

Demand for EU Polity Building in Shadow of the Russian Threat 1**1 Introduction**

The Russian invasion of Ukraine came on the heels of a series of crises that tested the resilience of the EU as a compound polity (Ferrera, Kriesi, and Schelkle 2024). It has also, arguably, reshaped European policymaking at all levels and impacted the polity itself. This external threat triggered a debate between those arguing it can lead to an external security logic of polity building that serves as an impetus for (further) polity centralization in the EU, as per the ‘bellicist’ argument (e.g., Kelemen and McNamara 2021) and those who doubt it (e.g., Genschel and Schimmelfennig 2022). Taking the Russian invasion of Ukraine as a litmus test of the ‘bellicist’ argument, some contributions to the debate have questioned the extent to which it can really be conducive to polity centralization. The literature also casts some shadow of doubt on the extent to which such a threat is different than other threats and crises that the EU has been facing over the last couple of decades and the types of polity formation logics (external security vs. social security) it would trigger and their expected effects (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni 2022; Freudlsperger and Schimmelfennig 2022; Genschel and Schimmelfennig 2022; Ferrera and Schelkle 2024). Other contributions have explored specific topics such as the ways in which a rally around the European flag has evolved in the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Moise et al. 2023; Truchlewski, Oana, and Moise 2023), or the nature of public opinion surrounding specific policies (Moise, Dennison, and Kriesi 2023; Wang and Moise 2023; Oana, Moise, and Truchlewski 2024). More generally, this debate is crucial for understanding the political dynamics that shape the current pathways of European polity formation.

This Element expands this debate in several ways and offers an empirically grounded analysis of the effects that the Russian invasion of Ukraine had on public support for European polity building in key policy domains. Focusing on public opinion support is important given the politicization of the European polity (Kriesi, Hutter, and Grande 2016), the debates on the democratic deficit in the EU and the weakness of voice channels (Bartolini 2005), but also as a supportive public opinion offers an enabling environment for policymaking at the EU level and could take the wind out of Euroskeptical parties’ sails. While this Element is definitely not the first to focus on public opinion in the EU in times of crises (De Vries 2018; Kriesi et al. 2024), it does bring in several theoretical and empirical contributions that offer unique analytical gains and novelty. These contributions are inspired by the polity approach to the European Union (Bartolini 2005; Ferrera 2005; Caramani 2015; Ferrera, Kriesi, and Schelkle 2024) arguing for the multi-dimensionality and lack of finalité in European integration. In other words, the building of the EU polity need not imply a

full transfer or new creation of ‘core’ institutions to the EU at the expense of the Member States. Instead, this approach acknowledges there can be a variety of polity-building pathways if one looks at the constitute elements of the EU as a polity (Ladi and Wolff 2021; Ferrera, Kyriazi, and Miró 2024; Truchlewski et al. 2025).

First, in line with this approach, rather than conceiving of public support for the EU as uni-dimensional – more or less integration – we conceive of such support as playing out in two dimensions stemming from a distinction between ‘policy’ and ‘polity’ support. By *policy* support, we refer here to support for pooling decision-making and/or resources at the EU level in specific policy domains. By *polity* support, we refer to a general positive attitude to the EU based on a deeper loyalty towards the polity. In other words, policy support is analogous to specific support, while polity support is analogous to diffuse support for the EU (Easton 1975). While specific and diffuse EU support have been related to one another in previous studies, we argue that they do not necessarily always go together and that studying their intersections opens up a richer analytical space in which public support for the EU can be categorized into four types: support for a *centralized* polity (high loyalty and high preference for pooling), *decentralized* one (low loyalty and low preference for pooling), *pooled* polity (low loyalty but high preference for pooling), or a *reinsurance* polity (high loyalty but low preference for pooling).¹

The second theoretical assumption that we start with is that crises are not monolithic threats. Crises play out in different policy domains and support for types of EU polity can vary across these domains as a function of the asymmetries that they exacerbate between countries and social groups, of the performance of European institutions and Member States in these crises, and/or of previous attitudes. These factors drive out territorial divisions – between citizens in different Member States – and functional divisions – between groups of citizens across Member States. In other words, akin to what the literature calls vertical differentiated integration (Holzinger and Schimmelfennig 2012; Dirk Leuffen and Díaz 2022; Schimmelfennig, Leuffen, and Vries 2023), support for the four polity types is policy domain-specific. This implies that there can be different polity-building pathways across policy domains, rather than a single logic of integration.

When it comes to the determinants of support for polity types across policy domains we, thus, inquire both into territorial divisions – *between* Member States – and into functional divisions – between social and attitudinal groups, *within* Member States. Concerning territorial divisions, we focus on the

¹ We develop the rationale for these four polity types in Section 2.

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distribution of preferences for our four polity types between Member States and how these vary across policy domains. Concerning functional divisions, our manuscript brings together under the same umbrella three main sets of factors that have previously been associated with support for the EU. First, in line with the cleavage and post-functionalist literature (Vries and Edwards 2009; Hooghe and Marks 2018, 2009), we examine the relationship between ideational factors such as ideology and support for EU polity types. Second, going beyond deep-rooted attitudes, we also examine the relationship between crisis performance evaluations of both the EU and national governments as stemming out from the literature on output legitimacy (Scharpf 1999; Jones 2009; Schmidt 2013). Finally, in line with more recent literature on external drivers of EU support, we look at factors related to the ‘bellicist’ argument and the hard security logic of EU polity building such as threat perceptions stemming from the invasion (Genschel 2022; Kelemen and McNamara 2022; Truchlewski, Oana, and Moise 2023; Moise, Truchlewski, and Oana 2024), but also those related to a ‘Milwardian’ social security logic (Milward, Brennan, and Romero 1992; Natili and Visconti 2023; Ferrera and Schelkle 2024) such as economic vulnerability. This allows us to examine and compare under the same theoretical and empirical umbrella the impact of both internal and external drivers of demand for different types of polities.

Beyond theoretically expanding the debate on EU support in light of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, we also empirically ground it by mobilizing a host of original public opinion data. Our Element relies on cross-national survey data that we contextualize using secondary source analyses of policy- and polity-making decisions undertaken in the EU during the invasion. Our empirical focus on public opinion is theoretically justified as, in line with the postfunctionalist literature (Hooghe and Marks 2009), we consider this to be one of the key mechanisms in the long causal chain between threats and polity formation (Truchlewski, Oana, and Moise 2023). Public support for both policies, but also for the EU polity at large, has the potential to tie or free the hands of policymakers at both the Member State and the EU level. At the Member State level, domestic policymakers are aware of the electoral consequences of their decisions and attempt to satisfy public opinion at home when making decisions on the EU stage. At the EU level, European policymakers have an interest in polity maintenance (Ferrera, Miró, and Ronchi 2021; Ferrera, Kriesi, and Schelkle 2024) and avoiding backlashes from domestic audiences. Nevertheless, beyond public support, we acknowledge that the structure of the polity in terms of how strong or weak its subunits are, how centralized, and so on, is important in shaping policy and polity responses to (external) threats (Genschel 2022; Moise, Truchlewski, and Oana 2024). We take this into account both by the

fact that we examine the Russian invasion of Ukraine not as a monolithic threat spurring just an external security logic of polity-building, but as a series of threats affecting various policy domains in which the EU and the Member States have different competence distributions and powers at the centre of the polity might differ, and by examining both policy and polity support. In sum, by contextualizing public opinion in various policy domains and under the various decisions undertaken in these domains during the invasion, we also inquire into the ways in which the structure of the polity itself is shaping public opinion support.

We further these empirical goals by using original public opinion data collected within the ERC Synergy project SOLID at three-time points (March, July, and December 2022) after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, forming an original three-wave panel in five countries (Germany, France, Italy, Hungary, and Poland) with an additional two countries (Finland and Portugal) studied only in the second wave. Panel data has the unique advantage of tracking individuals over time enabling an examination of how their attitudes shift in response to the changing conditions of the conflict. It also allows more in-depth exploration of the interplay between attitudes, such as crisis performance evaluations, and security conditions, such as vulnerabilities enhanced by the war. Our panel data, therefore, allows us to study the dynamics of EU public opinion through a critical juncture for EU policy and decision-making. The EU and its Member States are directly involved in the war, through refugee acceptance, sanctions, energy policy, military aid, humanitarian relief, and other geopolitical and national decisions. Russia itself claims that it is at war not just with Ukraine, but with the whole of NATO. European publics have, therefore, been exposed to a geopolitical struggle between the West and Russia, with the EU taking a strong role. They have been exposed to the quick, emergency-style, consensual policymaking of the beginning of the war, as well as to the later disagreements among member states over sanctions, energy policy, and grain exports. Respondents have been exposed to the terrifying images of war crimes and, particularly in Eastern countries, also to the threat of Russian aggression and possible escalation. Our period of study, therefore, captures what is, to date, the most salient external threat to the European polity. It is, therefore, the ideal scenario in which to test the ‘bellicist’ argument, starting from the demand side.

To sum up, our Element brings in several key contributions to the debate on EU polity building in the aftermath of the invasion:

- *First*, we seek to address the debate by delving deeper into the polity formation logics that are triggered across policy domains. Our Element pushes forward a distinction between ‘policy’ and ‘polity’ dynamics. By policy

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dynamics, we refer here to the specific support for decisions in various policy domains concerning the distribution of the burden of the shock across these policies among Member States. By polity dynamics, we refer to the shape and evolution of diffuse support for the EU based on a deeper loyalty towards the polity. By analogy, the polity is the container, while policies are what is contained. We argue that this distinction is important for capturing the various polity formation pathways upon which Europe can embark within crises. Rather than conceiving of public support for the EU as uni-dimensional – more or less integration – we conceive of such support as playing out in these two dimensions. Studying the intersections between these dimensions opens a richer analytical space for categorizing public support for the EU. We, hence, propose four polity types at the intersection of policy/specific and polity/diffuse support: a *centralized* polity (high loyalty and high preference for pooling), a *decentralized* one (low loyalty and low preference for pooling), a *pooled* polity (low loyalty but high preference for pooling), and a *reinsurance* polity (high loyalty but low preference for pooling).

- *Second*, in contrast to what has been labelled as the ‘bellicist’ argument, we argue that the Russian invasion of Ukraine exerted pressures on a variety of different policy domains with the potential to spur not only an external security logic of polity building (i.e., centralizing the defence domain as a consequence of the external threat) but also other logics of polity building such as a social security one – that is, centralizing of risk and redistribution in other policy domains to cope with the fallout of the crisis (Moise et al. 2023). In this Element, we further develop this idea that crises are not monolithic threats, but rather that they play out in different domains and support for EU polity types can vary across these as a function of the asymmetries that they exacerbate between countries and social groups. Consequently, the EU itself is not viewed as subject to more or less integration uniformly across the polity, but can be conceived of as an amalgamation of different polity types across policy domains. This idea structures the content of the Element as we analyse four highly salient policy domains on which the Russian invasion of Ukraine induced high pressures for reform – refugee policy, energy policy, foreign policy, and defence – while also focusing on the similarities and differences between them.
- *Third*, we contribute to the literature on the internal and external drivers of European polity formation and their relative weight. While the literature on European integration has classically been focused on internal drivers of polity formation, political economists have long been acquainted with the idea of the ‘second image reversed’ in international politics (Gourevitch 1978), that is, the idea that external crises affect domestic political cleavages and

thus shape the policy response and the development of any polity (Rogowski 1989; Midford 1993; Alt et al. 1996). The same is true of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and its influence on the formation of the European polity (Moise, Truchlewski, and Oana 2024). It is only recently that scholars started paying attention to the mechanism of external threats influencing the EU (Kelemen and McNamara 2022), leveraging an old literature on the sources of state-building and federalism (Riker 1964; Tilly 1975). We compare the impact of internal and external drivers of demand for different types of polities.

- *Fourth*, our Element attempts to further empirically ground the debate surrounding the polity formation consequences of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In doing so, we critically focus on public opinion as an important link in the chain of polity formation given the politicization of the European polity, criticism of democratic deficit in the EU and of weak voice channels, but also as a supportive public opinion offer an enabling environment for policymaking at the EU level. In light of this, the Russian Invasion of Ukraine and its impact on the European polity offers a critical case study of the linkage between public opinion and polity formation. Empirically, we use a host of original public opinion data consisting of a unique three-wave panel survey on the topic of EU polity building following the invasion.

Across the four empirical sections, we show that all four polity types that we conceptualize at the intersections between policy and polity attitudes (centralized, decentralized, pooled, and reinsurance) are supported by large percentages of European publics. These results illustrate that two categories of citizens that are largely ignored in studies of EU support, those who want to centralize decisions in particular domains but have low loyalty towards the polity and those who, while having high loyalty, still do not want to centralize, constitute significant groups across all of our policy domains. In terms of the determinants of EU support, we show that performance evaluations and ideational factors are significantly related to preferences for polity types across all four domains, while external factors such as perceived threats and economic vulnerability stemming from the invasion have a lower impact. These results hold not only when examining static relations between these attitudes but also when examining within-individual change across the crisis. Hence, preferences for our four polity types are more strongly rooted in output legitimacy and deep attitudinal variables, rather than in factors directly related to the security or economic threats raised by the war. Beyond these attitudinal divisions, our results also show important territorial divisions between citizens in different Member States, divisions which vary greatly across policy domains.

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While countries are hardly divided over refugee policy (with the exception of Hungary), across the other three policy fields studied in the manuscript we observe varying potential ‘coalitions’ of citizens across Member States likely as a consequence of the asymmetrical impact of the crisis.

The Element proceeds as follows. Section 2 sets the scene by introducing the theoretical framework and the empirical design. Sections 3–7 examine EU support across the four policy domains chosen: refugee policy (Section 3), energy policy (Section 4), foreign policy (Section 5), and defence (Section 6). Each of these empirical sections starts with a descriptive analysis of support for the four polity types that we introduce in our theoretical section. It then analyses statically the territorial divisions in such support and the relationship between individual factors related to performance evaluations, ideational factors, and security factors. Finally, each empirical section includes a dynamic analysis of within-individual attitudinal changes over time. The Element ends with a concluding section where we summarize our theoretical contributions as well as our empirical findings and discuss their wider implications.

2 EU Polity Support – A Theoretical and Empirical Framework

This section lays out the theoretical and empirical design of our Element. We begin by justifying our focus on public opinion, emphasizing its critical role in the context of the increasing politicization of the European polity and its influence as an enabler of European policymaking. We then focus on the conceptualization of the demand-side support for EU polity building in times of crises, putting forward two significant contributions inspired by the polity formation approach to the European Union (Caramani 2015; Ferrera, Kriesi, and Schelkle 2024). First, in line with this approach arguing for the absence of a clear *finalité* in the process of European integration, we say that the building of the EU polity does not necessarily imply a full transfer of sovereignty or the creation of ‘core state power’ institutions at the EU level. By contrast, there can be a variety of polity-building pathways that need not imply centralization at the EU level (Ladi and Wolff 2021; Ferrera, Kyriazi, and Miró 2024; Truchlewski et al. 2025). We leverage this insight and propose a four-fold typology of support for the EU polity stemming from a distinction between polity and policy attitudes. Second, we argue that crises are not monolithic threats but that they instead exacerbate divisions between Member States (territorial) and social groups (functional) that vary across policy domains. In light of this, we introduce the policy domains that this Element focuses on and theorize the kinds of divisions that are likely to be associated with polity support across

these domains. When discussing these divisions and the drivers of EU policy support we bring under the same theoretical and empirical umbrella both internal – such as output legitimacy and ideology – and external – such as threat perceptions – factors influencing support. Finally, we conclude the section by briefly introducing our data and the design of the empirical analyses.

2.1 Public Opinion and the EU Polity Formation

Since 1992, the politicization of European polity formation has brought public opinion into the picture of European politics (Hooghe and Marks 2009). The 1992 referendum failure in Denmark, which rejected the Maastricht Treaty, and the reluctant ‘little yes’ uttered by French voters marked the end of the permissive consensus and elite-driven European polity formation. More than ever after a decade-plus of crises, the EU relies on different types of support from electorates. Polity building – as embodied by the many reforms and capacity building at the centre – needs to be fully supported by voters to be sustainable in the long run and not exploited by euro-skeptic party actors. We, thus, argue that mapping out potential conflicts – whether functional or territorial (Caramani 2015) – is vital for understanding where political frictions can appear and how they will influence the future of both European polity formation and the Russian invasion of Ukraine (since Ukraine relies on its European allies for crucial help).

While the argument of external threats inducing polity centralization that stems from the state-building literature (Riker 1964; Hintze 1975; Tilly 1975; Kelemen and McNamara 2021) has been chiefly focused on the supply side of politics (policymakers) and does not have much to say about public demand for polity centralization, we argue that the demand side is an important link in the chain going from the external threat to polity centralization (Truchlewski, Oana, and Moise 2023).

First, the Hintze–Riker–Tilly thesis was developed to explain state formation in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance when elites operated without much popular constrain and when military technology required economies of scale that needed to go beyond the feudal structure (Cederman et al. 2023). Modern democratic nation-states need to consider public opinion, as it may constrain or enable elite action. We know that a strong dissensus among the European public can constrain further political integration (Hooghe and Marks 2009). Conversely, a strong consensus allows greater room of manoeuvre for politicians to steer the shape of the EU polity. At the Member State level, domestic policy-makers are aware of the electoral consequences of their decisions and attempt

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to satisfy public opinion at home when making decisions on the EU stage. At the EU level, European policymakers have an interest in polity maintenance and, hence, avoiding backlashes from domestic audiences that could threaten the polity and bring about divisions that would undermine common decision-making (Ferrera, Miró, and Ronchi 2021; Ferrera, Kriesi, and Schelkle 2024).

Furthermore, we note that public opinion is more likely to exert pressure on politicians during times of high salience when voters follow what is happening and have more well-formed preferences. The present moment is, therefore, an opportunity to probe into demand-side dynamics at a time when the public is particularly attuned to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the response of the EU.² We started our panel survey at the onset of the invasion in 2022, a moment of very high salience for the Russian war in Ukraine and the economic and political response of the EU. Thus, while several of the policy domains associated with the invasion (foreign policy, energy, etc.) are usually considered too complex for individuals and of low salience, our timing allows us to examine them in a situation when the public is aware and engaged in discussions surrounding the implications of these policies. Indeed, several elections, such as those in Hungary³ and Slovakia,⁴ showed that policies concerning the war were crucial for electoral success. All in all, we argue that in case of an external threat, when highly salient policies take centre stage in the public sphere, consensus on the demand side becomes crucial for policymaking.

Second, and more generally, following the polity approach to the European Union (Bartolini 2005; Ferrera, Kriesi, and Schelkle 2024) that draws on the Hirschman-Rokkan model of state-building (Hirschman 1970; Rokkan et al. 1999), we look at bonding as one of the main elements characterizing a polity (alongside bounding—borders and binding—authority/capacity).⁵ Bonding refers to the loyalty and solidarity that members of a polity have towards the polity itself and towards other members, a loyalty that ultimately constitutes

² When asked in our survey, 32 per cent of respondents thought that the war in Ukraine was the most important threat to the survival of the EU, with a further 21 per cent citing it as the second most significant threat. Other option categories included climate change, financial crises, refugee inflows from outside Europe, refugee inflows from within Europe, member states leaving the EU, poverty and unemployment, and pandemics.

³ www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-60977917.

⁴ www.ft.com/content/9de49e7a-d830-4d5d-8615-2c00ba6f8552 and <https://www.ft.com/content/4bd9bd86-69bb-40a1-8570-e40930208300>.

⁵ The relationship between these three elements is one of the main arguments in Rokkanian theory which suggests that external closure – strong borders would produce further political structuring – capacity and system building – loyalty. Others (Ferrera, Kriesi, and Schelkle 2024; Truchlewski et al. 2025) have argued for other configurations and re-configurations between these three elements. While we consider this an important topic of investigation, it is one that goes beyond the scope of this Element which focuses mainly on bonding at the demand-side level.