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How polarised is support for Ukraine across Europe?

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 triggered broad public support across Western democracies. Since then, support in the United States has declined and become sharply partisan. In this policy brief, we use Eurobarometer data from 2022 to 2024 to show that while overall support for Ukraine remains high in the European Union, it has declined over time and become more politically polarised. We introduce a polarisation index to compare trends across countries and over time. There is substantial heterogeneity: while support remains close to universal in some countries, such as Sweden, others have seen marked increases in polarisation, with support weakening particularly on the far right. We find that higher inflation is associated with greater polarisation for costly policies, such as sanctions against Russia, but not for humanitarian aid. Finally, we present suggestive evidence that polarisation in support for sanctions may reflect domestic political debate.

From consensus to polarisation?

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 prompted widespread public support for Ukraine on both sides of the Atlantic. According to a PEW survey less than one month after the invasion, only 7% of Americans (9% of Republicans and 5% of Democrats) said the US is providing too much support to Ukraine (PEW, 2022). Two years later, overall support dropped significantly and support for Ukraine became politically polarised: with 47% of Republicans but only 13% of Democrats saying that the US is providing too much support (PEW, 2024).

In this brief, we use microdata from Eurobarometer covering over 185,000 respondents to evaluate whether the same trends are present in the EU. We show that support for Ukraine remained relatively high and stable across Europe from 2022 to 2024. This finding is consistent with other surveys that report resilient support among Europeans despite pessimism about the war's likely outcome (Krastev and Leonard 2024) and personal costs in terms of inflation (Demertzis et al. 2023). Our brief focuses specifically on political cleavages within countries. We show that policies supporting Ukraine have become increasingly polarising in some countries and evaluate potential drivers of that polarisation.

Support for Ukraine across the political spectrum

Figure 1 shows support for economic sanctions against Russia (Panel A) and humanitarian aid for Ukraine (Panel B) in the EU, by respondents' self-

reported left-right political placement in the Eurobarometer (for details on this measure, see Lehne and Zhuang, 2023b). Support for Ukraine was high across the political spectrum in the immediate aftermath of the invasion, but declined in the latest Eurobarometer data from October 2024. The sharpest declines occur on the far right, especially for economic sanctions against Russia.

Figure 1A. Support for economic sanctions against Russia

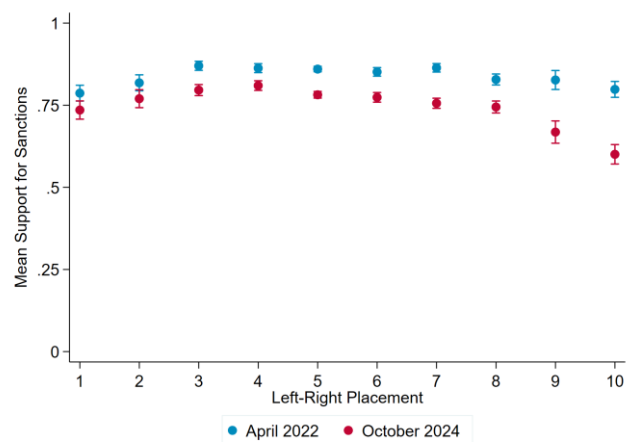
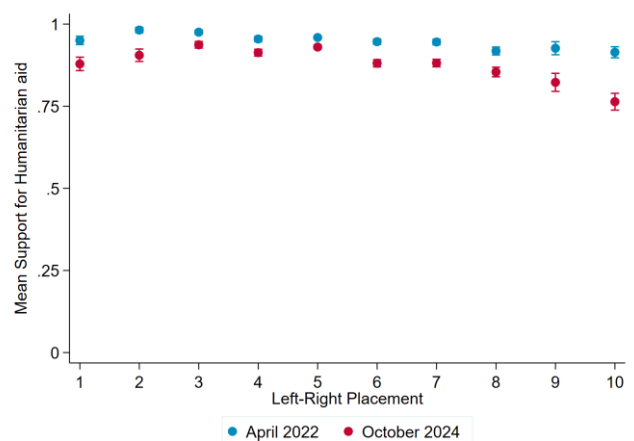


Figure 1B. Support for humanitarian aid to Ukraine



Source: Eurobarometer and authors' calculations. This chart shows the mean support for each measure in April 2022 (in blue) and October 2024 (in red) in the EU. Based on binary transformations of Eurobarometer questions on support for each measure; dots show means and bars indicate 95% confidence intervals.

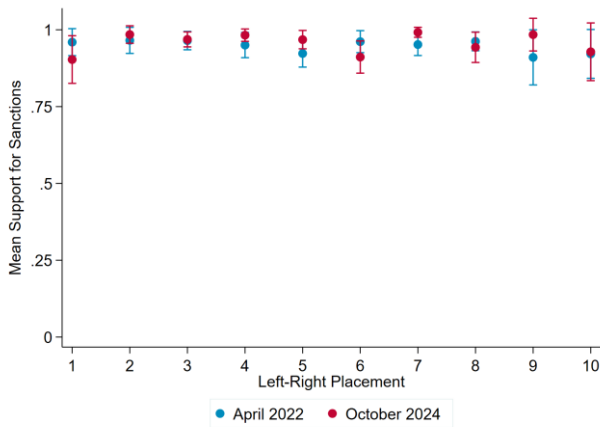


A similar pattern holds for military aid to Ukraine, though the average level of support is lower (not shown). Support for humanitarian aid is uniformly higher and less politically polarising; even among respondents on the very far right, more than three-quarters are in favour.

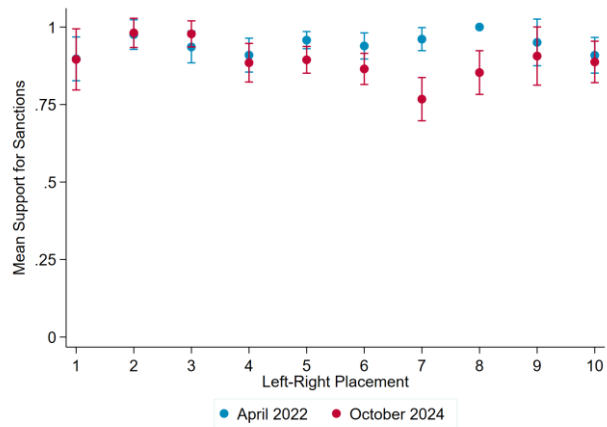
This overall pattern masks large heterogeneity across countries. Figure 2 shows support for sanctions against Russia in four European countries: Sweden, Poland, Greece and France.

Figure 2. Political Polarisation in Support for Sanctions across four European countries

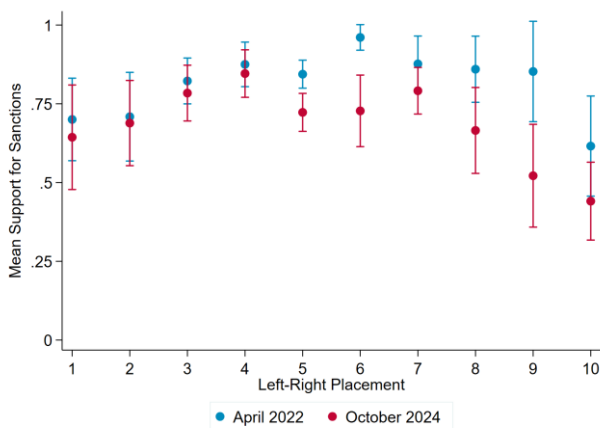
2a. Sweden



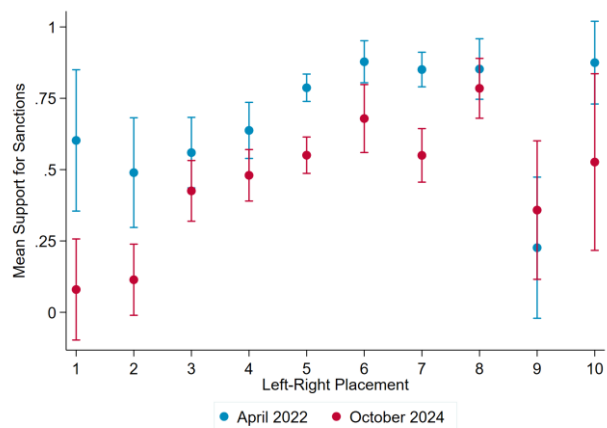
2b. Poland



2c. France



2d. Greece



Source: Eurobarometer and authors' calculations.

This chart shows mean support for sanctions against Russia in April 2022 (in blue) and October 2024 (in red) in (a) Sweden, (b) Poland, (c) France and (d) Greece. Based on binary transformations of Eurobarometer questions on support for each measure; dots show means and bars indicate standard deviations.



In Sweden, support for sanctions is close to universal, broadly uniform across the political spectrum, and has changed little in the two years since the start of the war. Similarly, in Poland, support remains very high but declines in 2024 among respondents on the centre-right. Support varies more with political leaning in countries such as France and Greece. While support for sanctions was relatively high in France in 2022, especially in the centre, it has declined markedly on the right. This pattern is repeated across many other European countries, including Austria, Germany, the Netherlands, and Italy. By contrast, in Greece, support for sanctions was comparatively lower to begin with and declined further over time. In Greece, as in Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Latvia and Slovakia, support is particularly weak on the left.

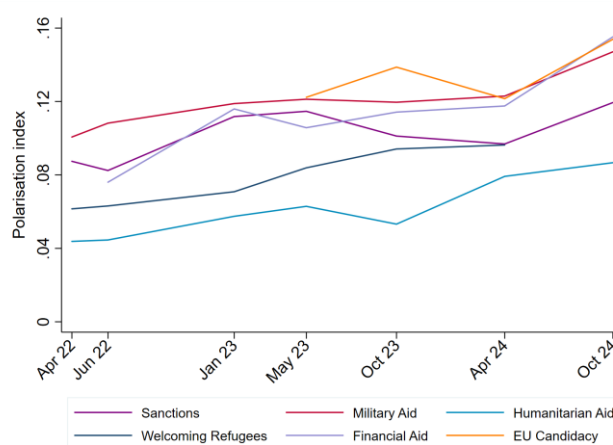
A Political Polarisation Index

In order to compare how politicised support for Ukraine is across countries and over time, we develop a polarisation index (see technical note for details). This measures the extent to which each self-reported ideology group's support for a policy differs from the country-wide average (in other words, how far the dots in Figure 1 lie from a horizontal line). The index ranges from 0 (all groups share the same position on sanctions) to 1 (groups hold opposing positions that are perfectly predicted by political ideology). Comparing the same country over time, there are two factors that change the index: (i) within an ideology group, average support for a policy may change, and (ii) the size of ideology groups (and their weight in the index) may change as the distribution of political views in the country evolves.

Comparing across countries, the index does not depend on the left-right gradient of support. While France and Greece show opposite patterns in Figure 2, they score similarly on the sanctions polarisation index in October 2024 (0.16 and 0.15, respectively). For Sweden, Figure 2 shows much greater consensus across the political spectrum, which translates into a significantly lower polarisation score: 0.05.

We find that some policies are associated with greater polarisation than others. There is widespread support in the EU for providing humanitarian aid and welcoming refugees from Ukraine, and polarisation scores are lower for these measures than for financial aid, military aid, sanctions on Russia or Ukraine becoming an EU candidate country. At the same time, looking at the EU as a whole, there has been an upwards trend in polarisation across all measures (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Political Polarisation Indices for different policies supporting Ukraine

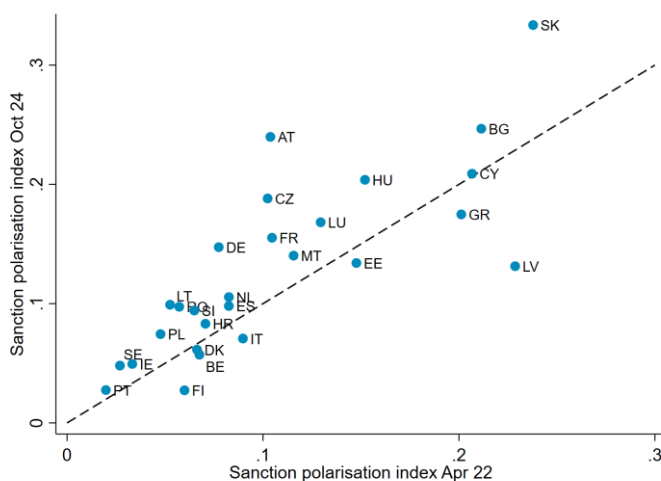


Source: Eurobarometer and authors' calculations. This chart shows the EU-average political polarisation index for six different policies supporting Ukraine. The EU average is constructed using population weights. Survey waves are unevenly spaced across time. Some policies are not asked about in some waves.



Figure 4 shows which countries are driving the increase in polarisation. It plots the polarisation score for sanctions in April 2022 (shortly after the full-scale invasion) against the corresponding score in October 2024 (the latest wave for which data are available). Austria, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia show the greatest increase in polarisation over this period. Views on sanctions are also increasingly aligned with political cleavages in France, Germany, and Hungary. By contrast, Latvia shows a significant decline in polarisation while in Finland, Ireland, Poland, Portugal, and Sweden polarisation remained at very low levels more than two years into the war.

Figure 4. Political Polarisation Index for Sanctions against Russia 2022 vs 2024



Source: Eurobarometer and authors' calculations. This chart shows the political polarisation index for support for sanctions against Russia from the Eurobarometer data in October 2024 on the y-axis against the polarisation index in April 2022 on the x-axis. Includes all EU27 countries.

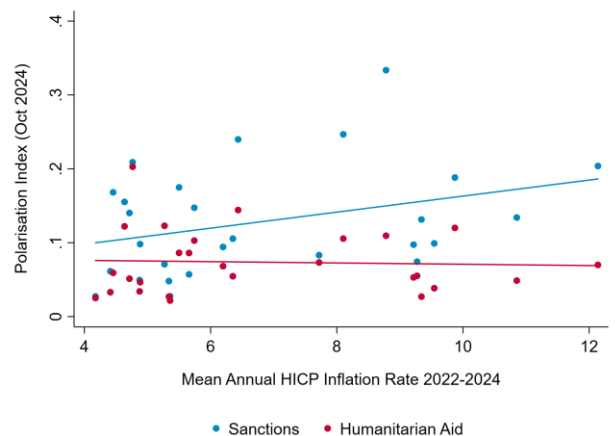
Drivers of Political Polarisation

In the next section, we show how political polarisation in support for Ukraine is related to the economy and domestic politics.

Polarisation and Price Increases

Figure 5 shows how political polarisation and inflation are related across countries in the EU. Political polarisation in support for sanctions against Russia at the end of 2024 tended to be higher in countries where prices increased faster between 2022 and 2024. As the cost of living increased, the issue of Russian sanctions became a point of contention between voters of different political leanings. Some political parties also started to capitalise on this issue to gain support. In contrast, there has been widespread agreement on the need for humanitarian aid to Ukraine and this was unaffected by the state of the economy.

Figure 5. Political Polarisation and Inflation



Source: Eurobarometer, Eurostat and authors' calculations. This chart shows the polarisation index for support for sanctions against Russia (in blue) and humanitarian aid for Ukraine (in red) from the Eurobarometer data in October 2024 against the average annual HICP inflation rate between 2022 and 2024 in percentage points. Includes all EU27 countries.

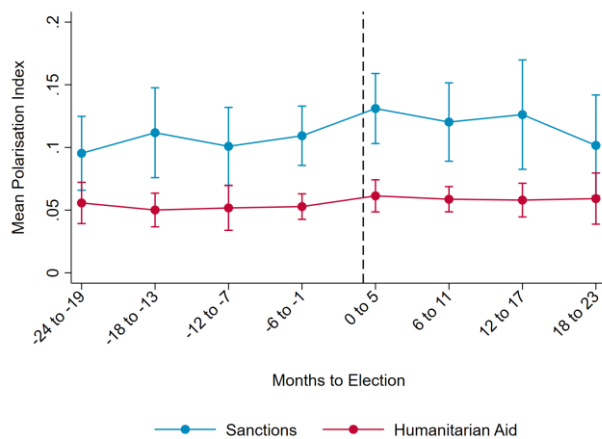
Polarisation and Elections

In Figure 6, we show how the polarisation index for support for sanctions against Russia (blue) and humanitarian aid for Ukraine (red) evolves around elections. Political polarisation for sanctions increases slightly around election



periods, suggesting heightened debate on this issue. In contrast, polarisation in support for humanitarian aid shows little change over the election cycle.

Figure 6. Political Polarisation and Elections



Source: Eurobarometer, PPEG, Manifesto Project and authors' calculations.

This chart shows the polarisation index for support for sanctions against Russia (blue) and humanitarian aid for Ukraine (red) in the two years before and after national parliamentary elections. Dots show means and bars indicate 95% confidence intervals. This is based on an unbalanced sample of EU countries with a lower house election between April 2022 and October 2024. For each country, only the closest election is used.

A Tale of Three Countries

Political parties play an important role in shaping the political discourse around Russia's war on Ukraine. They are likely to both influence and be influenced by their voters' attitudes towards supporting Ukraine.

In this section, we present a case study of three European countries that had elections between 2022 and 2024 and where parties have mentioned Russia in their manifestos according to data from the Manifesto project (see also Lehne and Zhuang, 2023a).

In Sweden, support for Ukraine in the face of Russian aggression has been consistently high along all dimensions and among voters across the political spectrum. In the Swedish elections in September 2022, six out of eight parties (including all three major parties) mentioned Russia in their party manifestos, and all supported sanctions against Russia.

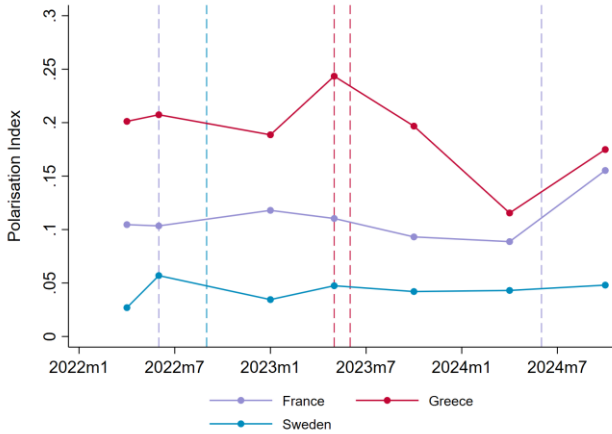
Russia was also mentioned in the party manifestos of many of the parties contesting the French election in June 2022. But in France, the far-right Rassemblement Nationale broke with the other political parties and struck a more conciliatory tone towards Russia. For instance, they stated that they "... will be seeking an alliance with Russia on certain fundamental issues: European security, which cannot exist without Russia; the fight against terrorism, which Russia has fought more consistently than any other power; and convergence in the handling of major regional issues impacting France ..." (Manifesto Project). This divergence is mirrored in voter attitudes. Support for sanctions against Russia has declined over time in France, especially amongst voters on the far right of the political spectrum.

In Greece, political support for sanctions against Russia is lower than in many other European countries has been declining over time. Political polarisation in support for Ukraine increased, especially around the elections in May and June 2023. Few of the political parties mentioned Russia directly in their manifestos, and then mostly in conjunction with rising prices and effects on the Greek economy.

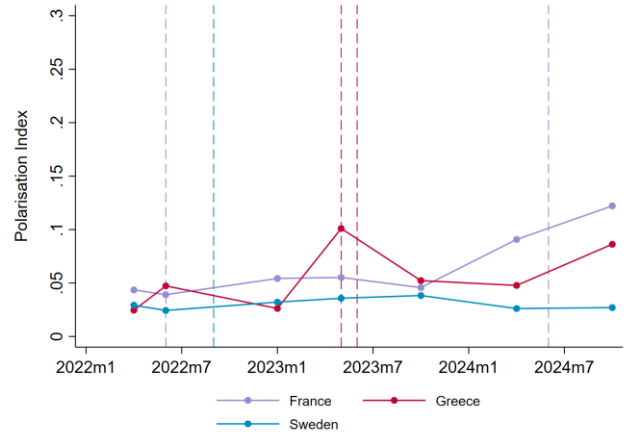


Figure 7. Political Polarisation in Support for Ukraine

7a. Sanctions against Russia



7b. Humanitarian Aid for Ukraine



Source: Eurobarometer, Manifesto Project and authors' calculations.

These charts show political polarisation in support for sanctions against Russia (Panel A) and humanitarian aid for Ukraine (Panel B) in France, Greece and Sweden. Vertical dashed lines show the timing of national parliamentary elections.

Conclusion

Public support for Ukraine remains high in the EU, but there are worrying signs of fragmentation. While some countries continue to exhibit broad consensus in supporting Ukraine across multiple policies, other countries have seen declining support as the debate has become aligned with domestic political cleavages. Sanctions against Russia and military aid to Ukraine have become increasingly contentious, while there is broader agreement on the need for humanitarian aid. In many countries, it is particularly voters on the far-right of the political spectrum who have become less supportive of policies supporting Ukraine.

Our analysis highlights two areas of fragility in the consensus around support for sanctions against Russia. We see some indication that the domestic political debate can drive polarisation in opinions on sanctions against Russia, with the salience of

these issues increasing around elections, particularly when parties competing in the elections have different policy platforms.

Another source of fragility is the economic cost of sanctions. Countries that experienced larger increases in prices since 2022 exhibit greater political disagreement over sanctions, suggesting that economic costs can shape the political sustainability of support for Ukraine. Recent increases in energy prices, linked to the war in Iran, may further amplify political polarisation around sanctions against Russia.

Despite these pressures, clear majorities across most EU countries continue to support Ukraine, especially when it comes to humanitarian aid and welcoming refugees. European solidarity has so far proven resilient in the face of growing external pressures.



Technical note:

The polarisation indices are computed as follows:

$$PI_{ct} = 2 \sum_{g=1}^{10} s_{gct} |\bar{y}_{gct} - \bar{y}_{ct}|$$

Where:

- c indexes country, t indexes wave
- g indexes left-right placement groups (1-10)
- s_{gct} is the population share of group g in country c at time t , computed from survey weights
- \bar{y}_{gct} is the weighted mean support of group g in country c at time t for a particular policy
- \bar{y}_{ct} is the weighted mean support in country c at time t for the same policy
- The factor of 2 normalises the index to [0,1]

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