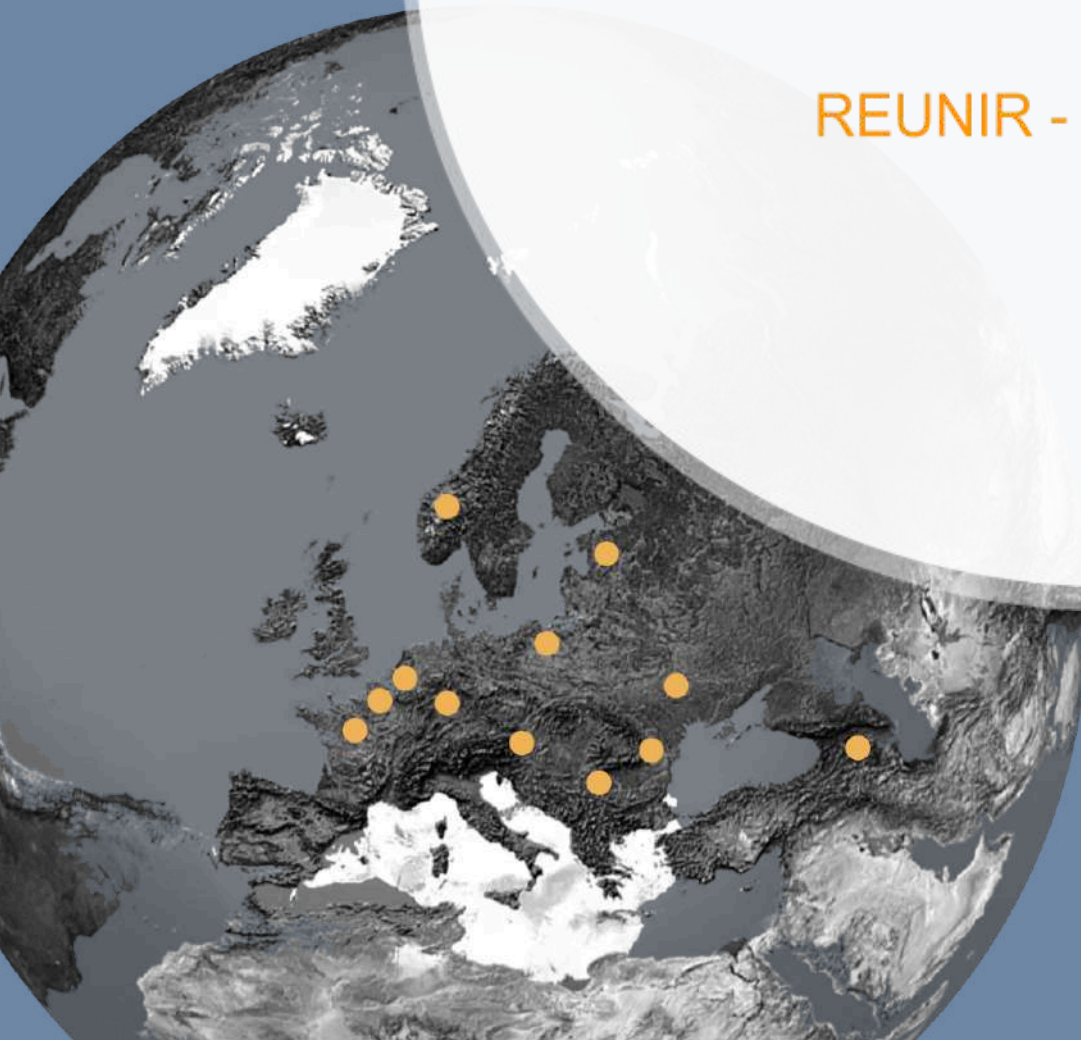




**PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR EU
ENLARGEMENT AND RUSSIA'S WAR ON
UKRAINE: HOW TO SUSTAIN THE
UNEASY MOMENTUM**

REUNIR - Guest Policy Paper



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SUMMARY & RECOMMENDATIONS

- Public support for EU enlargement and Ukraine's candidate status in particular have been strongly linked with the perception of Russia's war as a security threat for the EU.
- After an initial surge in public support for EU enlargement and Ukraine's accession following the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, it has stabilised and largely remained stable across EU member states.
- Public support for Ukraine's candidate status has been higher than that for EU enlargement in general, though significant variation exists across member states.
- By strongly emphasizing the security implications of Russia's ongoing aggression for Europe and focusing on the geopolitical rationales for enlargement, the Commission can help sustain public support for strategic EU expansion at a time when the transatlantic relationship is under severe strain.



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1. INTRODUCTION

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 triggered one of the most severe security crises in Europe since World War II, with far-reaching geopolitical and socio-economic implications. In response, the EU demonstrated strategic resolve by granting candidate status to Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. The long-stalled accession process for the Western Balkans also regained momentum, with accession negotiations beginning for Albania and North Macedonia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina attaining official candidate status. These historic decisions were framed by the EU in terms of geopolitical positioning and solidarity in the face of Russian aggression. They also coincided with a notable shift in public opinion in favour of enlargement.

This policy brief examines trends in EU public opinion on enlargement following Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Specifically, it assesses the extent to which support for enlargement - particularly Ukraine's candidacy - is associated with the perception of Russia's invasion as a security threat.¹ Finally, the brief provides policy recommendations to help maintain or strengthen public backing for future EU enlargement.

2. BACKGROUND

Following the "big-bang" enlargement of the 2000s, enthusiasm for further EU widening declined sharply. A key moment illustrating this shift was the Dutch referendum in 2016, where voters rejected the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement. Although the treaty was ultimately ratified, the Dutch government, under domestic pressure, sought additional assurances from EU leaders that it would not lead to Ukraine's accession.² Meanwhile, Britain's exit and the rise of populist, Eurosceptic forces across the continent and beyond further signalled that EU enlargement had been pushed into an uncertain future. The stalled integration process of existing candidates in the Western Balkans also dampened enthusiasm for welcoming new members soon.

However, everything changed on 24 February 2022, when Russia launched its invasion of Ukraine. In response, Ukraine - along with other Eastern Partnership countries - submitted urgent applications for EU membership. Almost immediately, public opinion surveys registered a sharp increase in support for EU enlargement, particularly for Ukraine's accession, even in traditionally sceptical member states

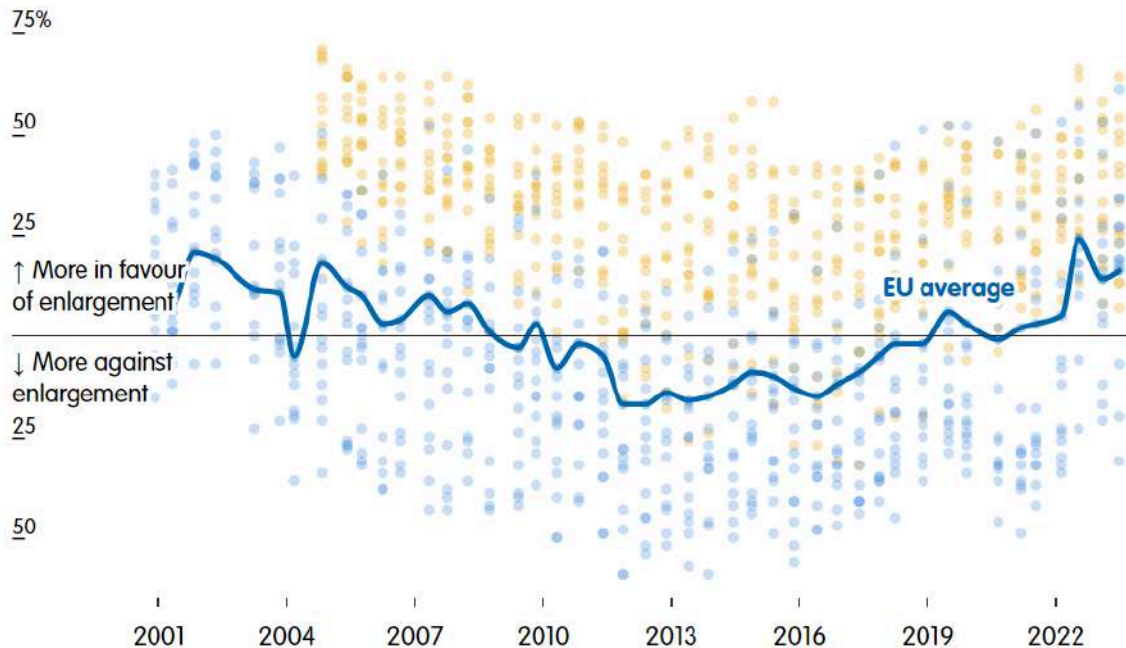
¹ By using Eurobarometer data to expand its geographic scope, this policy brief builds on and adds to the author's earlier academic work: Panchuk, D. (2024). The impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on public support for EU enlargement. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 31(10), 3128–3150.

² Leuffen, D., Dimitrova, A. L., Sedelmeier, U., Lavenex, S., Risse, T., & Schimmelfennig, F. (2024). Rhetorical action in a liberal international order in crisis: Theorising EU and NATO enlargements post-2022. *Journal of European Public Policy*, p. 7.

(Fig. 1).³ As of April 2022,⁴ a relative majority of respondents in every EU member state (except Hungary) supported Ukraine’s EU membership – something that would have been unthinkable just a year earlier.

Figure 1. Public support for enlargement in EU member states, 2000-2023.

Countries that joined the EU ● before 2004 ● in 2004 and after



Note: This figure shows the net difference between "for" and "against" opinions about the further enlargement of the EU to include other countries.⁵

It was likely the framing of enlargement as essential to the EU’s own security and a demonstration of solidarity with Ukraine and other neighbours vulnerable to Russian aggression that has played a decisive role in persuading both EU leaders and the public to embrace further widening. Nonetheless, the link between the ongoing Russian war on Ukraine and public support for EU enlargement has yet to be systematically explored. With some recent exceptions,⁶ European integration scholars and commentators have largely focused on peaceful periods, analysing various socioeconomic and

³ See also YouGov. (2022, March 24). Les Européens sont-ils favorables à l’adhésion de l’Ukraine à l’UE ? YouGov: What the world thinks. fr.yougov.com/news/2022/03/24/les-europeens-favorables-adhesion-de-lukraine/

⁴ European Commission. (2022). Flash Eurobarometer 506: EU’s response to the war in Ukraine.

⁵ Buras, P., & Morina, E. (2023). Catch-27: The contradictory thinking about enlargement in the EU. ECFR, p. 7, based on Eurobarometer, <https://datawrapper.dwcdn.net/6HKhk/4/>

⁶ Anghel, V., & Džankić, J. (2023). Wartime EU: Consequences of the Russia – Ukraine war on the enlargement process. *Journal of European Integration*, 45(3), 487–501; Gehring, K. (2022). Can External Threats Foster a European Union Identity? Evidence from Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine. *The Economic Journal*, 132(644), 1489–1516; Leuffen et al (2024).

identity-related factors in EU public opinion.⁷ In particular, it remains unclear whether, and to what extent, citizen concerns about the Russian invasion have been associated with increased public support for EU enlargement and the accession of specific candidate countries.

To address this question, I analysed data from multiple Eurobarometer surveys, which include representative samples from each of the 27 EU member states. Data were collected by Verian (former Kantar Public) through in-person or online face-to-face interviews conducted in respondents' respective languages. Eurobarometer surveys typically feature several items measuring support for EU enlargement, the accession of specific candidate countries, and individual concerns about key issues. For instance, support for enlargement is assessed by asking respondents whether they agree or disagree with the statement: *“Further enlargement of the EU to include other countries in future years.”* Support for Ukraine's accession is measured with the question: *“The EU has taken a series of actions in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following: Granting candidate status as a potential Member of the EU to Ukraine?”* Unfortunately, Eurobarometer has not consistently provided data post-invasion on other EU candidate countries. However, their level of support can sometimes be inferred by comparing Ukraine's accession support figures with general enlargement support. To measure Europeans' security concerns about Russia's war, Eurobarometer has regularly included the statement: *“Russia's invasion of Ukraine is a threat to the security of the EU”*, asking respondents to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement. The following sections present the most recent findings and insights based on these data.

2.1 Public support for enlargement remains stable but uneven across the EU

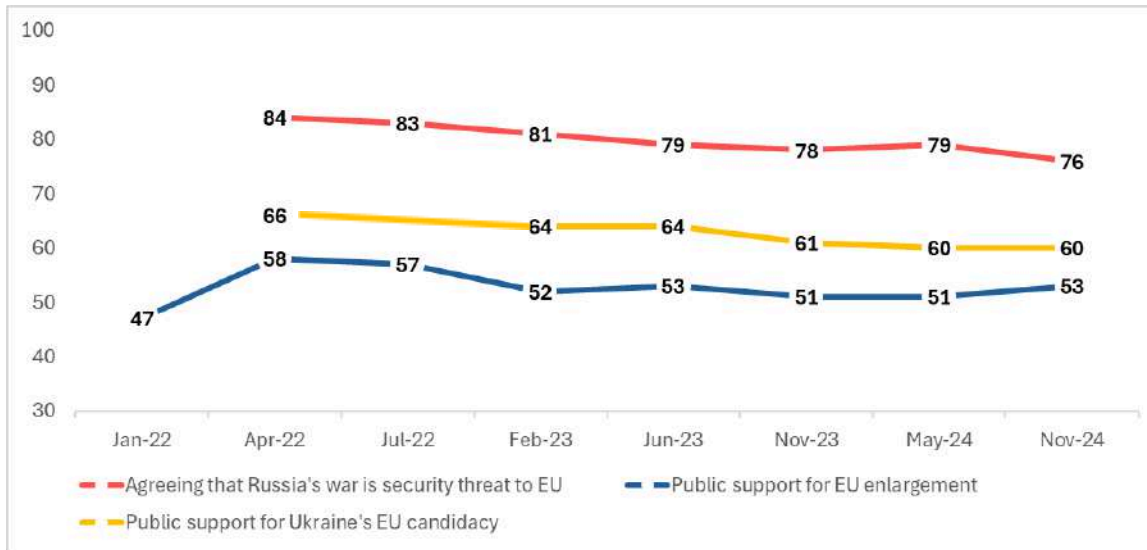
The analysis of survey data from January 2022 (just before Russia's invasion) to November 2024 confirms that, indeed, the EU public has become significantly more enthusiastic about enlargement post-invasion (Fig. 2). When it was last measured by Eurobarometer in 2010, the level of public support for Ukraine's accession stood at 37%,⁸ reaching a whopping 66% in 2022. However, after a spike following Russia's invasion, support for enlargement has stabilized, with recent indications of decline in some member states. At the same time, the number of people considering Russia's invasion of Ukraine a security threat for the EU has fallen by 3 p.p. since early 2024 and by 8 p.p. since 2022

⁷ De Vreese, C. H., & Boomgaarden, H. G. (2006). Media effects on public opinion about the enlargement of the European Union. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 44(2), 419–436; Hobolt, S. B. (2014). Ever closer or ever wider? Public attitudes towards further enlargement and integration in the European Union. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 21(5), 664–680.

⁸ European Commission. (2010). Standard Eurobarometer 74—Autumn 2010. <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/918>

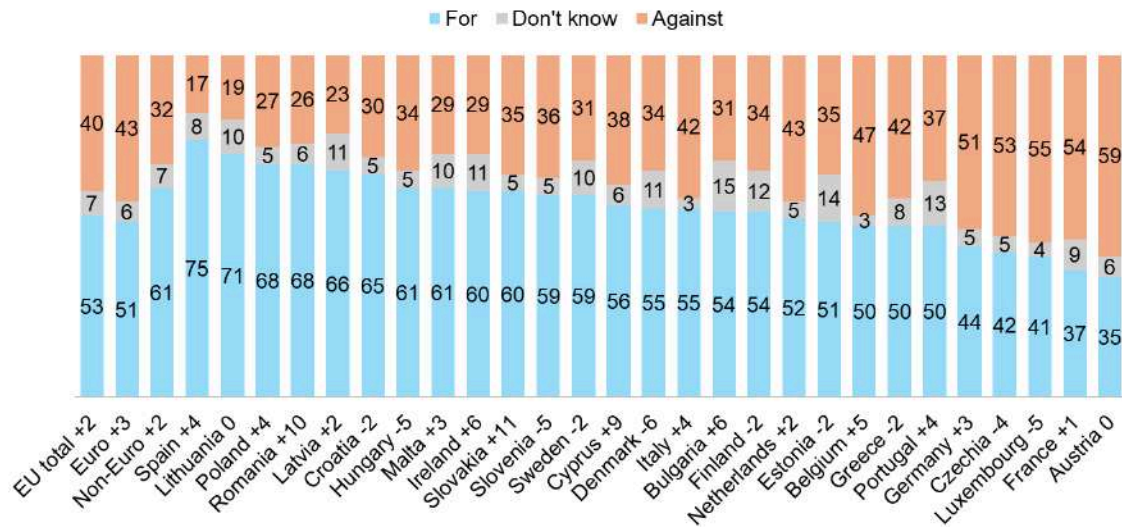
(Fig. 2, 5). In the absence of “big” news from the battlefield, this may be an indication of a lower interest in or awareness of the evolving security situation in Ukraine by European publics.

Figure 2. Perception of Russia’s war as a security threat to the EU and public support for EU enlargement / accession of Ukraine (%), 2022-2024⁹



The analysis of latest survey data point to several interesting observations. First, public support for the EU enlargement slightly increased throughout 2024, with the majority of EU citizens (53%) being in favour of EU widening as of autumn that year (Fig. 2, 3). However, publics in some EU member states were more supportive than others. For instance, the eurozone countries were on average 10% more sceptical about accepting new members than the non-eurozone ones (Fig. 3). The most supporters of enlargement (~70%) are in Spain, Lithuania, and Poland, with Romania rapidly catching up, whereas Austrians, French, Luxembourgish, Czechs, and Germans have the most enlargement sceptics.

⁹ Based on data from Flash Eurobarometer 506 and Standard Eurobarometers 96-102.

Figure 3. Public support for EU enlargement across member states (%), Oct/Nov 2024¹⁰


Note: the figures next to country names denote percentage-point change in support from Apr/May 2024.

There also continues to be a divide in public opinion between countries that joined the EU since 2004 and the older member states (Fig. 3, 1). The new member states, particularly Lithuania, Poland, and Romania (but not Czechia), are clearly more supportive of EU widening than the old Europe. Among the more supportive, older member states are Spain, Ireland, and Sweden, while Germany, France, Luxembourg, and Austria are the greatest enlargement sceptics. This geographical distribution of public opinion may also suggest that the net beneficiaries of the EU budget are more enthusiastic about widening than the net contributors.¹¹

While enlargement support on average minimally increased at the EU level over the course of 2024, there were some important variations across member states (Fig. 3). Whereas support most declined in Denmark, Hungary, Luxembourg, Slovenia, and Czechia (4–6 p.p.), it visibly strengthened in Cyprus, Romania, and Slovakia (9–11 p.p), while remaining virtually unchanged in France, Austria, and the Netherlands.

¹⁰ European Commission. (2024, November). Standard Eurobarometer 102 - Autumn 2024. <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3215>

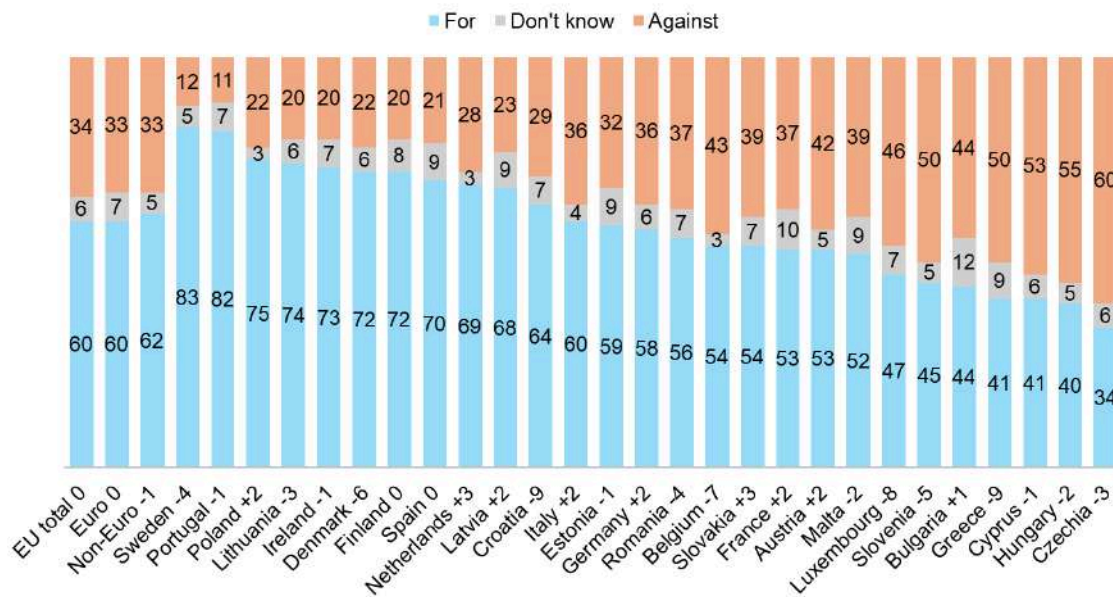
¹¹ Hobolt, S. B. (2014). Ever closer or ever wider? Public attitudes towards further enlargement and integration in the European Union. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 21(5), 664–680.

2.2 Public support for Ukraine’s accession has remained stable but stagnated or declined in some member states

Public support for Ukraine’s EU candidacy largely mirrors broader trends in support for EU enlargement, with some notable exceptions. The strongest backing for Ukraine’s accession is found in Sweden, Portugal, and Poland, while scepticism is highest in Czechia, Hungary, and Cyprus (Fig. 4). Over the course of 2024, support increased in the Netherlands and Slovakia (+3 p.p. each) but declined in Greece, Croatia, Luxembourg, and Belgium (-7 to -9 p.p.).

On average, EU public support for Ukraine’s candidacy was 7 percentage points higher than for enlargement overall. This suggests that some respondents who are generally sceptical of enlargement view Ukraine’s accession more favourably. (Fig. 2, 4, 5). This trend may stem from their sense of solidarity with Ukraine amid Russian aggression and/or from the belief that welcoming Ukraine into the EU is a geopolitically sound strategy.

Figure 4. Granting EU candidate status to Ukraine as response to Russia’s invasion (%), Oct/Nov 2024¹²



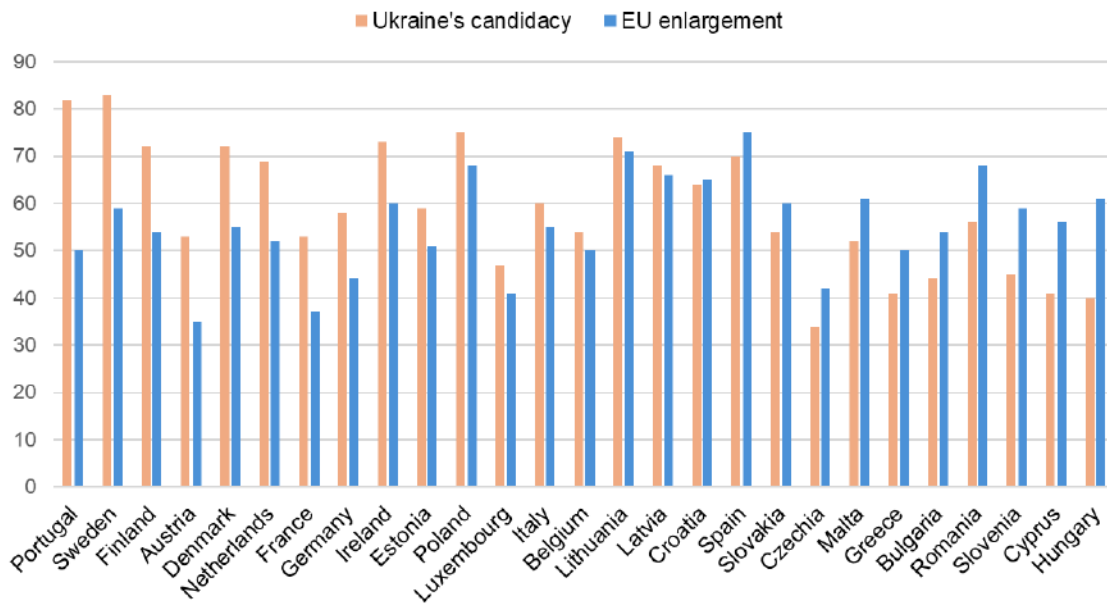
Note: the figures next to country names denote percentage-point change in support from Apr/May 2024.

This tendency to support Ukraine’s EU accession more than enlargement in general is particularly pronounced in Portugal and the Nordic countries (Sweden, Denmark, and Finland). It is also significant

¹² Standard Eurobarometer 102 - Autumn 2024.

in Austria, the Netherlands, France, and Germany (Fig. 5). However, this pattern does not hold across all member states. For instance, in Lithuania, Latvia, and Croatia, support for Ukraine’s candidacy in October-November 2024 was nearly identical to the overall support for EU enlargement in those countries. Conversely, in some newer member states, such as Hungary, Cyprus, Slovenia, and Romania, citizens expressed stronger support for further EU enlargement but were more sceptical about Ukraine’s accession. This might be due to the higher influence of pro-Russian narratives and disinformation about Ukraine in some of these countries and hence a stronger preference for the European integration of the Western Balkans and/or other EU candidates, rather than Ukraine.

Figure 5. Public support for EU enlargement and Ukraine’s candidate status (%), Oct/Nov 2024¹³



Note: the member states are sorted by percentage-point difference between support for Ukraine’s candidate status and overall enlargement support.

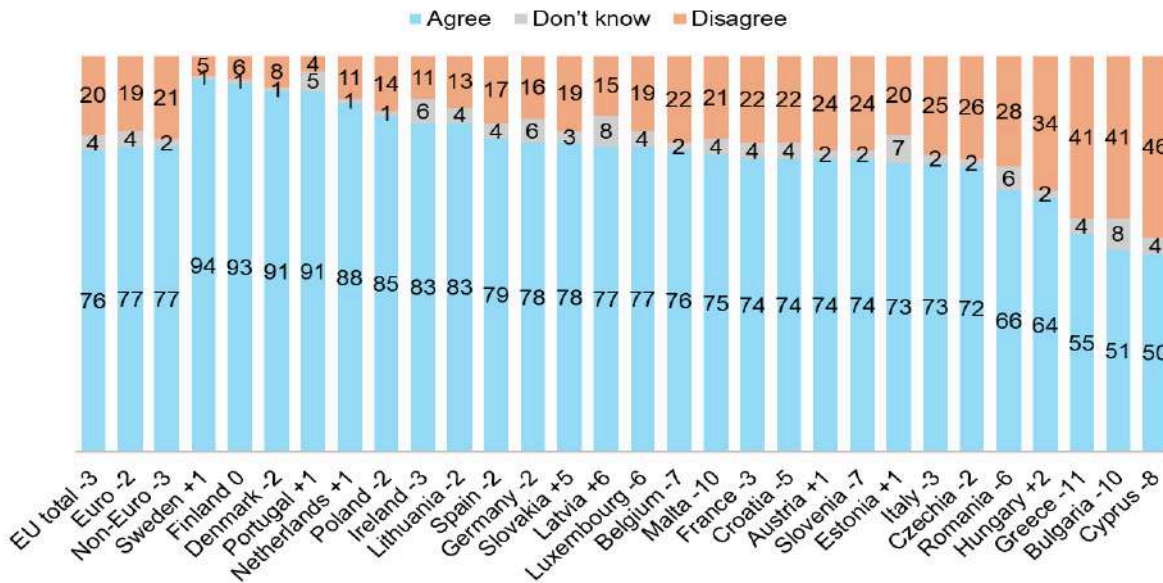
¹³ Standard Eurobarometer 102 - Autumn 2024.

2.3 Security concerns about Russia’s invasion are still running high but may be gradually dwindling

Perception of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine as a security threat to the EU remains high across nearly all member states, reaching 90% among respondents in Nordic countries and Portugal (Fig. 5, 2). For the Nordics, this heightened concern may stem from their geographical proximity to Russia and the repeated warnings by officials - such as in Sweden - about the risk of Russia’s invading more countries in Europe. Portugal’s strong threat perception, however, is less easily explained by these factors. In contrast, lower levels of concern in Cyprus, Bulgaria, Greece, and Hungary may reflect these countries’ historically close ties with Russia or the potential effects of pro-Russian disinformation. The minor decline in perceived threat levels across the EU throughout 2024 (-3 p.p.) could be a result of decreased coverage of Russia’s invasion in EU domestic media and political discourse.

In a similar vein, citizens in countries most sceptical about Ukraine’s accession also tend to be less concerned about the security repercussions of Russia’s war for the EU. For instance, countries that are most worried about Russia’s security threat for the EU are also typically strong backers of Ukraine’s candidacy. Additionally, in countries such as Belgium, Luxembourg, Greece, and Romania, where threat perception declined in 2024, public support for Ukraine’s candidacy also weakened. However, in Slovakia and Latvia, the relationship appears to be inverse. This link with war concerns seems, however, less pronounced in the overall support for EU enlargement (Fig. 6).

Figure 6. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is a threat to the security of the EU (%), Oct/Nov 2024¹⁴



Note: the figures next to country names denote percentage-point change for “Agree” from Apr/May 2024

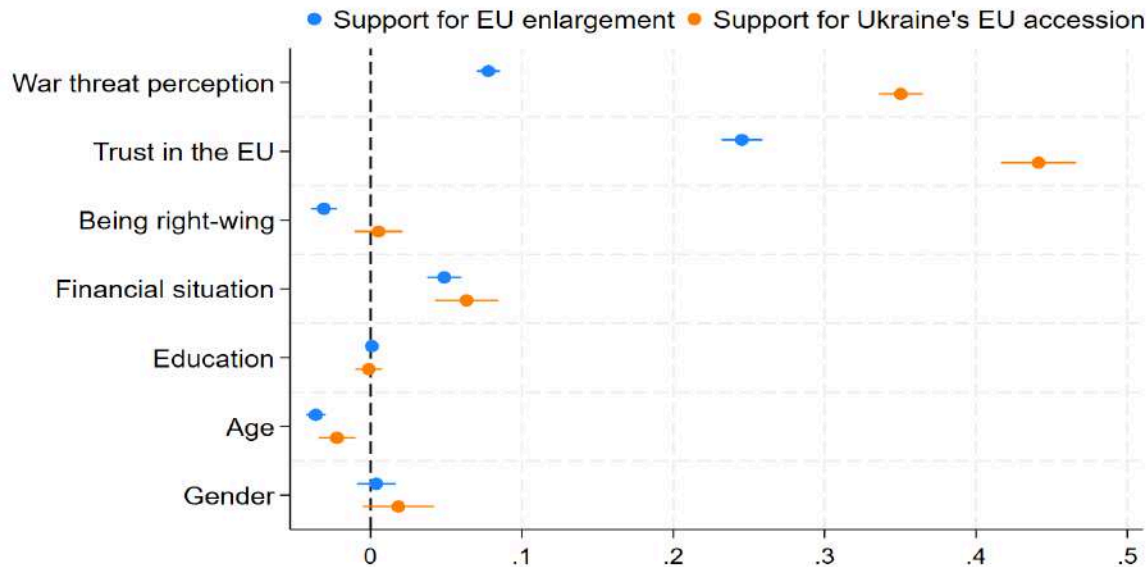
2.4 War concerns are linked with greater support for Ukraine’s EU accession, but less so – with overall enlargement

Multivariate regression analysis has statistically confirmed the link between support for EU enlargement (including Ukraine’s accession) and the perception of Russia’s invasion as a security threat.¹⁵ Indeed, EU citizens who deem Russia’s invasion as a security threat are more likely to support Ukraine’s EU candidate status and, to a lesser extent, EU enlargement in general (Fig. 7). This relationship also works in reverse: those less concerned about the war tend to be less supportive of enlargement and even less - of Ukraine’s candidacy. The finding remains robust even after accounting for important socioeconomic and country-specific factors such as trust in the EU, political ideology, education, financial situation, gender, and age. This finding thus reinforces the abovementioned trends, whereby the perceived threat of Russia’s invasion positively correlates with public support for enlargement and particularly Ukraine’s candidate status.

¹⁴ Standard Eurobarometer 102 - Autumn 2024.

¹⁵ This analysis is based on individual-level data from Standard Eurobarometer 100.2, conducted in October-November 2023 and made available by the Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences (GESIS), <https://doi.org/10.4232/1.14363>

Figure 7. Regression coefficient plot of determinants of public support for EU enlargement and accession of Ukraine, Oct/Nov 2023



Note: positive associations are mapped to the right of the vertical zero line, negative - to the left. The more extreme the value – the stronger the association. Values with “whiskers” (95% confidence intervals) crossing the zero line are not statistically significant. The analysis controls for respondent’s country and applies population weighting supplied by Eurobarometer.

The analysis of control variables largely aligns with expectations in the European integration literature on public opinion. Trust in the EU emerges as one of the strongest predictors of support for enlargement, with an even stronger link in the case of Ukraine. Right-wing respondents are generally more likely to oppose further EU widening, though this does not extend to Ukraine’s accession. Education level does not show a statistically significant association with enlargement support. However, a better financial situation correlates with higher support for enlargement. Older individuals tend to be less supportive of EU enlargement than younger ones, though this age-related trend is slightly weaker regarding Ukraine’s candidate status. Lastly, there is no significant relationship between gender and support for EU enlargement.

3. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Using multi-year survey data from Eurobarometer for all 27 EU member states before and after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, this brief has evaluated the shifts in EU public opinion on enlargement, Ukraine’s candidate status, and Europeans’ threat perceptions related to the war. The results reveal a spike in support for both EU enlargement and Ukraine’s candidate status immediately after Russia’s invasion in February 2022. Almost three years after, a majority of EU citizens surveyed still support further expansion of the EU to include other countries, albeit with important variation across the member states. Public support for Ukraine’s accession remains higher than that for EU enlargement as a broader policy, though this pattern also does not hold equally across all member states.

Additionally, I find a positive link between EU citizens’ perception of Russian aggression as a security threat for Europe and their support for enlargement, and for Ukraine’s candidacy in particular. The European Commission’s framing of enlargement as a matter of security, geopolitics, and solidarity appears to have resonated with many citizens. Ukraine’s fight for Europe’s democratic values against authoritarian Russia and its allies may have also persuaded some Europeans to take a clear stance of support for Ukraine, including through endorsement of its EU candidate status. Thus, the perception of the Russian invasion as a challenge to the democratic world order¹⁶ may have convinced some in the EU to lay aside their traditional concerns about enlargement. The Russian threat may have also consolidated a sense of European identity, through a rally-round-the-flag effect, leading to more public support for European integration.¹⁷

The EU’s decision to grant Ukraine and a few other aspiring countries a membership perspective, as well as to open the negotiation process, may have been facilitated by the positive shift in public opinion on enlargement. The fact that Europeans have been more enthusiastic about it than before Russia’s large-scale aggression could also be used by the European Commission as an additional argument to further speed up the accession process. The Commission’s seizing the opportunity afforded by Russia’s invasion to breathe a new life into the enlargement policy may well prove far-sighted, if not seen to go at the expense of the values-based approach.¹⁸ By continuously appealing to the geopolitical implications of this war for the EU, solidarity, and shared European

¹⁶ Akhvediani, T. (2022). Geopolitical and Security Concerns of the EU’s Enlargement to the East: The Case of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. *Intereconomics*, 57(4), p. 227.

¹⁷ Nicoli, F. et al (2024). Closer during crises? European identity during the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 31(10), 3066–3092.

¹⁸ Emerson, M., & Blockmans, S. (2025). A redynamised EU Enlargement Process, but hovering between Accession and the Alternatives. *SCEEUS*. <https://sceeus.se/en/publications/a-redynamised-eu-enlargement-process-but-hovering-between-accession-and-the-alternatives/>

values, the Commission and most EU member states could maintain favourable public support for the accession process of Ukraine and other candidate countries.

However, public opinion also seems fragile as demonstrated by some flattening out of enlargement support and threat perceptions in 2024. Despite intensive battles still raging on the frontlines and daily Russian drone and missile attacks against Ukrainian cities, this war is gradually disappearing from the EU political and media spotlight. With the dwindling public interest in security developments in Ukraine, there is also a risk of diminishing enlargement support among Europeans over time. A resurgence of nativist and populist sentiment on both sides of the Atlantic requires more strategic effort on the EU's part to keep the enlargement process alive.

For the enlargement policy to be supported by public opinion and ultimately successful this time around, it may need to be explicitly based on the geopolitical rationale. As Putin's Russia appears determined to continue and expand its aggression in Europe, the European Commission should continue driving home the point that there is no viable alternative to a security-driven enlargement, which would integrate Ukraine and other European allies. Indeed, the latest statements and actions by Trump administration officials in Munich and Riyadh leave little doubt that ensuring its own security becomes the EU's utmost concern for the foreseeable future.

ABOUT REUNIR

REUNIR, a Horizon-funded project with 12 partners from across Europe, examines how the EU can strengthen its foreign and security toolboxes to bolster the resilience and transformation of (potential) candidate countries in a new age of international relations. REUNIR’s foresight approach takes the fundamental uncertainty and openness of alternative futures seriously. Adding the effects of ‘protean power’ unleashed in unforeseen circumstances to a multi-disciplinary approach to the research of the EU’s ‘control power’ in relations with strategic rivals, REUNIR empirically assesses foreign threats to the military, socio-economic and democratic resilience of nine neighbouring countries, determines capability shortfalls, maps local perceptions of the EU’s support and political perspectives inside the EU on neighbourhood relations. Outlining scenarios up to 2035, REUNIR offers evidence-based policy recommendations to mitigate malign foreign interference and contribute to strengthening the EU’s external action.



