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The Road to Strategic Autonomy: Reflections from the Russia-Ukraine War

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Introduction

In 2016, the European Union (EU) launched a new Global Strategy (EUGS), outlining its ambition to acquire "strategic autonomy" (European Union 2016). Even though the strategy did not precisely define what this term meant, it nonetheless signalled that the EU was determined to enhance its ability to carry out military operations with greater autonomy from the United States (Tocci 2021). The EUGS injected fresh momentum into European security and defence efforts, spurring the implementation of various initiatives to enhance European defence cooperation, including the Permanent Structured Cooperation, the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence, and the European Defence Fund. These measures collectively sought to reinforce the EU's strategic autonomy and laid the groundwork for a European Security and Defence Union.

However, despite the implementation of significant initiatives, many scholars remain sceptical about the EU's ability to achieve its goals, at least in the short and medium term (Menon 2011; Simón 2017; Hyde-Price 2018; Barrie *et al.* 2019, 2021). The hypotheses developed by these academics were summarised in an important study conducted by Meijer and Brooks in 2021. According to these scholars, two mutually reinforcing constraints prevent the EU from achieving strategic autonomy: "strategic cacophony", or profound, continent-wide divergences across all domains of national defence policies – most notably, threat perceptions, and severe military capacity shortfalls that would be very costly and time-consuming to close. To develop their hypotheses, Meijer and Brooks analysed the historical trajectory and the current and likely future state of European interests and defence capacity. Their analysis is rigorous and systematic, providing very clear results. However, as they explain in their article, it is not conducted by examining case studies but instead based on a hypothetical scenario in which the EU finds itself facing the Russian threat alone without the United States. As such, although their hypotheses effectively explain why the European defence integration process often encounters obstacles, they have not been verified considering the actual response implemented by European countries in reaction to a real military threat.

Within this context, the Ukrainian war acts as a proving ground to explore the consistency of these assertions. With the war, the EU was confronted with a signific-

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ant threat to its security. How it reacted greatly helps in understanding how well-founded the arguments presented by pessimist scholars are. Analysing the EU's response to the war in Ukraine is also helpful in understanding to what extent the EU members have managed to overcome the problem of strategic cacophony and address their military deficits since they were identified by Meijer and Brooks in 2021.

This article provides a detailed analysis of the European Union's response to the outbreak of the Russo-Ukraine war. The objective is to provide an initial exploratory analysis that allows for some preliminary considerations regarding the war's effect on the strategic cacophony and the defence capability shortfall of the European Union. For this reason, the article analyses the reaction of the EU on three analytical dimensions. First, the measures taken by the EU and its member states in support of Ukraine and against Russia. We outline the assistance provided by the EU to Ukraine, including its form, evolution, contributors, and amounts, both at the supranational and national level, including sanctions. This allows us to evaluate to what extent the EU's strategic cacophony has affected the response's cohesiveness. The second one is the reaction of the public opinion. We analyse the EU's public attitude toward the main issues concerning the war. This allows us to assess how and to what extent the perception of the Russian threat varies from one country to another and across time. The third dimension is military adaptation, namely the increase in defence spending and the investments in conventional military systems. This dimension allows us to assess how much the war in Ukraine has succeeded, at least so far, in pushing Europeans to address their military deficits. Of all these dimensions, the analysis is conducted cross-country and cross-time. The data primarily consists of secondary sources, predominantly from the Military Balance, the EU's Eurobarometer, and the Ukraine Support Tracker Dataset developed by the Kiel Institute, supplemented by secondary sources, primarily comprised of grey literature and reports.

The article is structured as follows. The first part provides a brief overview of the debate on strategic autonomy; the second part introduces our research design; the third part presents the analysis results; the fourth discusses our results. Finally, the last section concludes.

1. The Debate on the European Union's Strategic Autonomy

In the last twenty years, the emergence and progression of European defence cooperation have sparked a significant debate among academics. Although this debate has been ongoing since the early 2000s, particularly since the initiation of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), it received a significant acceleration in 2016, when the new EUGS publicly revealed the EU's new ambitions in the defence and security domain. This debate has not been limited to Europe, but has also garnered considerable attention beyond the Atlantic, given its relevance to US grand strategy and NATO (Brooks, Wohlforth 2016). Scholars participating in the ongoing US grand strategy debate were interested in engaging with this issue because the prospect of Europe achieving defence autonomy holds implications for US resource allocation,

potentially allowing a shift in focus towards the Indo-Pacific region (Walt 2019; Posen 2021a). Conversely, a Europe reliant on external defence arrangements would necessitate continued US presence on the continent.

Within this debate, it is possible to distinguish two main perspectives. The first is optimistic. This perspective was prevalent in the early years of the CSDP when the prospects of a more integrated Europe in the defence sector were more favourable. This group of scholars acknowledged that the EU still faces many obstacles to becoming autonomous from the United States, but they also recognise that the EU has made significant progress that bodes well for the future (Smith 2004; Meyer 2005; Cross 2011). This view is supported by several American scholars advocating for a policy of restraint by the USA, suggesting that they should allow Europe to take more independent responsibility for its security. As one of the most optimistic scholars argued in 2006, "Europe will within a decade be reasonably well prepared to go it alone" (Posen 2006: 153). This optimistic scenario, however, was followed by a period of disillusionment. The 2008 financial crisis and the subsequent economic depression led to drastic cuts in defence budgets, while the 2011 military operations in Libya – conducted first through a bilateral Franco-British mission and then by NATO – confirmed a growing distrust towards the CSDP (Menon 2011; Hyde-Price 2018). In the last ten years, therefore, the optimistic view has given ground to a more pessimistic view. Scholars embracing this perspective believe that the obstacles the EU must overcome to achieve strategic autonomy are too significant, at least in the short to medium term, preventing them from operating more autonomously from the United States (Meijer, Brooks 2021). As a result, they argue that the USA should not disengage from Europe because it would not be able to ensure its own security independently.

Although these two views differ on multiple points, there are two primary dimensions where the differences are most pronounced (Posen 2021b). The first dimension concerns the perception of threats among European countries. Pessimist scholars argue that one of the most significant obstacles, if not the most important, to the EU's ambitions in the defence domain is the presence of discrepancies in national threat assessments (Meijer, Wyss 2019; Béraud-Sudreau, Giegerich 2023). Europeans are profoundly divided as to the main threat to their security. Meijer and Brooks have referred to this situation as "strategic cacophony"[1], defined as the presence of "profound, continent-wide divergences across all the domains of national defence policies, most notably threat perceptions" (Meijer, Brooks 2021: 9-10). The varied threat perceptions of European states have been shaped by a complex mix of history, politics, and geography, as well as by changes in the regional strategic environment. The main problem, they argue, is that, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Europeans lacked any semblance of a unifying threat. As a consequence, wide discrepancies emerged in their threat prioritizations. Whereas some states rank terrorism and instability in the Mediterranean region at the top of their threat assessments,

[1] "Strategic cacophony" is a term first coined, although without being defined, in a 2013 policy paper that referred to the incongruences in the national security strategy documents of the EU member states. See De France, Witney 2013.

others identify Russia as their overarching security concern while largely ignoring the diffuse threats on Europe's southern shores. Between these two extremes, different countries and groups of countries exhibit varying perceptions of their core security challenges. Strategic cacophony negatively affects the ability of various governments to support a European defence policy (Howorth 2017). First, it leads to capacity gaps in the military domain. This is because different perceptions of threats correspond to investments in various weapon systems. Second, it makes institutionalised, intra-European defence cooperation harder. Third, it prevents the EU from adopting a common response in the case of external aggression.

Optimist scholars argue that this discussion is excessively pessimistic. In their view, differences exist among EU members on the issue of threat prioritisation, but the EU can play an important role in bringing European countries together in the security realm. In this regard, Posen stresses that the EU is "a good base" on which Europeans could build an autonomous defensive capability and that the emergence of a Common Security and Defense Policy "demonstrates that [the Europeans] can look after themselves" (Posen 2018: 89-90). Pessimist scholars reply that the EU is not an effective institutional platform for overcoming Europe's strategic divergence, pointing to the fact that the EU is a kaleidoscope of countries with diverging interests that operates on the basis of consensus in the field of foreign and defence policy—thus making the Common Security and Defense Policy a "structurally limited undertaking" (Howorth, Menon 2009).

The second dimension on which pessimist and optimist scholars' views diverge the most is military capability. Pessimist scholars argue that the EU suffer from a severe capacity shortfall, especially in the conventional dimension (Barrie *et al.* 2019, 2021; Meijer, Brooks, 2021). Meijer and Brooks have outlined four main hurdles in these dimensions (2021). First, since the early 1990s, Europeans, especially those in Western Europe, including France, Germany, and Italy, have rapidly reduced the resources and personnel available and have structured their military apparatus for conducting crisis management operations out of the area (Coticchia *et al.* 2023; Coticchia, Di Giulio 2024). Further, these countries also face readiness issues. This means that not only they have few assets, but many of them are not ready for deployment. Second, they point out that the effective employment of modern weapons systems is far more challenging than in past eras for various reasons and argue that the EU lacks both these systems and the capacity to use them. In their view, to overcome this deficit, the European Union would need to buy large amounts of new C4ISR systems (*e.g.*, surveillance and communication satellites; early warning and control aircraft; sensor systems; air, naval, and land command and control platforms) and invest the financial resources needed to develop the skills to use these systems. Since the EU member states are reluctant to invest resources into the military domain and are increasingly struggling with recruiting high-skilled personnel, overcoming this deficit would take decades. Third, Europe lacks a centralised command structure like that of NATO, without which it is impossible to conduct operations coordinating numerous quantities of personnel and weapon systems. Without US leadership and command-and-control hardware, the

Europeans could not manage allied forces for a war with a country such as Russia. Fourth, the European military industry is too fragmented. Today, European factories produce too many different weapon systems, creating inefficiencies (Calcara *et al.* 2023).

In contrast to the negative view, an optimistic view considers it plausible that the EU could develop the military and political capabilities necessary to achieve a strategic autonomy that enables it to address its security more independently within a relatively short period of time. This view is characteristic of scholars who support American restraint (Posen 2006). On military capabilities, they point out that Europe's deficits are exaggerated. Posen argues that the EU has the material wherewithal to fight Russia (Posen 2020, 2021b). The point they raise is that Europe already has enormous potential today, with a GDP of 600 trillion, significantly higher than that of Russia, with which it could quickly address all the problems raised by pessimistic scholars in a short time (Posen 2014, 2020; Walt 2019). They also note that Europe has an advantage in manpower superiority over anyone else, as it has a population of 600 million. Consequently, the Europeans could impose a long attrition war on Russia, in which Europe could mobilise its superior resources. Readiness might be low, although they say that this allegation is based on anecdotal information but that this can easily be raised. Finally, they reckon that the EU has overlapping production capacities but that these inefficiencies in procurement are exaggerated (Posen 2020).

So far, these hypotheses have been tested through official document analysis, interviews, counterfactual analysis or war-games. Few empirical case studies have been conducted to verify Europeans' threat perception and ability to recover their military capabilities. Within this context, the Ukrainian war acts as a proving ground to evaluate the credibility of these assertions. With the war, the European Union was confronted with a significant threat to its security and had to react. How it responded greatly helps in understanding how well-founded the arguments presented by scholars are.

The initial studies on the topic suggest that Russia's attack on Ukraine has significantly weakened strategic cacophony. Mader (2024) showed that the war has led to increased perceptions of threat and stronger support for collective defence among European countries. He also demonstrated that the Russia's invasion of Ukraine clarified Europeans' preference for NATO over an EU alternative and boosted Europeans' willingness to defend other European countries. These findings are in line with other studies that provided evidence that Russia's unexpected acts of aggression against Ukraine in 2014 and 2022 strengthened European identity, trust in EU institutions and support for various EU policies (Fernández *et al.* 2023; Gehring 2022; Steiner *et al.* 2023; Wang, Moise 2023), and that Europeans who perceive higher levels of international threat are more supportive of European security and defence integration (Graf 2020; Mader *et al.* 2023; Mader *et al.* 2024). These are in line with the hypothesis according to which the notion that common threat perceptions may foster alliance cohesion (Everts, Isernia 2015). Recent work by Graf, Steinbrecher, and Biehl (2023) reports not only that threat perceptions and support for collective defence increased among the German population following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 but also that the increase in the latter was more pronounced among those who perceived a high level of threat.

This article aims to contribute to this debate by providing a comprehensive descriptive analysis of the EU's reaction. It examines the main initiatives of the EU and its member states, the internal adaptation that the war has caused within European states and the reaction of public opinion. The goal is to provide an initial assessment of the validity of the principal hypotheses developed in the scholarly debate and to furnish a basis for further development of the discussion more grounded on empirical analysis. Without claiming to provide a definitive assessment of the war's effect on the European integration process in the defence sector, the article merely offers some initial points of reflection that emerge from the analysis.

2. Research Design

Analytically, we divide the EU's reaction into three dimensions. The first dimension includes all the initiatives launched by the EU and its members to provide material aid to Ukraine and weaken Russia. To analyse the EU's assistance, we distinguish between military assistance (transfer of weapons and ammunition), financial assistance (grants and loans) and humanitarian assistance (refugees). In doing that, we rely on the data furnished by the Ukraine Support Tracker (Trebesch *et al.* 2024), a database of military, financial and humanitarian aid provided by a German think-tank, the Kiel Institute for the World Economy. The dataset distinguishes between allocations and commitment. Allocations are defined as aid that is earmarked and/or specified for delivery in the near term. Governments allocate aid by specifying an aid package to be sent to Ukraine. These announcements can usually be linked to a previous specific government commitment to military, financial or humanitarian aid. In practice, the commitment is "drawn down" and specified through an allocation, thus moving closer to the actual delivery to Ukraine. All allocations coded are intended for delivery in the short to medium term, meaning in a few days, weeks or months. Commitment includes aid to be allocated or delivered within the next fiscal year (short-term commitment) or over a horizon of two or more years (multi-year commitment). Initiatives launched with the aim of directly weakening Russia mainly consist of sanctions. To analyse sanctions, we rely on data provided by the official website of the European Commission and the European Parliament. We examine which sanctions have been implemented and how many.

The second analytical dimension is the attitude of public opinion. Within this dimension, we focus on the attitude of public opinion toward those issues, which we consider relevant to assess the validity of the hypotheses presented in the prior section: strategic cacophony and defence capability shortfall. We use data from the EU Eurobarometer, a collection of cross-country public opinion surveys conducted regularly on behalf of the EU Institutions. We analyse the results of the surveys conducted by the EU Eurobarometer from April 2022 to November 2023.

The third dimension includes the initiatives implemented by EU members to strengthen their armed forces. Specifically, we focus on initiatives to modify the budget and to invest in conventional military capabilities (main battle tank, artillery,

infantry fighting vehicle). For both of them, we use data from the International Institute of Strategic Studies' Military Balances (2020-2024).

3. Analysis. The European Union's Initiatives

The European Union and its members have implemented extraordinary actions to aid Ukraine and its populace, weaken Russia, and strengthen Europe's security. These initiatives include providing Ukraine with financial, humanitarian, and military assistance, applying sanctions against Russia, and deploying military contingents to Eastern Europe to reinforce NATO's deterrence and defence capabilities.

At the institutional level, the EU implemented a series of groundbreaking measures in response to the conflict in Ukraine. Firstly, the EU endorsed a strategic compass aimed at delineating a cohesive foreign policy and security strategy, while also strengthening its collaboration with NATO. Additionally, the EU adopted multiple sanctions packages targeting President Vladimir Putin and his close circle of oligarchs, aiming to impose financial constraints, politically deter Russia, and undermine its economic capacity to sustain the ongoing aggressive war. Concurrently, the EU made history by activating the European Peace Facility (EPF), a novel financial instrument linked to the new EU multi-annual budget. This initiative mark the first instance where EU funds were directed towards supporting the Ukrainian military, including the procurement of lethal weapons. Furthermore, the EU launched a Military Assistance Mission focused on training Ukrainian army officers in the effective utilization of advanced weaponry provided by European nations. In the early summer of 2023, the European Parliament (EP) and the Council of the European Union jointly approved the Act on Supporting Ammunition Production (ASAP). The primary objective of ASAP is to bolster the production capabilities of the EU defense industry. This pioneering initiative represents a significant step in industrial defense, expediting the supply of ground-to-ground artillery ammunition and missiles crucial for Ukraine's battlefield needs, funded entirely by EU resources for the first time.

3.1. EU's Assistance to Ukraine

Based on the data provided by the Ukraine Support Tracker developed by the Kiel Institute, the combined support from the EU institutions and its member states to Ukraine as of 15th February 2024 amounted to over €144 billion across various forms of military, financial, humanitarian, and emergency aid (Trebesch *et al.* 2024: 8). In terms of allocations, total EU aid totals €77 billion. Regarding the United States, the total commitment amounts to €68.72 billion, while the allocations are EUR 66.6 billion. It is evident, therefore, that a significant gap exists between commitments and allocations among EU countries, as only about 50% of promised aid has been allocated for delivery or disbursement. This implies that the aid reaching Ukraine is much smaller than what commitment numbers suggest, and it also indicates that the EU still has ample financial room to allocate future aid to Ukraine.

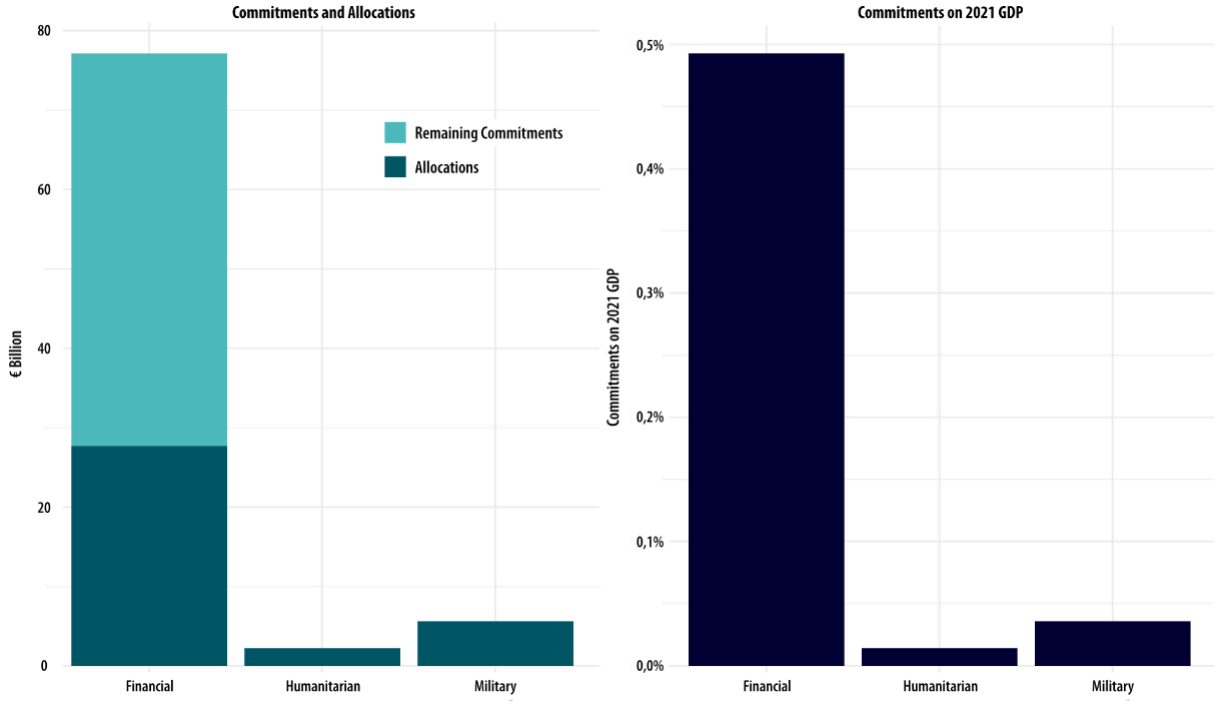


Figure 1: Total bilateral aid commitments provided to Ukraine by EU institutions in billion euros between January 24, 2022, and January 15, 2024 (Trebesch et al. 2024).

In total, European institutions committed €84,99 billion in aid, more than any EU member. Regarding the EU countries, in absolute terms, with €22.06 billion, Germany was the top EU country in terms of assistance provided to Ukraine, followed by Denmark (€8.76 billion), Norway (€7.57 billion), and the Netherlands (€6,21 billion). According to the Kiel Institute, France ranks eighth, with €2.0 billion, and Italy ninth, with €1.4 billion.

However, when considering assistance measured relative to GDP, the top country is Estonia (3.6% bilateral aid, 0.5% share of EU aid), followed by Denmark (2.4% bilateral aid, 3% share of EU aid) and Lithuania (1.5% bilateral aid and 0.5% share of EU aid). Germany ranks tenth (0.6% bilateral aid and 0.5% share of EU aid), Italy ranks twenty-first (0.07% bilateral aid and 0.6% share of EU aid), and France ranks twenty-second (same values as Italy) (see figure 2).

Furthermore, various EU countries have concluded bilateral agreements with Ukraine to further strengthen their bilateral assistance, with the aim of providing critical long-term military and economic support. The foundations for these agreements were laid at the NATO Vilnius Summit in July 2023, where the leaders of the G7 countries announced a framework for negotiating security agreements with Ukraine (Boswinkel 2024). Most of these agreements were signed in the weeks leading up to the war's second anniversary (see figure 3).

We now unpack the assistance and see how it has evolved over time and how various states have contributed.

Regarding financial support, throughout 2022 and 2023, the EU and its members pledged a combined €85.41 billion to bolster Ukraine's broader economic, social, and

financial stability (Trebesch *et al.* 2024). This assistance took various forms, including macro-financial aid, budgetary support, emergency relief, and crisis management (European Commission 2024a). During an extraordinary summit in Brussels on 1 February, all 27 EU heads of state finally agreed on a €50 billion support package for Ukraine through the Ukraine Facility, a new funding instrument (€33 billion in loans and €17 billion in grants) for the 2024-2027 period (European Commission 2024b). The funds will be disbursed over the next four years. Unlike previous financial aid packages for Ukraine, this plan will be financed through contributions from member states rather than borrowing from financial markets. The financial grants will be sourced from the revised 2021-2027 European multiannual financial framework. Additionally, funds will be derived from profits generated by immobilised Russian assets, which is unprecedented.

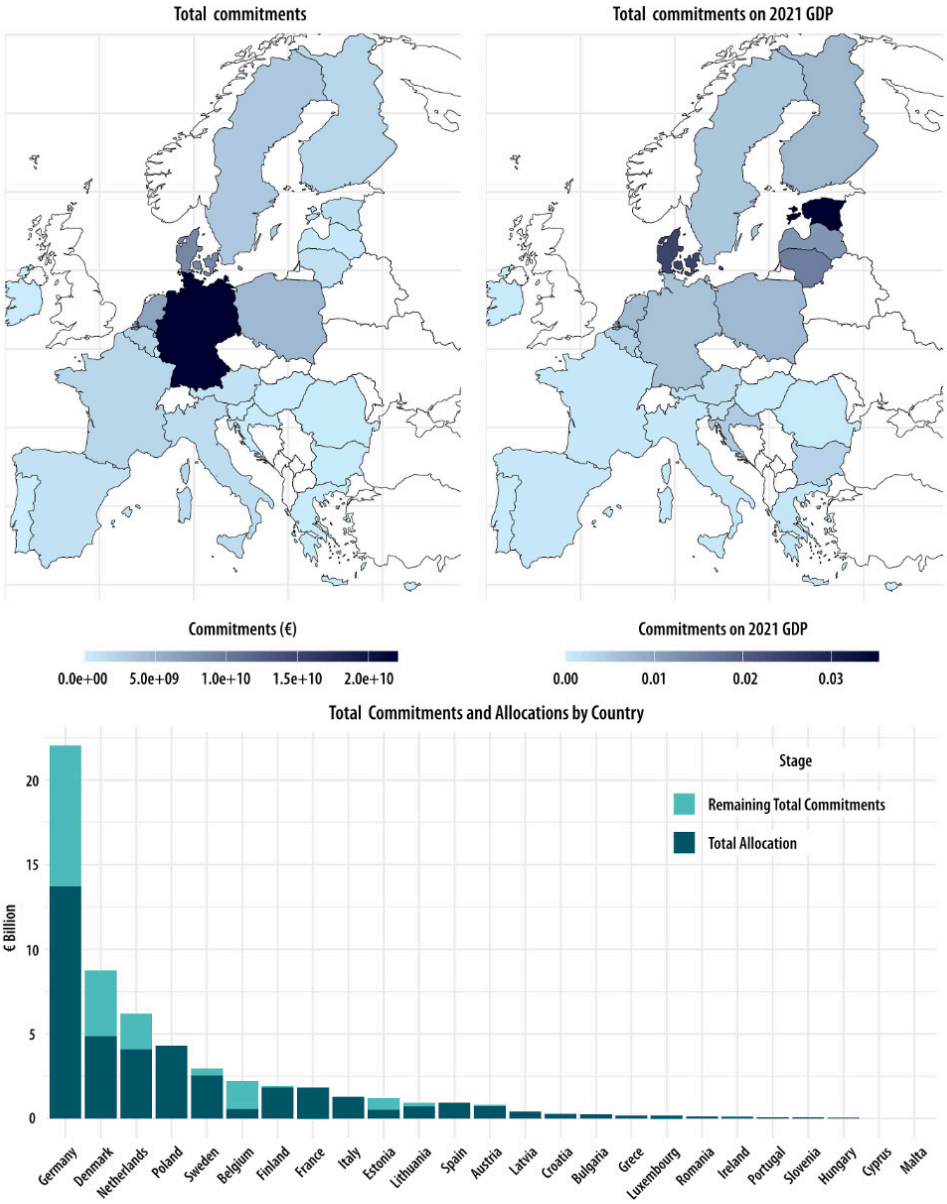


Figure 2: Total bilateral EU aid commitments provided to Ukraine across donors in billion euros between January 24, 2022, and January 15, 2024 (Trebesch et al. 2024).

Unlike in the case of humanitarian and military aid, this type of assistance has been predominantly provided by European institutions. Overall, according to the classification made by the Kiel Institute, the EU has contributed approximately €77.18 billion. As a point of comparison, this is much more than the US, which has contributed €24.03 billion. The contribution directly provided by individual European countries is very modest. Norway provides the highest contribution, amounting to €3.42 billion (see figure 4).

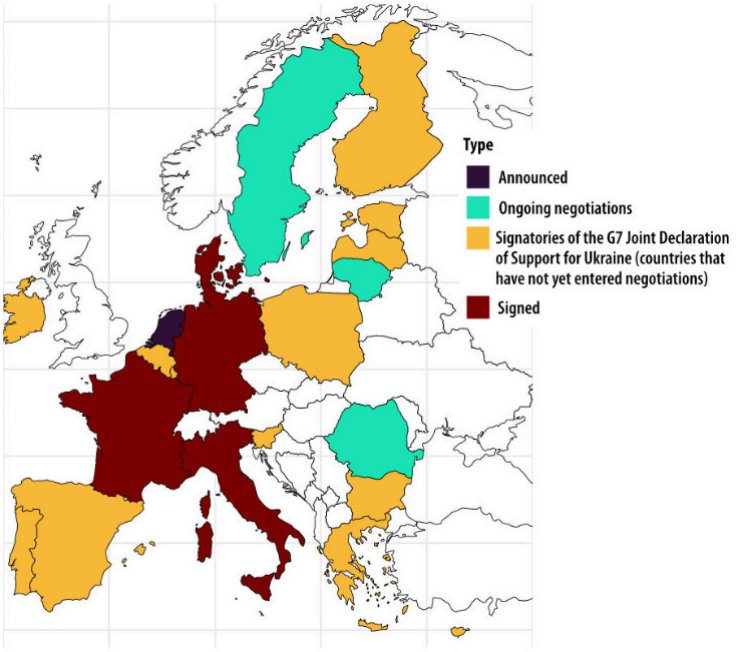


Figure 3: EU members post-NATO 2023 Vilnius Summit bilateral security agreements with Ukraine (Boswinkel 2024).

Regarding humanitarian aid, the EU has allocated €926 million for civilians affected by the Ukraine war, with €860 million for Ukraine and €66 million for Moldova. Additionally, €9.1 billion was raised at the 'Stand Up for Ukraine' event, including €1 billion from the EU. The EU provides substantial support to Ukraine through emergency loans and budget assistance. Material assistance is being coordinated through the EU Civil Protection Mechanism, with offers from EU Member States and other countries. Moldova has also activated the Mechanism to assist Ukrainian arrivals. Further aid, including medical equipment valued at over €127 million, has been provided through EU medical stockpiles.

Overall, EU members and institutions have allocated €9.05 billion, with €6.84 provided by EU countries and €2.21 provided by EU institutions. Germany made the most significant contribution, with €2.95 billion, followed by Switzerland (€2.28 billion) and the Netherlands (€0.72 billion) (see figure 5).

The provision of military assistance by the EU to Ukraine is undoubtedly one of the most debated topics. This is because it marks the first instance in its history where the EU has supplied lethal weaponry to a third country. The assistance has been provided through the European Peace Facility. It is an off-budget instrument aimed at enhancing the EU's ability to prevent conflicts, build peace and strengthen international security. Through its European Peace Facility (EPF), the EU has committed €5.6 billion to date in military assistance financing for Ukraine, including €3.1 billion for lethal equipment, €380 million for nonlethal supplies, and €2 billion to provide Ukraine with 1 million rounds of ammunition (either from member state stocks or through joint procurement, but production challenges exist). In addition, on 17 October 2022, the EU agreed to set up a two-year Military Assistance Mission in support of Ukraine (EUMAM Ukraine), providing training to the Ukrainian armed forces and coordination and synchronisation of member states' training support for Ukraine.

Until January 15, 2024, the military aid provided by EU countries collectively amounted to €49.67 billion, more than that provided by the United States, which amounted to €42.22 billion. The EU institutions provided €5.60 billion, while EU countries provided €44.07 billion. The top contributing country was Germany (€17.70 billion), followed by Denmark (€8.40 billion), the Netherlands (€4.44 billion), and Norway (€3.80 billion). France ranked thirteenth, with €0.64 billion, while Italy ranked twelfth, with €0.67 billion (see figure 6).

3.2. Individual and Economic Sanctions

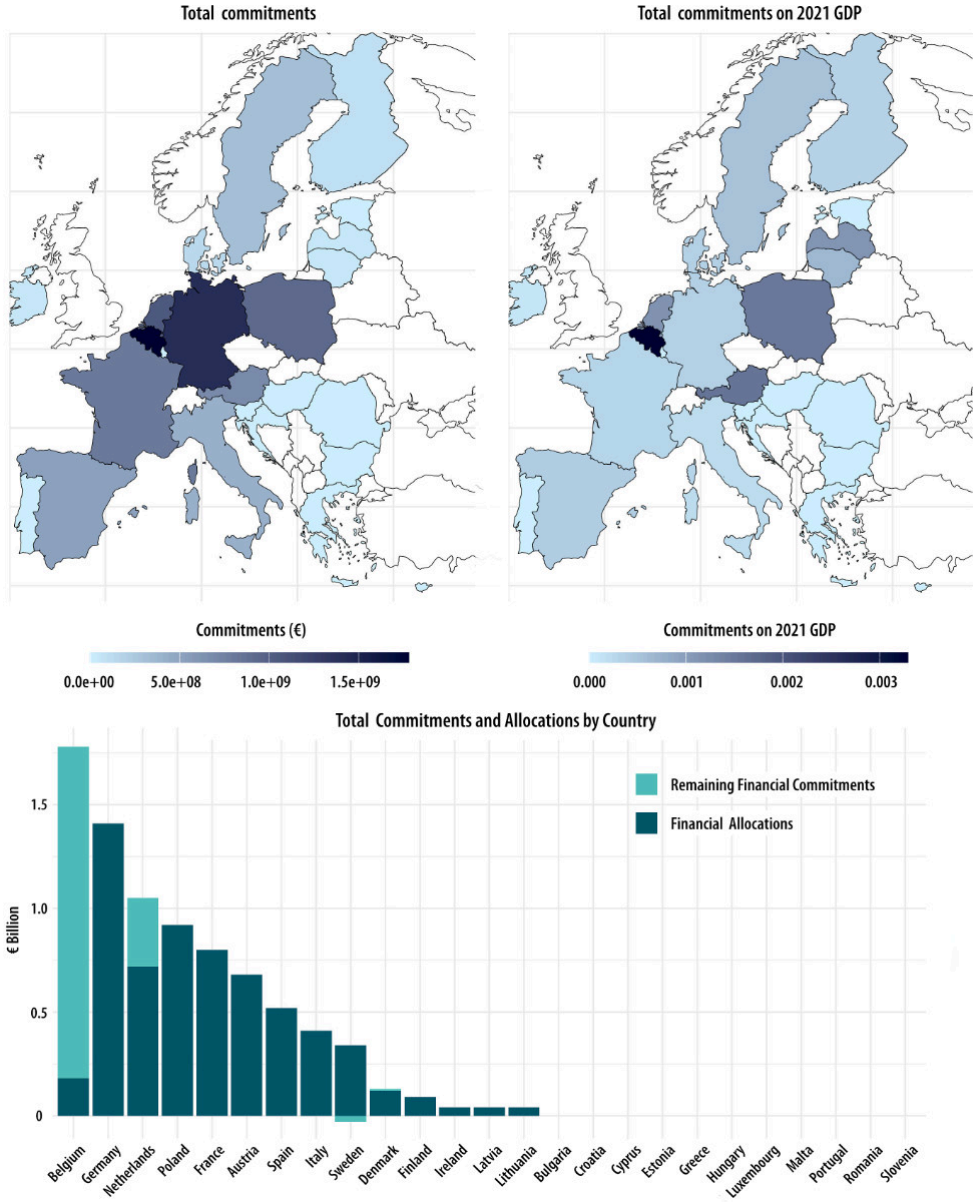


Figure 4: Total bilateral financial aid commitments to Ukraine across donors, in billion euros, from January 24, 2022, to January 15, 2024 (Trebesch et al. 2024).

The EU has enacted various sanctions in response to Russia's war, extending beyond Russia to include Belarus due to its involvement in the invasion of Ukraine and Iran because of the use of Iranian drones in the conflict. Initially, there were concerns that the EU might lack the necessary unity to approve sanctions, given that unanimity is required. This was particularly concerning in Hungary, where public opinion was against sanctions. However, despite various attempts to weaken the sanctions packages and remove specific individuals and entities from the EU's sanctions list, Hungary has not vetoed any of the previous rounds of sanctions. As of February 23rd, 2024, the EU has implemented 13 packages of sanctions (European Commission 2024c). These sanctions target critical sectors such as finance, business, defence, technology, media, and energy, freezing the assets of numerous entities and individuals, imposing restrictions on transactions with Russia's central bank, and prohibiting exports of specific goods. Additionally, there are bans on activities like transactions with Russian military-industrial enterprises and broadcasting by certain Russian media outlets. However, the EU faces challenges in fully enforcing these sanctions due to its reliance on Russian energy sources.

The EU has also taken several initiatives to reduce its energy dependency on Russia. In response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the EU committed to phasing out all imports of Russian fossil fuels, including natural gas, before 2030. By the end of 2022,

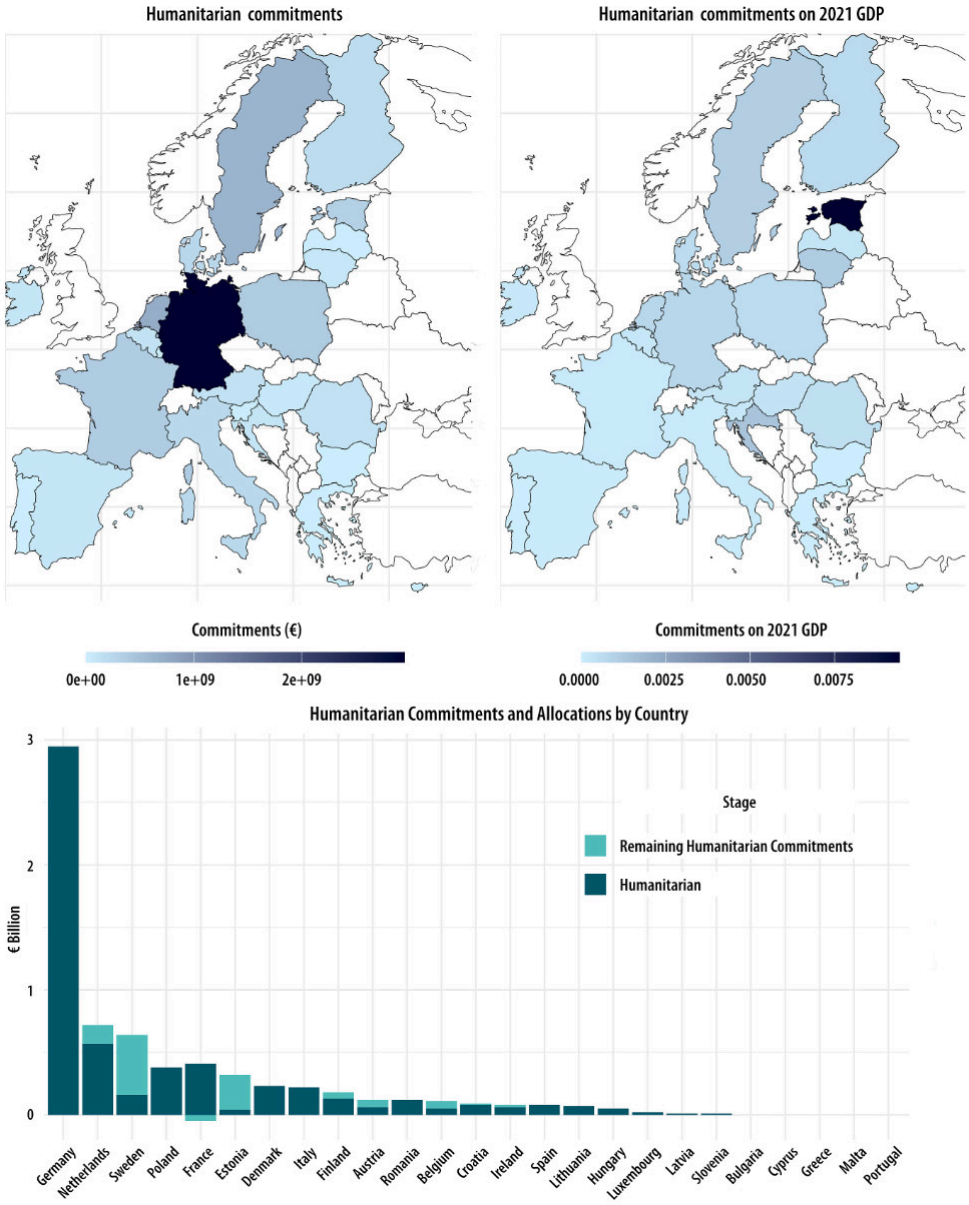


Figure 5: Total bilateral humanitarian aid commitments to Ukraine across donors in billion Euros between January 24, 2022, and January 15, 2024 (Trebesch et al. 2024).

pipeline gas from Russia represented approximately 8% of EU gas imports, down from 40% in early 2022, although this reduction partly reflects Russia's decision to decrease deliveries. Meanwhile, EU imports of Russian liquefied natural gas (LNG) slightly increased during the same period. In 2023, EU data indicated further declines in Russia's share of EU coal, oil, and pipeline gas imports and a slight decrease from 2022 in Russia's share of EU LNG imports (Congressional Research Service 2024).

It should be noted that while all EU countries adhered to the sanctions policy, the effects on the economies of these countries varied significantly. Specifically, Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries were particularly vulnerable to disruptions in trade relations with Russia, as many of them relied heavily on Moscow, especially in terms of energy. In addition to the CEE countries, Germany and Italy were also severely affected, given their substantial trade dependencies on Russia. Before February 2022, Germany imported 55% of its gas from Russia, while Italy imported around 40% (Andreolli *et al.* 2023). The impact was significant not only in the energy sector, prompting both countries to seek alternative sources (Germany turning to Norway, Italy to Algeria), but also in the automotive industry, where both nations excel due to their reliance on palladium sourced from Russia (Redeker 2022).

3.3. The Public Opinion

This session examines the response of public opinion. Specifically, the section analyses the trend of public opinion in European countries regarding EU initiatives towards Russia, the perception of the Russian threat, and the necessity for further integration of European defence. Previous research have already shown that the war has increased perceptions of threat and stronger support for collective defence, with some variation in the size of these changes across countries and aspects of collective defence. Perhaps most noteworthy, while Russia's invasion of Ukraine clarified Europeans' preference for NATO over an EU alternative somewhat, the most pronounced changes occurred with respect to their general willingness to defend other European countries. More than coming to terms with institutional issues, at least in the short term, the event reminded Europeans of the fundamentals of collective defence.

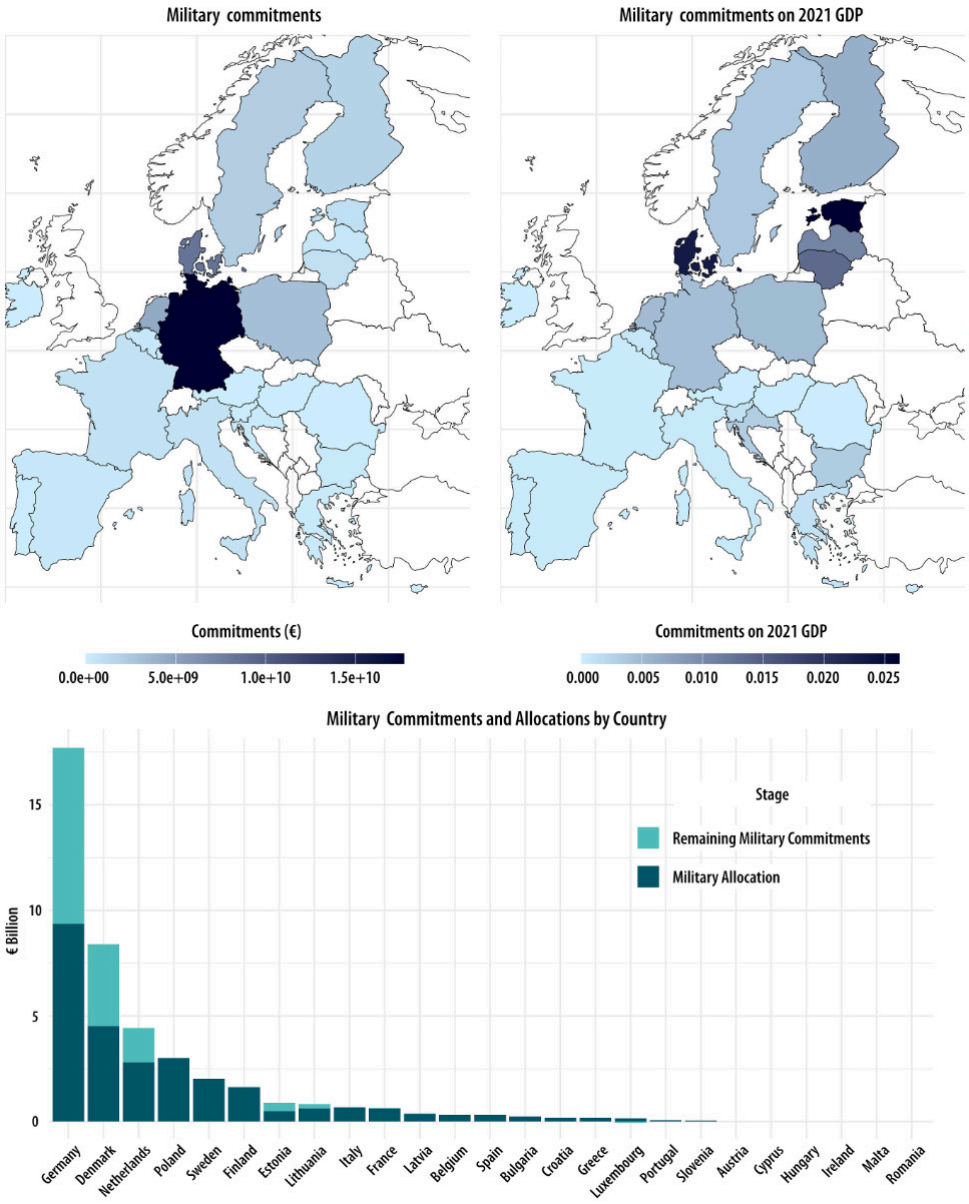


Figure 6: Total bilateral military aid commitments to Ukraine across donors in billion Euros between January 24, 2022, and January 15, 2024 (Trebesch et al. 2024).

Based on the surveys performed by EU institutions, support for a range of actions taken in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine remains very high. Almost nine in ten (89%) agree with providing humanitarian support to the people affected by the war, and more than eight in ten (84%) agree with welcoming into the EU people fleeing the war. Moreover, 72% of respondents agreed with providing financial support to Ukraine. The same proportion (72%) support economic sanctions on the Russian

government, companies, and individuals. Around six in ten approve of the EU financing the purchase and supply of military equipment to Ukraine (60%).

Although the overall percentage of support is quite high, as illustrated in the graph, these values have decreased significantly since the beginning of the war. In some countries, the decrease in support is very pronounced (see figure 7).

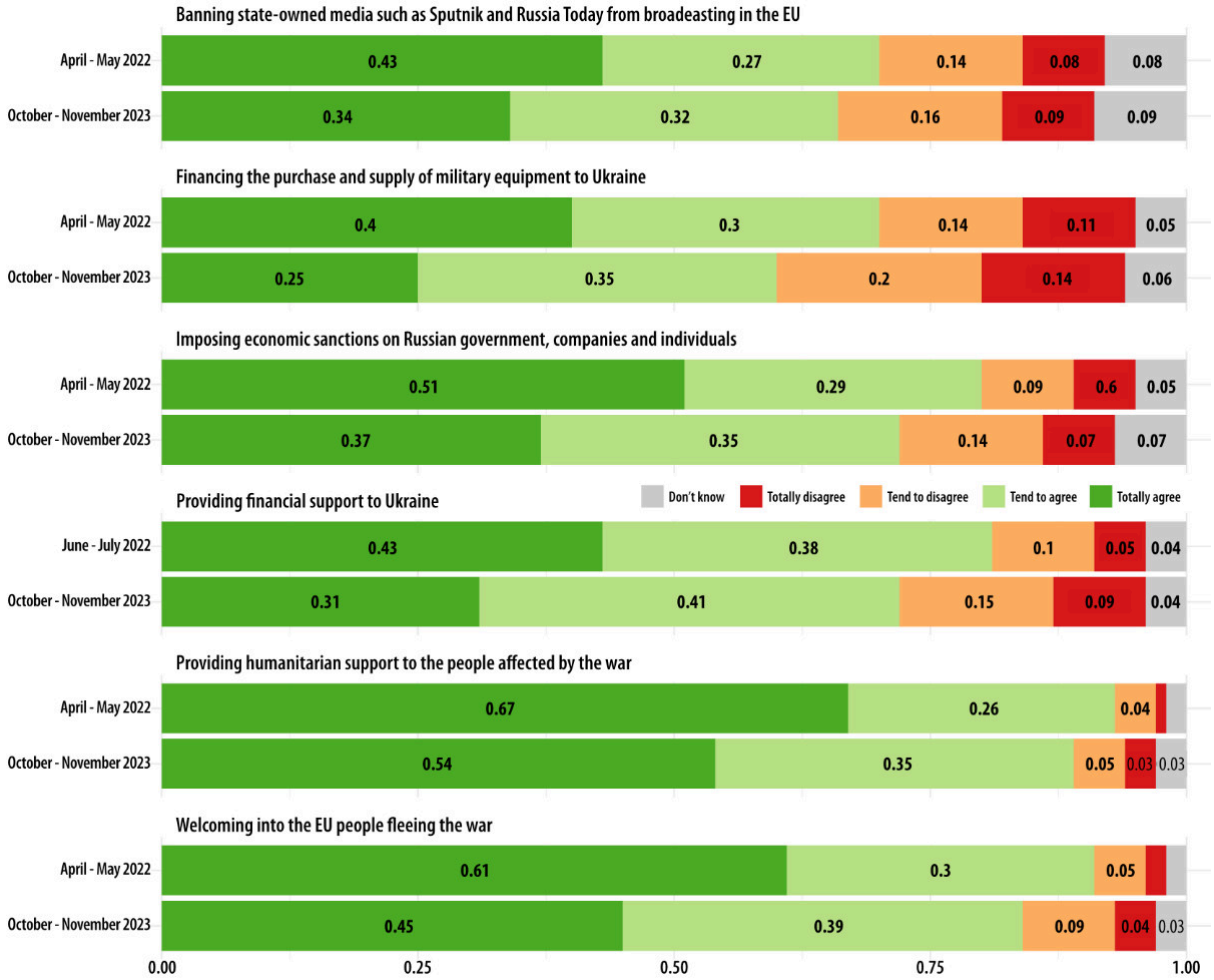
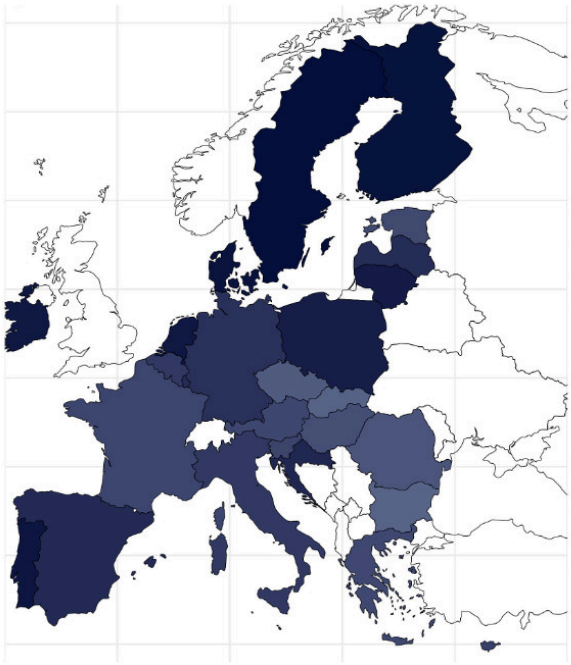


Figure 7: Evolution of European countries' public opinion towards the main initiatives adopted by the EU to support Ukraine and weaken Russia (April/May 2022 – October/November 2023) (European Commission 2023).

The reduction in the percentage of those who agree with these initiatives has decreased on average by 8.75%. Where it has decreased the most is in support for the provision of weapons (-12.5%) and financial support (-11.5%), while where it has decreased the least is in humanitarian support (-5%).

The types of assistance that have seen the most significant decline in support are financial and military aid. As shown in Fig. 6, public opinion strongly supports financial assistance to Ukraine in almost all European countries. Even where lower values are recorded, such as in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia, the percentage supporting this aid still hovers around 50% at the end of 2023. As noted from the graph, countries in North-Eastern Europe, those closest to Russia, tend to express greater consensus towards financial assistance to Ukraine, while the lowest percentages of support are recorded in South-Eastern Europe, particularly in the Balkans (see figure 8).

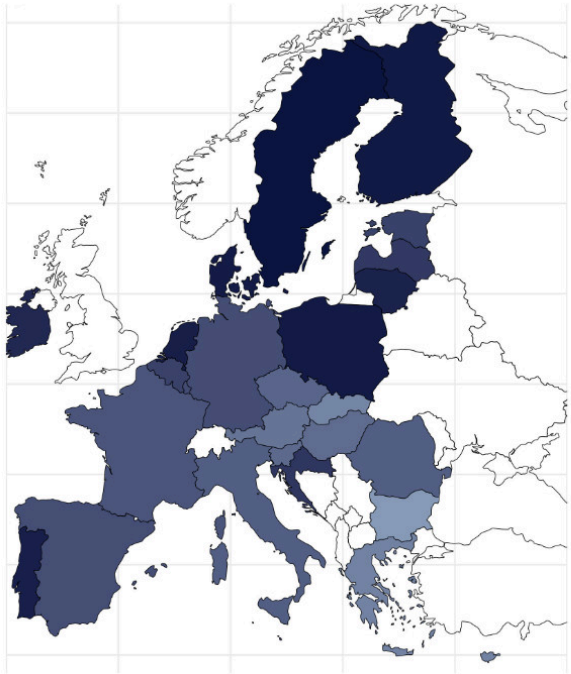
QD2.6. The EU has taken a series of actions as a response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. To what extent you agree or disagree with each of these actions taken.



	Jun-Jul 2022	Jan-Feb 2023	May-Jun 2023	Oct-Nov 2023
Austria	0.74	0.71	0.58	0.65
Belgium	0.8	0.75	0.73	0.67
Bulgaria	0.58	0.55	0.54	0.52
Croatia	0.82	0.83	0.82	0.82
Cyprus	0.8	0.81	0.62	0.57
Czech Republic	0.64	0.61	0.6	0.48
Denmark	0.93	0.92	0.94	0.91
Estonia	0.76	0.72	0.58	0.59
Finland	0.95	0.94	0.91	0.93
France	0.72	0.68	0.68	0.64
Germany	0.84	0.8	0.75	0.73
Greece	0.75	0.66	0.66	0.59
Hungary	0.75	0.61	0.6	0.58
Ireland	0.94	0.9	0.91	0.86
Italy	0.8	0.76	0.72	0.67
Latvia	0.78	0.84	0.8	0.77
Lithuania	0.86	0.92	0.89	0.86
Luxembourg	0.84	0.76	0.82	0.76
Malta	0.88	0.87	0.85	0.81
Netherlands	0.88	0.93	0.91	0.88
Poland	0.92	0.86	0.86	0.84
Portugal	0.93	0.88	0.94	0.89
Romania	0.7	0.59	0.58	0.56
Slovack Republic	0.64	0.53	0.54	0.5
Slovenia	0.73	0.72	0.66	0.62
Spain	0.86	0.82	0.78	0.78
Sweden	0.95	0.94	0.95	0.96

Figure 8: The EU has taken a series of actions as a response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of these actions? Providing financial support to Ukraine.

QD2.3. The EU has taken a series of actions as a response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. To what extent you agree or disagree with each of these actions taken.



	Apr-May 2022	Jun-Jul 2022	Jan-Feb 2023	May-Jun 2023	Oct-Nov 2023
Austria	0.54	0.5	0.5	0.4	0.43
Belgium	0.76	0.73	0.68	0.69	0.6
Bulgaria	0.3	0.35	0.33	0.3	0.31
Croatia	0.81	0.74	0.73	0.72	0.74
Cyprus	0.45	0.44	0.49	0.36	0.31
Czech Republic	0.66	0.56	0.5	0.54	0.42
Denmark	0.9	0.91	0.89	0.89	0.83
Estonia	0.75	0.75	0.72	0.64	0.62
Finland	0.9	0.89	0.88	0.89	0.9
France	0.68	0.62	0.6	0.58	0.55
Germany	0.66	0.7	0.63	0.62	0.61
Greece	0.5	0.41	0.36	0.43	0.37
Hungary	0.6	0.57	0.5	0.44	0.43
Ireland	0.9	0.86	0.81	0.79	0.72
Italy	0.61	0.57	0.56	0.6	0.51
Latvia	0.74	0.72	0.77	0.74	0.7
Lithuania	0.86	0.83	0.88	0.84	0.83
Luxembourg	0.68	0.62	0.64	0.7	0.59
Malta	0.8	0.74	0.76	0.64	0.61
Netherlands	0.87	0.85	0.9	0.85	0.85
Poland	0.93	0.91	0.89	0.86	0.85
Portugal	0.91	0.86	0.82	0.9	0.82
Romania	0.65	0.61	0.55	0.55	0.49
Slovack Republic	0.42	0.5	0.38	0.37	0.34
Slovenia	0.57	0.54	0.52	0.49	0.46
Spain	0.74	0.67	0.65	0.6	0.53
Sweden	0.92	0.92	0.92	0.93	0.91

Figure 9: The EU has taken a series of actions as a response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of these actions? Financing the purchase and supply of military equipment to Ukraine.

With regard to military aid, it is immediately apparent that support for military assistance is generally lower than that expressed for financial assistance. In countries like Bulgaria and the Czech Republic, it hovers around 30% by the end of 2023. Similar to the previous case, this support tends to decrease almost everywhere, even in countries expressing stronger stances towards Russia, such as Poland and Sweden. Again, as in the previous case, support is solid in the northeast and particularly weak in the southeast, especially in the Balkans (see figure 9).

With regard to the perception of insecurity. The Eurobarometer show that war is not a top priority for every European country. It is indeed a concern in general, as 28% of Europeans consider immigration and the war in Ukraine to be among the two most important issues facing the EU. Then comes the international situation (24%), followed by rising prices, inflation, and the cost of living (20%, ranking fourth while it was the primary concern last spring). However, for many countries, war is not their primary concern at all. For many Southern European countries, other concerns take precedence, such as immigration (the top concern in France) and inflation (the top concern in Italy). The following figure shows the main issues according to public opinion in the member states in November 2023 (see figure 10).

Opinion Level 0.0 0.1 0.2 0.3 0.4 0.5

	Austria	Belgium	Bulgaria	Croatia	Cyprus	Czech Republic	Denmark	Estonia	Finland	France	Germany	Greece	Hungary	Ireland	Italy	Latvia	Lithuania	Luxembourg	Malta	Netherlands	Poland	Portugal	Romania	Slovack Republic	Slovenia	Spain	Sweden
The war in Ukraine	0.26	0.24	0.32	0.31	0.25	0.40	0.43	0.52	0.46	0.20	0.35	0.19	0.31	0.48	0.23	0.45	0.52	0.25	0.46	0.35	0.24	0.41	0.31	0.38	0.39	0.31	0.44
Immigration	0.26	0.29	0.32	0.20	0.47	0.35	0.22	0.24	0.13	0.30	0.45	0.27	0.29	0.26	0.20	0.26	0.21	0.27	0.32	0.43	0.30	0.21	0.12	0.29	0.35	0.25	0.15
The international situation	0.26	0.21	0.37	0.29	0.19	0.27	0.29	0.35	0.34	0.20	0.25	0.33	0.23	0.22	0.25	0.26	0.35	0.22	0.36	0.25	0.23	0.20	0.26	0.30	0.21	0.25	0.24
Rising prices/ inflation/ cost of living	0.21	0.27	0.22	0.27	0.28	0.20	0.09	0.14	0.15	0.24	0.19	0.19	0.18	0.28	0.25	0.23	0.12	0.32	0.16	0.12	0.26	0.21	0.20	0.18	0.17	0.26	0.10
The environment and climate change	0.23	0.21	0.04	0.09	0.05	0.07	0.37	0.07	0.19	0.21	0.17	0.12	0.13	0.17	0.14	0.05	0.08	0.18	0.12	0.36	0.13	0.12	0.12	0.10	0.16	0.12	0.41
The economic situation	0.17	0.12	0.11	0.15	0.22	0.14	0.08	0.15	0.09	0.12	0.12	0.19	0.15	0.11	0.20	0.15	0.14	0.12	0.13	0.07	0.13	0.19	0.15	0.14	0.15	0.18	0.12
Terrorism	0.10	0.18	0.11	0.14	0.19	0.11	0.10	0.06	0.12	0.19	0.05	0.08	0.11	0.10	0.06	0.12	0.15	0.13	0.09	0.05	0.11	0.11	0.17	0.07	0.16	0.10	0.14
Energy supply	0.10	0.11	0.15	0.11	0.07	0.15	0.09	0.14	0.11	0.10	0.10	0.19	0.15	0.12	0.14	0.10	0.09	0.11	0.06	0.08	0.10	0.06	0.14	0.12	0.13	0.09	0.15
The state of Member State's public finances	0.09	0.08	0.07	0.15	0.04	0.12	0.05	0.09	0.12	0.08	0.12	0.15	0.17	0.03	0.14	0.05	0.07	0.07	0.07	0.09	0.13	0.15	0.09	0.19	0.05	0.11	0.06
The EU's influence in the world	0.11	0.09	0.10	0.10	0.03	0.07	0.14	0.05	0.13	0.08	0.08	0.11	0.08	0.05	0.06	0.05	0.10	0.10	0.07	0.14	0.09	0.08	0.09	0.07	0.07	0.08	0.07
Crime	0.05	0.08	0.04	0.06	0.11	0.03	0.04	0.03	0.05	0.10	0.04	0.05	0.06	0.03	0.06	0.03	0.04	0.10	0.04	0.02	0.07	0.03	0.11	0.05	0.06	0.03	0.07
Health	0.04	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.01	0.04	0.02	0.03	0.05	0.01	0.03	0.06	0.05	0.05	0.09	0.02	0.04	0.03	0.01	0.07	0.08	0.09	0.03	0.02	0.05	0.02
Unemployment	0.04	0.04	0.03	0.04	0.03	0.01	0.02	0.04	0.02	0.04	0.01	0.04	0.03	0.03	0.10	0.05	0.02	0.03	0.04	0.00	0.03	0.05	0.04	0.03	0.01	0.06	0.01
Pensions	0.04	0.02	0.02	0.03	0.01	0.03	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.04	0.02	0.01	0.02	0.01	0.05	0.05	0.01	0.03	0.01	0.00	0.04	0.02	0.05	0.03	0.02	0.03	0.00
Taxation	0.03	0.02	0.01	0.02	0.01	0.02	0.01	0.04	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.06	0.03	0.03	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.05	0.03	0.05	0.02	0.02	0.03	0.00
Don't know	0.00	0.00	0.04	0.00	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.02	0.01	0.02	0.00	0.01	0.01	0.02	0.00	0.03	0.03	0.01	0.02	0.00	0.01	0.03	0.01	0.00	0.01	0.05	0.00
Other (SPONTANEOUS)	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.02	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
None (SPONTANEOUS)	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00

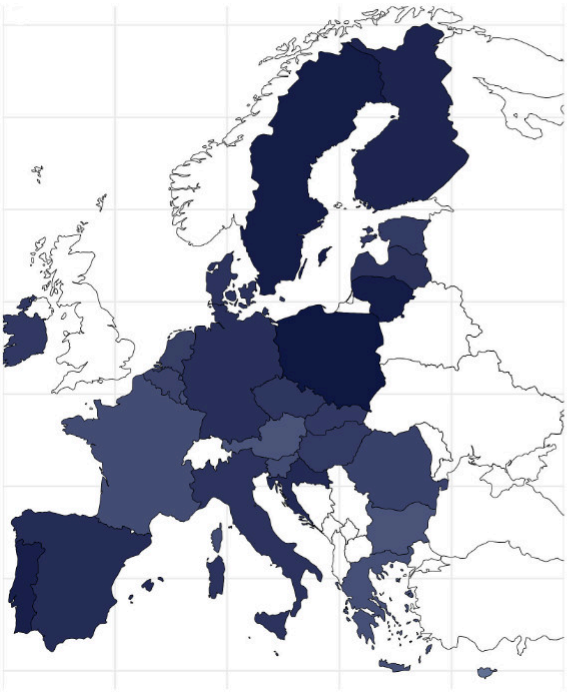
Figure 10: What do you think are the two most important issues facing (OUR COUNTRY) at the moment? (MAX. 2 ANSWERS) (%).

It is worth noting that although the war is perceived as a significant threat almost everywhere in Europe, it has experienced a decline over time. This also occurs in countries most concerned about Russia, such as the Baltic Republics (see figure 11).

QD3.2. Please tell to what extent you agree or disagree with each of the following statement: Russia's invasion of Ukraine is a threat to the security of (OUR COUNTRY)

AVG Value 0.00 0.25 0.50 0.75 1.00

Opinion Level 0.00 0.25 0.50 0.75 1.00



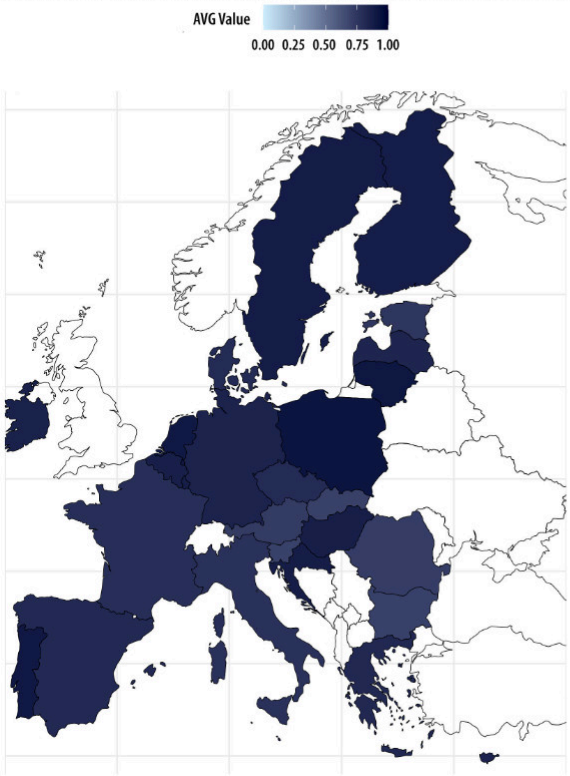
	Apr-May 2022	Jun-Jul 2022	Jan-Feb 2023	May-Jun 2023	Oct-Nov 2023
Austria	0.66	0.65	0.61	0.53	0.61
Belgium	0.71	0.67	0.74	0.69	0.66
Bulgaria	0.68	0.64	0.6	0.58	0.56
Croatia	0.83	0.82	0.81	0.83	0.74
Cyprus	0.57	0.6	0.51	0.41	0.36
Czech Republic	0.78	0.76	0.74	0.77	0.69
Denmark	0.68	0.7	0.81	0.81	0.82
Estonia	0.73	0.77	0.76	0.68	0.71
Finland	0.84	0.81	0.85	0.82	0.85
France	0.65	0.65	0.67	0.64	0.62
Germany	0.79	0.81	0.77	0.78	0.76
Greece	0.64	0.68	0.62	0.64	0.58
Hungary	0.79	0.81	0.72	0.7	0.63
Ireland	0.78	0.77	0.72	0.77	0.64
Italy	0.77	0.76	0.79	0.77	0.73
Latvia	0.75	0.76	0.81	0.78	0.73
Lithuania	0.91	0.86	0.89	0.89	0.84
Luxembourg	0.56	0.57	0.72	0.71	0.64
Malta	0.86	0.8	0.8	0.79	0.69
Netherlands	0.7	0.63	0.75	0.76	0.71
Poland	0.94	0.92	0.9	0.88	0.9
Portugal	0.83	0.89	0.85	0.91	0.82
Romania	0.74	0.72	0.71	0.65	0.66
Slovack Republic	0.82	0.76	0.71	0.68	0.69
Slovenia	0.62	0.67	0.69	0.65	0.63
Spain	0.84	0.8	0.8	0.78	0.78
Sweden	0.88	0.86	0.89	0.87	0.88

Figure 11: Please tell to what extent you agree or disagree with each of the following statements. Russia's invasion of Ukraine is a threat to the security of (OUR COUNTRY).

With regard to the public opinion towards European defence integration, compared to what we have seen regarding the Russian threat and military and financial assistance, the response from Europeans is more homogeneous. Even countries like Bulgaria and Slovakia, more reluctant to align against Russia, show strong support for European defence, with "agree" percentages exceeding 70%. This demonstrates that, in line with previous findings, the consensus towards European defence is closely linked to the perception of the external threat (Mader *et al.* 2024).

Yet, an interesting point is that this support follows the trend we have seen in the case of public opinion regarding military and financial assistance: it declines over time. The support towards EU integration in the defence domain is thus subject to a fading effect (Johansson *et al.* 2021). Like many studies on political behaviour have shown, the increased support caused by the occurrence of exceptional circumstance and major crises tend to wane over time as consensus over policy innovation fades away (Altiparmakis *et al*. 2021; Baker, Oneal 2001). Recent research shows that, in the case of the EU, this fading effect is mainly driven by partisan polarisation both at the national and European levels (Truchlewski *et al.* 2023). This implies that the response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine is underpinned by strong political conflicts that might be detrimental to European unity in the future (see figure 12).

QD3.4. Please tell to what extent you agree or disagree with each of the following statements: Co-operation in defence matters at EU level should be increased



	Apr-May 2022	Jun-Jul 2022	Jan-Feb 2023	May-Jun 2023	Oct-Nov 2023
Austria	0.79	0.75	0.75	0.64	0.69
Belgium	0.92	0.89	0.84	0.83	0.82
Bulgaria	0.73	0.72	0.71	0.68	0.66
Croatia	0.88	0.86	0.86	0.9	0.85
Cyprus	0.86	0.85	0.86	0.83	0.81
Czech Republic	0.84	0.83	0.8	0.79	0.76
Denmark	0.81	0.77	0.8	0.81	0.83
Estonia	0.77	0.8	0.76	0.7	0.72
Finland	0.92	0.86	0.86	0.85	0.88
France	0.82	0.79	0.8	0.76	0.76
Germany	0.87	0.87	0.84	0.83	0.81
Greece	0.84	0.82	0.82	0.83	0.78
Hungary	0.9	0.9	0.85	0.85	0.82
Ireland	0.92	0.89	0.82	0.85	0.77
Italy	0.81	0.78	0.79	0.75	0.74
Latvia	0.83	0.82	0.87	0.83	0.82
Lithuania	0.94	0.9	0.92	0.9	0.88
Luxembourg	0.89	0.88	0.85	0.89	0.84
Malta	0.88	0.93	0.91	0.88	0.75
Netherlands	0.9	0.89	0.91	0.89	0.89
Poland	0.95	0.95	0.92	0.88	0.88
Portugal	0.95	0.9	0.82	0.92	0.9
Romania	0.79	0.71	0.69	0.72	0.67
Slovack Republic	0.73	0.8	0.65	0.66	0.65
Slovenia	0.71	0.73	0.67	0.69	0.68
Spain	0.86	0.84	0.82	0.76	0.79
Sweden	0.91	0.89	0.85	0.86	0.88

Figure 12: Please tell to what extent you agree or disagree with each of the following statements: Co-operation in defence matters at EU level should be increased.

3.4. Changes in Military Policy

This section analyses European Union countries' response by examining military policy changes. Specifically, two aspects are analysed: changes in defence budgets and investments in conventional military capabilities, focusing solely on the land sector. According to Meijer and Brooks (2021), we focus on land systems because these are the ones Europe needs most.

3.4.1. The Defence Budget

The data demonstrates that the war in Ukraine has prompted European Union countries to increase defence budgets. In real terms, European defence spending rose by 4% between 2022 and 2023, accelerating from a 2% annual increase the previous year (International Institute of Strategic Studies, 2024). Across the EU, aggregate defence spending increased by 6% between 2022 and 2023, compared to a 4% annual rise in the previous year. Data from the Military Balance shows that in 2023, ten European NATO allies met the agreed objective of spending at least 2% of GDP on defence, up from eight countries in 2022 and only two in 2014. Several countries are nearing or have reached the 3% mark, including Estonia (2.9%), Greece (3.0%), and Poland (2.8%). However, Germany, Europe's largest economy, still falls significantly below this spending level, allocating only 1.4% of GDP to the armed forces. Most of

these budget increases are directed towards higher equipment spending, encompassing weapons acquisitions and defence research and development.

Despite overall growth at the aggregate level, there are significant disparities between sub-regions, indicating continued variations in threat perceptions. Central and Northern European countries, closer to Russia, increased defence spending more rapidly than their Western and Southern European counterparts. In Southern Europe, only Spain substantially increased defence expenditure, with a real-term growth of 20% to reach €17.5 billion in 2023. Portugal saw a more modest 1% increase in real terms, while all other countries in the sub-region reduced their military outlays. Greece's 13% decline in real terms is attributed to several significant procurement expenses spreading over the years, including ongoing purchases of three frigates and 24 Rafale fighter ground-attack aircraft. Although Greek procurement spending remained high at € 3.1 billion in 2023, it fell short of the previous year's €3.41 billion. Italy increased its budget by a minimal percentage between 2021 and 2023 (from 1.58% to 1.68%), but it returned to decrease in 2023.

In Central Europe, Poland primarily drove the increase, with Warsaw's defence budget growing by 46% in real terms between 2022 and 2023. In South-Eastern Europe, all three countries increased their defence spending in 2023 compared to 2022, with Bulgaria seeing 6% growth and Romania 32%. Turkey's allocations doubled in local-currency terms between 2022 and 2023, translating into 39% real-terms growth, which is noteworthy given the country's staggering inflation rate of over 50% in 2023. In the Balkans, total defence spending rose by 7%, driven by a significant swing in Bosnia-Herzegovina's defence budget (see figure 13).

	2020	2021	2022	2023
Greece	2.63%	3.63%	3.97%	3.20%
Estonia	2.34%	2.20%	2.57%	3.18%
Lithuania	2.08%	2.07%	2.64%	2.78%
Latvia	2.26%	2.18%	2.44%	2.47%
Poland	2.15%	2.01%	2.08%	3.02%
Romania	2.08%	2.00%	2.04%	2.64%
France	2.10%	2.02%	2.06%	2.07%
Finland	1.54%	2.02%	2.19%	2.26%
Hungary	1.29%	1.46%	2.95%	2.24%
Cyprus	1.76%	2.13%	2.04%	1.87%
Slovack Republic	1.78%	1.74%	1.89%	2.18%
Croatia	1.77%	2.13%	2.04%	1.53%
Bulgaria	1.81%	1.61%	1.68%	1.73%
Italy	1.58%	1.63%	1.68%	1.58%
Netherlands	1.38%	1.40%	1.66%	1.59%
Czech Republic	1.33%	1.41%	1.46%	1.64%
Slovenia	1.13%	1.38%	1.59%	1.60%
Sweden	1.30%	1.33%	1.43%	1.64%
Germany	1.36%	1.34%	1.41%	1.52%
Denmark	1.38%	1.37%	1.36%	1.31%
Portugal	1.25%	1.18%	1.11%	1.07%
Spain	0.99%	1.09%	1.12%	1.25%
Belgium	1.03%	0.95%	1.07%	0.91%
Austria	0.80%	0.89%	0.83%	0.90%
Luxembourg	0.53%	0.49%	0.59%	1.38%
Malta	0.54%	0.49%	0.51%	0.42%
Ireland	0.28%	0.26%	0.24%	0.23%

Figure 13: Defense Budgets of European Countries, 2020-2023.

3.4.2. Investments in Conventional Military Capabilities

The war in Ukraine has prompted European countries to reorient their armed forces towards traditional defence and deterrence tasks. Many countries, such as France, Germany, and Italy, have published political-strategic documents stating their intention to reinvest in these capabilities (Barrie *et al.* 2019; Meijer, Brooks 2021). To assess what has been done, we observe how the numbers of key ground assets considered essential in conventional combat have varied – specifically, main battle tanks, artillery systems, and infantry fighting vehicles.

The graph represents the variation of these systems over time. It emerges that it is possible to distinguish a general trend in none of the three categories. Regarding main battle tanks (MBTs), in many countries, the number of systems remains essentially the same (such as Greece and Denmark) or even decreases (Italy and Poland). An increase is recorded in a few cases, such as in Germany and Finland. The same applies to infantry fighting vehicles (IFVs), with a slight increase in Romania and Hungary and a sharp decline in Poland – likely due to the transfer of these systems to Ukraine. As for artillery, again, there is no general trend. The inability to notice a trend is likely because it takes a long time to procure these systems. Even if one wishes to purchase off-the-shelf – something the national military industry seeks to avoid – it takes several years for the acquisition process to begin (see figure 14).

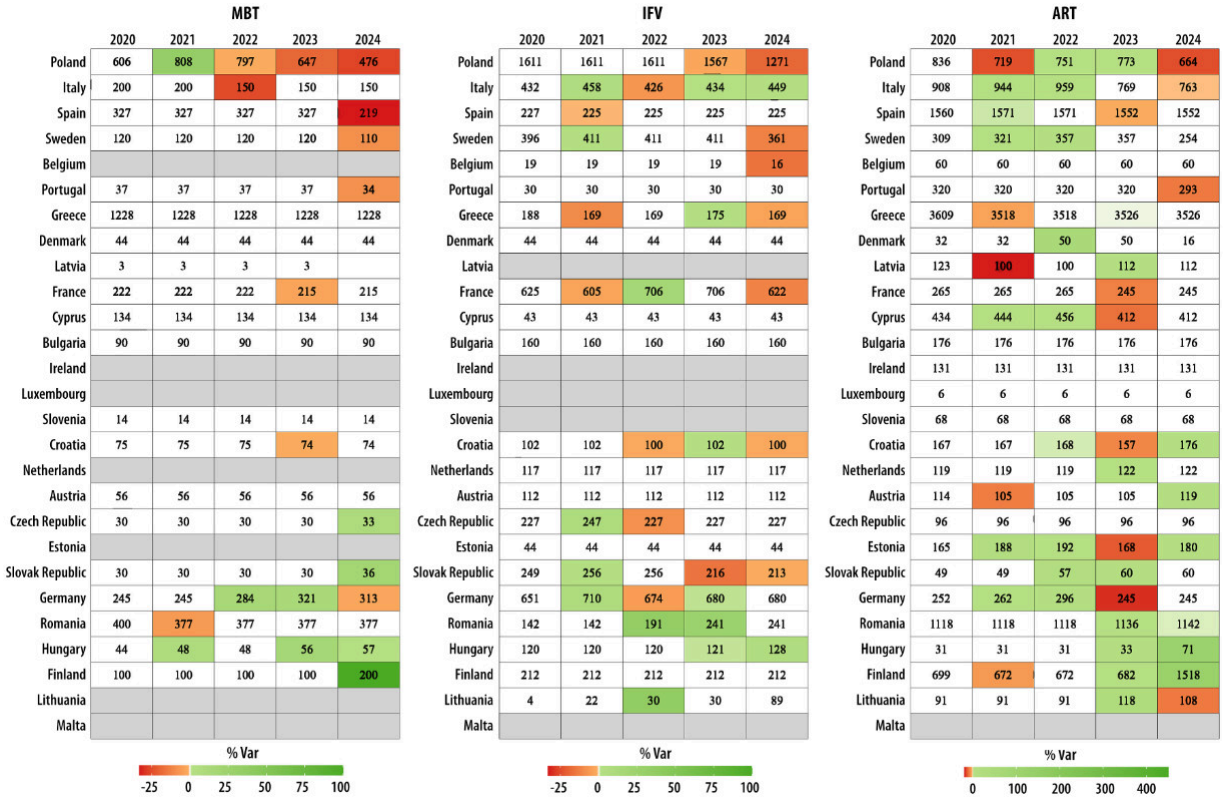


Figure 14: Variation in the number of MBTs, IFVs, and artillery systems in European countries, 2020-2024.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The article analysed how the EU and its members reacted to the Ukraine war outbreak. It was conducted to provide some initial considerations regarding the EU's capacity to overcome two important obstacles that constrain the achievement of full strategic autonomy: strategic cacophony and defence capabilities shortfall.

The results of our analysis allow us to formulate three main considerations. Firstly, despite differences of views within the EU, the response has been relatively cohesive overall. The analysis results demonstrate that the EU members have shown substantial consensus towards the measures adopted by the EU against Russia, featuring a surprising unity. Although support for Ukraine is not a priority for all EU member states, it remains high among European publics. There have been obstacles, such as those posed by Hungary, and delays. However, ultimately, the EU approved the most significant aid packages, unlike the United States, where, as of 15th February 2024, aid commitments and deliveries have essentially come to a halt, given the blocking of the package at Congress. European aid, in contrast, continues to grow in terms of commitments and aid allocations.

Secondly, the EU response features a relevant cross-country variation in terms of assistance provided, public opinion towards the war, and adaptation of military policy. In all these dimensions, Europe appears to be divided into two parts. On the one hand, the countries of North-Eastern Europe, which deploy significant resources supporting Ukraine, endorse EU initiatives, consider the war a top priority threat to their security, and substantially increase resources for their armed forces. On the other hand, the countries of Southern Europe, except Spain, and particularly those in the Southeast, which are more reluctant to allocate resources in favour of Ukraine, show less consensus on EU initiatives and do not necessarily consider the war an essential threat to their security – although among the top threats – and are not willing to invest too many resources in their armed forces.

The third consideration concerns the cross-time variation of this support. Over time, public support for EU initiatives and the willingness of member states to contribute to Ukrainian support have significantly declined in virtually all countries. Europe has implemented a decisive and cohesive response, but over time, the determination with which it carries it forward seems to decline gradually. This suggests that support for Ukraine may be more fragile than we think.

In light of these considerations, it is possible to conclude that, to date, strategic cacophony has not prevented the EU from implementing an adequate response. The EU has contributed more than the United States, at least based on the data provided by the Kiel Institute. However, strategic cacophony indeed persists, as evidenced by the cross-country variation in response, even though the reaction of some countries, like Spain, demonstrates that even Southern European countries perceive Russia as a danger. Regarding the shortfall in military capabilities, the analysis results are more pessimistic. They show that many Southern European countries, including Italy, Greece, and Portugal, are not willing to invest resources to address their military deficits, demonstrating how differences in the perception of the threat not only still exist

but are still able to hinder the development of greater military capabilities for the EU.

All in all, the analysis provides two main contributions. First, it offers a detailed description of the European response, providing some initial considerations on the EU's ability to achieve strategic autonomy. It demonstrates that the response is generally unanimous but features important cross-country and cross-time variation. It also shows that support toward EU initiatives is subject to a fading effect, the causes of which have yet to be investigated. Second, it lays the groundwork for future research to understand the variables that explain this variation. For example, future studies could identify the main variables that help understand why some Southern countries, like Spain, have proven to be more proactive than expected while others, like Italy, have shown more reluctance, especially when considering the adaptation of military policy. Another line of research could investigate the reasons behind the attitudes of South-Eastern European countries. Like the North-Eastern countries, they are very close to Russia. However, unlike the latter, the response of South-Eastern countries has been much weaker, especially in Bulgaria, Hungary, and the Czech Republic.

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