

What do Germans of Russian and Turkish migration background think about sanctions against Russia?

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Abstract

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has significant implications not only for foreign, defence, economic and energy policies of European democracies, but also for their societal cohesion. While the debates about sanctions against Russia are mainly structured along partisan lines, with supporters of far-left and far-right parties tending to be against harsh responses, we argue that also a specific migrant background and an ethnic identity matter for the position on this highly salient and polarizing issue. Using original survey data from Germany, we find that respondents with a Russian or a Turkish ethnic background are less in favour of sanctions against Russia. This finding remains robust when considering respondents' party preferences, education level, age, religious affiliation, and their region of residence, whether in Western or Eastern Germany. The results suggest that Russia's war against Ukraine is likely to create tensions not only between individuals with different ideological orientations, but can also result in conflicts between citizens with and without a Russian or Turkish migrant background or identity.

Keywords

Foreign policy attitudes, sanctions against Russia, Russian migrant background, Turkish migrant background, German politics

Introduction

The Russian invasion of Ukraine and the ongoing war have massively transformed political competition in Europe and beyond. Economic issues, energy policy and migration as well as foreign and defence policy have become central to political discourse, and sanctions against Russia or military support for Ukraine are highly contentious issues. In Germany, the socialist Left Party even split over questions of responsibility for the war, refugee migration and support for Ukraine (Wurthmann and Wagner, 2025). This change in the German party system is just one indication that the newly emerged conflicts about Russia and the war in Ukraine significantly reshaped voting behaviour and party competition. Across Europe, we notice that parties from the far left and far right tend to support Russia – or at least

oppose sanctions on Russia. In contrast, moderate parties tend to support Ukraine (by delivering weapons) and favour (strong) sanctions against Russia. Recent research shed light on voter positions along these conflict lines. Bøggild et al. (2024) show that citizens who are concerned about human rights and democracy tend to support Ukraine even if it compromises their economic self-interest.

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We do, however, know little about the deeper roots of these preferences, most importantly regarding migration and ethnic backgrounds of voters. This question is pressing, as positions in many domestic conflicts (e.g. about support of Israel or Ukraine) seem to be strongly influenced by ethnic loyalties of voters in increasingly diverse European societies. Moreover, there are strong indicators that ethnic and migration background matter for the support of a tough stance towards Russia. Individuals of Russian descent constitute a core voter clientele for the far-right ‘Alternative für Deutschland’ (AfD) in Germany (e.g. [Spies et al., 2023](#)). Along with the newly founded ‘Bündnis Sarah Wagenknecht’ (BSW), the AfD is the most vocal opponent of supporting Ukraine and sanctioning Russia. With their growing vote shares, AfD and BSW now manage to pressure established parties to reconsider their stances towards Russia and Ukraine. Recent policy counterfactuals suggest that sanctions may have large-scale effects, as stricter EU sanctions against Russia could have led to policy concessions by Putin’s regime ([Niemeier and Schneider, 2024](#)). Understanding the extent and determinants of support for sanctions against Russia is, hence, highly important.

We thus ask if a specific migrant background and/or ethnic identity of an individual is related to his/her position on the relationship with Russia. Specifically, we investigate whether Germans with a Russian or Turkish migrant background differ from individuals without a migrant background in their position on sanctions against Russia. Using original survey data from Germany, we find that respondents with a Russian but also with a Turkish migrant background express less support for sanctions against Russia. Interestingly, the support for sanctions is the lowest among respondents with a Turkish migrant background. These results are mostly consistent when using either the objective migrant background of respondents or their self-identification. Our results hold when accounting for political party affiliation, age, education, religious affiliation and residence in Western or Eastern Germany. Our findings are important for understanding the individual drivers of foreign policy attitudes in general and positions on the Russian invasion of Ukraine specifically.

Theoretical considerations

A migrant background shapes political attitudes through differences in socialization and identity ([Careja and Emmenegger, 2012](#); [Goerres et al., 2020](#)). Migrants experience dual socialization: exposure to values from their society of origin and the culture of their host country ([Maxwell, 2013](#)). These factors interact, sometimes reinforcing and other times conflicting with one another, shaping the attitudes of migrant background citizens ([Debus et al., 2024](#); [Voicu and Tufiş, 2017](#)). Migrants may retain values from their home country that prioritize collective

identity or national loyalty, which can influence their stance on foreign policy issues, like sanctions against another country. A migrant’s stance on sanctions may, therefore, reflect a blend of personal identification with their homeland and the host country’s prominent political position on these issues.

The specific socialization of migrants influences their political attitudes, leading to differences based on the country of origin, religious involvement and identity instead of a uniform effect for all migrants ([Dancygier and Saunders, 2006](#); [Debus et al., 2024](#)). Individuals with migrant backgrounds retain experiences and narratives from their country of origin, through which they perceive politics in their host country ([Voicu and Tufiş, 2017](#)). This filtering process is shaped by the migrant’s individual trajectory and community-level interactions within the host country. Migrants living in diasporic communities may experience reinforcing effects of their cultural and political norms through community networks and media consumption (e.g. [Christiansen, 2004](#)), particularly if their network consists of individuals with the same ethnic or migrant background ([Dancygier and Saunders, 2006](#)). When these networks align with the norms of the origin country, they can influence political attitudes, like opposition to sanctions against their homeland or countries with which they have cultural or political ties ([Dancygier, 2010](#)). Some diasporas are highly organized and connected with the politics and society of their country of origin. In these cases, the ethnic identity of migrants can be strengthened, combined with stronger political alignment with the ruling party in their country of origin ([Aksel, 2024](#); [Yener-Roderburg and Yetiş, 2024](#)). The cultural background of a migrant’s society of origin thus provides a constant frame of reference for their attitudes ([Careja and Emmenegger, 2012](#); [Goerres et al., 2020](#)), which is likely to affect their position on international affairs and associated policy measures, including sanctions.

While foreign policy attitudes of citizens with a migrant background have rarely been the explicit focus of researchers (but see [Abrajano and Alvarez, 2011](#)), the connection of immigrants to their country of origin shapes their attitudes towards this and similar countries ([Aydm, 2024](#); [Jakobson et al., 2023](#)). Generally, individuals with a migrant background likely hold positive attitudes towards their country of origin, translating into preferences for cooperative foreign policy.

Expectations

Mass migration has fundamentally transformed modern democratic societies in recent decades. This applies to Europe in general and to Germany in particular. Millions of so-called ‘guest workers’ from Southern Europe and Turkey have migrated to Germany since the 1960s. Also, between

1987 and 1999 about 1.5 million people moved from the Soviet Union and its successor states to Germany (Stricker, 1997). These migrants were considered ‘German resettlers’ (*Spätaussiedler*) as they were descendants of Germans who emigrated to the Russian Tsardom about 200 years earlier. We argue that the specific migrant background and, thus, the cultural background of the country of origin shape stances not only on issues that generally structure political competition like economic or societal issues (see Debus et al., 2024), but also issues in which countries of origin are (indirectly) involved. The position on Russia’s war against Ukraine and how third countries like Germany should react is such an issue that should be specifically relevant for individuals with a Russian migrant background.

The combination of the unique cultural background, personal connections and media consumption of Russian immigrants should strongly influence their attitudes towards sanctions against Russia. Russian migrants likely maintain strong familial or social ties with people living in Russia, making them more likely to view sanctions against Russia through a personal lens. This personal connection could increase empathy for those affected by sanctions, leading to opposition against such measures. These sentiments are probably also influenced by enduring cultural ties that many Russian migrants have with their country of origin, shaping their perceptions of sanctions as unjust.

The consumption of Russian state-controlled media and their propaganda likely further influences attitudes among Russian migrants. Individuals with a Russian migrant background might either directly consume Russian media or maintain contact with others who consume state propaganda, as indicated by their international media diet (Ryzhova, 2024). This exposure can increase pro-Russian sentiments, shaping views on the justification of sanctions. Russian propaganda portraying sanctions against Russia as unjust and Russia’s invasion of Ukraine as a legitimate reaction to Western aggression may particularly reach and influence individuals with Russian migrant backgrounds. Even in Ukraine, pro-Russian propaganda successfully strengthens pro-Russian beliefs and increases voting for pro-Russian candidates (Peisakhin and Rozenas, 2018). Ukrainians with ethnolinguistic ties to Russia are also more likely to believe pro-Kremlin misinformation (Erlich and Garner, 2023). These dynamics likely travel to people with a Russian migrant background in Germany leading to stronger pro-Russian attitudes and opposition towards sanctions against Russia. This may also explain the increased popularity of the right-wing and pro-Russian AfD among Russian-German voters (Spies et al., 2023), leading to the following hypothesis:

H1: Respondents with a Russian migrant background or Russian-German ethnic identity are less supportive of sanctions against Russia than respondents

with no migrant background or with a German ethnic identity.

The Turkish diaspora in Germany is highly organized through multiple organizations. Especially since 2003, the Turkish government initiated a series of diaspora engagement policies to strengthen regime support and Turkish nationalism abroad (Aksel, 2024). As a result, members of the Turkish diaspora in Germany retain strong social, cultural and political ties with Turkey (Yener-Roderburg and Yetiş, 2024) and a strong Turkish ethnic identity (Jakobson et al., 2023). This diaspora engagement leads to a high prevalence of Turkish nationalism and anti-Western attitudes among Turkish migrants in Germany (Aydın, 2024). In turn, the Turkish president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his ruling party, frequently criticizing German decision-makers, enjoy significant support among Turkish immigrants in Germany (Jakobson et al., 2023). Similar to Russian migrants, consuming Turkish (state) media may further influence the attitudes of Turkish migrants in Germany towards the stances of the Turkish government (Yıldırım et al., 2021).

Complementing general anti-Western sentiment, Erdoğan also pursues a more conciliatory approach towards Russia, maintaining positive relations (Bechev, 2022). As many members of the Turkish diaspora in Germany support Erdoğan, this may shape positive views on Russia and, coupled with the prevalence of anti-Western attitudes, translate into an opposition towards sanctions against Russia.

The experiences of Turkish migrants in Germany may further shape their attitudes towards sanctions, specifically considering that many Turkish migrants in Germany are Muslims. Muslims who experience discrimination are more likely to develop anti-system attitudes and exhibit lower support for democracy (Grewal and Hamid, 2024). Experiencing discrimination can also make members of a diaspora more receptive to populist-nationalist influence from their homeland (Arkilic, 2021). In Germany where over half of Muslims experience discrimination (Grewal and Hamid, 2024), this can lead to opposition against policies seen as representing Western politics, including sanctions against Russia.

Geopolitically, Turkish migrants may perceive Russia more favourably due to its involvement in conflicts aligning with Turkish nationalist interests. Russia’s military actions have often been directed against groups, such as Kurdish factions in Syria and Iraq, who are considered outgroups by many Turks in the German Diaspora (Jakobson et al., 2023). This may lead to perceived alignment with Russia’s geopolitical stance (Tokdemir, 2021), leading Turkish migrants to view sanctions against Russia as counterproductive. On that basis, we develop the following hypothesis:

H2: Respondents with a Turkish migrant background or Turkish ethnic identity are less supportive of sanctions

against Russia than respondents with no migrant background or a German ethnic identity.

Data and methods

We use individual-level data from the survey ‘Societal Conflicts and Dynamics of Party Competition in Migration and Integration Policy’ (MigRep),¹ fielded between 14th September 2022 and 11th February 2023.² The survey has 2228 total respondents, 2024 of which stated their migrant background. Out of these, 1022 (50.5%) reported having no migrant background, 389 (19.2%) reported Russian migrant background, 348 (17.2%) reported Turkish migrant background and 265 (13.1%) reported having a migrant background other than Russian or Turkish. These first three groups are sufficiently large to draw inferences on their policy preferences. Additionally, the survey covers the subjective ethnic identity of respondents. This allows for taking their subjective group belonging into account when analysing their preferences. 1446 respondents (72.5%) consider themselves Germans, while 53 (2.7%) and 45 (2.3%) consider themselves Turks or Russians, respectively. Further, 98 respondents (4.9%) consider themselves Russian-Germans, 22 (1.1%) identify as Jewish and 44 (2.2%) as Muslims. 171 (8.6%) individuals reported a different identity than the ones mentioned, for example, they identify as Kurds or Blacks, while 115 (5.8%) stated having another, not explicitly mentioned, ethnic identity.

Our main dependent variable is a respondent’s support for sanctions against Russia measured on an 11-point scale with higher values indicating stronger support (see the appendix for more details on the survey question and [Figures A1 and A2](#) for descriptive statistics). As explanatory variables, we use the respondent’s migrant background and their self-identification, as explained above. We control for gender, age, education, whether a respondent lives in East or West Germany and if she/he has German citizenship or not. Furthermore, we include the self-reported likelihood of voting for the AfD, the Greens and the socialist Left Party. These parties represented very different positions on sanctions against Russia when the survey was conducted, with the Greens strongly favouring sanctions while the AfD and the Left strongly opposed sanctions.³ These factors are important for explaining the positions of Germans with and without a migrant history on several issues, including foreign and defence policy ([Debus et al., 2024](#); [Isernia et al., 2024](#)). To estimate the effect of migrant background on support for sanctions against Russia, we run OLS regression models, using either the objective migrant background or self-identification as the independent variable with no migrant background or German self-identification as a

baseline. The complete regression results are provided in the appendix in [Table A1](#).

Results

[Figure 1](#) shows – based on model 1 in [Table A1](#) – the predicted support of a respondent for sanctions against Russia, depending on their objective migrant background. Both Russian and Turkish migration backgrounds are associated with significantly lower support for sanctions against Russia, compared to respondents without a history of migration. Respondents with another migrant background do not differ systematically from individuals without a migrant background regarding their support for sanctions. Most striking is that a Turkish migrant background is associated with the lowest support for sanctions against Russia, even significantly lower than for respondents with a Russian migrant background. While the difference between respondents with no migrant background and those with a Russian migrant background regarding their support for sanctions is about 0.6 points on an 11-point scale, the support of those with a Turkish migrant background is more than 1.5 points lower than for respondents without a migrant background. Thus, on average individuals without a migrant background are slightly in favour of sanctions, whereas individuals with a Turkish migrant background slightly oppose these sanctions.

A similar pattern emerges when analysing the effect of self-identification instead of objective migrant background, as shown in [Figure 2](#). Respondents identifying as Turkish or Muslim have the lowest support for sanctions against Russia, both more than 2 points lower than those identifying as German. For Russian-German and Russian self-identification, the point-estimate of support for sanctions is about 0.7 points lower than for those identifying as German. This difference is, however, only significant for those identifying as Russian-German, which might be related to the lower sample size for those identifying as Russians. Unfortunately, and because of the sample size, we cannot dig deeper into the differences in the political attitudes and their origins between individuals with a Russian and a Russian-German background.

We additionally explore whether the effect of objective migrant background or subjective ethnic identity on support for sanctions against Russia is moderated by age, party vote propensity or residency in East or West Germany. As can be seen in [Tables A2–A4](#) and [Figures A3–A4](#) in the appendix, while age slightly influences the effect of some objective migrant backgrounds, the other variables do not significantly moderate our relationship of interest. The observation that respondents with a Turkish migrant background show even lower support for sanctions against Russia than those with a Russian migrant background seems puzzling at first. There are, however,

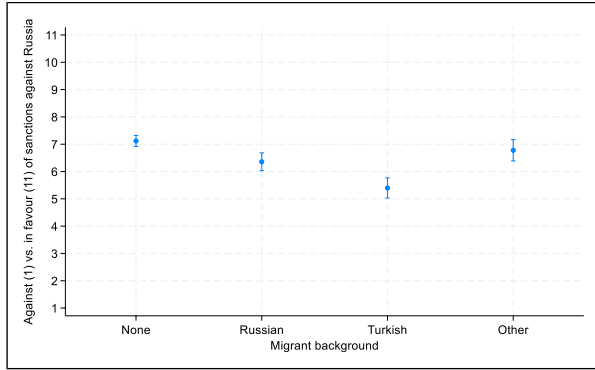


Figure 1. Predicted support for sanctions against Russia based on objective migrant background. Comment: Predicted values based on model 1 in Table A1 in the appendix. Bars indicate the 95% confidence intervals (CI).

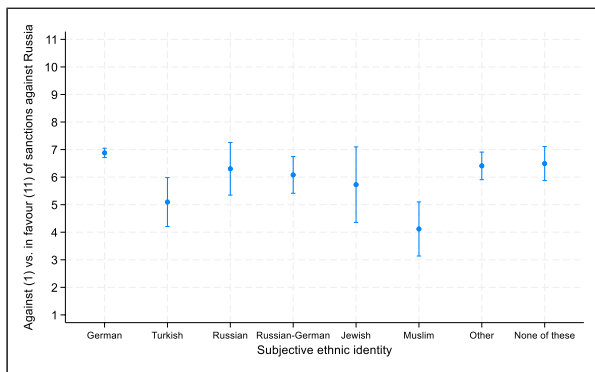


Figure 2. Predicted support for sanctions against Russia based on subjective ethnic identity. Comment: Predicted values based on model 2 in Table A1 in the appendix. Bars indicate the 95% CIs.

possible explanations. Individuals with a Russian migrant background and/or their relatives and friends likely had first-hand experiences with oppressive aspects of the Russian authoritarian regime. This may induce some scepticism towards said regime among some individuals with a Russian migrant background. This is not the case for those with a Turkish migrant background who are less likely to experience oppression by the Russian regime. Those with a Turkish migrant background may also have more discriminatory experiences in their daily lives than those with Russian migrant background, leading to stronger anti-system attitudes, translating into opposition towards policies implemented by the German government (Grewal and Hamid, 2024). Furthermore, critical positions towards Western liberal democracies, which are often communicated in Turkish media, strongly aligned with Erdoğan’s positions (Yıldırım et al., 2021), might positively influence the attitudes about Russia of individuals with a Turkish background in general and their

foreign policy preferences in particular. The Turkish government is also actively attempting to broker a peaceful solution to the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Al Jazeera, 2024). It is therefore plausible that Germans with a Turkish identity or migrant background, who show high electoral support for the nationalist and authoritarian political style of the Turkish president Erdoğan (e.g. Yener-Roderburg and Yetiş, 2024), are, on average, more sceptical of sanctions against Ukraine.

Conclusion

In this contribution, we investigated whether Germans with a Russian or Turkish migrant background or ethnic identity express lower support for sanctions against Russia than those without a migrant background. We argued that personal connections to Russia, alongside differences in socialization and media consumption, lead to different stances towards sanctions against Russia among immigrant-origin citizens in Germany. We found that respondents with both Russian and Turkish migrant backgrounds are less supportive of sanctions against Russia, compared to respondents without a migrant background or a German ethnic identity. Furthermore, we observe significantly lower support for sanctions among respondents with a Turkish than with a Russian background. These results are mostly consistent when using either objective migrant background or subjective self-identification and are robust to the inclusion of several covariates, like party alignment, age, education or religious affiliation.

These results suggest that the war of Russia against Ukraine is likely to create tension not only beyond ideological lines, but also leading to conflicts between German citizens with and without a Russian or Turkish background. Given that the relationship between immigrant-origin citizens and those without a migrant background is already difficult due to widespread experiences of discrimination (e.g. Grewal and Hamid, 2024), this new line of disagreement is likely to intensify this tense relationship further, negatively affecting societal cohesion. Future research should dive deeper into explaining the mechanisms behind the opposition of migrant-origin citizens in Germany towards sanctions against Russia and the support for Ukraine, especially those with Turkish migrant backgrounds. Here, central points of investigation could be the effects of the consumption of Russian and Turkish (state) media on political attitudes in general and foreign policy in particular. In addition, differentiating in more detail between individuals with a Russian and a Russian-German migrant background seems worthwhile because their motivations to migrate from Russia likely differ, which should affect their positions on Russia’s invasion into Ukraine and how Western states should react. Such research should ideally be based on panel data that covers a larger number of respondents with the

respective migrant background than the data we used for answering our research question.

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Supplemental Material

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Notes

1. See <https://www.dezim-institut.de/en/projects/project-detail/social-conflicts-and-dynamics-of-party-competition-in-migration-and-integration-policy-migrep-7-12/> and the appendix for more information.
2. The relatively long field time the survey is not optimal, because the views of individuals, in particular in the case of a highly dynamic issue like international crises, can change over time. There is, however, to the best of our knowledge no other data available that allows for analysing positions of specific migrant groups on the actions Germany should undertake against Russia in the context of Russia's war against Ukraine.
3. The BSW was founded as a party in January 2024 and is thus not covered in the survey.

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