine, as can similarities and differences within these societies. Variation within and across countries tends to be moderate, and essentially always within the pro-Ukraine/anti-Russia camp. Even in countries where support for Ukraine is in general lower (Hungary and Italy), or among more sceptical groups (right-wing populists and younger populations) we typically find a majority or plurality supporting (national) policy positions that are favourable to Ukraine (or, at worst, we find only a small majority are pro-Russia). This pattern suggests that there is little space for political entrepreneurs to enter the political arena by exploiting an unmet demand for anti-Ukraine/pro-Russia foreign policy messages. Moreover, based on our polling, there would be little electoral reason for existing parties to adopt such positions (though strong cues from existing parties would likely be more successful than from new political entrepreneurs). Public support for pro-Ukraine policies in this military conflict appears to be dependable.

European domestic audiences are more divided regarding policy options for NATO. In some countries, majorities support both increasing NATO's presence in eastern Europe and Ukraine's admittance to NATO, while in others, majorities oppose these policies. Given the unanimity requirement for the admittance of new member states to the NATO alliance, this division suggests that Ukraine's bid for NATO membership is unlikely to be approved. Citizens' greater reluctance towards supporting NATO policy options may reflect perceptions that such steps may lead to a deeper involvement of their country in the Russia–Ukraine conflict, possibly including the deployment of soldiers, and the potential for a greater war. Looked at from this perspective, more substantial shifts in the strategic set-up are not likely to win public approval.

Although most of the world's population resides in countries that are either siding with Russia or remaining neutral,<sup>32</sup> and Ukraine's admittance to NATO seems unlikely, European citizens remain united in supporting the Ukrainian war effort. Failure to achieve military successes—including in the counter-offensive which began in mid-2023—could however undermine this support. If perceptions shift, and publics begin to question the chances of Ukrainian success, they might be less keen for their governments to provide assistance—the costs of warfare are more tolerable when citizens perceive benefits are being achieved.<sup>33</sup> This might be particularly problematic in countries like Germany where the public is more sceptical (and where long-held non-militarist and isolationist sentiments remain).<sup>34</sup>

<sup>32</sup> 'Who are Russia's supporters?'

<sup>33</sup> Gelpi, Feaver and Reifler, *Paying the human costs of war*.

<sup>34</sup> For evidence on the German public, for instance, see Matthias Mader and Harald Schoen, 'No *Zeitenwende* (yet): early assessment of German public opinion toward foreign and defense policy after Russia's invasion of Ukraine', *Politische Vierteljahresschrift* 64: 3, 2023, pp. 525–47, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11615-023-00463-5>.



Maintaining a united front is pivotal as European stances diverge on more specific issues, such as Germany's resistance to Hungary's rotational assumption of the EU Council presidency in late 2024<sup>35</sup> or Hungary holding Ukrainian prisoners of war who transferred from Russia without Ukrainian involvement.<sup>36</sup> More importantly, although thus far the US has played a war-defining role—having provided military equipment and training worth more than US\$33 billion to Ukraine<sup>37</sup>—Europe cannot rely on these levels of support going forward. Despite general public support for Ukraine in the conflict, some Republican lawmakers in the US are arguing for a reduction in support on the part of the Biden administration,<sup>38</sup> as have current Republican presidential front runners Donald Trump and Ron DeSantis.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Gregorio Sorgi, 'Germany questions Hungary's ability to hold EU's rotating presidency in 2024', *Politico*, 30 May 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/germany-hungary-viktor-orban-eu-presidency-democracy-backsliding>.

<sup>36</sup> 'Ukraine repatriates three POWs from Russia via Hungary', Reuters, 20 June 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/ukraine-repatriates-three-pows-russia-via-hungary-kyiv-2023-06-20>.

<sup>37</sup> 'Who are Russia's supporters?'

<sup>38</sup> Lexie Schapitl, 'Ukraine can't join NATO yet. But Biden says Zelenskyy is OK with that', NPR, 20 June 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/07/12/1187291581/biden-vilnius-ukraine-nato>.

<sup>39</sup> Applebaum and Goldberg, 'The counteroffensive'; Franco Ordoñez, 'Ron DeSantis says backing Ukraine is not in the U.S. interest, a sign of a GOP divided', NPR, 14 March 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/03/14/1163363579/desantis-trump-ukraine-republican-split>.