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A missing link? Maintaining support for the European polity after the Russian invasion of Ukraine

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ABSTRACT

Recent research argues that external threats like war spur EU polity formation (Kelemen & McNamara, 2022). One key mechanism of this process is public support for policy responses designed by policymakers. However, like the ‘rally-round-the-flag’ effect (Mueller, 1970), public support wanes over time and we decompose this decrease into two elements: salience and polarisation at the domestic level for national and European policies in both soft and hard security (aid and sanctions). We show that while salience can sustain public support for European policy innovations, polarisation about national and (unexpectedly) European policies accelerates its decline. We thus qualify the story of EU polity formation through external security crises.

KEYWORDS Public support; EU polity formation; external security threat; Russian invasion of Ukraine

Introduction

Recent debates on European polity formation have stressed the security logic as a key determinant of policy and polity centralisation in Europe (Kelemen & McNamara, 2022). This literature has its roots in the state formation literature according to which ‘war made the state and the state made war’, to cite the classic words of Tilly (1990). Arguably, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has brought such a crucial threat on the European Union’s doorstep. While the EU is not directly at war, it is indirectly actively involved on one side, supplying weapons and aid to Ukraine, imposing sanctions on Russia, and facing

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direct security threats in terms of energy supply, among others (McNamara & Kelemen, 2022). It is for these reasons that EU member states are increasing military spending and the EU is coordinating foreign policy to a greater degree. These actions at the elite level (supply side), spurred by the war, depend crucially on sustained support from the population (demand side), as the public can tie or free policy-makers' hands on these key policy domains of previously low EU competence. For these reasons, we consider it crucial to study whether there is broad public support behind these policy innovations.

While examining the long causal chain between the external threat and polity formation goes beyond the scope of this paper, we start from the post-functional idea that one key mechanism in this process is public support for policies implemented by European leaders (Hooghe & Marks, 2009). Studies of political behaviour show that exceptional circumstances and major crises (Altiparmakis et al., 2021; Baker & Oneal, 2001; Bol et al., 2021; Mueller, 1970, 1973; Schraff, 2021; Steiner et al., 2023) give rise to such moments of unity in which a majority of citizens show increased levels of political support, which then wanes over time as consensus over policy innovations fades away. Such a fading effect has two crucial components (Johansson et al., 2021): *salience* and *polarisation*. Public support varies with both the saliency and the polarisation of a crisis. Initially, as political divides are momentarily surpassed, such moments can prove crucial for successful collective action. A 'rally-round-the-flag' gives policymakers leeway to push through difficult decisions and, as such, offers a fertile ground for increasing policy capacities and, consequently, further build the polity. But as time passes by, public support fades away and it is crucial to understand why to shed light on the public constraint that policymakers face when taking innovative decisions.

Given these insights, the aim of our paper is to explore how the various components of support operate in Europe in light of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. As such, our first contribution is to study public support not only at the domestic level of member states but also at the European level. If the external threat is to be consequential for European polity formation, it is important to understand whether citizens show levels of exceptional political support not only for their government but also for the EU and around European joint solutions. For both national and EU responses, our second contribution is to study public support around two sets of policies, 'soft security', i.e., humanitarian aid, and 'hard security', i.e., sanctions. This allows us to examine whether the dynamics of support work in a similar fashion across policy domains.¹ Finally, our third contribution is to inquire into the temporal

¹We study other key aspects of hard security and polity building like preferences for a European army in other articles.

dynamics of support by asking whether and to what extent does support fade away and which of its two components, salience or polarisation, stand behind this.

To shed light on support during the Russian invasion of Ukraine and its impact on Europe, our article proceeds in four steps. First, we leverage the literature on decrease in the rally-round-the-flag and derive hypotheses. We stress that, like support, the rally effect has two components, salience and polarisation (Johansson et al., 2021), and that depending on which element prevails, public support will pan out differently. Second, we describe the data we generated in a two-wave original panel survey. Third, we perform a static and a dynamic analysis of our data, shedding light on what determines the level and changes in public support. We find that while salience has a small positive effect, polarisation between voters of different parties and between supporters and opponents of governments increases for both the national *and* European policies. Finally, we also map country differences, which could be important due to benchmarking (De Vries, 2018). The last section concludes by drawing the implications of these findings, the most problematic one being that, on top of national partisan divides, we find polarisation for the EU policies as well as an additional conflict line. This leads us to qualify the security logic proposed by Kelemen and McNamara (2022).

Salience, polarisation and the dynamics of support across levels of the EU polity

Studies of political behaviour show that exceptional circumstances and major crises (Mueller, 1970, 1973; Waltz, 1967) give rise to moments of unity in which a majority of citizens show increased levels of political support for incumbents or their policies. This public support is an important link in how threats impact polities by offering policymakers the leeway needed to push through difficult decisions and surpassing political divides. Such an effect has two crucial components (Johansson et al., 2021): *salience* and *polarisation*. Public support increases both when the salient crisis draws the attention of the public to the issue at stake but also when support becomes cross-cutting across political divides (low polarisation). The canonical example of when crises trigger an increase in public support are the 9/11 attacks in the United States which boosted George W. Bush's ratings from around 51 to more than 88%. It took around 2 years for this effect to disappear (for George Bush senior, the war on Saddam Hussein translated into a 1-year boost). The effect of COVID on incumbents' popularity was estimated (Bol et al., 2021; Schraff, 2021) but it varied widely between countries, especially in Europe. For instance, the rally effect boosted Austrian incumbents but not French ones (Kritzinger et al., 2021).

Starting from the recent debates on European polity formation that have stressed the security logic as a potential driver of EU polity building (Kelemen & McNamara, 2022), we expect that in the case of the Russian invasion of Ukraine public support would increase and then decrease not only for national level policies, surrounding incumbent governments, but also for EU-level policies. It is worth mentioning at this point that while some studies of public support during crises use government approval ratings or measures of diffuse support (such as trust in government) as the dependent variable, in this study we follow the approach of Altiparmakis et al. (2021) who use policy satisfaction in specific issue domains: in our case either hard (e.g., sanctions) or soft (e.g., humanitarian aid) security policies. Satisfaction with what governments and the EU do is indicative of such a rally because if in 'normal times' politics, political groups usually hold divergent views on political issues, in crisis politics an overwhelming majority of public opinion tends to support the incumbent policies (Altiparmakis et al., 2021). Additionally, such an approach is crucial for our study as it enables the direct comparison of public support both across policy levels (EU vs. national) and policy domains (hard vs. soft).

Our comparison across policy domains is guided by the aim of examining whether the dynamics of public support work similarly for hard versus soft security. Because the Russian invasion of Ukraine triggered many policy reactions, public support is hard to observe in general for all policies at the same time. However, we can see how support varies between policy domains: arguably, support is easy to maintain in terms of soft policies like humanitarian action which is always welcome by the public and incurs no personal costs. By contrast, hard policies like sanctions can invite retaliation that entails costs for the public (e.g., cuts in energy supplies driving prices up). Consequently, the public could become more divided quicker, especially between 'doves' and 'hawks'. Given these considerations, rather than having specific hypotheses for each of these domains, our cross-domain analysis can be viewed as a robustness check on whether public support travels across policy domains.

Taking as a departure point the two components of public support, salience and polarisation, we aim to inquire both into what characterises public support across levels and policies through a static analysis, but also what drives its temporal dynamics. When it comes to the dynamics of public support, both salience and polarisation are likely to experience changes throughout the crisis situation. For example, the public might lose interest over time as the exceptional becomes common, or the new issues at stake can become more divisive as political parties begin to position themselves more clearly in the debates over time. Consequently, public support is likely to fade away over time and hence reduce the 'grace period' given to policymakers.

H1: Average satisfaction for both government and EU policies declines as the crisis progresses.

Beyond this, we argue that the reason behind the eventual fading of public support is crucial. If the source of the decline is political polarisation, i.e., voters start diverging on their support for policy along the lines of previous political divides (partisan, ideological or identitarian), polity formation and centralisation may lose steam. As a result, policymaking can become more risk-averse, as the probability of losing the next elections becomes higher and as opposition policymakers can block certain policies knowing that they can obtain backing from a divisive electorate. Such prudent governments might avoid any quantum leaps that may lead to political backlash. Political polarisation in the wake of a shock may also create taboos and trigger an *omertà* around truly desirable polity solutions. Consider for instance how the botched response to the Euro Area crisis has put on hold any real discussions of a common budget and debt at the European level (until the COVID crisis) and created many spatial conflicts between northern and southern Europe (Matthijs & McNamara, 2015, to name but a few). Polarisation in the wake of a crisis as public support fades can thus have serious consequences for polity building.

We measure polarisation at the national level through left–right self-placement as well as voting intention (for incumbents or opposition). At the EU level we measure polarisation through views on EU integration. Higher individual level differences across these measures indicate higher polarisation. The rationale is straightforward: individual differences aggregate up to societal differences. If, for example, we observe a large effect size of left-wing compared to right-wing voters, this implies large differences between these groups and thus higher polarisation in society.

By contrast, if the source of an eventual decline of public support is reduced salience, then the fading can arguably be more benign. On the one hand, one can argue that other items make it onto the agenda and the momentum around polity politics runs out of steam. On the other, fading public support due to reduced salience is unlikely to spur a legitimacy crisis for policymakers, contrary to polarisation. Thus reduced salience without increased polarisation might shift the public's gaze to other issues, but it would not close the window on tough political decisions in terms of the crisis at hand.

At the national level, we hypothesise that since the member states' governments have more competences on both hard and soft security, and since they are more visible to audiences, ideological and political polarisation plays a more crucial role in determining levels of policy satisfaction. Dynamically, on the national level, we also hypothesise that polarisation may accelerate the decline of public support because even if satisfaction from

incumbents drops a bit, satisfaction in the opposition is more likely to drop more sharply (Altiparmakis et al., 2021).

H2a: At the national level, polarisation has a stronger effect on average levels of policy satisfaction than salience.

H2b: At the national level, polarisation has a stronger effect on changes in policy satisfaction than salience.

On the EU Level, by contrast, we expect less partisan polarisation because the EU's centre is not necessarily seen in terms of partisan conflict but rather through the lens of territorial conflict: governments have different approaches to policy challenges and often clash on their preferred policy solutions. Examples of this territorial logic abound: from the Euro Area to the COVID crises, North and South have debated vehemently the pros and cons of common debt. In the refugee crisis, Central European countries refused quotas proposed by the Commission and backed by Germany. This is the key characteristic of the EU's weak centre, weak opposition, diffuse responsibilities and low visibility (Middelaar 2019), which the polity perspective of the EU also stresses (Alexander-Shaw et al., 2023; Ferrera et al., 2023): in the EU's 'weak centre', partisan conflict and polarisation is not uploaded to the centre, thus preventing policy making from being deadlocked, like in the USA for instance. Rather, we expect salience to have a positive effect mostly at the EU level. It is plausible that the seriousness of the threat increases public support due to salience effects. Schraff for instance suggests that higher levels of COVID infections impacted public support (Schraff, 2021). The same logic can be applied to external events and war in particular: a war that happens on our doorstep will have a lower impact than if the belligerent targets our territory directly. Additionally, we expect salience to also play the most important role in terms of the dynamics of the rally at the EU level. As the public loses interest over time, it is less satisfied with exceptional solutions at the EU level (vs. standard solutions at the national level).

H3a: At the EU level, salience has a stronger effect on average levels of policy satisfaction than polarisation.

H3b: At the EU level, salience has a stronger effect on changes in policy satisfaction than polarisation.

Summarising, we argue that public support is important to study for the European Union in times of crisis because it can be a decisive mechanism: at a critical juncture, it can tip the balance between crisis as a force for change or into a force cementing the status quo (Bol et al., 2021). Indeed, governments having satisfied publics can feel more confident at the negotiation table. If support fades quite quickly due to polarisation, political manoeuvring lacks legitimacy. Therefore, we argue, the bellicist approach to polity formation can overlook the various forces that shape policy responses during a crisis and ultimately impact polity formation.

Data and context

This study uses data from an original two-wave panel survey conducted in five European countries (Germany, France, Italy, Poland, Hungary) with a variety of geopolitical contexts, centrality within the EU, and political discourse related to sanctions. Interviews were administered in March and July 2022 on national representative samples. While our data does not allow us to study the extent of a rally-around-the-flag between the start of the invasion on February 24 and the launch of our survey on March 11, a host of Eurobarometer data indicates that such a rally did indeed happen (see Figure 8 in the Online Appendix). Between December and April, the Eurobarometer (EB042EP, 2022) reports a 3% increase in people reporting a positive image of the EU coupled with a 2% decrease in people reporting a negative image. These changes bring the gap between the positive and negative views to 40%, which is the largest gap on record. Additionally, Figure 9 in the Online Appendix shows similar evidence comparing our data² with that from a previous survey that we conducted in December of 2021. The figure shows that support for EU integration went up in the month after the war started, compared to December 2021, and that it later goes down (beyond the initial baseline) in July 2022. On the one hand, we know that support for EU integration is strongly linked to satisfaction with war-related policies (see Table 2 in the Appendix), which makes sense given that war-related policies were the most salient topics in EU politics at the time and thus most likely to be directly linked to any change in attitudes. On the other hand, such pre-war data, the best that we have given that it is impossible to measure satisfaction with policies that did not exist at the time, will need to remain an imperfect measure of the rise and fall of support over time. More importantly, the panel structure and the timing of our survey are most suitable for studying the dynamics of public support and its components (salience and polarisation) at both the aggregate and individual levels as the crisis progressed.

Figure 1 shows the main dependent variables that we use to measure public support, namely satisfaction with policies related to the war in Ukraine. Satisfaction was measured at both the national and EU level, for humanitarian aid and for sanctions against Russia.

Figure 2 shows the average support, by country, for policies to increase humanitarian aid and sanctions. Importantly, satisfaction, our main dependent variable, does not tell us the reason for satisfaction (or dissatisfaction). Support for increasing aid or sanctions (measured only in our second survey) shows a very wide agreement among respondents to increase both aid and sanctions. Lack of support in Hungary for sanctions is an exception.

²We show a comparison of views on European integration as a comparable indicator across the different surveys.

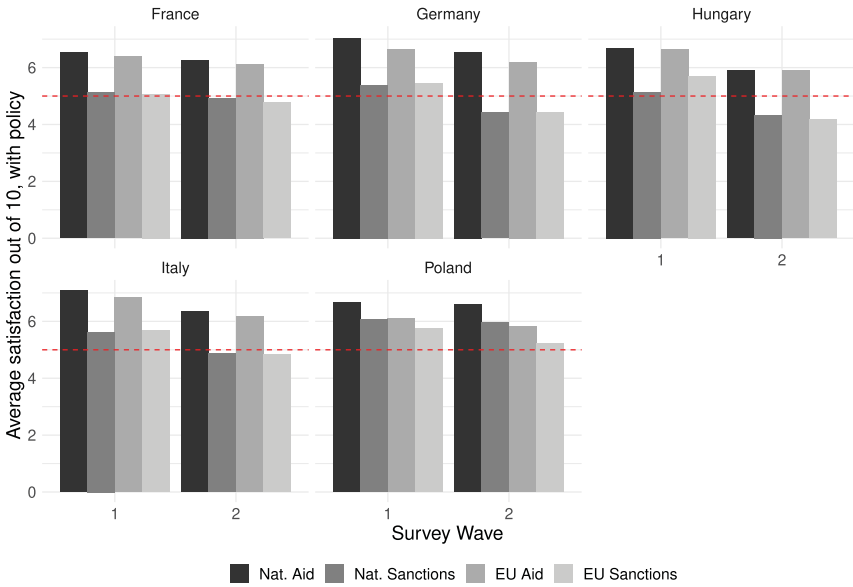


Figure 1. Dependent variables: Satisfaction with policies across waves and countries.

The very high support in Poland for increasing sanctions suggests that the small decrease in satisfaction with sanctions may be due to respondents believing sanctions need to be increased.

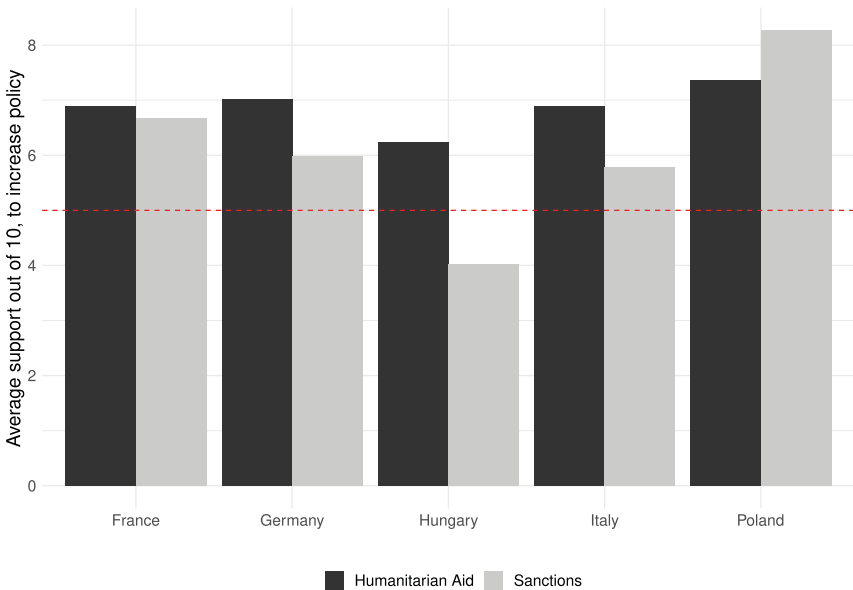


Figure 2. Support for policies across countries, second wave.

We measure salience by asking respondents to pick the most important threat to the EU from a list of eight crises (Dennison, 2019; Wlezien, 2005). In the first wave of the survey, 32.3% of respondents consider the war in Ukraine as the most important threat, which decreases to 27.8% in the second wave. We also asked respondents to pick the second most important threat. A further 21% considered the war to be the second most important threat, which remained stable across the two waves. We therefore consider the war to be extremely salient for respondents during the entire period, with a small decrease in salience. Given how dominant the war was in all national and international media in the beginning of the Russian invasion, and the relative dominance of other topics (such as inflation and energy prices) during our second wave, we would have expected a much larger decrease in salience. We measure polarisation based on ideology (Hegewald & Schraff, 2022; Johansson et al., 2021) and party affiliation (Cardenal et al., 2021; Kritzinger et al., 2021) in a similar vein to a host of other literature. We acknowledge that there are many possible measures for polarisation. We choose these since they are straightforward and comparable.

Results

Static analysis

We plot all our coefficients for satisfaction with each policy (humanitarian aid and sanctions) and the two levels (EU and national) in Figure 3. All coefficients

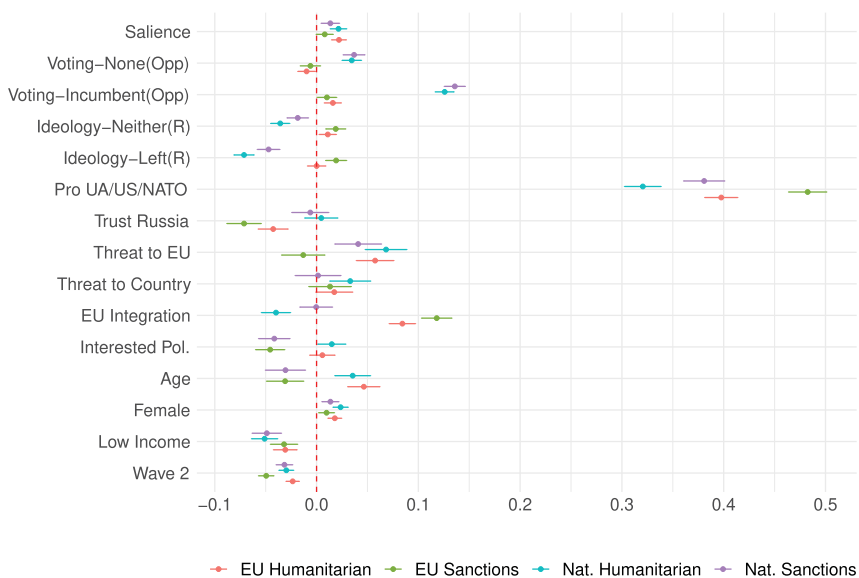


Figure 3. Static analysis.

are scaled 0 to 1, therefore all effects can be interpreted as maximum effects of predictors on the dependent variable scaled 0 to 1. The models contains country fixed effects (not shown) and a wave fixed effect.

We see the strongest effects from predictors about attitudes towards the war. The maximum effect of being pro-Ukraine/United States/NATO increases satisfaction with EU sanctions by about half of its total range.

Surprisingly, we see a very small, although statistically significant, effect of salience on all four outcomes. This suggests that salience is not a driving factor of public support. We see a slightly stronger effect for a related measure, the extent to which respondents think the war is a threat to the EU (significant for all except sanctions at the EU level), while threat to the country of the respondent does not appear to be relevant.

We see more evidence for the importance of both national-level and EU-level polarisations. At the national level, we see those who intend to vote for incumbents much more satisfied with national-level policies (compared to opposition voters) and to a lesser degree those who do not intend to vote also more satisfied than opposition voters. Left-wing voters, and to a lesser degree the ideologically unaffiliated, are more dissatisfied with national-level aid and sanctions compared to right-wing voters, and slightly more satisfied with EU-level sanctions.

At the EU level, polarisation as measured by support for European integration, strongly positively predicts satisfaction with EU level policies, and is more weakly negatively associated with satisfaction with national humanitarian aid.

Therefore, our static analysis lends more weight to the importance of polarisation at both the EU and National levels, compared to salience.

We further break down the effect of national-level polarisation in [Figure 4](#), which shows the predicted values for ideology by country for satisfaction with sanctions at the national and EU levels.

We first look at the effect of ideology at the national level, on the left side of the figure. We see ideological effects that are much stronger for Hungary and Poland compared to the other countries. Hungary in particular shows the greatest divide between left-wing voters and the other two categories, as well as between opposition and incumbent voters (much of the opposition in Hungary is left-wing). Incumbent voters are more satisfied with government policy across countries. We further explore this effect in the dynamic analysis. We see a similar picture at the EU level where national polarisation is stronger in Poland and Hungary. Poland in particular seems much less satisfied with EU sanctions, likely due to believing that they are not enough. The right wing and the incumbents are also much less satisfied with both EU-level policies. This is contrary to most other EU countries where incumbent voters are more likely to be satisfied with the EU.

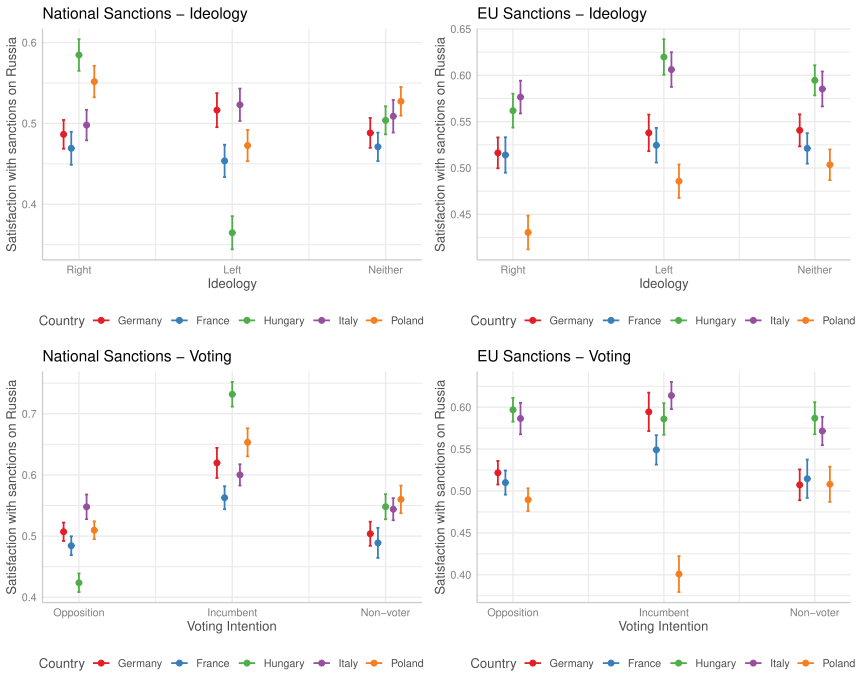


Figure 4. Predicted values – ideology and voting by country.

We now turn to the time dimension of public support. The significant negative coefficient for our wave dummy tells us that there is a small decrease, more so for sanctions at the EU level. Figure 5 further investigates this by plotting an interaction between the wave dummy and our national polarisation indicators, voting and ideology.

We see a decrease in satisfaction across all groups in the second wave. We observe that ideology becomes less polarising at the national level, as right-wing and ideologically unaffiliated respondents come closer to the views of the left-wing. At the EU level ideology becomes more polarising as the right wing becomes more dissatisfied than the other two groups. Voting polarisation maintains the same dynamic in both waves.

Finally, we look closer at the effect of salience across time. We hypothesised that salience would be a stronger driver of satisfaction in the first wave of our survey. Figure 6 shows instead that across the waves individuals who perceive more salience (blue line) and not statistically significantly different from those who do not view the crisis as salient (blue lines).

Dynamic analysis

The static part of our analysis focused on the absolute level of satisfaction in the two waves. We now turn to the dynamic part of our analysis in an

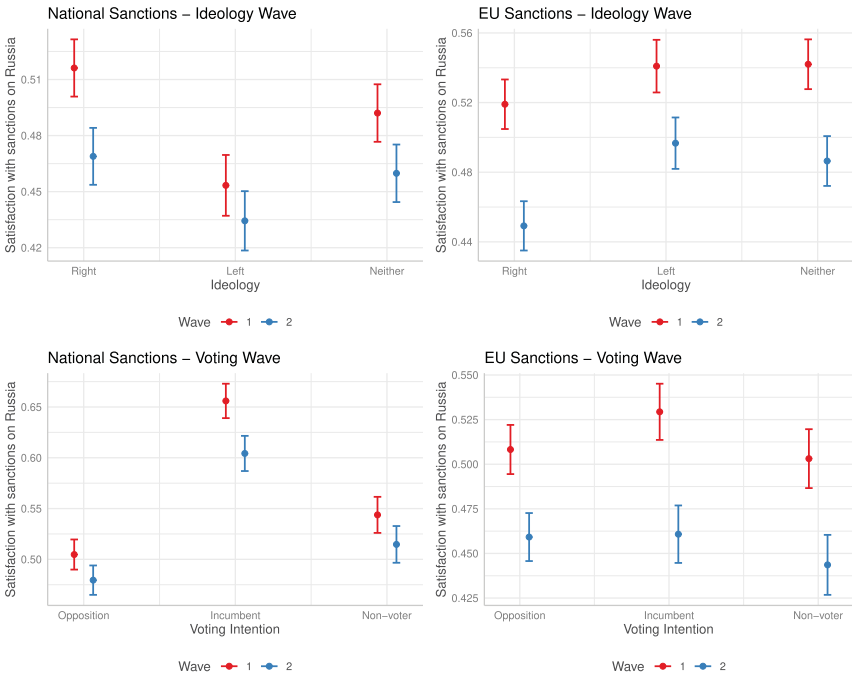


Figure 5. Predicted values – ideology and voting by wave.

attempt to understand how the views of individuals changed over the period.

In our dynamic model, we take the difference of satisfaction as our dependent variable (positive values indicate that individuals increased their

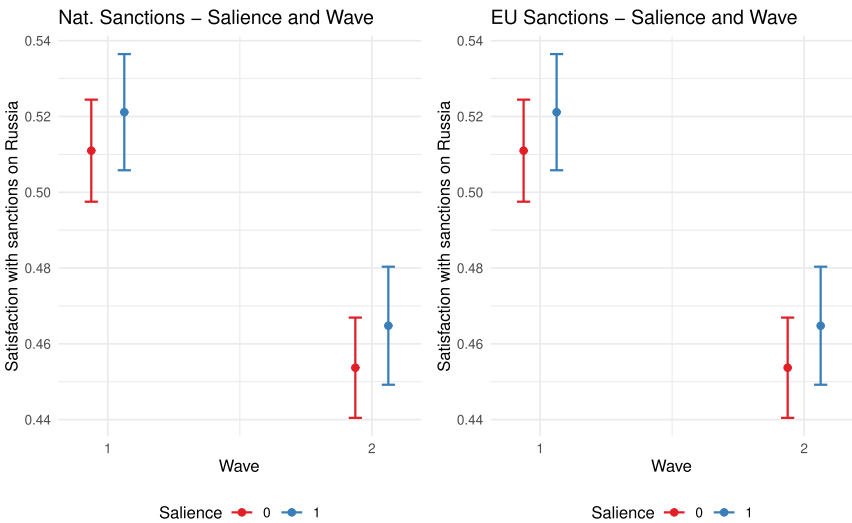


Figure 6. Predicted values – salience by wave.

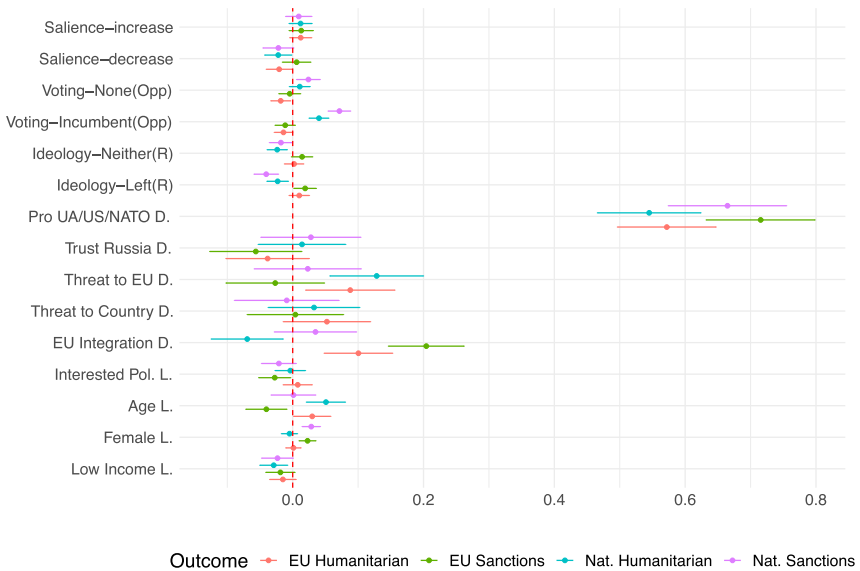


Figure 7. Analysis of change.

satisfaction across the two waves, negative that they decreased). We then take both the difference of our predictors, as well as their level in the first wave. [Figure 7](#) plots the results of the model. For ease of interpretation, we remove the coefficients for the levels of the time-varying variables and leave only the difference. Again we see the strongest effect to be support for Ukraine/US/NATO. Becoming more pro-NATO is associated with becoming more satisfied with all policies.

Turning to our coefficients of interest, we see that changes in salience are not related to changes in satisfaction. Instead, we see again the relative importance of polarisation factors. Incumbent voters, on top of being more satisfied to begin with, are also more likely to become more satisfied with national-level policies as the crisis moves on. Interestingly, left-wing respondents, who were initially less satisfied with government policy, are even more likely to become further dissatisfied. This confirms the results of our static analysis, showing the increased polarisation over time.

We also see the confirmation of the effect of polarisation at the EU level. Respondents who became more pro-EU integration were more likely to be satisfied with sanctions and aid at the EU level, and less satisfied with aid at the national level. The effects are substantively important, the full effect of becoming more pro-EU integration is a 0.2 increase in satisfaction on the 0 to 1 scale.

Our dynamic analysis results are corroborated by an individual fixed effects model shown in [Table 2](#) in the Appendix. Modelling only the within-individual

variation we see that salience has a negligible impact only on aid, whereas polarisation is predictive at both the EU and national levels, across policies.

Our dynamic analysis confirms the importance of polarisation for the change in satisfaction. It, however, does not tell us whether this effect is symmetric or not for increases and decreases in satisfaction. Figures 11 and 12 break down these effects by whether respondents increase or decrease satisfaction. For the national level, we see that voting for incumbents has a stronger positive effect in increasing satisfaction and a smaller negative effect in decreasing satisfaction while left-wing ideology has a larger negative effect for increasing satisfaction and a smaller positive effect for decreasing satisfaction. At the EU level, we see that views on European integration have a symmetric effect.

Discussion and conclusion

This article studies the dynamics of public support for European policies in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Our contributions are to show how different elements of public support (salience and polarisation) vary at the national and *European* levels in two policy fields (soft and hard security). We link public support to the literature on external crises which predicts that the greater the external threat, the greater the satisfaction with security policies, and thus the greater the pressure for polity formation (Kelemen & McNamara, 2022).

We suggest that the causal chain from external threat to polity formation is long and that public support is one of its key links: as public support can either enable polity formation if it is sustained, or block it if it is short-lived and triggers further polarisation. Our findings thus qualify the thesis that external threats and the security logic lead to polity formation, and that as a result Europe will likely integrate more in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. We have both good and bad news. On one hand, we show that the decline in public support effect is quite small in our two waves. On the other, we also show that, while the decrease in public support is small, salience plays only a minimal role in this decline. By contrast, partisan polarisation appears as a key driver of such a decline at both the national and European levels, in both policy fields. This implies that the response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine – although relatively united so far – is underpinned by strong political conflicts at both the national and European levels that – if politicised – might be detrimental to European unity and polity building. Further research can disentangle whether high satisfaction is conducive or not to polity building. For one thing, those who are satisfied want keep the status quo. For another, given that in our data those who support further integration are most satisfied with the EU, satisfaction could also be conducive to more

demand for polity building. Satisfaction might permit further integration along the lines of 'give me more of the same'.

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