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Whose war, whose sanctions? Understanding socio-economic drivers of European attitudes toward the EU's response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine using fuzzy-hybrid topsis

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Abstract

The Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 has had a significant impact on governments and civil society in Europe. In response, the European Union (EU) implemented sanctions to weaken Russia and support Ukraine. This study examines the attitudes of European citizens towards these measures, using data from the 98th Eurobarometer (Winter 2022–23). These attitudes are measured using the Fuzzy-Hybrid TOPSIS methodology, which considers socioeconomic variables such as country, age, gender, political orientation, and location of residence. Additional factors, such as interest in local, national, and European issues, political engagement, perceptions of personal and national economic situations, and views on the EU, were also included in the analysis. Overall, Europeans hold positive opinions of the EU's sanctions, but crucial differences exist: residents of northern countries, individuals actively involved in local and international issues, politically engaged people, and those with a favourable view of the European Union (EU) exhibit more positive attitudes. Conversely, individuals in Balkan countries, those with negative perceptions of personal and national economic conditions, and those with unfavourable views of the EU exhibit more negative attitudes.

Keywords: *Russia Invasion, Ukraine, Europeans Attitudes, EU Sanctions, Fuzzy-Hybrid TOPSIS*

1 Introduction

Russia invaded Ukraine on 24 February 2022, following its annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the subsequent military action. This invasion is Russia's attempt to politically and economically dominate the territory (Anghel and Jones, 2023). The scale and intensity of the attack have resulted in the most brutal warfare in Europe since the Second World War, causing a humanitarian and geopolitical crisis of unprecedented proportions (Kurapov et al., 2023). Not only has the war devastated Ukraine, but it has also greatly affected European societies, raising concerns about traditional security, energy supply security, economic stability, and migration management (Benton et al., 2022; Guild and Groenendijk, 2023; Žuk, 2023).

The war's effects on Europe have been most significant in two respects. Firstly, the invasion's impact on energy markets led all European countries to review their dependence

on Russian gas and oil, which pushed prices up and placed an inflationary burden on the continent (Liadze et al., 2022; Ozili, 2024). Secondly, the war also created a record-breaking refugee crisis, forcing millions of Ukrainians to flee their country in search of asylum. This has raised existential questions about solidarity, integration, and the capacity of host states to respond (Anghel and Jones, 2023). These issues have collectively strained the unity of the European Union and its Member States, prompting fervent debates over how best to respond collectively to Russian aggression (Juc, 2023). One of the EU's most notable reactions has been the imposition of sanctions aimed at reducing Russia's economic and political capacity to continue fighting.

The success of such measures depends not only on institutional resolve but also on popular support. In her 2025 State of the Union address, President *von der Leyen* emphasised that 'this has to be Europe's moment of sovereignty... because Ukraine's freedom is Europe's freedom'. She framed the war not just as a regional conflict, but as a struggle for Europe's survival and its ability to defend its values, institutions, and collective security. Europe's sovereignty and Ukraine's sovereignty are synonymous. Therefore, it is essential to understand how EU sanctions are perceived by citizens to determine whether this 'independence moment' can be sustained through popular legitimacy. Using data from the 98th Eurobarometer survey (Winter 2022–23) across 38 countries, the article explains how Europeans perceive EU sanctions on Russia, the level of support for them among their populations, and the reasons behind this support. The effect of socioeconomic characteristics, political engagement, attitudes towards the European Union, and opinions about the individual and national economy on citizens' attitudes are analysed using Fuzzy-Hybrid TOPSIS and the Fuzzy Quadrant Mapper (Indelicato and Martín, 2025).

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: Section 2 presents the theoretical background. Section 3 presents the dataset and descriptive analysis. Section 4 details the methodology. Section 5 presents the results, which are discussed in Section 6. Section 7 concludes by summarising the key findings and limitations.

2 Brief theoretical context

The Russian invasion of Ukraine is deeply rooted in competing historical narratives and geopolitical tensions. According to Oksamytna (2023), Russian action is less driven by nostalgia for the Russian Empire than by the belief that Ukraine's integration into Europe will destroy Russian power hierarchies. Howlett (2023) challenges the representation of Ukraine as merely a 'borderland' between East and West, instead emphasising its unique identity and centuries-long history of resistance. Ukraine is thus revealed to be not a passive periphery, but a contested ground of ideologies.

Kasianov (2022) reveals that Russian officials continue to perpetuate the myth that Ukrainians and Russians are 'one people', thereby denying Ukraine's sovereignty and justifying aggression. Conversely, Ukrainians assert their own distinctive historical trajectory, interpreting their history as an ongoing battle for independence. This struggle over history has only intensified since the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the war in Donbas, with Ukrainians increasingly invoking national symbols and collective memory to define their identity (Liu and Mei, 2020). This has not only strengthened their resistance to Russian expansionism but also changed the way Europeans view Ukrainians, no longer seeing them as victims of violence but as ordinary refugees.

The effects of the war are being felt beyond the battlefield, reverberating through global economic and political institutions. Mbah and Wasum (2022) observe that the conflict has

destabilised the global energy and food markets and driven up the prices of oil, gas, and wheat. For the EU, which relies heavily on Russian energy, these shocks have manifested as inflationary pressure, increased household spending, and weaker business sentiment (Sun et al., 2024; Zhao et al., 2023). These interruptions also serve to reinforce the impact of Russia's actions as direct threats to European societies, evoking sympathy for Ukrainians as victims of the borderlands and justifying costly EU responses.

Public opinion and emotional mobilisation demonstrate the different treatment of Ukrainians. While social media has amplified narratives of anger, sadness, and solidarity, disinformation has increased polarisation (Fox and Pearce, 2018). Fernández et al. (2023) demonstrate that public opinion has shifted more decisively in favour of a common EU defence policy, showing that the war has not only galvanised positive sentiment for Ukraine, but also for the collective identity of the EU. Gürkan (2024) emphasises the emotional impact of the conflict, observing that the sympathy for Ukrainian casualties and the outrage at Russia's disregard for international law have led to a European response involving defence commitments, sanctions, and aid.

Most remarkably of all, this solidarity has manifested in unparalleled support for Ukrainian refugees. Chitadze (2023) notes that Europe's initial response was characterised by a sense of moral obligation towards Ukraine, contrasting with its policies towards other refugee groups. Savolainen (2023) reports on experimental findings from the UK, which show that attitudes towards refugees have converged significantly according to the latter's origin. Respondents were more willing to help Ukrainians than Yemenis due to greater perceived similarity and lesser perceived threat. This portrays Ukrainians not only as refugees, but also as 'deserving victims', making them worthy recipients of support due to their cultural proximity and political narrative.

Cross-nationally comparative research confirms these processes. Dražanová & Geddes (2023) demonstrates that the public and state reception of Ukrainian refugees varied across eight EU countries, but Ukrainians were always received more hospitably than other groups. In reviewing the latest research, Kentmen-Cin (2025) finds that the initially strong solidarity appears to be gradually wearing off as the cost of the war continues to escalate. This 'compassion fatigue' suggests that deservingness is conditional and based on economic interests and shifting political rhetoric.

Mbah and Wasum (2022) offers the useful analytical concept of 'promising victimhood'. Ukrainians are undoubtedly victims of aggression, but they are also culturally similar, not a security threat, and potentially economically beneficial. These factors render them particularly deserving of assistance, in contrast to refugees from other places who are bound to be viewed with suspicion or resentment. This report explains why assistance to Ukrainians has been unprecedented, but also cautions that this assistance is contingent on their ability to maintain perceptions of their legitimacy.

However, solidarity does not stop there. The war, Mirkina (2018) argue, is an external shock that has triggered 'bellicist' dynamics in the formation of the EU polity. This produces unity on issues such as refugee protection and energy solidarity, but creates more polarised divisions on costly policies such as sanctions. This suggests that the same affective and moral logics that underlie support for Ukrainian refugees are applicable to public opinion on sanctions. In other words, the willingness to bear the economic burden of sanctions represents a translation of humanitarian solidarity into the political realm, even if constrained by political divisions and material interests.

However, Euroscepticism is also a factor. As Palmowski and Fedorov (2020) demonstrate, public support for EU sanctions towards Russia is closely linked to views on democracy, trust

in institutions, and perceptions of the EU as an institution. Those who are more trusting of and identified with the EU are more supportive of sanctions, while Eurosceptic and populist attitudes undermine such support. These findings emphasise that the legitimacy of EU action is central to public support for costly commitments beyond humanitarian aid.

Literature illustrates how Ukrainians, who are now facing Russian bombing, have been portrayed as exceptional victims, prompting a level of solidarity that is not extended to other refugee populations. However, sustaining that level of solidarity as it extends to costly economic and political sanctions depends not only on judgments of comparability and deservingness, but also on broader EU orientations and the politicisation of the latter's role.

Building on these observations, our study examines how Europeans position themselves not only in relation to humanitarian solidarity but also in relation to costly policy measures, such as sanctions against Russia. To address this complexity, we employed the 98th Eurobarometer cross-country survey (Winter 2022–23), which allowed us to make comparisons across contexts in which solidarity, economic leverage, EU identity, and Euroscepticism manifest differently. The following section presents the dataset, variables, and indicators used to operationalise attitudes towards sanctions, providing an empirical basis on which to test the dynamics found throughout the European public in the literature.

3 Data and descriptive analysis

Data from the 98th Eurobarometer (Winter 2022–2023) are utilised for this study. This dataset was published approximately one year after the onset of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and aimed to help analyse the solidarity of European citizens with the Ukrainian people. The countries under analysis number 38 and include Norway, Sweden, Kosovo, the Netherlands, Finland, Denmark, Cyprus (TCC and Republic), Lithuania, Latvia, the United Kingdom, Malta, Ireland, Portugal, Spain, Estonia, Switzerland, Poland, Germany (West and East, separately considered), Moldova, Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Luxembourg, Croatia, France, Albania, Austria, Czech Republic, Italy, North Macedonia, Belgium, Montenegro, Greece, Slovakia, Turkey, Romania, Hungary, Serbia, and Bulgaria. The sample sizes for each country are shown in Figure 1.

Our analysis focuses on the Eurobarometer elements that delve into the perspectives of European citizens on the measures enacted by the European Union in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These elements aim to scrutinise European citizens' viewpoints on specific issues, encompassing: (1) funding allocated for the procurement and supply of military equipment to Ukraine, (2) economic sanctions imposed on Russia, (3) providing financial assistance to Ukraine, (4) the provision of humanitarian aid to Ukrainians affected by the conflict, and (5) the welcoming of Ukrainian refugees within the EU. Responses to these statements are systematically evaluated on a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 4, with 1 denoting 'Strongly Agree' and 4 signifying 'Strongly Disagree'. The scale is inverted to enhance interpretability, ensuring that higher values correspond to more favourable opinions. The distribution of responses to the statements on the inverted Likert scale is elucidated in Figure 2.

To provide a more comprehensive analysis of European citizens' opinions on the EU's responses to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the study examines various socioeconomic segments. These include country of residence, gender, age, interest in national, European, and local matters, political interest, perception of the situation in the country, the economy, personal employment, financial situation, the labour market in the country, and public services. Additionally, the analysis will be differentiated based on citizens' diverse perceptions

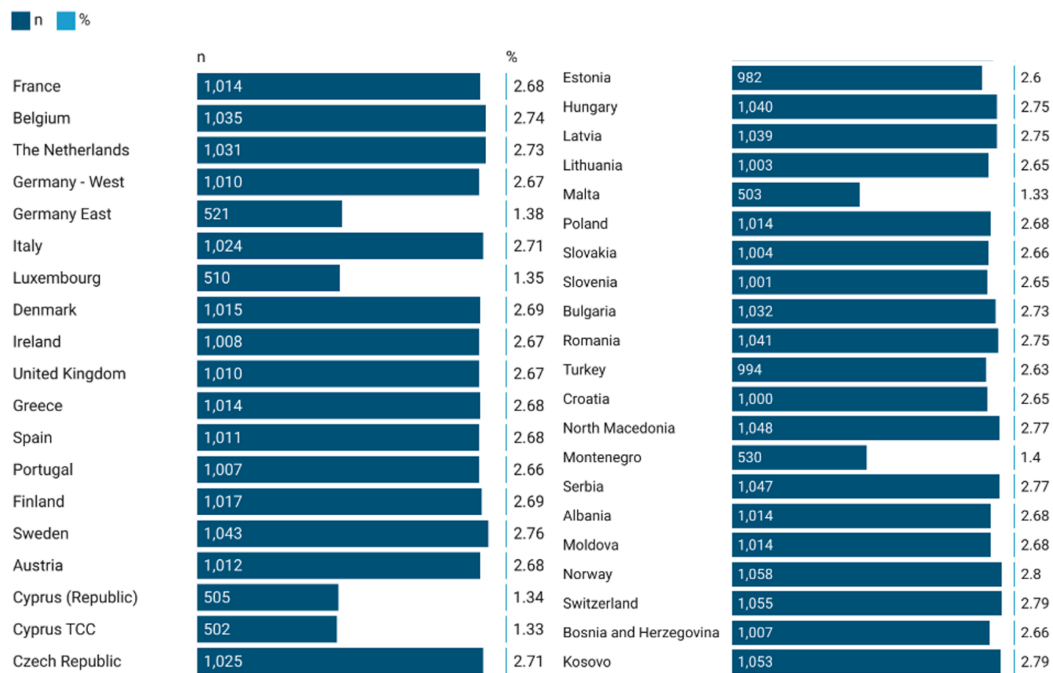


Figure 1 Descriptive Statistics

of the EU, the perception of the threat posed by the Russian war in Ukraine to the EU and national security, and the values of the EU. Finally, respondents' political orientations and place of residence (urban or rural) are also considered.

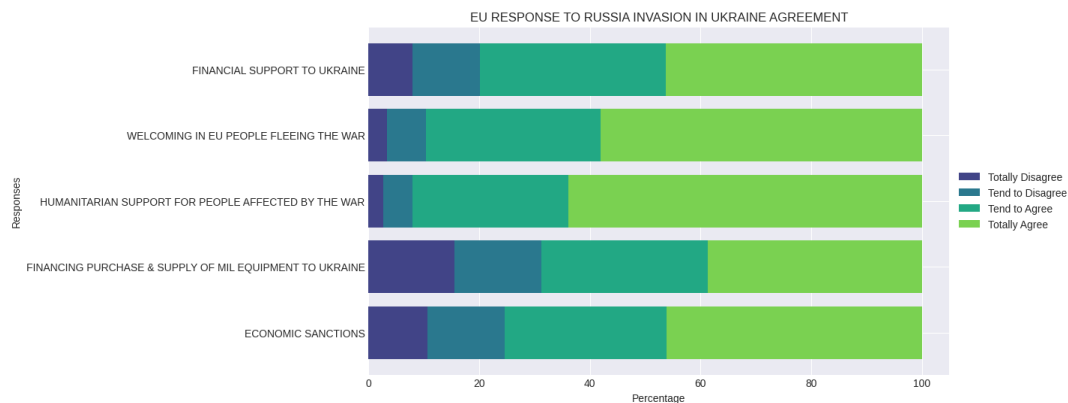


Figure 2 Response distribution across items

4 Methodology

Opinion surveys are susceptible to subjective bias, and respondents may interpret response categories differently (Disegna and Massari, 2018). For example, one respondent's expression of 'very much in agreement' may be interpreted as 'in agreement' by another respondent. To overcome this limitation, we propose a new Fuzzy-Hybrid TOPSIS solution that combines two distinct yet linked approaches (Figure 3). The first approach uses fuzzy set logic to address the vagueness of responses in questionnaires, while the second uses the Technique for

Order of Preference by Similarity to Ideal Solution (TOPSIS) to integrate indicator measures of European opinions on the EU's response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine (ATEUR-RIU).

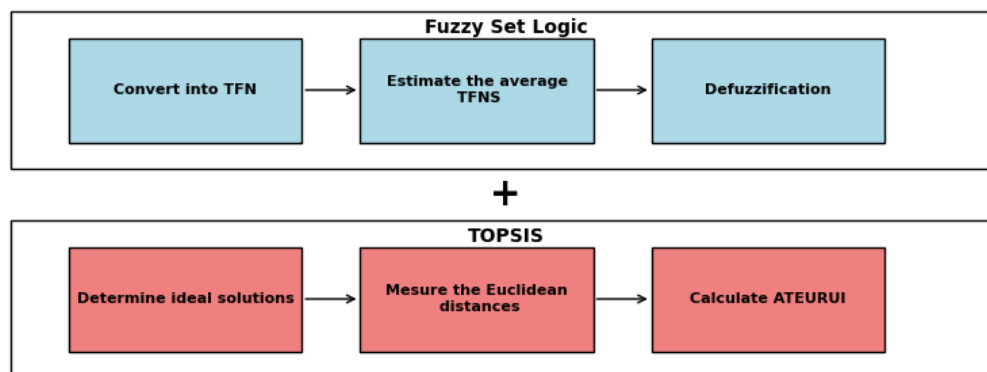


Figure 3 Methodology

This is intended to address the imprecision of survey responses and the relative positioning of respondents on a scale of support. Fuzzy set theory allows for partial membership of response categories rather than definite boundaries, meaning that respondents can be somewhat in agreement and somewhat neutral at the same time. These responses are then converted into triangular fuzzy numbers and defuzzified into quantitative values, without losing the richness of uncertainty or the parameters required for quantitative analysis. TOPSIS then ranks all the profiles based on closeness to an ideal positive point and distance from an ideal negative point. The output is a score between zero and one; the higher the score, the stronger the support for EU action.

By integrating fuzzy logic and TOPSIS, the method provides a detailed yet comprehensible quantitative estimate of public sentiment. It can handle imprecise survey responses, prevent data loss from hard-coding, and provide a ranking system that identifies the degree to which individuals or groups express higher or lower levels of agreement with the EU sanctions. Therefore, the Fuzzy-Hybrid TOPSIS method preserves the diversity of attitudes towards sanctions while producing concise, comparable outcomes between regions and categories.

4.1 Fuzzy Set Logic

Fuzzy sets offer a mathematical framework for addressing non-statistical uncertainty in information data (Zadeh, 1965) and serve as a valuable tool for handling the inherent uncertainty and vagueness present in information (Carlsson and Fullér, 2001; Disegna and Massari, 2018). While classical logic relies on a binary distinction between true and false, in fuzzy logic, a subset A of a set X is mapped by the function x_A as $x_A : X \rightarrow [0, 1]$. Thus, fuzzy logic overcomes the limitations of classical two-valued logic and allows for the obtaining of values between 0 and 1 (Mamdani and Assilian, 1999).

Thus, a fuzzy number represents a range of possible values with varying degrees of membership (Nguyen et al., 2005). In this context, Triangular Fuzzy Numbers (TFNs) are a specific type of fuzzy number called 'triangular' because the membership function, which describes the degree of belonging to the fuzzy set, is shaped like a triangle (Anand and Bharatraj, 2017). Thus, a TFN is defined by a tuple of three parameters (a_1, a_2, a_3) , a lower bound (minimum), a modal value (peak or most likely value), and an upper bound (maximum). These three

values form the vertices of the triangular membership function (Anand and Bharatraj, 2017; Wang, 2017). The membership function of a TFN assigns a degree of membership to each possible value within the range defined by the lower and upper bounds (Tseng et al., 2018).

In the context of the study, fuzzy set logic is employed to address the vagueness inherent in information derived from responses of the 98th Eurobarometer (Winter 2022-2023). The transformation of respondents' Likert-type scale responses into TFNs is characterised by a universe of discourse ranging from 0 to 100, as shown in Figure 4. This interval is selected to prevent a loss of generalisation by four intersecting 3-tuples (Cantillo et al., 2021).

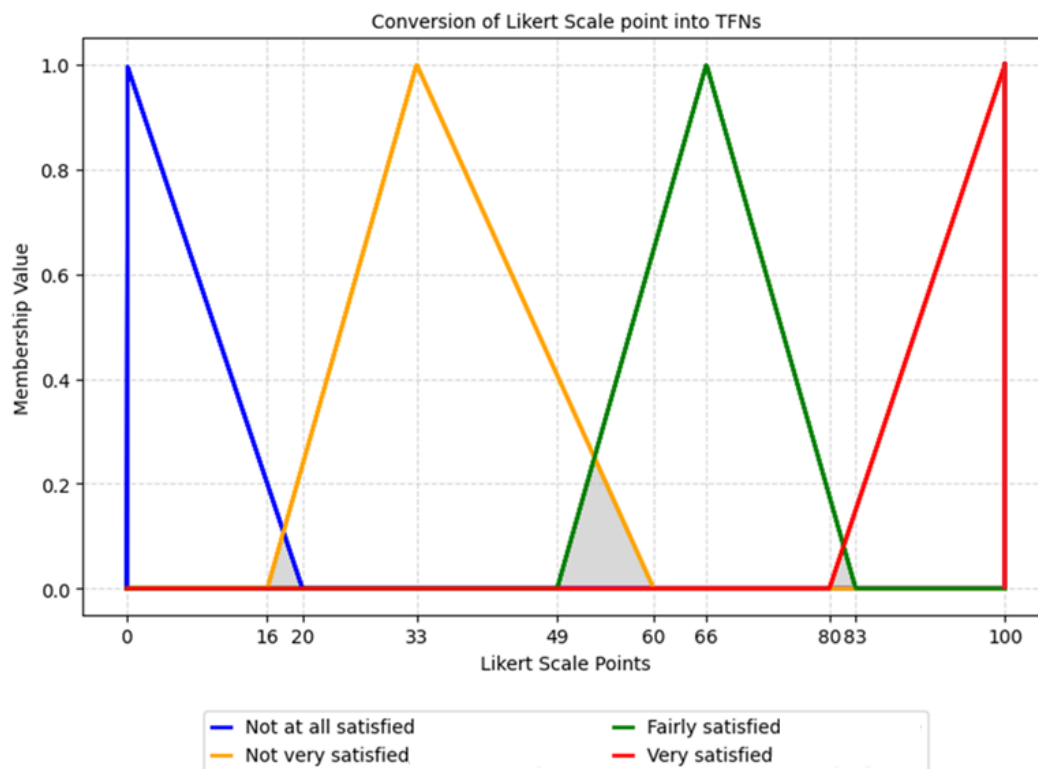


Figure 4 Conversion of Likert Scale points into TFNs

By aggregating the mean for each population segment, a TFN information matrix is obtained. However, the information remains challenging to analyse in its fuzzy form. To address this complexity, a defuzzified information matrix is generated by converting the fuzzy information matrix into a plausible real-number matrix, as vagueness and uncertainty are already managed (Kumar, 2017). Kaufmann and Gupta (1988) introduced a tool for obtaining crisp values from TFNs by calculating the weighted average of the 3-tuple of the respective TFN within the fuzzy information matrix. This awards more importance to the central values, aligning with fuzzy logic principles. The defuzzified value is determined as follows:

$$v_{\bar{A}} = \frac{a_1 + 2a_2 + a_3}{4} \quad [1]$$

4.2 TOPSIS

Hwang and Yoon (1981), the TOPSIS approach provides a method for obtaining synthetic indicators. It is widely applied across various disciplines, including tourism (Martín et al., 2020), logistics (Liu et al., 2020), and transportation (Indelicato et al., 2024). In this work, we adopt

a hybrid approach, as TOPSIS is not directly applied to raw information but after converting Likert-type data into TFNs. Thus, upon obtaining the defuzzified information matrix, TOPSIS follows three steps to derive a synthetic indicator that estimates the ATEUR-RIU. First, the positive and negative ideal solutions are computed as the maximum and minimum values for each item of analysis, respectively:

$$A_j^+ = \{(max V_{ij}), j = 1, 2, \dots, J\}, i = 1, 2, \dots, m \quad [2]$$

$$A_j^- = \{(min V_{ij}), j = 1, 2, \dots, J\}, i = 1, 2, \dots, m \quad [3]$$

Here, V_{ij} denotes the defuzzified information matrix, J are the items represented in Figure 2, and $\mathbb{X}$ represents the various segments of the population under analysis. Once the positive and negative ideal solutions are determined, the Euclidean distances between each group and the ideal solution are calculated using Equations [4] and [5]:

$$S_i^+ = \sqrt{\sum_{j=1}^m (A_j^+ - V_{ij})^2} \quad [4]$$

$$S_i^- = \sqrt{\sum_{j=1}^m (A_j^- - V_{ij})^2} \quad [5]$$

Finally, the TOPSIS indicator measuring ATEUR-RIU is given by the ratio of the Euclidean distance between the negative ideal solution and the sum of the Euclidean distances between the positive ideal solution and the negative ideal solution. Mathematically:

$$ATEUR - RIU_i = \frac{S_i^-}{S_i^+ + S_i^-} \rightarrow [0, 1] \quad [6]$$

5 Results

5.1 Socioeconomic contexts

Figure 5 presents a comprehensive map of the Attitudes Toward the EU Response to the Russian Invasion of Ukraine (ATEUR-RIU) across European countries. The scores range from 0.30 to 0.98. The map reveals distinctive patterns that divide Europe into three major blocks. The first block encompasses Northern European countries and Kosovo, showing the highest values of the indicator. The second block comprises countries with moderate values, situated in Southern and Central Europe. Conversely, the third block includes countries with the lowest values, representing a group with less favourable attitudes towards EU actions. Notably, the Balkan countries and Hungary, on average, exhibit the least favourable attitudes towards EU responses to the conflict in Ukraine.

However, Figure 5 does not illustrate territorial nuances within particular countries. To partially solve this limitation, Figure 6 delves into specific territorial disparities within Germany, contrasting West and East Germany, and within Cyprus, scrutinising distinctions between the Turkish Cypriot Community (TCC) and the Republic of Cyprus. Although Cyprus, on the whole, exhibits higher average values than Germany, significant variations emerge between Cyprus TCC and the Republic. Notably, individuals in the region under Turkish

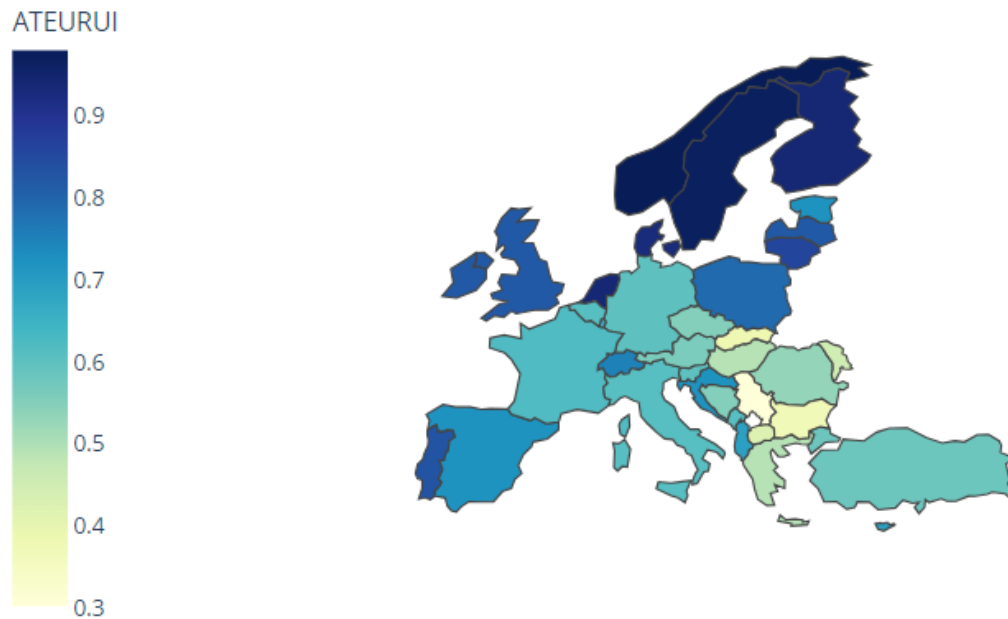


Figure 5 ATEUR-RIU by Country

administration tend to express more positive attitudes towards EU responses. Similar territorial differences are evident within Germany, where the Eastern region shows lower values than West Germany, indicating a disparity in attitudes towards EU responses to the conflict.

Figure 7 provides valuable insights into disparities among gender and various age-class demographics. Slight differences exist between males and females, and it is noteworthy that respondents identifying as other genders (0.06% of the sample) have notably higher values (0.82). When analysing different age groups, the oldest and youngest exhibit more favourable attitudes.

Some differences are identified across political orientations, dividing the respondents into five categories along a left-right axis, with a nuanced distinction among centre-left respondents, who exhibit slightly higher values (0.73). In contrast, right- and left-wing respondents have the lowest values (0.66 and 0.65, respectively). Similarly, those residing in large towns tend to have slightly higher values (0.71) than those in rural areas (0.68) or small towns (0.66).

Table 1 ATEURUI by Political Orientation and Urban-Rural

Variable	Group	ATEURUI	Variable	Group	ATEURUI
Left-Right	Centre-Left	0.73	Urban-Rural	Large town	0.71
	Centre-Right	0.70		Rural area or village	0.68
	Centre	0.68		Small/middle town	0.66
	Right	0.66			
	Left	0.65			

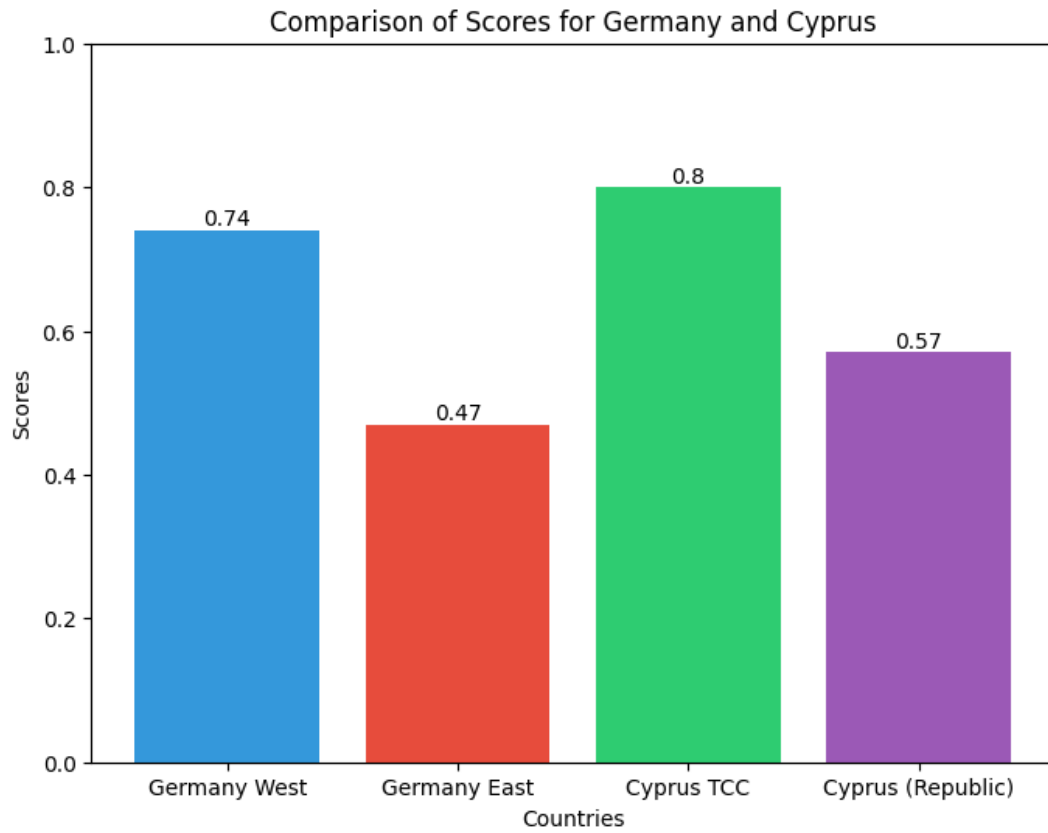


Figure 6 ATEUR-RIU differences within Germany and Cyprus

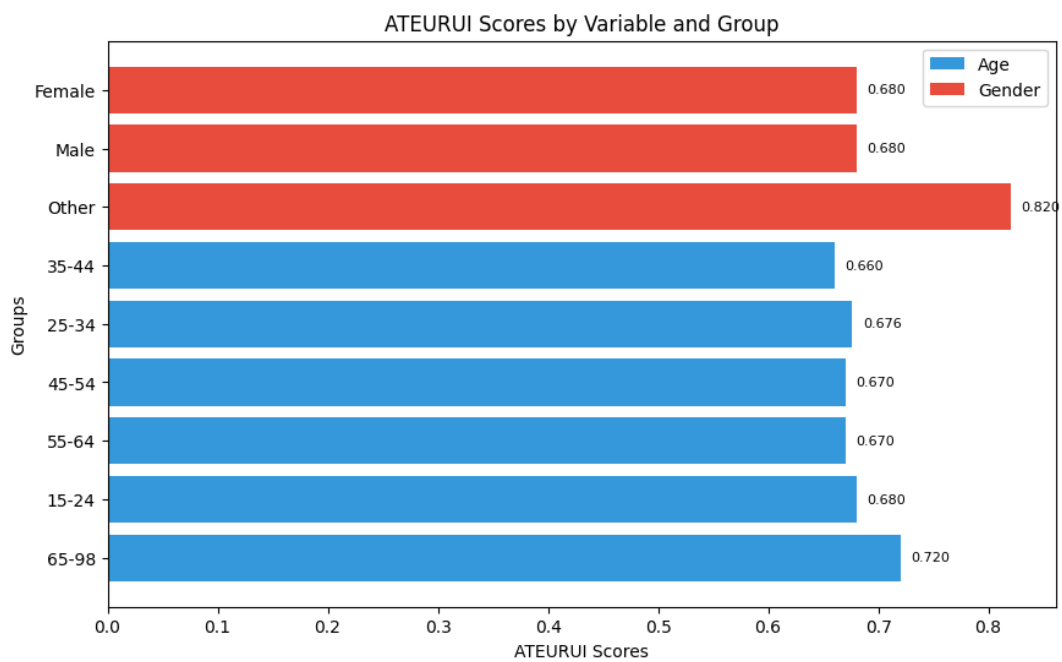


Figure 7 ATEUR-RIU by gender and age

5.2 Geopolitical Statements Analysis

Table 2 provides an in-depth analysis of ATEUR-RIU across various population segments, shedding light on the impact of factors such as discussion frequency on national, European, and local matters, political interest, and perceptions related to economic and employment conditions. Individuals who engage frequently in discussions about national (0.72), European (0.73), and local matters (0.71) exhibit higher values than those who discuss these topics occasionally or never (lower than or equal to 0.69). Moreover, individuals with a strong political interest demonstrate higher values (0.73) than those with low political interest (0.66) or no political interest (0.64). When considering respondents' perceptions, those who perceive the situation in their country as very good, as well as those with a positive outlook on the national and European economy, show higher values (0.80 or higher) than those with negative perceptions (0.48, 0.38, and 0.49, respectively). Significant variations are also detected across personal job situations. Respondents who perceive their job situation as very good are associated with the highest value (0.85), whereas those who perceive it as rather bad (0.57) or very bad (0.49) are associated with lower values. Similarly, perceptions of one's financial situation significantly influence ATEUR-RIU values. Respondents perceiving their financial situation as very good show a value of 0.88, while those perceiving it as very bad exhibit a low value of 0.41. The impact of the employment situation is also rather evident. Respondents who perceive the employment situation in their country very well report a value of 0.88, while those who perceive it as very bad report a value of 0.49. Lastly, the perception of public services plays a role, with respondents perceiving the situation as very good presenting higher values (0.86) than those perceiving it as very bad (0.49). These findings highlight the multifaceted influence of various factors on attitudes toward EU responses to the Russian-Ukrainian conflict.

Figure 8 illustrates variations in the index across different statements gauging perceptions of the threat of invasion of the EU, the country, and the EU's commitment to defending European values through its measures in response to the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Individuals who strongly agree with these statements exhibit notably higher values, surpassing 0.85. Conversely, ATEUR-RIU values decline as respondents express increasing disagreement with these statements. Specifically, those who tend to reject the threat of Russia invading the EU present a value of 0.39. Similarly, those expressing scepticism about the threat to their country report values of 0.51, while those questioning the EU's defence of European values register a value of 0.33. The lowest values are observed among those who completely disagree with these statements, with figures plummeting from 0.01 to 0.17.

Finally, this study delves into the impact of individuals' perceptions of the EU image on ATEUR-RIU, as shown in Figure 9. Distinctive patterns emerge across these opinions, revealing that a very positive (0.89) and a fairly positive (0.80) perception of the EU image both positively influence the index. Conversely, individuals harbouring a fairly negative or very negative EU image experience a more negative impact, registering values of 0.46 and 0.22, respectively.

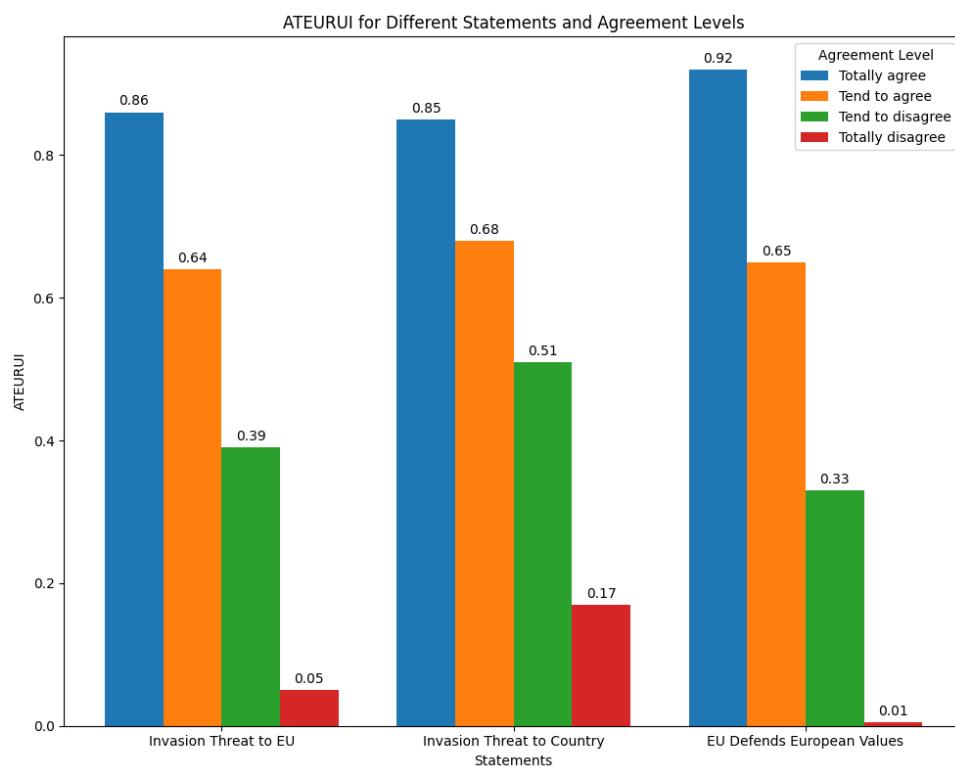


Figure 8 ATEUR-RIU according to statements about threat perception and European values

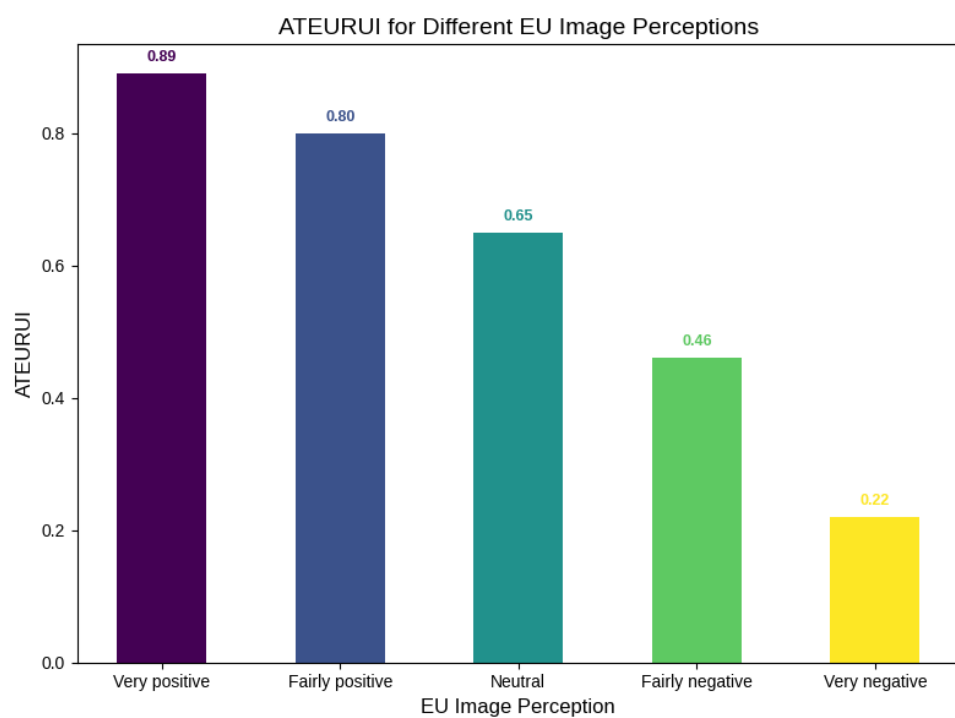


Figure 9 ATEUR-RIU according to EU image perception

Table 2 ATEURUI according to geopolitical statements

Variable	Group	ATEURUI	Variable	Group	ATEURUI
National matters	Frequently	0.72	European economy situation	Very good	0.80
	Occasionally	0.68		Rather good	0.77
	Never	0.64		Rather bad	0.64
European matters	Frequently	0.73	Personal job situation	Very bad	0.38
	Occasionally	0.69		Very good	0.85
	Never	0.64		Rather good	0.70
Local matters	Frequently	0.71	Financial household situation	Rather bad	0.57
	Occasionally	0.68		Very bad	0.49
	Never	0.66		Very good	0.88
Political interest	Strong	0.73	Country employment situation	Rather good	0.72
	Medium	0.68		Rather bad	0.55
	Low	0.66		Very bad	0.41
	Not at all	0.64		Very good	0.88
Country situation	Very good	0.84	Public services situation	Rather good	0.75
	Rather good	0.79		Rather bad	0.62
	Rather bad	0.63		Very bad	0.49
	Very bad	0.45		Very good	0.86
National economy situation	Very good	0.84		Rather good	0.74
	Rather good	0.79		Rather bad	0.63
	Rather bad	0.66		Very bad	0.49
	Very bad	0.48			

6 Discussion

Our research shows that Europe is divided into three categories based on citizens' views of the European Union's actions concerning the conflict in Ukraine. These views range from full support to general criticism, reflecting mixed opinions. The first group comprises Northern European countries and Kosovo, which have a strongly positive attitude towards the EU's initiatives. The second group comprises Central and Southern European nations with more moderate attitudes towards the EU's response. The third group comprises the Balkan states and Hungary, which collectively have the most negative views.

These groupings should not be regarded as mere descriptive classifications, but rather as phenomena that can be explained by including theoretical and historical models. Northern European countries, particularly those in Scandinavia, have traditionally been regarded as models of welfare-state consolidation and accommodating democracy, which amplify institutional trust and EU identification (Marozzi, 2015). Their historical commitment to multilateralism and integration within Europe may partly explain their unwavering support for EU initiatives concerning Russia. On the other hand, the Balkan countries exhibit the effects of post-socialist transition, characterised by weak institutions and contentious processes of national identity formation. As Jović (2018) argues, this history has resulted in long-standing Euroscepticism and scepticism regarding supranational power, making resistance to EU sanctions more likely. Hungary is a good example of how domestic politics can influence public opinion. Its leadership has consistently taken a negative stance towards Brussels and a neutral stance towards Moscow for most of the past decade. This factor has contributed to diminished public support for EU sanctions (Ivanov and Laruelle, 2022). Southern and Cen-

tral European countries adopt intermediate stances, which are moderated by their economic vulnerability to sanctions and their mixed perceptions of EU membership. These differences align with research on Euroscepticism, which indicates that economic reliance, historical factors, and elite influences predict variations in attitudes across countries (Palmowski and Fedorov, 2020). They also corroborate Kentmen-Cin (2025)'s findings that initially high levels of support for EU activity have diminished as the cost of war escalates.

Those who engage more in political discussions and have a greater interest in politics tend to express stronger support for EU action. This suggests that political engagement increases awareness of the geopolitical interests at play in times of war, which aligns with theories of elite cue-taking and political socialisation (Clark and Hellwig, 2012). Second, literature on party alignment suggests that support for sanctions is often influenced by national parties' positions on Europe and foreign affairs. This is because voters use these positions as a way of understanding complex foreign affairs (Hooghe & Marks, 2018). Countries where political elites prioritise Eurosceptic frames show less support, whereas contexts in which elites frame sanctions as acts of solidarity and the defence of shared values show more. These findings support the idea that sanctions backing is not merely a rational economic choice, but rather an extension of the same moral and political rationalities that guided solidarity with Ukrainian refugees (Mirkina, 2018).

In addition to regional and political divisions, the research also considers generational and educational factors. Although the gender gap is slight, younger groups express more favourable attitudes towards EU actions, corroborating earlier work which found that exposure to European institutions in an experimental setting can implant lasting pro-EU dispositions (Ringlerova, 2019). These results suggest the consolidation of long-term support for European integration, as younger, more educated citizens increasingly replace older, more sceptical generations (Down and Wilson, 2013). They also align with Dražanová & Geddes (2023) study, which demonstrated cross-country heterogeneity in the willingness to accept Ukrainian refugees. This suggests that generational cohorts and their formative experiences determine the limits of European solidarity.

Perceptions of the economy also influence attitudes towards sanctions. Those with positive views of their national and individual economic circumstances tend to have higher ATEUR-RIU values, whereas those with negative views tend to have lower values. This is consistent with studies linking citizens' well-being and approval of EU policies, whereby trust in the economy enhances trust in collective action (Bevan et al., 2016). Conversely, during periods of economic crisis, people prefer local or national solutions, perceiving EU action as distant from their immediate needs (Braun et al., 2019). This confirms an observation of political economy that has been evident for years: that citizens' support for costly foreign policy arrangements depends on whether they are economically secure enough to support them. The findings are in line with the fact that public support for costly humanitarian and foreign policy measures is vulnerable to waning when economic interests are taken into consideration (Kentmen-Cin, 2025).

Finally, threat perception is the most significant catalyst of attitudes. People who view Russia's invasion as a significant threat tend to support EU measures more, which is consistent with securitisation and collective defence frameworks. This impact is further compounded by historical legacies in border states such as Finland and the Baltic states, which have memories of past conflicts with Russia (Forss, 2009; Outeda, 2025), as well as Poland, which has acted as a geopolitical buffer between East and West for centuries (Palmowski & Fedorov, 2020). However, threat perceptions are also influenced by economic interests: citizens in states that are more vulnerable to energy or fossil fuel prices place greater weight on

material consequences when making judgements about sanctions (Gueorguiev and Steinberg, 2020). This explains Sinclair's et al. (2024) finding that approval for Ukraine and Ukrainians (and, by extension, EU action against Russia) is based not only on solidarity, but also on similarity and threat perceptions.

Overall, these three clusters of European positions on EU sanctions are not random classifications but reflect historical paths, institutional confidence, party cues, and economic fragilities. By placing our analysis within the broader literature on Euroscepticism, post-socialist transformation, political identification, solidarity, and threat perception, we demonstrate that opinions on EU sanctions are firmly rooted in the moral rationalities that portray Ukrainians as 'promising victims' (Mbah and Wasum, 2022) and the structural factors that determine the extent of solidarity in the face of costly policy commitments.

7 Conclusion

In conclusion, this research has revealed the complex interactions influencing European citizens' opinions regarding the EU sanctions imposed on Russia following the invasion of Ukraine in early 2022. An innovative approach based on fuzzy methodology was employed to analyse these attitudes and examine how various socio-economic factors interact. Different factors, such as country of residence, age, gender, and political orientation, as well as personal perceptions of employment, economic situation, geopolitical threats, and the EU's commitment to defending European values, have been analysed. The data for this study were drawn from the 98th Eurobarometer, covering winter 2022-2023, providing a solid foundation for a thorough analysis of citizens' attitudes.

Significant variations emerge between European countries, demonstrating how cultural, historical, and socio-economic differences can profoundly influence perceptions and public opinions on complex geopolitical issues. The analysis of age groups revealed that both young and older individuals have more favourable attitudes towards EU actions, reflecting greater sensitivity and openness to European issues among marginalised groups and generations that have experienced periods of stability and economic growth under the EU's influence. Another key finding from the study is the importance of economic and employment perceptions in shaping the attitudes of European citizens. This highlights the need for effective communication and economic policies that promote stability and well-being, thereby maintaining and strengthening public support for the EU.

The present study has limitations, which offer insights for future research. Although data were collected in winter 2022-2023, this timeframe may not be sufficient to capture long-term opinions of European citizens on sanctions. Examining how these perceptions evolve and identifying the main factors influencing public opinions are crucial issues that will be important to scrutinise in the future. Additionally, it would be beneficial to further consider socio-economic factors, such as education level, employment sector, and trust in national and European institutions, to achieve a more comprehensive analysis. It is also important to explore how direct or indirect experiences with EU programmes and policies, such as benefits from regional development programmes, might influence citizens' opinions. Finally, another promising area for future research is the analysis of the influence of European and international media on citizens' perceptions of the conflict and sanctions.

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