

Geopolitical Crises and Consensus in the European Parliament: Initial Response to the War in Ukraine

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Abstract

Do members of the European Parliament (MEPs) experience the rally-around-the-flag effect? What explains the consensus and dissensus in the European Parliament (EP) when responding to geopolitical crises? Guided by these questions, we compare how MEPs debate the EU's initial response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and annexation of Crimea in 2014. Considering that the EP is a multi-level and transnational context, we explore the patterns of consensus and dissensus on the EP level, on the EP party group level, and on the regional level of East versus West Europe. To this end, we use an original dataset of hand-coded speeches of MEPs in 12 EP debates. We identify three types of reasoning behind the MEPs' speech acts in terms of the optimal EU response: power-driven, value-driven, and non-response. Each sentence from MEPs' interventions is coded under one of the three categories. Consequently, we create a three-dimensional space where we can locate each individual MEP as well as aggregate MEP positions into a party group, regional, or the EP level. This allows to estimate geometric distances between MEPs' positions and that of their party group, region, and the EP. Basing these estimations on speech acts makes a mixed-methods design possible. We first conduct regression analysis to explore what explains the variance in the distances and then compare patterns of consensus and dissensus across parties and regions qualitatively. We find evidence for the rally-around-the-flag effect, but also show that the effect is not uniform across party groups.

Keywords

consensus; European Parliament; European politics; MEPs; Russian invasion of Ukraine

1. Introduction

The unity of party groups in legislatures and their ability to exhibit a high degree of cohesion in voting or acting uniformly to achieve collective goals has long puzzled political scientists. This high level of uniformity is frequently observed in the European Parliament (EP) and is an even more puzzling phenomenon (Hix et al., 2005), especially against the background that the EP party groups lack many conventional mechanisms of party discipline such as the ability to control candidate selection or to allocate cabinet positions. Furthermore, the EP context is more fragmented institutionally and ideologically than national parliaments, requiring alternative explanations for the cohesion that EP party groups demonstrate.

Party cohesion or party unity is a well-established concept in the literature on legislative politics and is relevant not only in democracies but also autocracies (Levitsky & Way, 2012). It traditionally refers to the observable unity in group decision-making (Ozbuđun, 1970) and is usually measured with the Rice Index (Rice, 1925). Although the concept captures both behavioural outcomes—such as voting unity—and the underlying motivations, including ideological commitment, strategic calculations, or institutional pressures, most scholarly literature is focused on measuring the outcome based on the roll-call votes. This has led some scholars to argue that cohesion indices often mask the multidimensionality of party unity, which includes not only votes but also rhetorical, procedural, and strategic alignment and that cohesion must be understood not only as an outcome but as a process shaped by interactions between party groups, national delegations, and the broader institutional environment (Crespin et al., 2013; Sieberer, 2006).

The EP exemplifies a case where a high level of cohesion is achieved not through coercion or institutional dominance, but through a complex interplay of shared ideology, strategic coordination, and group socialization. Therefore, this article aims to understand consensus within the EP party groups as well as across them. This study bridges the rhetoric of members of the European Parliament (MEPs) with different ideological and geographical backgrounds, particularly in the context of geopolitical crises. The article uses party cohesion, unity, and consensus interchangeably, but as we focus on the language MEPs use when talking about the ways the EU should respond to the Crimean annexation and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, we prefer to use consensus and dissensus. We understand consensus as degrees of uniformity of EP party groups, a general amount of agreement among the MEPs (Flater, 2024), how close their preferences are with each other (Chiclana et al., 2015), or how widespread a given opinion is within a group (Riley et al., 1952). This understanding implies gradation as opposed to viewing consensus as a binary phenomenon of complete agreement or unanimity versus disagreement (Crowe, 1983; Halligan & Reid, 2016; Settembri & Neuhold, 2009). Although our focus on rhetorical action implies that we cannot construct the traditional cohesion index that uses roll-call votes as a source for data, this opens new possibilities to compensate for the shortcomings of the traditional indices. Such limitations would include forced reduction of cohesion to a binary choice between “yes” and “no” when politicians vote on legislative initiatives (Sieberer, 2006).

Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, EU leaders promptly decided to provide military support to a country in an ongoing war. Notably, the European Peace Facility that now serves the provision of weapons to Ukraine was already established in 2021 (Rehrl, 2022). Moreover, geopolitical understandings of the EU’s international role more generally have been furthered by von der Leyen’s “Geopolitical Commission” at least since 2019 (Haroche, 2023). Yet, making use of such an instrument and the surge of references to “geopolitical power Europe,” including by the High Representative (Håkansson, 2024), point to the unity of

the EU leadership. However, is this unity observed in the increasingly Eurosceptic EP (Hix et al., 2024)? We argue that within a multi-level and multi-faceted actor such as the EU, the EP is a central forum to observe deliberations about the EU's international role (Goinard, 2020; Góra, 2019; Hix & Høyland, 2013; Rosén & Raube, 2018; Szép, 2022). The debates in the EP reflect diverse and presumably competing conceptions of the European project (Kakhishvili & Felder, 2024). In the context of the geopoliticized enlargement following the invasion of Ukraine (Schimmelfennig, 2024; Schimmelfennig & Kakhishvili, 2025), consensus among MEPs becomes especially important for the EU to speak in one voice to ensure credibility of the external incentives for candidate countries (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2004, 2020). Our analysis aims to answer the following question: What explains the consensus and dissensus in the EP when responding to geopolitical crises?

Our approach introduces a novel measure of consensus, which constitutes a key contribution of this study. Existing research on the EP largely relies on roll-call votes, showing strong cohesion among centrist party groups and weaker cohesion among extremists (Ripoll Servent, 2019). Yet we know little about how consensus is built or contested during debates. This study shifts the focus from voting outcomes to parliamentary discourse, analyzing 12 debates on two major crises: Crimea (2014) and Ukraine (2022). To capture how MEPs reason about the EU's response, we developed an original coding framework based on three frames: capability-driven (actions tied to tangible resources such as military power or sanctions), value-driven (normative or transformative approaches toward neighbors), and non-response (calls for inaction). These frames form a three-dimensional space in which we locate individual MEPs and aggregate positions by party group, region, and the EP as a whole. Consensus is measured as the average distance between MEPs and their respective group, region, and EP positions. We then compare consensus levels across these dimensions and between the two crises, combining quantitative and qualitative analysis to uncover determinants and narratives of unity and division. Our findings reveal a rally effect, but not uniformly: Consensus varies by party family and region, exposing both solidarity and fragmentation in EU crisis politics. This approach complements research on party ideologies and foreign policy (Otjes et al., 2023) and responds to calls for examining how external shocks reshape Europe's transnational foreign policy space.

The article proceeds with a brief literature review on how to explain party unity in legislatures, specifically focusing on the particularities of the EP. This is followed by a brief description of methods and data. We then present the empirical analysis in two parts: First, we analyze the predictors of consensus through regression analysis; and second, we qualitatively look into the narratives emerging in the EP. The final section summarizes the main findings and suggests further avenues for research.

2. What Explains the High Level of Cohesion in the EP Party Groups?

The rally-around-the-flag effect refers to a temporary convergence of political positions and increased support for leading institutions during external threats. Applied to the EP, this raises the question of whether and how geopolitical shocks such as the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the 2022 invasion of Ukraine strengthen cohesion within and across EP party groups. Party group cohesion is one of the central features of legislative politics. Research on intra-party cohesion highlights its multidimensional nature (see Close & Gherghina, 2019, for an extensive discussion), which becomes even more complex in a supranational setting (see Felder-Stindt & Kakhishvili, 2026, for an extensive discussion). The multi-level nature of the EP means that party group cohesion is partly shaped by factors that are relevant for national

parliaments, as well as a unique interplay of determinants characteristic to the institutional framework. Party groups in the EP are central actors in structuring debates, allocating resources, and shaping legislative outcomes, yet they lack the disciplinary tools available to national parties. Consequently, cohesion in the EP must be understood as a multidimensional phenomenon, shaped by ideology, organizational dynamics, and the EU's multi-level structure (Chiru & Stoian, 2019; Ripoll Servent, 2013; Ripoll Servent & MacKenzie, 2011). The multi-level nature of the EP creates an interplay of determinants similar to federal systems, where competing interest constellations can reduce cohesion (Desposato, 2004). Based on the literature, we identify two main explanatory factors: (a) ideological alignment and party group incentives, and (b) the dominance of national interests and country-specific factors. These provide the foundation for analyzing patterns of consensus and dissensus in EP debates during major geopolitical crises.

2.1. Ideological Factors

A consistent finding in the literature is that ideology is one of the strongest predictors of party group cohesion in the EP, particularly policy positions of national parties, which can control the re-election prospects of MEPs (Hix, 2002, 2004; Meserve et al., 2017; Rasmussen, 2008). Hix et al. (2005) show that EP party groups are not only highly cohesive but also ideologically distinct, with economic left-right positions explaining a significant share of group-level voting patterns (see also Hix & Noury, 2007). Similarly, Bowler and McElroy (2015) find that ideological congruence within party groups substantially increases cohesion, particularly when national party positions align with the EP group. Costello and Thomson (2016) add that party groups are more cohesive when national delegations share similar positions and when rapporteurs come from within the party group, thereby aligning legislative agenda-setting with group goals. Raunio (1999) and Chiru and Stoian (2019) further confirm that internal ideological coherence boosts cohesion, even in contexts with weaker party discipline. Chiru and Stoian (2019) find that Romanian MEPs, although coming from a post-communist context, conform to party group lines when ideological compatibility is strong. In contrast, ideological extremity—especially on the far-right—can increase defection (Chiru & Stoian, 2019). However, ideological convergence is not exclusively based on the distance between policy preferences. Klüver and Spoon (2015) argue that variance in issue salience is important enough to lead to MEPs defecting from their party group even if ideological distance is held constant (see also Rahat, 2007; Yordanova & Mühlböck, 2015).

The EP lacks traditional tools of party discipline such as candidate selection or ministerial appointment, making its cohesion especially noteworthy. Institutional norms and incentives can also foster cohesion. Roos (2019) shows that even before direct elections in 1979, EP party groups exhibited considerable unity, driven by norms of ideological solidarity and institutional socialization (see also Gherghina & Chiru, 2014). Lindstädt et al. (2012), on the other hand, demonstrate that the behaviour of new MEPs is different from their more experienced counterparts as they operate under the informational deficit and a high level of uncertainty. Furthermore, Costello and Thomson (2016) argue that incentives like rapporteurship and control over legislative reports help maintain unity, as MEPs are incentivized to support the group to gain access to agenda-setting roles. In the context of EP party groups' inability to control rank-and-file members, the leaderships of the largest party groups tend to increase their control over the EP structures (Kreppel, 2002), which can be used to endogenously manufacture unity within the EP committees (Ringe, 2009).

From this discussion it follows that "the EP stands out by having party politics dominate all business, including external relations" (Raunio & Wagner, 2020a, p. 547; see also Jensen et al., 2007; Raunio &

Wagner, 2020b). Therefore, ideological factors are the key for consensus to emerge. However, party group size and its potential to provide institutional incentives to individual MEPs for advancing their careers should be expected to increase the level of consensus. Therefore, we hypothesize that large, mainstream, and centrist EP party groups exhibit a higher level of consensus compared to smaller groups on the fringes of the ideological spectrum. In other words, members of the mainstream party groups should generally express similar views, and their positions should converge more.

2.2. National Factors

Another recurring theme in the literature is that national party considerations significantly shape the cohesion of EP party groups. Considering the multi-level nature of the EP, national interests have the potential to incentivize defection of MEPs from their party group. For example, Bailer et al. (2009) show that party group cohesion in the EP tends to decline in the later legislative stages, when national governments exert more pressure and party group influence wanes. Furthermore, McElroy (2008) finds that large national delegations often steer the policy direction of party groups, creating cohesion around dominant national interests, indicating that internal power distribution within the EP party groups shapes cohesion.

The importance of the national context particularly increases when the issues discussed in the EP are a matter of national interests. Costello and Thomson (2016) demonstrate that when national governments have a stake in EP legislation, particularly in high-salience areas, national delegations are more likely to side with their home governments than with the EP party line. This is especially true for areas such as foreign policy and external relations. According to Otjes et al. (2023), only a portion of voting patterns in the area of foreign policy can be explained by the MEPs' positions on the left-right and EU-integration dimensions.

Furthermore, there are additional factors related to domestic political incentives that contribute to the defection of MEPs. Chiru and Stoian (2019) underscore the relevance of the degree of strength of national-European party linkages, particularly for MEPs from unstable party systems. When such linkages are weak, which is mostly true for former-communist member states, MEPs are more prone to defection. This finding speaks to national context and the party system stability, on the one hand, and ideological alignment, on the other. A stronger linkage between national and European parties is an indicator of a stable party system, which is closely aligned with EP party group ideology.

Yet another layer is the electoral dimension, which offers variance across member states. Mühlböck (2013), for example, demonstrates that MEPs elected through open-list systems—where personal votes matter—are more prone to defection. According to Hobolt (2015), on the other hand, accountability in front of voters is an important factor: When voters are more informed about EP party groups, MEPs are more responsive to group positions, but when voters view MEPs primarily as national representatives, cohesion suffers.

While the interaction of national-level variables with EP structures more generally produces complex cohesion outcomes, the interaction between ideology and national interests should be particularly salient in foreign and security policy. The literature on EP cohesion proposes that the assumption of ideology generally trumping nationality weakens under geopolitical crises and identifies mechanisms through which national factors shape parliamentary behavior, including power positions, strategic culture, and economic interdependence (Otjes et al., 2023). We operationalize these through variables such as region (East vs. West, i.e., former communist

countries represent the East and countries that have no experience of communist rule represent the West), NATO membership, geographic proximity, energy dependency, and whether the party is in government. These factors are particularly relevant in foreign policy debates, where stakes are high and divergence between supranational and national priorities is likely. External shocks such as Russia's annexation of Crimea (2014) and its full-scale invasion of Ukraine (2022) create conditions where national interests and threat perceptions interact with ideological alignments. We hypothesize that geographic proximity to the active military conflict shapes how politicians view the course of action, producing a geographic division among MEPs with varied levels of consensus. Given that stakes are higher in 2022 compared to 2014, we expect further variance by case. Specifically, due to national interests and threat perception, the level of consensus among Eastern European MEPs should be higher than among Western European MEPs. Moreover, the increased threat of full-scale invasion, as opposed to Crimea's annexation, should lead to stronger overall consensus in 2022. In other words, positions of MEPs from former communist countries should be closer to each other, while the invasion should rally MEPs more broadly around the EU flag.

2.3. Alternative Explanations

Beyond institutional and ideological factors, several scholars emphasize psychological and normative foundations of party group cohesion. Russell (2014) argues that social identity and fear of ostracism contribute to cohesion in contexts like the UK House of Lords, where formal discipline is minimal. Group belonging and loyalty, she argues, exert a powerful behavioural influence (see also Skjæveland, 2001) even if the context may incentivize personalization of political behaviour (see Pedersen & Rahat, 2021). Roos (2019) and Faas (2003) also highlight the role of informal norms in the EP, especially before the first direct elections. Norms of group solidarity and ideological affinity served as substitutes for formal discipline (Roos, 2019), while internal peer pressure and expectations played a larger role than sanctions in enforcing cohesion (Faas, 2003). Furthermore, Owens (2003) advances a purposive model of cohesion that blends rational re-election motives with social and organizational learning, suggesting that loyalty can be internalized through repeated interaction and shared goals. Although our data are limited to test these alternative explanations, we control for factors such as MEPs' previous legislative experience, which we believe should act as a proxy for socialization and loyalty towards their own party group.

Overall, this review demonstrates that party group cohesion in the EP is the product of multiple overlapping factors. Ideological affinity remains a strong unifying force, but institutional roles, national party constraints, electoral incentives, and informal norms also play significant roles. Unlike national parliaments, where cohesion is often enforced through direct party control, the EP relies on non-coercive mechanisms embedded in the structure of the EU's multi-level governance system. This highlights the EP's unique position: It is both similar to and distinct from national legislatures. While it displays high levels of voting unity, the underlying mechanisms are more nuanced. As the EP continues to evolve as a legislative body, understanding the dynamics of cohesion will remain crucial.

3. Methods and Data

To explore the patterns of consensus and dissensus in the EP, we focus on MEPs' interventions in the plenary debates. Putting the language under the spotlight allows us to conduct both quantitative and qualitative analyses with the same data. The debates were sampled from the initial response of the EP to geopolitical

crises, which include the 2014 annexation of Crimea by Russia and 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine (for details on the sampling procedure of the debates, see Annex 1 in the Supplementary File). We treat these cases as most similar because they share key contextual features: Both involve Russian aggression against Ukraine, both triggered EU foreign policy responses under comparable institutional conditions, and both unfolded within the same supranational setting of the EP. This similarity makes any potential differences in consensus particularly noteworthy. If rally effects were automatic and uniform, we would expect similar patterns across both crises. By comparing these cases, we can assess whether this assumption holds and explore how ideology and national interests might interact under conditions of external threat.

The EP debates were processed through content analysis. We coded the data using three broad categories, differentiating between capabilities-driven response, values-driven response, and an *in-vivo* category of non-response. Capabilities-driven response includes statements that focus on the EU capabilities, e.g., appealing to the military and economic capacity of the EU including sanctions as well as geopolitical and strategic thinking. Values-driven response includes statements that advocate for a normative response to the crises. This would focus on the nature of the EU as a normative and transformative actor, putting values, norms, rules, and procedures at the forefront of the EU response. The coding framework was developed as a reflection of the literature on the EU's international roles, where capability-driven and value-driven responses are understood through the traditional distinction between interest-based and value-based arguments (Sjursen, 2006). Specifically, capability-driven frames derive from a logic of consequences, emphasizing issue-specific, interest-oriented reasoning such as appeals to military strength, economic capacity, and strategic considerations (Gehring et al., 2017; Telò, 2006). In contrast, value-driven frames reflect a logic of appropriateness, portraying the EU as a normative and transformative actor that prioritizes values, norms, and procedural legitimacy in its external actions (Aggestam, 2008; Manners, 2002). Finally, a third category of the response was derived from empirical data advocating for inaction by arguing that the EU should not interfere in the relations of third countries. Each of these broad categories was broken down into three sub-categories of goals, values, and instruments. Respectively, these include what issues MEPs think of as problems and goals in the given context, why MEPs believe these goals should be achieved or problems resolved, and what solutions or instruments MEPs advocate for in their speech acts. We derived these lowest-level codes inductively from the data. We focused on a (quasi-)sentence as a coding unit and coded each unit only once. To create the initial coding framework, two coders coded the first debate of 2014 independently and compared the inductively derived set of codes. The converged framework was updated for the 2022 debates, and again both coders agreed on the updated framework (for details on the coding procedure, see Annex 2 in the Supplementary File). Consequently, we created an original dataset that includes every MEP—and their speech acts—who intervened in each session by making a speech or submitting a written question in advance. This resulted in 306 MEPs in the dataset, which was supplemented with additional data about the MEPs' personal, national, and ideological characteristics.

Next, in order to construct a political space, in which we would explore the consensus and dissensus, we treat the three broad categories of responses, i.e., capabilities-driven, value-driven, and non-response, as dimensions of the political space in which MEPs position themselves. Any MEP can argue for capabilities-driven and values-driven responses or argue for hesitation from some types of responses and not others. This means that MEPs can propose multiple (non-)responses, and our goal is to capture the complexity of these positions. Consequently, for each MEP we calculate the share of statements that fall under each of these three categories and treat these figures as coordinates of a given MEP's estimated

position. This ensures that our estimations incorporate MEPs' complex ideas, i.e., the three dimensions, regarding the EU's response to geopolitical crises, without losing any data that we collected. From these data points, we calculate the average position within the EP in 2014 and 2022, within Eastern European and Western European MEPs, and within each EP party group. We then estimate the Euclidean distances between MEPs and the average position at three levels: EP, geographic regions, and EP party groups. As a next step, we estimate, on average, how far MEPs are from the average position. This measure is finally converted into a standardized consensus measure with the following formula:

$$C = \frac{1 - D_{\text{average}}}{\sqrt{3}}$$

C in this formula is a degree of consensus, and its values can range between 0 and 1. Higher values indicate a higher degree of consensus. D_{average} is the average distance between MEPs and the average position of the EP as a whole, a geographic region, or a party group.

Our analysis combines quantitative and qualitative approaches to capture both the structure and meaning of consensus-making. Quantitatively, we examine two variables of interest: (a) levels of consensus, comparing descriptive statistics between 2014 and 2022 across three levels (EP, party group, and region); and (b) determinants of variation in consensus, using OLS regression to estimate what explains the distance between individual MEP positions and the average position at each level. Standard errors are clustered by country in all models. As a robustness check, we additionally estimated all specifications using two-way clustered standard errors by country and EP party group; the substantive results remain unchanged.

We have two sets of independent variables and additional controls. To explore the ideological explanation of consensus, we include EP party group membership, and economic left-right and GAL-TAN positions of the national party from Chapel Hill Expert Survey data. National characteristics include region of origin divided into Western Europe and Eastern Europe (former communist countries belong to Eastern Europe); membership in NATO; geographic proximity with Kyiv measured in distance from the national capital in Google Maps; military expenditure of the MEP's country measured as an average share of GDP during seven years prior to observation; intensity of trade relations between Russia and the MEP's country measured as an average share of GDP during seven years prior to observation; an average share of Russian imports in the total fossil fuel consumption of the MEP's country during seven years prior to observation; and whether the MEP's national party was in government, which we believe is a proxy for an MEP's sensitivity to national security issues. We additionally include personal characteristics of MEPs in all our models: gender, age, and whether the MEP is a newcomer to the EP. Consequently, we build three models for each dependent variable: (a) ideological factors and control variables; (b) national factors and control variables; (c) full model with all independent and control variables.

To complement this, we conduct a qualitative analysis of parliamentary discourse to uncover the narratives behind these patterns. All speeches from MEPs who intervened in the selected debates were processed and coded using our three-frame scheme (capability-driven, value-driven, non-response). We then selected illustrative examples that represent salient developments identified in the quantitative analysis, such as the increase in consensus among Western European MEPs compared to Eastern counterparts, and persistent dissensus within certain party groups despite the broader rally effect. This qualitative inquiry allows us to explore how MEPs construct their positions in relation to party affiliation, regional identity, and ideology, and contextualize the uneven manifestation of the rally-around-the-flag effect across time and groups.

4. Consensus and Dissensus in the EP About Geopolitical Crises

The first expectation about consensus in the EP is that MEPs experience a rally-around-the-EU-flag effect as a result of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Considering that we compare the invasion to the most similar case of Crimean annexation, this effect understandably can be limited, but we still observe an increase of eight percentage points in the consensus level in the EP as a whole (Figure 1a). Furthermore, we expected that the rally-around-the-EU-flag effect would not be uniform across various constellations of MEPs. This expectation is also confirmed. Although the effect transcends the geographic divides, i.e., whether an MEP comes from a former communist country or not (Figure 1b), we observe the lack of uniformity when it comes to the party groups (Figure 1c).

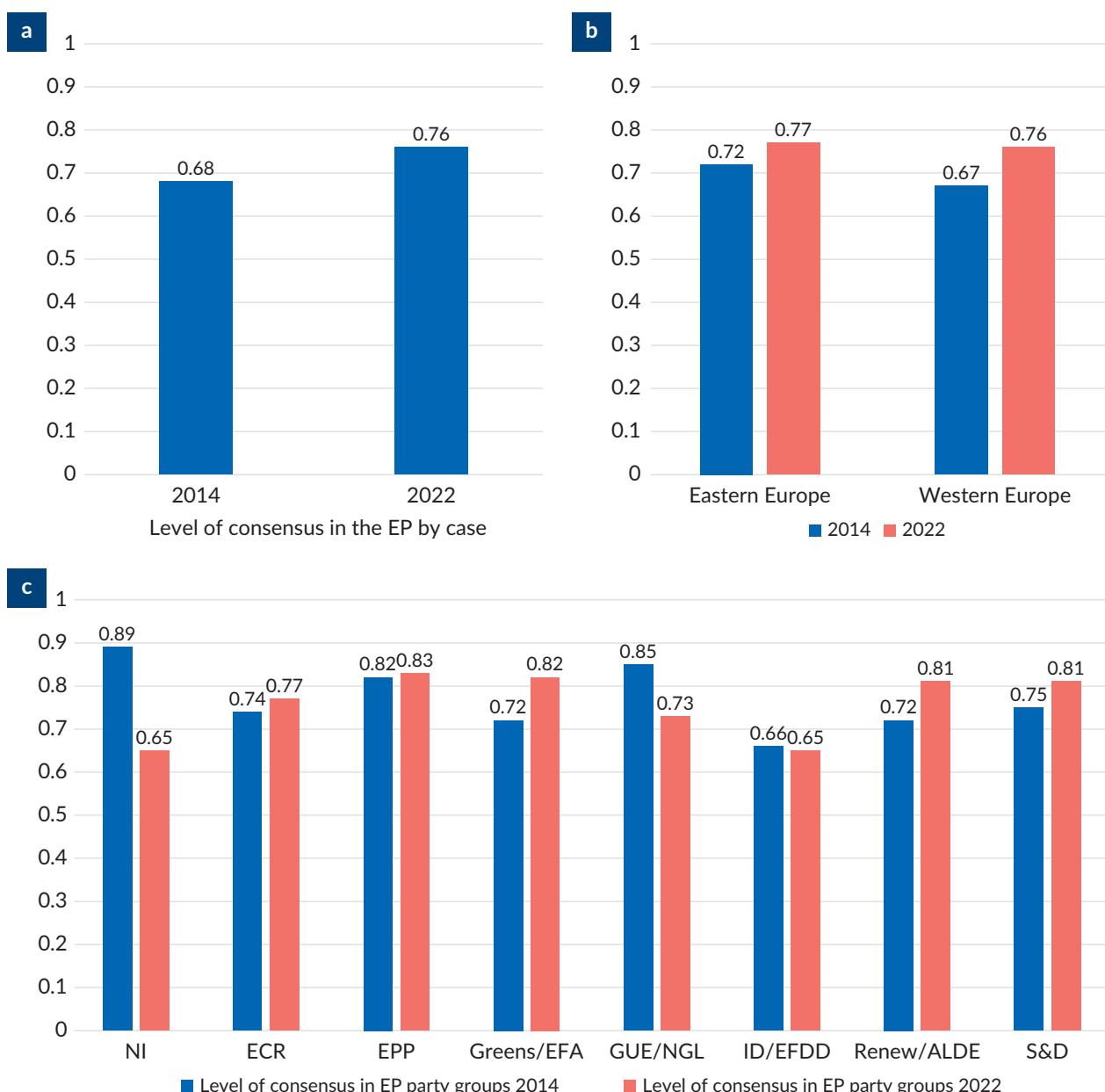


Figure 1. Levels of consensus in the EP (a) by case, (b) by geographic region, and (c) by party group, in 2014 and 2022.

The level of consensus was five percentage points higher in Eastern Europe in 2014 as opposed to Western Europe, but in 2022 the figure was virtually the same for both regions, with 77 and 76 percent, respectively. On the other hand, comparison of party groups tells a different story. According to our data, consensus levels decreased primarily in two groups of MEPs: non-attached members (NI) and the Left Group in the EP (GUE/NGL). The drop is considerable, with 24 and 12 percentage points, respectively. At the same time, the group of the Greens/European Free Alliance (Greens/EFA), Renew Europe group (former Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe—Renew/ALDE), and group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the EP (S&D) show increased levels of consensus respectively by 10, 9, and 6 percentage points. Furthermore, the group of the European People's Party (EPP) shows high consensus levels in both cases, with 82 and 83 percent in 2014 and 2022, while the figures for the European Conservative and Reformists group (ECR) stayed at a medium level with 74 and 77 percent, respectively. For the Identity and Democracy group (former Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy—ID/EFDD), consensus remained at lower levels, with 66 and 65 percent in response to the annexation and the invasion, respectively.

These patterns indicate that although the level of consensus increased in the EP overall, consensus within party groups has experienced varied effects of geopolitical crises, while geographic divisions do not seem to matter. As a next step, we turn to regression analysis to explore what factors are associated with the distance between MEPs' positions and the average position of the EP, regions, and party groups.

4.1. Patterns of Consensus and Dissensus in the EP From Annexation to Invasion

For OLS regressions, we use three dependent variables that we analyze with three models each. The dependent variables include the distance between an MEP and the EP as a whole, the distance between an MEP and their respective geographic region, and the distance between an MEP and their respective party group. Because the dependent variables measure distance, negative coefficients indicate greater convergence of positions within a given cluster of MEPs.

Apart from differentiating between the cases of annexation and invasion, which are included in all models, we have three sets of independent variables. First, personal characteristics of MEPs, such as gender, age, and whether an MEP is serving their first term, are included in all models. Second, ideological characteristics, such as EP party group, and left-right and GAL-TAN positions of the national party from Chapel Hill Expert Survey data, are included in model 1 and full model 3. Finally, national characteristics, such as whether an MEP comes from a former communist country, NATO membership, geographic proximity of national capital with Kyiv, defense expenditure as share of GDP, trade with Russia as share of GDP, degree of dependency on Russian energy, and whether the national party was in government for part of the year or for full year, are included in model 2 and the full model 3. We provide regression plots in the article, while full regression tables are available in Annex 3 in the Supplementary File.

4.2. The EP-Level Consensus

Figure 2 plots the three models explaining the distance between MEPs and the EP. Three main conclusions can be drawn from these results. First, the case of invasion remains statistically significant in all models and is negatively associated with the distance, meaning that, on average, MEPs are closer to the EP average position in 2022 as opposed to 2014. This suggests the rally-around-the-EU-flag effect of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia.

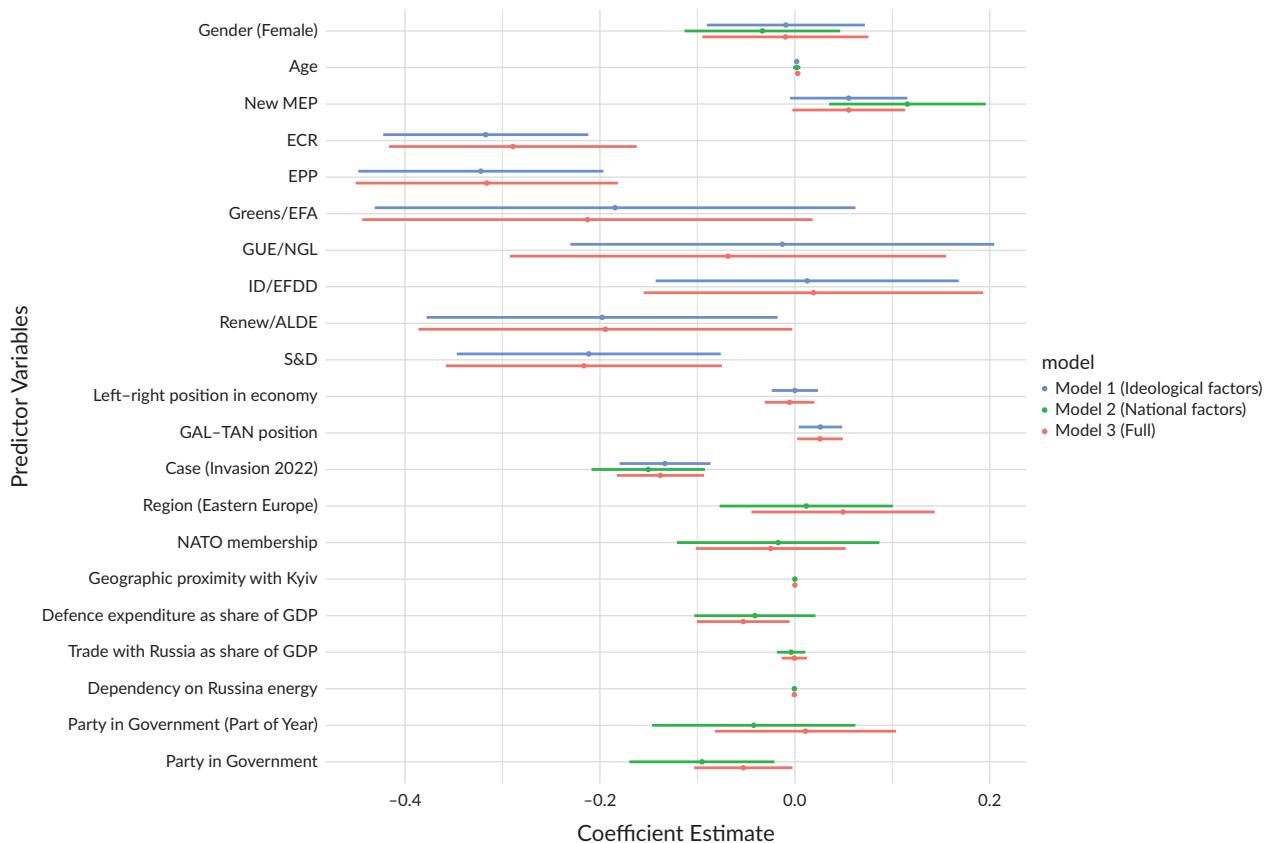


Figure 2. Explaining distance between MEPs and EP average position.

Second, although the full model performs the best, it is not significantly better than model 1, which includes ideological characteristics of MEPs' parties. Therefore, we argue that it is indeed party characteristics that matter the most for the convergence of positions of MEPs in response to the two geopolitical crises. Indeed, if we look at model 2, which includes primarily national characteristics, we can see that being a new MEP is positively associated with increased distance, while being from a government party decreases the distance between the MEP and the EP average positions. Meanwhile, most national characteristics—such as NATO membership, defense expenditure, proximity to Kyiv, dependence on Russian energy, and trade with Russia—are not statistically significant, while only limited institutional context variables (e.g., government participation) show occasional effects. This finding suggests that MEPs tend to act as popular representatives within a supranational parliament driven by their ideological views and not as national delegations.

Finally, we observe that as opposed to non-attached members, MEPs from ECR, EPP, Renew/ALDE, and S&D—and to a lesser extent Greens/EFA—are closer to the EP average position. The relationship holds in the full model as well when controlling for national characteristics. Furthermore, consensus and dissensus in the EP appear to be more closely related to the GAL-TAN dimension than to left-right economic positions, although this relationship is moderate in size and sensitive to conservative inference. MEPs from TAN parties are, on average, further from the EP position. Consequently, how the EU should respond to geopolitical crises is not affected by material considerations, i.e., left-right positions; instead, the MEPs' view of the EU's response is informed by ideas and values composing the GAL-TAN dimension of party competition. This can potentially be a result of the public good nature of the issues related to security.

4.3. The Regional-Level Consensus

These three conclusions largely hold when we analyze the distance between MEPs and their respective region (see Figure 3). Once again, the invasion is associated with a convergence of positions in terms of how the EU should respond to the crises. The model with ideological characteristics performs just as successfully as the full model, while factors related to the national context are statistically insignificant. Several mainstream party groups—most notably EPP, S&D, ECR, and Renew/ALDE—are associated with higher levels of regional consensus, while the significance of the GAL-TAN dimension is marginal for the regional consensus.

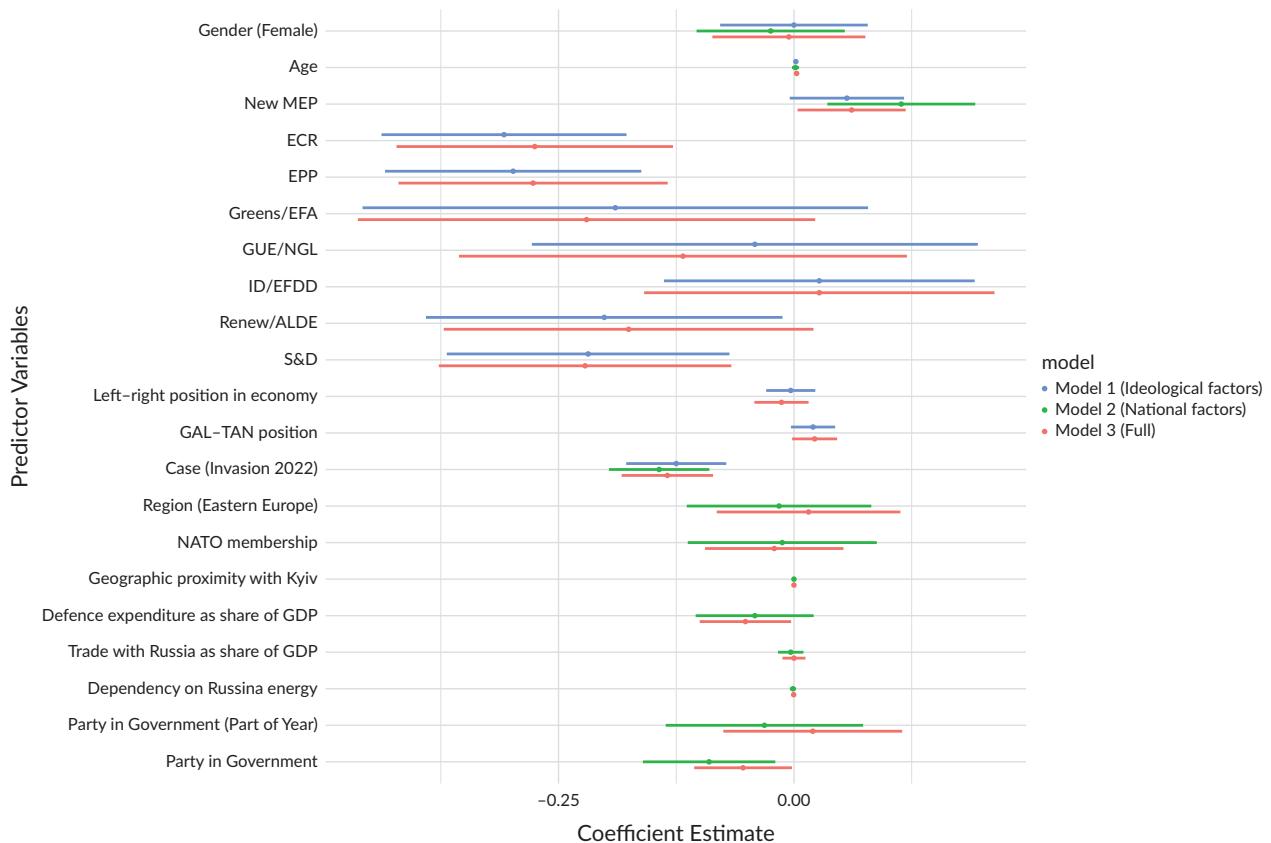


Figure 3. Explaining distance between MEPs and average regional position.

The only difference is that the statistical significance of the new MEPs is still observed in the full model. The distance between the positions of the newcomers to the EP is higher on average than the average position of the region. This pattern may point to the role of socialization within the EP, whereby longer-serving MEPs converge more strongly in their rhetorical positions regarding the EU's response to geopolitical crises.

4.4. The Party-Group-Level Consensus

Finally, we turn to the analysis of the distance between MEPs and their respective EP party group. Different patterns emerge in these results. The first important finding is that model 2, which focuses on national characteristics, is statistically insignificant, which is why in Figure 4 we do not plot the results of this model (see Annex 3 in the Supplementary File). This can be interpreted as evidence of how ideology trumps nationality when it comes to how MEPs view the EU and how they conceive the EU's actions. Second, the

invasion no longer has a statistically significant effect on the convergence of positions. This can be a result of the fact that, on average, the consensus levels within party groups, as shown in Figure 1, have been rather high both in 2014 and 2022. Third, only ID/EFDD is significantly different as a group from non-attached members of the EP. Being a member of ID/EFDD is associated with an increased distance between its members and the group's average position. This higher degree of dissensus within ID/EFDD speaks to the previous findings about the importance of GAL-TAN positions of national parties. Given the ideological heterogeneity and radical positioning of ID/EFDD, party-group membership appears to dominate over GAL-TAN positioning in explaining within-group dissensus in this case. Finally, in the full model, which includes all sets of independent variables, defense expenditure shows a weak and model-dependent association with party-group convergence, which does not remain robust under more conservative inference. The higher the share of defense expenditure in the GDP of member states, the lower the distance of the respective MEPs from their party group.

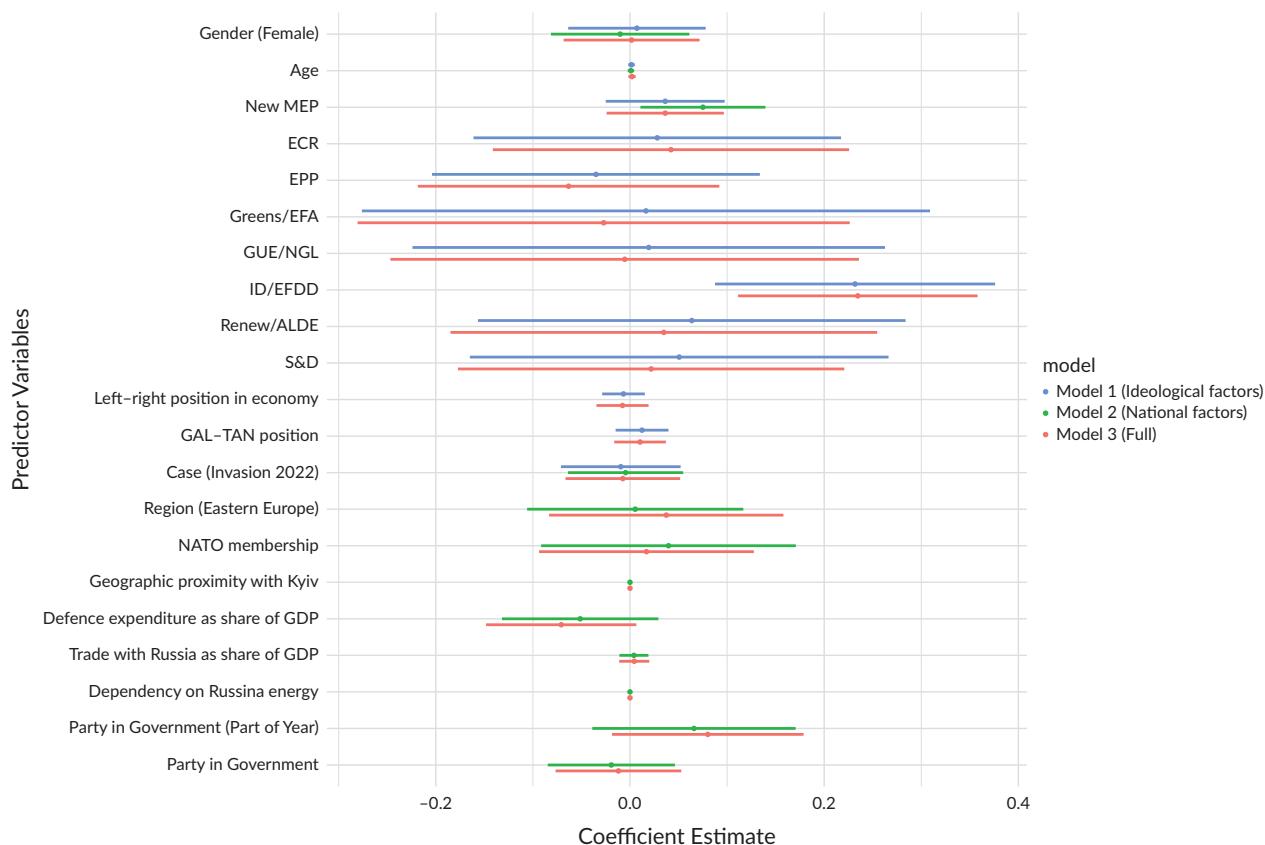


Figure 4. Explaining distance between MEPs and EP party group average position.

Overall, the quantitative analysis of the EP debates following Russia's annexation of Crimea and full-scale invasion of Ukraine shows that MEPs do experience the rally-around-the-EU-flag effect in response to significant geopolitical crises. This effect is stronger in the case of invasion and the return of a total war on the continent. However, the data also suggest that geopolitical crises have varied effects on different constellations of MEPs. Ideological positioning—particularly along the GAL-TAN dimension—plays a central role in structuring both consensus and dissensus in the EP, with especially strong effects for party-group-level dynamics. MEPs associated with the TAN pole tend to diverge more from common positions, most clearly within their own party groups and, to a lesser extent, at the regional and EP levels.

5. Consenting and Dissenting in Parliamentary Discourse: Divided in Unity?

The quantitative analysis provides a systematic overview of variation in MEPs' positions on the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. The qualitative component uncovers the narratives behind these patterns by examining parliamentary speech language to contextualize trends of consensus and dissensus. It explores how positions relate to party affiliation, regional identity, and ideology, complementing the quantitative findings by revealing discursive dynamics underpinning the rally-around-the-flag effect and its uneven manifestation across party groups and time. We focus on speech acts illustrating key developments: greater consensus among Western European MEPs versus Eastern counterparts, and persistent or intensified dissensus within certain party groups despite the broader effect. First, we show how EU foreign policy positions align with the GAL-TAN dimension, emphasizing values, identity, and cultural worldviews in consensus formation. We also consider the moderating role of national defense investment, noting that MEPs from high-spending countries align more closely with their EP party groups. Finally, we examine deviations from the consensus trend, such as enduring dissensus within GUE/NGL, non-affiliated, and far-right MEPs.

5.1. Ideational Foundations of "Unity" and Material Commitments as a Source of Consensus

The quantitative analysis revealed a notable increase in consensus among MEPs between the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, which is driven by increased consensus among Western European MEPs. This trend suggests a growing alignment within this regional cluster, particularly in response to the heightened geopolitical stakes of the latter crisis. To understand the discursive underpinnings of this shift, we examine how MEPs frame the EU's role, values, and strategic imperatives. The findings suggest discursive convergence from 2014 to 2022, where the perceived proximity to the conflict and the symbolic weight of Ukraine's European aspirations galvanized a shared narrative. A recurring theme in 2022 speeches is the emphasis on European unity and shared democratic values. Already in 2014, MEPs from traditionally moderate groups such as the EPP and S&D frequently invoked the EU's responsibility to defend peace, sovereignty, and the rules-based international order. Yet, in 2014, especially Western European MEPs were also more cautious and fragmented in their assessments, often expressing concerns about escalation, economic repercussions, and the limits of EU foreign policy capacity. In 2022, however, the tone shifted toward a more assertive and morally charged discourse, with MEPs across the political spectrum converging on the need for a strong, unified EU response.

This discursive shift is closely tied to the GAL-TAN ideological dimension, which, as the quantitative findings show, is a more powerful predictor of consensus and dissensus than the traditional left-right economic spectrum. MEPs' speeches reflect this ideational divide, with the pattern holding across both crises, but being more pronounced in 2022, when the stakes were higher and the symbolic dimensions of the conflict more salient. Most MEPs rallied around a shared narrative of European unity in 2022, evoking "how defending Ukraine means defending the European Union," voiced, e.g., by MEPs such as Mureyan, EPP; Banifei, S&D; Von Cramon-Taubadel, Greens. Yet, this unity bears different meanings for MEPs. GAL-oriented parties emphasize human rights, multilateralism, and the EU as a moral actor, while TAN-oriented parties prioritize sovereignty, tradition, and national interest. These orientations shape how MEPs interpret the EU's role in foreign policy. For example, GAL MEPs described the invasion as "barbaric" with "the atrocities committed against civilians as part of the invasion [constituting] a crime against

humanity" (Zorrinho, S&D) while TAN-aligned MEPs described the invasion as "unprovoked" and that despite supporting Ukraine with all means, the EU should not forget "one red line, which is that this diplomatic and political process cannot take place to the detriment of sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine" (Danjean, EPP). As a result, the GAL-TAN axis involves conflicting normative frameworks that may make consensus more fragile and contingent, particularly when crises touch on identity, sovereignty, and the EU's foundational values.

While much of the variance in MEPs' positions can be explained by ideological factors, the quantitative analysis also uncovered a material correlate of consensus: the higher the share of a member state's GDP allocated to defense, the closer its MEPs tend to be to their party group's average position. This relationship is reflected in the language and reasoning of MEPs. MEPs from countries with higher defense budgets, such as France, Poland, and the Baltic states, often framed the EU's response to Russia in terms of strategic necessity and shared responsibility. This suggests that material investment in defense translates into political alignment, as MEPs from these countries are more likely to support robust EU action and align with their party group's position. Their speeches emphasized the importance of deterrence, military preparedness, and transatlantic cooperation. For instance, a French MEP in 2022 argued:

Let us...jointly [buy] the armaments that we or our partners need. What we have done for vaccines—buying together and producing in Europe—let's do it for the equipment....I suggest going further and directing us towards a "Buy European Act" in terms of military equipment. Our sovereignty also depends on this and our credibility. (Loiseau, Renew)

MEPs from center-left groups echoed similar themes, such as Androulakis from S&D:

The European army, joint armaments programmes, strong economic sanctions and arms embargoes are tools that can guard our prosperity and our borders, from Estonia and Finland to Greece and Cyprus. I am by no means calling for Europe to return to militarism, but we must do everything in our power not to allow it to return. (Androulakis, S&D)

From this pragmatic understanding of security policy, consensus is not just a normative goal but a strategic imperative so that consensus may cut across ideological lines. Such statements reveal how material commitments can foster cross-party consensus, especially when national interests align with broader EU objectives.

5.2. Persistent and Rising Intra-Group Dissensus of Leftist, Non-Attached, and Radical Right MEPs

Despite the overall trend toward increased consensus in 2022, several groups stand out for their persistent and, in some cases, intensifying intra-group dissensus. The GUE/NGL group, NI MEPs, and members of the radical right consistently diverged from the rally-around-the-flag effect. A closer look into the substance of MEP's speech acts allows us to conclude that this divergence stems from a combination of ideological heterogeneity and national-level strategic positioning, which complicate consensus-building at the supranational level.

Within GUE/NGL, speech acts reveal deep internal tensions between anti-militarist, anti-imperialist, and pro-solidarity standpoints. While some MEPs condemned Russia's actions and supported EU solidarity with Ukraine, others framed the EU's response as part of a broader militarization trend, expressing skepticism toward NATO and Western foreign policy. For instance, a French left MEP in 2022 acknowledged the illegality of the invasion but warned against "military escalation and the arms race which would put our continent on fire and sword" (Aubry, GUE/NGL); whereas a Belgian MEP criticized the EU's double standard for sanctioning Russia but not the US, Saudi Arabia, Israel, or the EU itself:

When Russia attacks Ukraine, Europe sanctions, of course. But when the United States bombs Iraq, no sanctions, when Saudi Arabia bombs Yemen, no sanctions, when we, the European Union, bomb and destroy Libya, no sanctions, and when Israel is colonizing Palestine, no sanctions. It's two weights, two measures. (Botenga, GUE/NGL)

These conflicting narratives—solidarity versus systemic critique—reflect parallel but incompatible logics that prevent the formation of a unified group position. The result is a discursive fragmentation that mirrors the quantitative finding of increased intra-group distance, especially in 2022 when the stakes were higher.

A similar pattern emerges among non-attached MEPs, whose lack of formal group affiliation results in a highly individualized and ideologically diverse discursive space. NI MEPs include far-right, nationalist, and single-issue representatives whose positions are shaped more by domestic political agendas than by any transnational alignment. In both 2014 and 2022, their speeches ranged from support for Russia to isolationist calls for EU non-intervention. One NI MEP, for example, criticized the EU for dragging member states "into the tragic war next door" that does not serve people's interests (Kinga, NI). This deep skepticism toward EU foreign policy and preference for national sovereignty over collective action further reinforces their structural and ideological distance from the EP overall.

The radical-right groups represented in the EP across the two periods—first EFDD and later ID—also exhibited pronounced intra-group dissensus. Unlike mainstream EP groups, which tend to coalesce around shared values and strategic goals, both EFDD and ID brought together national parties united primarily by their opposition to EU integration rather than a coherent ideological platform. This lack of a coherent foreign policy vision leads to strategic ambiguity and rhetorical divergence. In the 2022 debates, for instance, one MEP emphasized that "support for the Ukrainian people must be total and we must ensure that, as soon as possible, the solution to this conflict is a peace that restores the territorial integrity of Ukraine" (Zanni, ID) while another warned that it is "dishonest for the European institutions to use this war to advance a federalist agenda that the people refuse" (Bardella, ID). Both invoked nationalist rhetoric, yet their strategic preferences—engagement versus isolation—diverged sharply. This fragmentation is not new; similar contradictions were evident in 2014, when EFDD members expressed conflicting views on Crimea.

The persistence of these divisions suggests that national party ideologies, particularly along the GAL-TAN axis, play a stronger role than EP group affiliation in shaping MEPs' positions. TAN-oriented parties, which emphasize tradition, authority, and nationalism, are especially prone to strategic ambiguity. Their MEPs often avoid clear endorsements or condemnations, instead framing the EU's response in terms of national interest and cultural identity. For example, one ID MEP in 2022 warned against escalation of the situation with Russia as a nuclear power and argued that "Russia and Ukraine are two sides of the same coin" (Zimniok, ID). Such

equivocation reflects a worldview in which supranational cooperation is inherently suspect, making consensus within these groups difficult to achieve—even in moments of acute geopolitical urgency.

6. Conclusion

This article explored MEPs' initial response to the Russian annexation of Crimea and full-scale invasion of Ukraine, as well as their conception of the EU's course of action. We aimed to investigate whether MEPs experience the rally-around-the-flag effect when the EU faces acute geopolitical crises. Relying on a mixed-methods approach, our analysis of EP plenary debates from 2014 and 2022 shows that MEPs do indeed rally around the EU flag. However, as expected, this effect is uneven across different clusters of MEPs. The quantitative part of the study uncovered that although the level of consensus increased in larger groups of MEPs, within individual party groups, patterns diverge. If on the EP and regional, i.e., Eastern and Western Europe, levels, consensus has become more pronounced in 2022 compared to 2014, party groups experienced varied effects. In groups such as Greens/EFA, Renew/ALDE, and S&D, consensus increased notably, while non-attached MEPs and GUE/NGL show declining consensus levels.

Regression analysis indicates that ideological factors play a central role in structuring patterns of consensus and dissensus in the EP, whereas national and material characteristics account for relatively little of the observed variation. Particularly, party-group membership emerges as the most consistent predictor across models, providing more evidence for arguments developed by Jensen et al. (2007) and Raunio and Wagner (2020a), while positions along the GAL-TAN dimension are associated with convergence and divergence at the EP and regional levels. MEPs affiliated with GAL-oriented parties tend to be closer to common positions, whereas representatives of TAN-oriented parties are more likely to deviate from aggregate positions of the EP and, to some extent, from regional averages. Unlike Hix et al. (2005) and Hix and Noury (2007), however, we find that left-right economic positions do not systematically shape convergence patterns.

Qualitative analysis of MEPs' speeches reveals a more nuanced picture underlying these quantitative patterns. When examining debates along the GAL-TAN axis, distinct normative frameworks emerge that render consensus inherently fragile. While MEPs from GAL-oriented parties tend to frame the crises in humanitarian and rules-based terms, TAN-oriented parties emphasize sovereignty, territorial integrity, and capability-based responses. As a result, even when MEPs converge on broad outcomes—such as the desirability of ceasefire or peace—these goals are often underpinned by divergent meanings. Consensus therefore appears contingent not only on shared policy positions but also on how crises intersect with identity, sovereignty, and foundational EU values. Our findings closely relate to the arguments of Börzel and Hartlapp (2022), who show that Eurosceptic MEPs contest most strongly issues related to foreign policy, particularly those that are situated on the GAL-TAN dimension. This is also where they show the highest level of cohesion (Börzel & Hartlapp, 2022). Our evidence shows that these MEPs offer policy options that differ from what the mainstream party groups would advocate. The option of non-response in our data is a direct result of the contestation of Eurosceptic MEPs. However, we have shown that they do not exhibit the same degree of consensus as MEPs from more mainstream party groups.

Furthermore, the analysis showed that among the non-attached MEPs and those from the fringes of the ideological spectrum, consensus is relatively lower or decreased between 2014 and 2022. Qualitative analysis showed that this is due to the ideological heterogeneity of these clusters of MEPs, reinforcing the findings from

the regression analysis about the importance of ideological factors. The ideological heterogeneity, on the one hand, and a lack of common vision of the EU foreign policy, on the other, lead the MEPs from these clusters to either employ ambiguous rhetoric or engage in the construction of conflicting narratives, confirming previous findings in the existing literature (see Gherghina & Fagan, 2021; Mitru & Tap, 2026). Furthermore, especially left MEPs are often caught between the willingness to support Ukraine and systemic criticism of the military imperative in the current world order, which leads to lower consensus as the stakes get higher in geopolitical crises, forcing some of these MEPs to pick a position (see Capati & Trastulli, 2026, on how crises affect the positioning of leftist parties).

Overall, our study confirms the importance of ideological factors for explaining MEPs' positions. We explored the consensus and dissensus in the EP with unique data that allow us to measure consensus in an innovative way and analyze the process of meaning-making behind the quantitative patterns. Our contributions speak to the importance of the values MEPs hold when analyzing legislative politics of the EP. This is related to not only the importance of ideological factors as shown in regression analysis, but also to within-group ideological heterogeneity and the conflicting values some MEPs may adhere to, as revealed by the in-depth analysis of the speech acts in the EP debates. We recognize that our data are limited to geopolitical crises and to the initial response to these crises. Therefore, exploring the same phenomena in the context of different types of crises or in a longitudinal manner to observe potential variance in the consensus levels has the potential to expand our understanding of legislative politics on a supranational level.

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The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data associated with this article are available from the corresponding author upon request.

LLMs Disclosure

The authors used ChatGPT 5.1 and 5.2 (OpenAI) to assist with drafting and troubleshooting R code. All analytical decisions (model choice, variable construction, robustness checks) were made by the authors, who reviewed, executed, and validated all code and results. All substantive interpretations and conclusions remain the responsibility of the authors.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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