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The changing geography of support for European integration in the shadow of the Ukraine war

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ABSTRACT

External crises have recently placed European governments under significant pressure, prompting deeper supranational cooperation in search of effective policy solutions. This paper investigates how such crises shape citizens' support for supranational policies, and how this effect varies geographically. We analyse the impact of Russia's invasion of Ukraine on public attitudes toward European integration across 229 regions in four key policy domains. Using geocoded data from eight Eurobarometer surveys (July 2020–June 2023) and an event-study design, we find that individuals living closer to the Russian border became more supportive of common European defence and foreign policies, as well as EU enlargement. In contrast, the energy crisis triggered only a short-lived increase in support for a common EU energy policy. These results underscore the spatial dimension of geopolitical shocks and provide evidence for a functionalist interpretation of public attitudes toward European integration.

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KEYWORDS Geopolitical crises; European integration; public opinion; spatial dynamics; security threat

Introduction

Since many of the problems confronting our societies are transnational in nature, states increasingly delegate authority to international institutions to provide effective policy solutions. In Europe, external influences have recently played a pivotal role in this regard by shaping the pace, dynamics, and direction of integration efforts. Over the last fifteen years, the financial and refugee crises, the pandemic, and the return of war in Europe have confirmed the strong interdependence among member states and fuelled functional

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demands for further integration. These external factors created pressures that forced the EU to adapt, cooperate, or rethink its policies and strategies (Anghel & Jones, 2023; Demirci *et al.*, 2025; Ferrara & Kriesi, 2022; Ferrera *et al.*, 2024; Freudlsperger & Schimmelfennig, 2023). Geopolitical events, like Russia's invasion of Ukraine, have accelerated EU cooperation on defence and energy independence. Economic crises, including the 2008 financial crash and the one following the COVID-19 pandemic, revealed the need for deeper fiscal coordination to stabilise member economies. Security threats, such as terrorism and cyberattacks, have pushed the EU toward stronger collective policies on defence and border control. Lastly, global environmental challenges have driven the EU to lead on climate action through initiatives like the Green Deal, reflecting the influence of international sustainability demands on its policy direction.

As the politicisation of European integration has amplified the relevance of public opinion in constraining the strength and direction of integration efforts (Hagemann *et al.*, 2017; Malet & Thiébaut, 2024), it is important to ask how those external influences affect people's opinions. External threats and transboundary crises may produce contrasting effects on public attitudes. On the one hand, they may heighten people's perceptions of policy interdependence, signal the need for further EU action in the affected policy domains, and increase support for supranational solutions. On the other hand, those same threats and crises may highlight the failure of supranational authority in providing effective solutions to collective action problems, and public resistance to increased coordination at the EU level may often reflect immediate national interests or concerns, creating a complex environment for EU policymakers attempting to balance national priorities with collective action.

This paper addresses this puzzle by examining how geopolitical pressures become visible to the public and how they materialise in people's everyday lives. We argue that geopolitical threats have both security and economic consequences. While security concerns may foster a sense of shared identity and increase support for common policy solutions, economic concerns may exacerbate existing inequalities and polarise the public. To understand the ramifications of a geopolitical crisis—much like a financial crisis—it is essential to analyse how a common external shock interacts with the economic and political geography of the EU (Beramendi & Stegmueller, 2020; Freudlsperger & Schramm, 2025). Does the crisis lead to greater convergence among member states in terms of resource distribution and risk exposure, or does it deepen disparities by affecting regions unequally? The outcome hinges on whether the adverse effects of the shock are widespread or confined to specific areas. If the fallout is localised, regional divisions may harden, shaping divergent preferences on institutional reforms. Conversely, if the disruption transcends regional boundaries, it could serve as a catalyst for deeper integration. For this reason, the

consequences of external threats cannot be fully understood without looking at the spatial dynamics they generate. Fundamentally, we propose that some European regions are more exposed to external threats than others and that this should influence whether people living in these regions support or oppose supranational policy solutions. In this framework, geography is not the root cause of divergent public responses but rather a proxy for underlying differences in exposure to and interdependence with external threats—be they economic, political, or security-related. It is through these varying levels of connectivity and vulnerability that geopolitical pressures are filtered and experienced unevenly across regions.

We analyse the spatial dynamics of the impact of geopolitical crises on people's preferences for European integration, focusing on the Russian invasion of Ukraine as a paradigmatic case. We rely on geocoded data from eight Eurobarometer surveys collected between July 2020 and June 2023, asking respondents whether they support: (1) a common defence and security policy among EU member states, (2) a common foreign policy for the EU, (3) a common energy policy among EU member states; and (4) further enlargement of the EU to new countries. Respondents in our data are clustered in 229 regions (mostly) at the NUTS-2 level. To capture the spatial dynamics of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, we calculate how threatened each region is by the Russian aggressiveness and how exposed it is to the energy crisis. We analyse this data in a classic event study setting relying on two-way fixed effects regressions.

Descriptively, we find that a major threat like the Russian invasion did not fundamentally alter people's support for EU policy solutions, except for a significant increase in support for enlargement. Our event study shows that individuals living in regions closer to the Russian border are more likely to support common defence and foreign policies, as well as further enlargement of the European Union, while individuals in regions hardest hit by the energy crisis display a higher support for a common energy policy (although this effect is short-lived).

These findings contribute to the broader debate on how external shocks shape public attitudes toward European integration by highlighting the spatial dynamics of geopolitical threats. While previous research has emphasised the role of crises in accelerating functional integration at the institutional level, our study demonstrates that public support for such initiatives is not uniform across regions but is instead shaped by varying levels of exposure to security and economic risks. The results suggest that proximity to geopolitical threats can strengthen support for collective security and foreign policy measures, while economic disruptions generate more transient and regionally contingent effects on integration preferences. By uncovering these spatial patterns, our analysis provides new insights into the conditions under which crises foster convergence or reinforce regional

divisions within the EU. This underscores the importance of adopting an outside-in perspective on European integration (see Freudlsperger & Schramm, 2025). External events, such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine, can lead to uneven external interdependence, with the most affected regions exhibiting the strongest shifts in support for further integration. Policymakers should thus not only consider aggregate public opinion but also the geographically differentiated nature of integration support when designing responses to future crises.

The role of external factors on support for integration

Political preferences are always made up of two components. First, citizens prefer a certain solution to a problem. Second, they prefer such a solution to be addressed at a certain level of government. How do citizens choose the most appropriate level of government to address a policy issue? Scholars identify two contrasting logics to address this question. On the one hand, according to a functional logic, jurisdictional design can be considered as the utilitarian solution to the dilemma of providing collective goods to people with heterogeneous preferences. In this regard, the costs and benefits of European integration vary across policy areas. For some policies, the benefits of size are large and the costs of heterogeneity low; for others, the reverse is true (Alesina & Spolaore, 2005; Gerring & Veenendaal, 2020). On the other hand, people feel part of a community and may take pride in the sovereignty of their nation over the functional benefits of European integration (Dahl & Tufte, 1973; Hooghe & Marks, 2016). Accordingly, scholars have debated whether the public attitudes towards European integration reflect consistent, issue-specific instrumental considerations (Anderson & Reichert, 1995; Gabel, 1998; Tucker *et al.*, 2002) or general affective dispositions towards one's national community (Bruter, 2003; Carey, 2002; McLaren, 2004).

Post-functional theory argues that as European issues have become increasingly politicised within domestic contexts, identity concerns have progressively overtaken instrumental considerations as the main factor influencing public attitudes toward the EU (Hooghe & Marks, 2009). However, recent studies have suggested that a stronger supranational authority could arise in response to citizens' expectations for the EU to address cross-border collective action challenges (Freudlsperger & Schimmelfennig, 2023), particularly those related to social security concerns (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, 2022; Ferrera *et al.*, 2024). In line with models of polity formation that describe it as the outcome of a competition on the 'market of governance' (Acharya & Lee, 2018), public opinion may favour building supranational capacities if the EU is perceived as better equipped than national governments to provide effective solutions for delivering public goods, such as security and economic prosperity. There is indeed evidence that

perceptions of functional interdependence foster beliefs about the capacity of international institutions to solve problems (Ecker-Ehrhardt, 2012) and that citizens' views on supranational institutions are influenced by comparisons to national institutions (De Vries, 2018; Sánchez-Cuenca, 2000). Recent studies also show that citizens support the transfer of a policy to the supranational level based on whether it may align better with their preferences than existing domestic policies (Hix & Høyland, 2023; Malet, 2023).

Yet, voters are more likely to perceive functional pressures for cooperation when policies involve consistently salient issues. In the absence of a significant trend or shock that brings interdependence to the forefront, public responses tend to be weaker and less driven by functional considerations (Moravcsik, 2018). This is why external factors can be considered a decisive push factor in people's opinion formation. External factors can produce crises that transcend traditional territorial, functional, and cultural boundaries, thereby challenging the ability of political systems to deliver public goods (Boin *et al.*, 2014; Freudlsperger & Schimmelfennig, 2023). This can change people's perceptions of policy interdependence and affect their calculus about the benefit of coordinating policymaking at a higher level of government. Of course, elite discourse may still exert a strong influence on public opinion formation and thus moderate the impact of a crisis on people's perceptions of interdependence (Schlipphak *et al.*, 2022). However, partisan bias in interpreting information may diminish when the evidence is clear and indisputable (Parker-Stephen, 2013; Redlawsk *et al.*, 2010; Stanig, 2013), suggesting that individuals can set aside political loyalties in the face of undeniable threats.

Previous studies have already analysed how external factors, that is, political and economic processes that are, at least in part, exogenous to the EU political system, can affect people's support for a stronger European policymaking. If we consider the effect of external economic factors, a large literature has investigated the effect of trade and financial crises on public support for the EU. Of course, both the increase in trade flows and the vulnerability to financial crises are endogenous to the policy choices of European governments that were eager to reap the benefits of economic globalisation, and their repercussions on the well-being of the European population could be, or could have been, moderated by more generous compensatory policies. That said, studies that have isolated the impact of trade flows on EU attitudes by analysing the effect of the 'China import shock' – i.e. the surge of China as a leading global manufacturer, with the resulting massive displacement of manufacturing activities across developed countries – have documented strong negative effects on public support for European integration (Colantone & Stanig, 2018a, 2018b). Similarly, the 2008 global financial crisis strongly increased public Euroscepticism and support for Eurosceptic parties (Hobolt & de Vries, 2016; Serricchio *et al.*, 2013). Neither of these two external economic factors seemed to have increased people's perceived

need for further EU cooperation to better control the negative consequences of trade flows or better regulate financial markets.

Migration policy is another area in which the EU has been strongly shaped by external forces (Zaun, 2025). Research on the major crisis of the mid-2010s, triggered by the arrival of large numbers of refugees, also documents a negative reaction to such external pressures. The refugee crisis increased support for a higher EU coordination only in countries under pressure and willing to share the burden, but not in others (Basile & Olmastroni, 2020). An increase in refugee arrivals is linked to lower support for a common EU migration policy, suggesting that heightened problem pressure leads people to prefer national solutions over European ones (Lutz, 2024).

While external socio-economic factors do not seem to increase people's support for supranational solutions, studies of the impact of security threats tell a different story. As noted by Freudlsperger and Schimmelfennig (2023: 848), 'Military transboundary crises potentially expose both scale deficits and community threats'. Such crises, on one level, generate strong pressures for cross-border cooperation to bolster collective defence capacity, and may convince citizens that individual nations alone may not be able to handle these threats (Howorth, 2017). Simultaneously, they foster a sense of unity and shared purpose within nations directly facing the threat, reinforcing internal cohesion against the aggressor (Schaub, 2017; Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Some studies have found that external threats increase the likelihood of EU citizens supporting integration in defence policy (Irondelle *et al.*, 2015; Schoen, 2008). However, other research indicates that only specific types of threats—such as terrorist attacks, rather than conventional warfare—significantly influence support for deeper EU security integration (Ray & Johnston, 2007). More recent evidence from a cross-sectional survey (Mader *et al.*, 2024) reveals that a heightened perception of international threats is linked to greater support for European-level cooperation in security and defence. This relationship holds equally for individuals with exclusive national identities and those with more inclusive identities. A study of the effect of the invasion of Crimea by Russia shows that external threat not only strengthened EU identity in high-threat countries but also increased support for integration in specific policy areas: defence, foreign policy, enlargement, Eurobonds, and migration policy (Gehring, 2022).

The impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on support for EU policies

The Russian war in Ukraine seemed to create a potential Tillian moment for the EU (Tilly, 1975), in line with 'bellicist' theories of state formation which argue that the EU's institutional 'incompleteness' and 'imbalance' stem from its development through a gradual process of market integration

rather than being forged ‘in the crucible of war’ (Kelemen & McNamara, 2022). In response to Russia’s aggressive actions against Ukraine, the perceived threat from Russia appears to have risen among the European public, along with increased backing for collective defence. Data show that, to an even greater degree than in the past, Europeans favoured NATO over the EU to handle territorial defence (Mader *et al.*, 2024). However, Europeans still seem to ‘want to have it both ways’ (Eichenberg, 2003), as support for a unified European security and defence policy remained exceptionally high, with some surveys indicating a growing demand for cooperative efforts beyond collective defence.

The analysis of a survey fielded after the Russian invasion confirms these findings by showing that Europeans wanted a more unified and autonomous EU in the foreign and security policy arena (Wang & Moise, 2023). Perceptions of both the short-term threat from the war in Ukraine and long-term threats from geopolitical competitors, such as Russia and China, were found to be associated with support for a stronger and autonomous EU in foreign and security policies. Mader *et al.* (2024) also show that the link between perceptions of threat and attitudes toward collective defence strengthened, implying that, on average, opinion formation in 2023 was more influenced by perceived threats than it was prior to the invasion. It is, however, unclear how long these effects have lasted. Some survey evidence already points to a decline in support for EU policies between March and July 2022 (Truchlewski *et al.*, 2023).

After all, beyond the most immediate security threat, the war in Ukraine has produced a transboundary crisis in the EU, challenging its political systems in multiple ways (Krotz *et al.*, 2025). Russia’s invasion of Ukraine led to a swift policy response from the EU, including a significant expansion of sanctions against Russian individuals and entities. The EU introduced unprecedented measures, particularly broad financial sanctions aimed at freezing the overseas assets of Russian elites and the government, and black-listing major Russian banks from the global dollar-based payment system (Kantorowicz & Kantorowicz-Reznichenko, 2023). However, many EU nations were heavily reliant on Russian fossil fuel imports, with around 45% of gas imports coming from Russia by March 2022, making energy dependence a strategic concern (Redeker, 2022). This reliance, which helped fund Russia’s military, led the European Commission to introduce the *REPowerEU* plan, aiming to phase out Russian energy imports by 2030.

Energy prices, already rising in 2021 due to the post-pandemic economic recovery, surged further when Russia cut 80% of its energy supply to Europe. Fears of shortages intensified when Russia completely halted deliveries to most EU countries in the summer of 2022. Leaders blamed Russia for weaponising energy, but some argued that past policy decisions, particularly Germany’s heavy reliance on Russian gas, were partly to blame (Redeker, 2022).

Dependency on Russian energy varied across the EU; Germany and Italy were the largest importers, while countries like Spain and Portugal were less affected. The transition away from Russian energy sparked a dilemma: whether to accelerate the shift to clean energy or temporarily revert to less sustainable sources, as several countries extended coal plant operations. Moreover, skyrocketing fossil fuel prices fueled inflation, reducing purchasing power, increasing poverty, and forcing companies to cut production and lay off workers (Kuzemko *et al.*, 2022).

The surge in energy prices weakened public support for sanctions in countries like Germany and Poland, leading to calls for negotiations with Russia rather than a steadfast approach. This aligns with research suggesting that public opinion on international issues is often shaped by personal interests and values—whether in security (Gartner, 2008), trade (Mayda & Rodrik, 2005; Owen & Johnston, 2017), or the environment (Bechtel *et al.*, 2019; Gaikwad *et al.*, 2022). Many citizens were simply unwilling to bear the economic burden of their governments' support for Ukraine (Kantorowicz & Kantorowicz-Reznichenko, 2023). On the contrary, another study based on a cross-sectional analysis of survey data fielded after the invasion shows that Europeans who perceived the war as the most pressing threat to the EU supported a supranational response to these three challenges. They backed EU initiatives to reduce reliance on Russian energy, accelerate the green transition through investments in renewable energy, and strengthen EU solidarity by introducing social compensation mechanisms (Natili & Visconti, 2023).

In this paper, we test whether the impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine increased support for European policies in the most threatened regions. Such a regional perspective not only allows us to compare citizens interviewed before and after the invasion, but is also in line with many studies that have shown that shifts in the spatial dynamics of advanced industrial economies are a key factor in explaining reshaped patterns of mass political behaviour (Carreras *et al.*, 2019; Colantone & Stanig, 2018b; Dijkstra *et al.*, 2020; Essletzbichler *et al.*, 2018; Ford & Jennings, 2020). In particular, this body of research highlights how individuals residing in regions disadvantaged by widening economic disparities have increasingly gravitated toward political movements that challenge the status quo, expressing resentment, disillusionment, and growing support for Eurosceptic ideologies (Chalmers & Dellmuth, 2015; Colantone & Stanig, 2018a; Lechler, 2019; Lipps & Schraff, 2021; Lubbers & Scheepers, 2007).

We hypothesise that individuals in regions most directly threatened by Russian aggression and most severely affected by the energy crisis are more likely to increase their support for supranational policy solutions. In contrast, residents of regions less exposed to the military threat or the economic impact of the energy crisis may be more inclined to resist greater burden-sharing and, consequently, reduce their support for further European

integration, given the costs associated with EU policies. This double dynamic may contribute to a scenario of uneven external interdependence, leading to territorial variation in support for further integration (see Freudlsperger & Schramm, 2025). While individuals in regions most directly affected by the Russian invasion of Ukraine are likely to become more supportive of transferring authority to the supranational level, overall societal support may remain largely unchanged.

Research design

We analyse the spatial dynamics of geopolitical threats by examining the impact of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine on public support for European integration. Specifically, we analyse shifts in support across four key policy domains: defence policy, foreign policy, energy, and enlargement. To this end, we rely on data from eight Eurobarometer surveys collected between July 2020 and June 2023, among 211,612 respondents.¹ This allows us to compare support for supranational policy solutions before and after the invasion under different levels of threat. Support for supranational policy solutions is measured using survey items that ask respondents whether they support: (1) a common defence and security policy among EU member states, (2) a common foreign policy for the EU, (3) a common energy policy among EU member states, and (4) further enlargement of the EU. Each variable is binary, coded as 0 for opposition and 1 for support.

In line with our main argument, which draws attention to the importance of the spatial component inherent in external threats, we measure exposure to the security crisis induced by the Russian invasion of Ukraine at the NUTS level across 229 regions.² Specifically, we calculate the logged geographic distance of each NUTS region's centroid from the Russian border. We then reverse code this variable such that higher values indicate greater proximity to Russia. To facilitate the interpretation of the results, we also rescale this variable to range from 0 to 1.³

As a manipulation check, [Figure 1](#) plots the correlation between our measure of closeness to Russia and respondents' agreement with the statement that Russia's invasion of Ukraine poses a threat to their country. Each dot in the scatter plot represents the average level of agreement with this statement at the NUTS level across four Eurobarometer waves, which were fielded after the war began. The moderate, positive correlation between both variables already provides some evidence in favour of our argument that people living in regions closer to the Russian border felt more threatened by the invasion.⁴

In addition to the security crisis triggered by the invasion, the EU was already contending with an emerging energy crisis even before the conflict began. As shown in [Figure 2](#), which displays electricity prices per kilowatt-

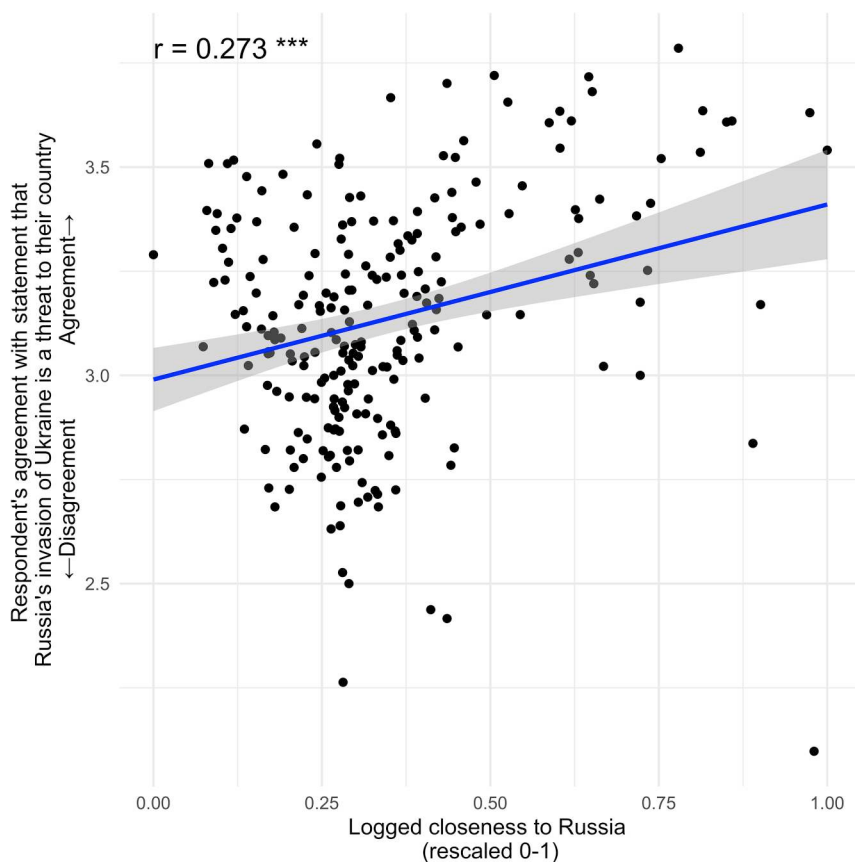


Figure 1. Correlation between closeness to Russia and threat perceptions of Russian invasion.

Note: Pearson's r coefficient; $***p < 0.001$.

hour (kWh), energy costs in many EU member states were already rising prior to the invasion. However, the severity of the energy crisis varied markedly across countries. For instance, electricity prices more than doubled in Denmark, Greece, and the Netherlands when comparing post-invasion peaks to pre-2021 averages. In contrast, countries such as Hungary and Poland experienced relatively modest increases. The figure also reveals that the peak of the energy crisis did not coincide with the invasion itself but emerged more prominently in the subsequent year. As a result, we expect the public response to energy-related hardship to be more delayed than the immediate reactions to the security threat.

Figure 3 also reveals some significant differences in exposure to the energy crisis between regions. To measure exposure to the energy crisis, we calculate the peak change in electricity prices at the country level. Specifically, we

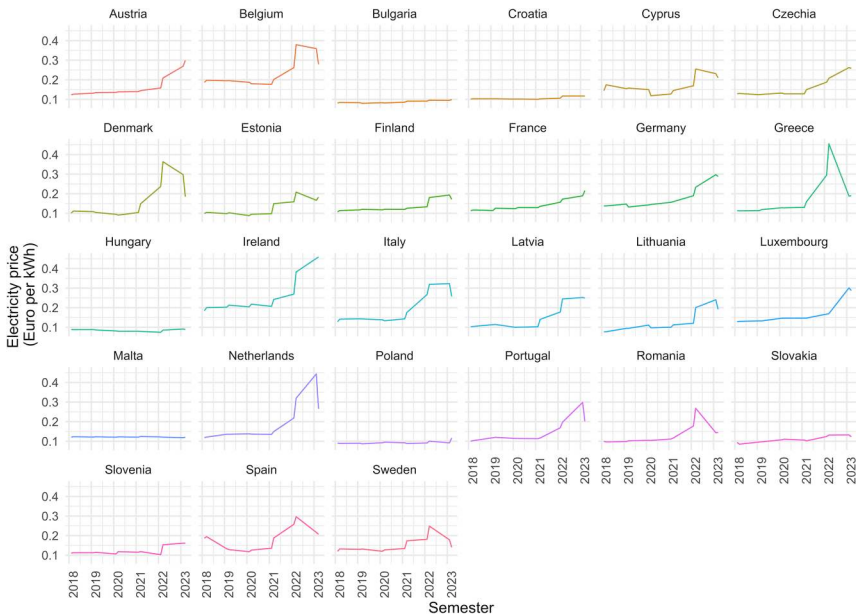


Figure 2. The energy crisis in the European Union.

Note: Electricity prices per kWh by semester, 2018–2023.

compare the highest recorded electricity prices after 2021 with the 2020 electricity price. This price change is then normalised by dividing it by the logarithm of the average NUTS level household income in 2021. The resulting value is further weighted by the combined index of heating and cooling degree days (HDD/CDD) in 2021 at the NUTS level, capturing regional variations in energy demand. Finally, the energy exposure variable is normalised to range between 0 and 1.

To estimate the effect of the geopolitical threat of the Russian invasion on support for European integration, we rely on a classic event study setting employing regression models with two-way fixed effects for NUTS regions and time. Our models control for a range of demographic covariates, including gender, age, education, urban-rural residence, profession, and left-right ideological self-placement. As elite cues may play a crucial role in shaping public opinion, particularly during crises, we account for country-level political trajectories by including two time trends, one for pre-invasion party polarisation over Europe and one for the average position of government parties on the EU. Both country-level variables rely on data from the 2019 wave of the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (Jolly *et al.*, 2022). All our event study specifications cluster standard errors at the NUTS level. We also conducted several placebo tests using dependent variables that capture support for European integration in policy areas not functionally linked to the Russian invasion of

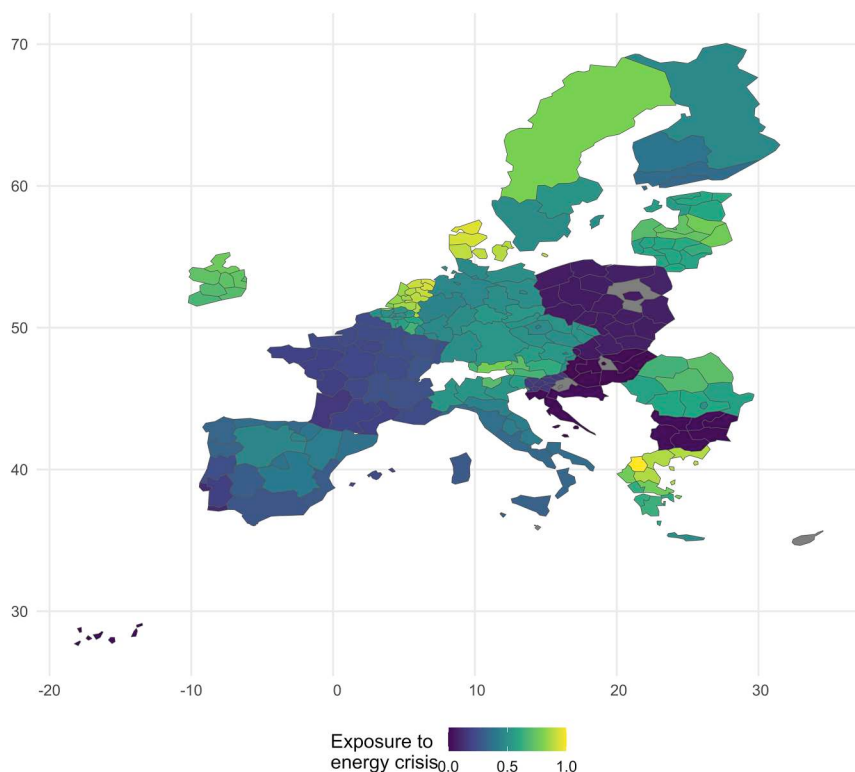


Figure 3. Exposure to the energy crisis by NUTS region.

Note: Exposure to the energy crisis is calculated as the peak increase in electricity prices after 2021 relative to 2020 levels, normalised by the log of average NUTS level household income in 2021. This value is then weighted by the number of heating and cooling degree days (HDD/CDD) in 2021 at the NUTS level, and rescaled to range from 0 to 1.

Ukraine. Results are shown in Figures A4 and A5 in the Appendix. Finally, since both of our treatment variables are continuous, we have replicated our main results with a categorical treatment variable, as shown in Figure A6 in the Appendix.

Results

The Russian invasion of Ukraine marked a watershed moment for Europe, representing one of those rare historical events with the potential to fundamentally reshape public attitudes. However, our findings indicate that, on average, European citizens did not exhibit a drastic shift in their support for a European solution in the realms of foreign, defence, and energy policy. Despite a brief and modest increase in support for a common defence and foreign policy immediately following the invasion, support for supranational approaches in these areas remained consistently high and

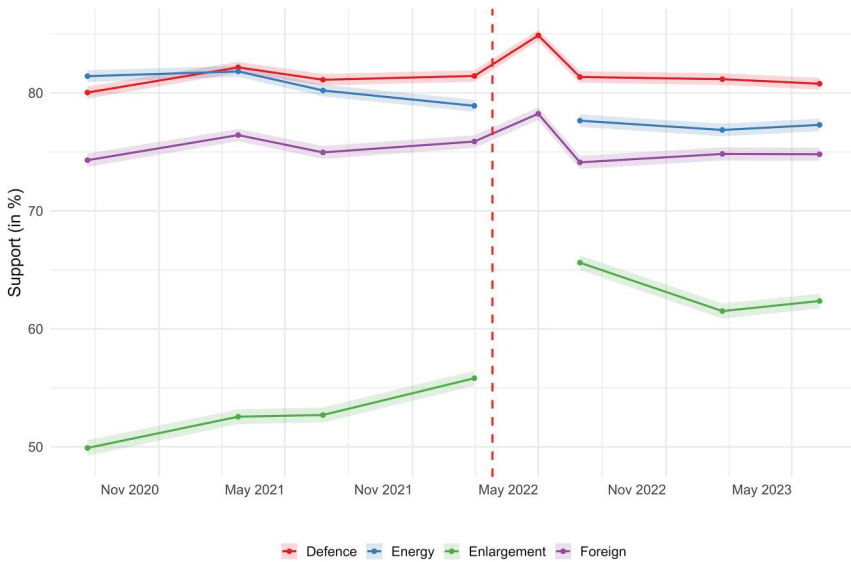


Figure 4. Support for EU integration across policy areas.

Note: 95% confidence intervals displayed. Mean level of support across policy areas in percent over time. The dashed red line indicates Russian invasion of Ukraine.

stable over time. This suggests that European citizens already possessed a strong foundational preference for collective decision-making in these domains, and the invasion did not fundamentally alter this predisposition.

As shown in [Figure 4](#), the most significant shift in public opinion occurred in attitudes toward EU enlargement, with support rising sharply above 60%. This underscores the impact of geopolitical threats in shaping public sentiment on expanding the European Union. Following Russia's invasion and the 2023 Enlargement package adopted by the European Commission, enlargement has come to be primarily associated with the EU's Eastern flank, rather than regions like the Western Balkans (Anghel & Džankić, 2023). These developments heightened public awareness of security vulnerabilities, increasing support for enlargement as a strategy to bolster European unity and resilience against external threats. This shift in public opinion mirrors a broader change in the 'policy logic' of enlargement aimed at redefining the EU's political, economic, and strategic boundaries to reduce dependencies and curb the influence of rival powers (Ghincea & Plesca, 2025).

While the overall stability of public support for European integration suggests resilience in citizens' attitudes, this aggregate pattern masks significant regional variation. [Figure 5](#) illustrates that support for integration increased in some regions while declining in others, pointing to heterogeneous reactions across Europe.⁵ This regional differentiation suggests

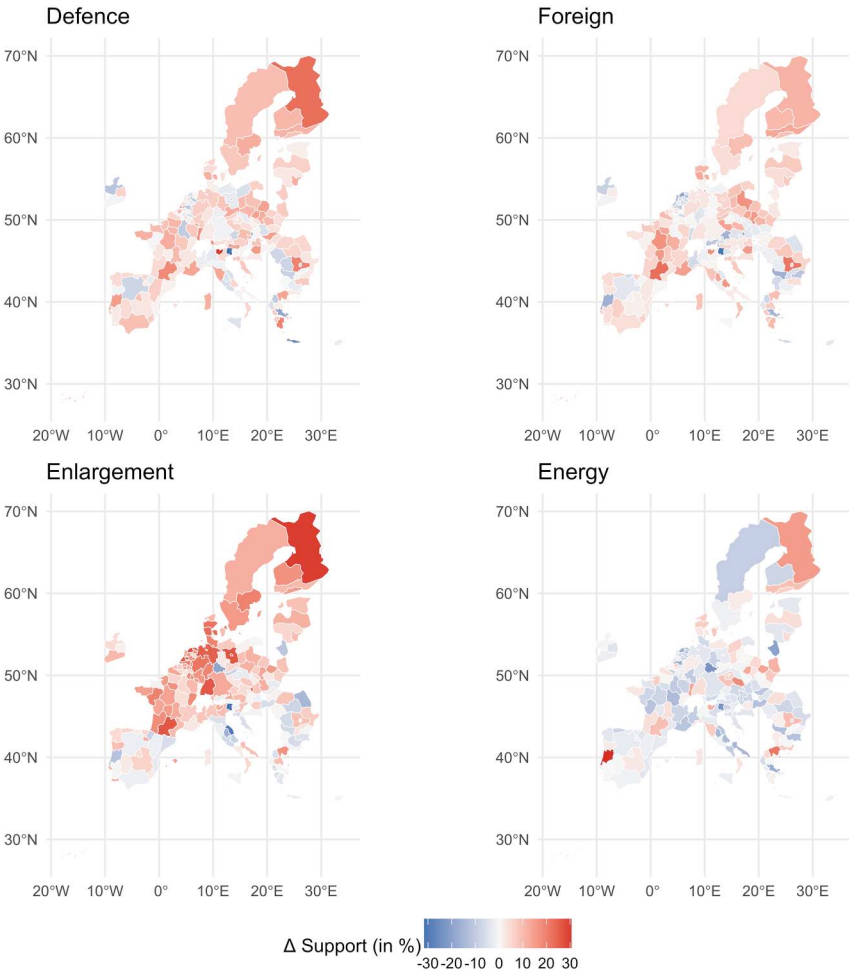


Figure 5. Change in support for EU integration across policy areas (2021–2023) by NUTS region.

Note: Estimates are based on multilevel regressions with poststratification (MrP), implemented using the *autoMrP* R package (Broniecki *et al.*, 2022). The model includes sex, age, and education as level-1 predictors, and population density at the NUTS level as a level-2 predictor.

that citizens' exposure to geopolitical threats and economic pressures influenced their perspectives on deeper European cooperation.

We argue that the observed regional variation can be attributed to differences in exposure to security threats. The results of our event study (Figure 6) lend strong support to this hypothesis, particularly in the areas of defence, foreign policy, and enlargement. Panel A of Figure 6 shows that moving from the minimum to the maximum values of the 'closeness to Russia' variable is associated with a 12-percentage point increase in support for a common EU defence policy. Similarly, Panel B indicates an equivalent 12-

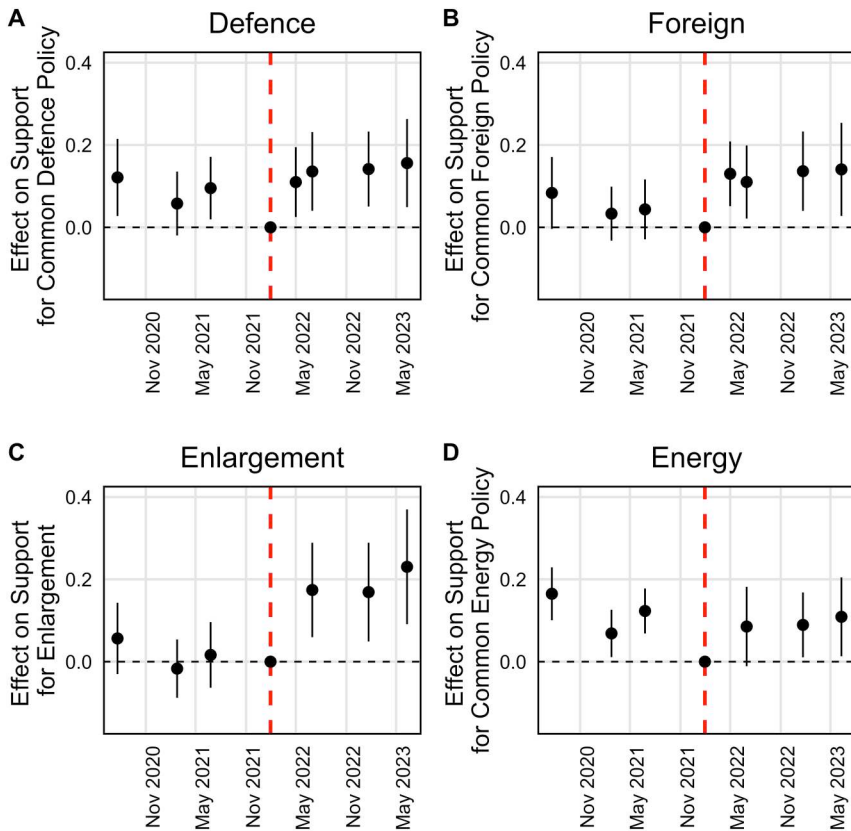


Figure 6. Event study estimates for the effect of closeness to the Russian border on support for European integration by policy areas.

Note: 95% confidence intervals displayed. Based on two-way fixed effects regressions controlling for gender, age, education, urban-rural residence, profession, left-right ideological self-placement, party polarisation over Europe, the average position of EU member state governments on the EU, and regional exposure to the energy crisis. For full model results, see Table A4 in the Appendix.

percentage-point increase in support for a common EU foreign policy. These findings suggest that individuals living closer to Russia perceive a heightened security threat and are therefore more inclined to endorse a coordinated European response. This aligns with the broader theoretical expectation that perceived external threats can drive demand for collective security measures. Our results also indicate that the Russian invasion increased support for further EU enlargement by nearly 20 percentage points in regions closer to the Russian border compared to more distant regions. This suggests that citizens in more proximate regions recognise the strategic and security benefits of a larger European Union, potentially as a means of deterring future Russian aggression. Enlargement is likely perceived not just as an economic or political project, but as a crucial security measure to

reinforce European stability.⁶ In the Appendix, we replicate these results using a difference-in-differences design with the treatment variable divided into three terciles (see Figure A6). The findings corroborate the geographic realignment of policy-specific support for integration: regions in the East exhibit a 5-percentage-point increase in support for defence and foreign policy compared to those in the West, and a 7-percentage-point higher increase in support for enlargement.

Our findings diverge when it comes to public support for a common European energy policy. While we estimate an Average Treatment Effect on the Treated (ATT) of approximately 9 percentage points following the invasion, the statistical significance of these coefficients is limited to the most recent period in our dataset. Additionally, the presence of significant coefficients in the pre-treatment period raises concerns about a potential violation of the parallel trends assumption. This suggests that factors beyond security threats may play a more substantial role in shaping public opinion on energy policy. Unlike defence and foreign policy, where immediate security concerns may lead to a direct increase in support for integration, attitudes toward energy policy could be more susceptible to shifting economic conditions and crises.

Given that the energy crisis could serve as an alternative explanation for regional variation in public support for European integration, we further examined the effect of exposure to the energy crisis on public attitudes. [Figure 7](#) presents event study estimates that control for the effect of proximity to the Russian border. Our results indicate that exposure to the energy crisis does not have a causal effect on support for European integration in the areas of defence and foreign policy. This suggests that security concerns, rather than energy supply disruptions, are the primary drivers of regional variation in these policy areas.

However, we find a significant increase in support for a common European energy policy in regions most affected by the energy crisis, particularly in January 2023, following the most challenging winter. This supports the idea that economic hardship can lead to increased public demand for collective action in policy areas directly related to citizens' material well-being. However, this effect appears to be short-lived, as public concern over energy policy receded once the immediate crisis abated. Finally, we also observe an effect of the energy crisis on support for EU enlargement. However, significant coefficients in the pre-treatment period suggest that the parallel trends assumption is violated, making it difficult to draw strong causal conclusions. This may indicate that broader economic and political dynamics, beyond the energy crisis itself, were already shaping public attitudes toward enlargement before the invasion occurred.

The asymmetry in public response to the invasion versus the energy crisis likely reflects fundamental differences in how these crises are

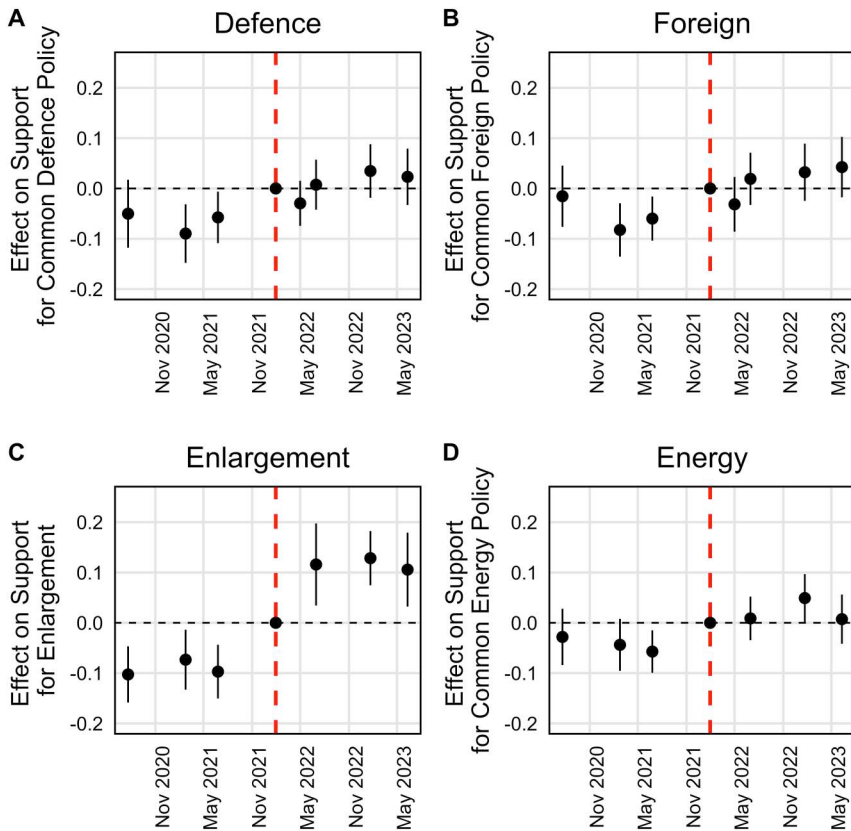


Figure 7. Event study estimates for the effect of exposure to the energy crisis on support for European integration by policy areas.

Note: 95% confidence intervals displayed. Based on two-way fixed effects regressions controlling for gender, age, education, urban-rural residence, profession, left-right ideological self-placement, party polarisation over Europe, the average position of EU member state governments on the EU, and closeness to the Russian border. For full model results, see Table A4 in the Appendix.

perceived and politicised. Military threats, like the Russian invasion, reveal the limits of national defence and evoke a shared sense of vulnerability, making supranational cooperation appear both necessary and urgent. This helps explain the increased public support for EU-level action in areas such as defence, foreign policy, and enlargement. In contrast, economic disruptions like the energy crisis are often viewed through a national lens, with governments seen as having the tools to manage them directly. The fact that responses to the energy crisis were primarily national may have reinforced this perception, dampening public demand for deeper integration. These differences in perceived urgency and capacity for national response help account for the stronger attitudinal shift triggered by the security threat.

Finally, we provide further evidence in support of a functionalist interpretation of these findings. After all, the increase in support for EU policy solutions detected above could still be due to a higher salience of identity-related concerns in the most affected regions. A potential way to disentangle these mechanisms is to conduct a placebo test, using support for integration in policy areas not functionally linked to the Ukraine crisis. If interdependence is the driving force, we should not see effects in unrelated policy domains. Figure A5 in the Appendix shows no significant treatment effect on support for EU-level policies on trade, digital market, free movement, funding for SMEs, labour and environmental regulations, or gender equality. In line with the results on support for enlargement, we find that individuals in regions closer to Russia are more likely to support an EU asylum policy and are less likely to support a hardening of borders. These results lend further support to our interpretation that functional interdependence, rather than broad sentiment shifts or identity-based mechanisms, is driving the results.⁷

Overall, our results illustrate how the Russian invasion of Ukraine has triggered a scenario of uneven external interdependence. By and large, with the exception of support for enlargement, Europeans' support for integration in the realms of foreign policy, defence, and energy policy has remained stable. However, support has increased significantly in regions experiencing heightened security threats as a direct consequence of the crisis. This underscores the importance of adopting both an outside-in perspective on European integration and a regional approach to understanding variations in public support.

Conclusion

The findings of this study contribute to a broader understanding of how geopolitical crises shape public attitudes toward European integration. Our analysis reveals that while the Russian invasion of Ukraine did not lead to an overall shift in support for supranational governance, it significantly influenced regional variations in public opinion. This regional heterogeneity underscores the importance of spatial dynamics in determining whether external shocks generate convergence or deepen divisions among EU member states. We find that external events can sustain a case of uneven external interdependence, with the most affected regions exhibiting a strong shift in support for further integration, while public opinion in the broader society remains largely unchanged (see Freudlsperger & Schramm, 2025, in this special issue). In light of this, one of the key takeaways from our study is that security threats, for regions geographically closer to Russia, have reinforced support for collective European action in defence and foreign policy. The increase in support for these policies among individuals in the most exposed regions suggests that external aggression serves as

a unifying force, encouraging a stronger role for the EU in safeguarding member states' security interests. Similarly, the rise in support for EU enlargement among residents of these regions highlights a strategic rationale for expanding the Union to bolster its geopolitical stability. This finding aligns with previous scholarship on crisis-driven integration, demonstrating that perceived external threats can foster greater willingness to pool sovereignty in areas directly related to security and stability.

Conversely, our findings suggest that the economic consequences of geopolitical crises, particularly those stemming from the energy crisis, yield a different public response. While we observe a temporary increase in support for a common EU energy policy in the regions hardest hit by the crisis—particularly in January 2023 following the most challenging winter—this effect appears to be short-lived. Unlike security threats, which generate lasting concerns and encourage structural shifts toward collective action, economic shocks seem to produce more volatile public attitudes. This underscores a critical distinction in how different types of crises influence European integration: security-based threats generate sustained support for supranational policies, while economic hardships elicit more transient and situational responses.

These results have important implications for European policymakers. They suggest that geopolitical threats can serve as a catalyst for deeper integration, particularly in areas related to defence, foreign policy, and enlargement. Policymakers seeking to advance European cooperation in these domains can leverage the heightened sense of collective vulnerability to advocate for stronger institutional frameworks. However, our findings also indicate that economic crises present a more complex challenge. While they can momentarily increase support for integration in affected regions, their effects may dissipate as economic conditions stabilise. This calls for more proactive and sustained policy interventions to maintain public trust in European solutions during periods of economic distress.

More broadly, our study contributes to the ongoing debate on how transnational crises shape European integration by highlighting the role of varying regional exposure. While events such as the Euro-crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the refugee crisis have each influenced public opinion on integration in different ways, the Russian invasion of Ukraine provides a particularly clear example of how security threats and economic shocks produce divergent effects. By demonstrating that spatial variation in threat exposure plays a crucial role in shaping attitudes toward European integration, our findings emphasise the need for regionally targeted policy responses that address both security and economic concerns.

This study is not without limitations. In particular, it would be interesting to assess the role of domestic elites in people's threat perceptions. While we control for different domestic political structures in our models, future

research could investigate how elite messages have channelled or constrained people's response to the Russian invasion (Hooghe *et al.*, 2024). Looking ahead, it is also important to explore whether similar spatial patterns emerge in response to other geopolitical crises and whether the observed shifts in public attitudes lead to tangible policy changes at the EU level. Additionally, as new external shocks emerge—whether in the form of environmental crises, technological disruptions, or shifting global power dynamics—it will be crucial to assess how these challenges interact with the existing structures of European governance and public opinion. Understanding these dynamics will not only provide valuable insights into the resilience of the European project, but also inform strategies for fostering deeper and more inclusive integration in an increasingly uncertain world.

Notes

1. For descriptive statistics of all variables used in the analysis, as well as fieldwork dates for each Eurobarometer wave, see Tables A1, A2, and A3 in the Appendix.
2. We use NUTS-1 regions for Germany, Malta, and Sweden, and NUTS-3 regions for Cyprus, Estonia, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, and Slovenia. For all other countries, data are available at the NUTS-2 level. For the distribution of unique respondents per Eurobarometer wave, see Figure A1 in the Appendix.
3. Figure A2 in the Appendix displays the regional distribution of the closeness to Russia variable.
4. The correlation between regional proximity to Russia and perceived security threat is moderate, reflecting substantial variation among more distant regions. However, this variation is asymmetric: nearly all regions close to Russia report high levels of perceived threat. In contrast, several distant regions also report elevated threat perceptions. This suggests that proximity functions more as a threshold—making threat perception nearly universal in border regions—while in more distant areas, other factors such as political narratives, media framing, or solidarity with Ukraine may also drive concern.
5. Figure A3 in the Appendix displays the temporal dynamics of this geographic variation.
6. Importantly, in the case of support for an EU foreign policy and for EU enlargement, our results show no evidence of pre-trends in these cases, reinforcing the credibility of our causal identification and the validity of the parallel trends assumption. Instead, in some periods, regions closer to Russia already displayed a higher support for an EU defence policy.
7. We also obtain suggestive evidence regarding public support for the economic and monetary union. Regions geographically closer to Russia show higher support after the invasion, whereas regions more exposed to the energy crisis display lower support. However, these effects are not statistically significant across all post-invasion periods.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available on the Harvard Dataverse at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/FJH6AK>.

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