

Strong European backing for Ukraine leaves 'little space' for exploitation of pro-Russian politics, study shows

January 31 2024



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Strong support for Ukraine means there is "little space" for European politicians to exploit pro-Russia foreign policy messages, a new study shows. Researchers have found widespread backing for Ukraine across the continent, and for policies that help the nation, such as imposing

sanctions on Russia.

But public opinion is more mixed on the approach NATO should take and whether Ukraine should become a member.

Experts have found that European nations can be classified into three distinct groups. Citizens of Germany, France and Spain were "solid supporters" of Ukraine. Those in Italy and Hungary were "nearer the fence," while residents of Estonia, Finland, Poland, Sweden and the UK were "staunch supporters."

[The study](#), by Catarina Thomson, Matthias Mader, Felix Münchow, Jason Reifler and Harald Schoen, is published in the journal *International Affairs*. Researchers analyzed [public opinion](#) data about the Ukraine war collected in February 2023 in France, Germany, the UK, Estonia, Hungary, Poland, Finland and Sweden, Italy and Spain.

People in the UK were among the staunchest supporters of Ukraine, together with Eastern European nations and Finland and Sweden, who applied for NATO membership following the Russian invasion.

In a second group of countries, which includes France, Germany, and Spain, citizens also blamed Russia for the war and were strongly in favor of standing by Ukraine. A minority of voters believed Ukraine should be urged to accept territorial losses that could help end the war or that economic sanctions against Russia should be lifted.

In this second group of countries researchers found some pockets of pro-Russian sympathy in far-right populist parties, as well as among some groups of leftist parties with a history of close relations with the Soviet Union. Around half of supporters of Germany's Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) attributed some responsibility for the war to Ukraine, and 56% said they would urge Ukraine to concede some

territory to Russia.

In a third group of countries—Italy and Hungary—people supported Ukraine but remained "nearer the fence." More than 40% of Italians attributed some responsibility for the war to Ukraine, as did 55% of Hungarians. In contrast, 20% or less attributed some responsibility to Ukraine in the UK, Eastern European countries, Finland and Sweden, as did between 25% to 35% in France, Germany and Spain.

In all countries [older people](#) were more supportive of increasing NATO's troop presence in eastern Europe and admitting Ukraine to the alliance than are younger age groups.

People were more divided regarding policy options for NATO. In some countries, majorities supported both increasing NATO's presence in eastern Europe and Ukraine's admittance to NATO, while in others, majorities opposed these policies. This may reflect perceptions that such steps may lead to a deeper involvement of their country in the Russia–Ukraine conflict.

Dr. Thomson said, "European citizens remain united in supporting the Ukrainian war effort. Failure to achieve military successes could however undermine this support. This might be particularly problematic in countries like Germany where the public is more skeptical, and where long-held non-militarist and isolationist sentiments remain.

"Russia may now be 'playing for time,' hoping war-weary publics will demand a conclusion to the war. There are reasons to think that such an approach on Russia's part is unlikely to work. Our findings suggest admitting Ukraine as a NATO member would be politically difficult."

More information: Catarina Thomson et al, European public opinion: united in supporting Ukraine, divided on the future of NATO,

International Affairs (2023). [DOI: 10.1093/ia/iad241](https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iad241)

Provided by University of Exeter

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