

Citizens' Trust in the European Union During Crisis and Conflicts Across 10 Countries

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Abstract

The increasing support for populism is indicative of a profound crisis in European societies. The prevailing cultural narrative posits that support for populist parties, particularly those of a right-wing orientation, is predominantly a reaction to the erosion of nationalistic and religious identities. A growing critique of supranational institutions became visible in some countries. In Europe, populist parties are growing, but Euroscepticism seems to show different trends. Euroscepticism is diminishing and trust in Europe has been growing since 2018 and in particular since 2022. Is there a lack of trust in the European institutions which is reflected in all political parties? What are the reasons for trust and distrust within the political parties in general and within the populist parties in particular? In most countries, the war between Ukraine and Russia is seen as an external threat to the European Union. Did the Covid-19 pandemic and the Ukraine war lead to a "rally around the flag" phenomenon, and is trust in the European Union increasing because of this external hostility? We found evidence of people switching back from populist to mainstream parties and becoming less Eurosceptic, hinting at a "rally around the flag" effect. The study focuses on panel data from voters in 10 countries—Spain, Germany, France, Italy, the Netherlands, the UK, Sweden, Romania, the Czech Republic, and Hungary—from two waves, namely 2018 and 2023, as well as a cross-section of the 2023 wave.

The main focus is on supporters of populist parties, which will be compared to mainstream parties. This study thus explores whether the Ukraine war reinvigorated trust in the European Union.

Keywords

European Union; political parties; populism; trust

1. Introduction

Since the end of the 2010s, trust in the European Union (EU) has been growing. This trend is evident despite the growing strength of populist parties. Following the democratic “honeymoon” period after 1989, trust in the EU declined until the mid-2010s (Hobolt & De Vries, 2016). Since then, however, trust has been on the rise. There was a significant increase in 2022. Using a broad comparative survey and panel data at the individual level, we attempt to explain this phenomenon. We argue that an external shock in the form of aggression leads to higher trust in supranational institutions. The Russian war against Ukraine can be seen as such a hostile aggression and a threat to EU member states. Did external hostility lead to greater internal solidarity and trust in the EU?

This article is a result of the PRECEDE (Populism’s Roots: Economic and Cultural Explanations in Democracies of Europe, funded by the Volkswagen Foundation) project. In our project, the focus was on the social, economic, and cultural triggers of populist voting, and on the relationship between political parties’ agendas and populist voters’ demands. One idea was to detect the push and pull factors that transform voters from mainstream parties into supporters of populist parties. Secondly, we analysed pull factors that move voters away from populist parties and back towards less radical mainstream parties. The focus was on comparing supporters of mainstream and populist parties in 10 different countries, namely the UK, the Netherlands, Italy, Germany, Spain, Romania, France, Sweden, Hungary, and the Czech Republic. In recent years the world has been facing multiple overlapping crises, a situation often described as a *polycrisis*. During times of external shocks and instability, maintaining political stability requires broad support from citizens. Public trust in local, national, and supranational institutions becomes crucial, as the rise of extremist movements and populist parties can hinder the development of effective public policies. In particular, citizen trust in non-populist parties plays a vital role during external shocks such as the war in Ukraine (Gherghina et al., 2025). In this context, our focus is less on external shocks themselves and more on their imminent threat and their implications for citizens’ attitudes. While previous research has focused on data from the supply side (political party perspective), this study focuses on data from the demand side (citizen perspective), using two waves of our survey panel data from 2018 and 2023/2024.

Mainstream parties are in distress, as populism has been on the rise in Europe in recent years. Since 2010, populists have won in Hungary and Italy and gained seats in most other countries, including France and Sweden. Populism and Euroscepticism are cross-European phenomena that occur in countries with and without extensive social systems. European citizens report growing dissatisfaction with their standard of living and working conditions, which can result in declining support for the EU and national democratic institutions.

Euroscepticism was prevalent in the 2000s. Since the end of the 2010s, however, we have not seen a similar increase, even though opposition to European integration is one of the common correlates of populism. But there are some exemptions, such as the Scottish National Party, the Irish Sinn Féin, the Welsh Plaid Cymru, the Bulgarian GERB (Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria), and the parties supported by individual politicians such as Boyko Borisov in Bulgaria (Petrović & Bilić, 2025). The trend in trust in the 24 EU countries (excluding the UK, Bulgaria, Croatia, and Romania) is based on Eurobarometer data. In fact, trust in the EU has increased since 2018. So, while populism is growing, trust in the EU is increasing. In this article, we seek to explain this apparent contradiction. We can do so because we have data on both populism and trust in the EU at the individual level from 10 European countries.

In the early 2010s, most right-wing populist parties were highly critical of the EU. By 2015, this trend decreased. However, the effect on their election and poll results varied despite these similarities. This gives rise to several questions, which we intend to answer below: How did mainstream and populist voters react to the war between Russia and Ukraine, as some right-wing parties supported the Russian invasion? Did their voters continue to vote for right-wing populist parties, or did they switch to non-populist mainstream parties? Did the ruling parties benefit from a “rally around the flag” effect, persuading formerly populist voters to defect?

In the following section, we will develop and formulate our research questions and hypotheses. Section 3 presents contextual data and details of the various political developments in our case study countries during the crisis. It includes details of the case selection, our methodology, and our definition of populist parties. Finally, Section 5 presents our empirical data analysis and conclusions.

2. Trust in Europe, Mainstream and Populist Parties, and “Rally Around the Flag”

Our comparative survey analyses mainstream and populist parties across European countries. This article reflects party positions but focuses on the demand side and presents panel survey data of party supporters.

This article is concerned with the concept of trust in supranational democratic institutions, namely the EU. Trust is widely regarded as a pivotal component of democratic systems, functioning as a cohesive agent that binds society and political systems together. Trust is established over time and is predicated on various forms of legitimacy. Trust is based on input legitimacy, as well as output legitimacy. According to Easton (1965), this diffuse support is based on specific support over the years. The legitimacy of a political organisation such as the EU can be characterised by satisfaction with the policies implemented by the political organisation. Its trust is affected by the openness towards citizen participation (see for input legitimacy and democratic innovation in this regard: Dahl, 1965; Habermas, 2000; Kersting, 2023; Smith, 2009). The correlation between the input list and the outputs is direct, since the inclusion of citizens in the process of policymaking is regarded as a favourable factor in the development of suitable policies.

It becomes obvious that the concept of populism is related to trust in Europe and Euroscepticism (Hooghe & Marks, 2007). Party systems in Europe are affected by strong polarisation, and this is strongly related to the development of populist parties. The right-wing populist parties are anti-establishment, anti-migration, and nationalistic. Consequently, these parties predominantly oppose supranational institutions. Left-wing populist parties are against economic elites and thus criticise the EU's neoliberal profile rather than the process of

European integration. In the following we use the concept of populism defined as “a thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately divided into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite,’ and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people” (Mudde, 2004); for ideational populism see Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017). Other definitions highlight populism as a strategy and the necessity for controversy and conflicts (Laclau, 2005), as primarily a rhetorical device or communication strategy used to shape political discourse (Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Kampwirth, 2012), as a distinct political style characterized by moral dichotomies and hostility toward outgroups (Moffitt & Tormey, 2013), as an organizational strategy employed by political parties, or as a distinct mode of communication (Heinisch & Mazzoleni, 2016; Weyland, 2001, 2017). The ideational approach has a significant advantage for empirically driven research, as it provides relative conceptual clarity and analytical precision with its minimal definition.

In the 2000s, EU scepticism was growing after the failed referendums of 2005 and the rejection of the constitutional treaty in France and the Netherlands, as well as the 2008 Irish referendum (Ultan Sönmez & Ornek, 2015). The reasons for EU scepticism and distrust were less prevalent among those facing economic hardship due to EU policies, but more prevalent among citizens with lower education (see for Belgium, Abts et al., 2009). Citizens in lower-income regions have more trust than those in middle-income regions (Gherghina & Tap, 2023; Vasilopoulou & Talving, 2024).

Thielmann and Hilbig (2023) argue that conspiracy mentality shares an ideological core with populism in that they both rely on “us versus them” narratives, which is accompanied by strong nationalism and strong anti-establishment attitudes towards international organisations such as the EU. In this context, European institutions are perceived as part of the governing elites and as tools that national elites can use to insulate themselves (Moravcsik, 1994).

Nevertheless, we must differentiate between the party’s position (supply side) and that of its voters (demand side). Populist parties do not appear to be any closer to their voters on the issue of Euroscepticism. Support for populist parties may be driven less by their contribution to closing representation gaps in Euroscepticism and more by the rise of ideational populism. Populist parties appear to adopt radical anti-European positions in pursuit of their long-term goals rather than to maximise their votes.

The relationship between populism and attitudes towards the EU has become a focal point in political science literature, particularly since the financial crisis of 2008 and the refugee crisis of 2015, both of which exposed tensions between national democracies and supranational governance (De Vries & Edwards, 2009; Kriesi et al., 2016). Many scholars have analysed this relationship at both the party level (Pirro et al., 2018) and the voter level (Ivaldi, 2020). Evidence suggests that, although the two phenomena are conceptually distinct, they often occur together in practice.

Empirical research shows that distrust of EU institutions is strongly correlated with support for populist parties. De Vries and Edwards (2009) found that Eurosceptic attitudes were a significant predictor of voting for parties at the political extremes. Furthermore, Kopecký and Mudde (2002) showed the Eurosceptic tendencies of populist parties. Similarly, Rooduijn et al. (2016) demonstrate that individuals with strong populist attitudes, characterised by anti-elitism, people-centrism, and a demand for popular sovereignty, are more likely to be Eurosceptic, particularly when they perceive the EU as distant and technocratic. However,

the alignment between populist parties and their voters is often weak, as the policy positions of populist parties (supply side) frequently diverge from the attitudes of their populist supporters (Zhirnov et al., 2025).

Euroscepticism is also linked to nativism and strong nationalism, which are core components of right-wing populism and its opposition to international cooperation (Isernia et al., 2025). This is reflected in xenophobic attitudes and nationalism, as well as exclusionary identity politics rather than European integration (Noury & Roland, 2020, p. 423). Van Der Brug et al. (2021) demonstrate that support for illiberal democracy is negatively correlated with support for the EU. Therefore, it is not surprising that the advance of populist parties and the spread of populist attitudes among European voters in recent decades have been associated with increased contestation of supranational governance structures and political institutions. Various crises, such as the eurozone and migratory crises, have further exacerbated and intertwined these trends until the mid-2010s. Surprisingly, however, the rise of populist parties and their better electoral results were accompanied by a higher level of trust in the EU in the following years.

To resolve this conundrum, it is necessary to turn to the concept of the “rallying around the flag” effect. This effect posits the hypothesis that, in periods of international crisis, citizens will frequently respond by expressing increased support for their political leaders (Baekgaard et al., 2020; Kizilova & Norris, 2024). In times of crisis, voters have been observed to coalesce around the flag. Hooghe et al. (2024, p. 460) posit that an “external threat produces collective governance” as a fundamental hypothesis within political science. The presence of external threats has been shown to engender a state of tension between populist and Eurosceptic tendencies, compelling even populist parties to acknowledge the necessity of embracing a degree of supranational collective action. In the following, the research questions will be developed.

It is argued that trust can also be influenced by external factors and events. The present study hypothesises that a strong national identity and a strong dissatisfaction with supranational institutions can compromise trust in supranational institutions. The present study posits that the EU’s inability to address issues of inequality has precipitated a pervasive sense of disillusionment, particularly among Eastern European nations. This phenomenon emerged in the 1990s and early 2000s. Consequently, the EU was witnessing a decline in its popularity. A growing mistrust was observed among members of newly established right-wing and left-wing populist parties.

In the context of the global coronavirus pandemic, starting in 2020, the role of the EU assumed a diminished significance, with national governments assuming primary responsibility. However, the EU demonstrated its support for this strong position of national governments. In response to the pandemic, the EU created the Next Generation EU programme. It is imperative to acknowledge the pivotal function it fulfilled in the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, particularly its pivotal role in defence. The EU emerged as a source of stability. Following the crisis on migration in 2015, its legitimacy increased once more. In the Russia–Ukraine war starting in February 2022, the EU and most of its member states strongly supported Ukraine.

The social and economic divide is regarded as a significant social deficit within the EU, precipitating mounting discontent towards political institutions in European societies. This discontent encompasses diverse political institutions at all levels, ranging from local to regional, national, and supranational bodies such as the EU. Moreover, the EU initiated the European Pillar of Social Rights, which delineates 20 key principles on equal opportunities. Despite the absence of a comprehensive dissemination strategy, this

information was not widely circulated. The relationship between economic growth and redistribution on the one hand, and trust and legitimacy on the other, is a highly relevant one. In this regard, trust in political institutions and in the EU can be regarded as a significant indicator of support for the political system and of stability (Easton, 1965).

The initial Hypothesis 1 (H1) is predicated on this line of argumentation and employs an analytical framework that encompasses both mainstream political parties and left-wing and right-wing factions during the late 2010s and early 2020s. It is argued that, concomitantly, there is an increase in trust in the EU; however, strong supporters of right-wing populist parties exhibit a pronounced anti-EU stance. Furthermore, the within change of people who switched back from voting for populist parties to mainstream parties have become less Eurosceptic due to a “rally around the flag” effect.

Nevertheless, this is indicative of Hypothesis 2 (H2). A series of events transpired between 2018 and 2023/2024, including the Ukraine war and the emergence of the coronavirus in 2020. In this instance, the countries in question employed a variety of strategies in response. The EU was not perceived as the primary agent responsible for the harmonisation of policies concerning Covid-19. This was because these policies were implemented by national governments in a variety of different ways. Nonetheless, it appears that the EU was regarded in a favourable light, with relations within the EU assuming greater significance. It is argued that this should have resulted in a greater degree of trust in the EU. In the short term, a proportion of voters from populist parties opted to abstain and instead cast their votes for mainstream parties. Nevertheless, since the mid-2010s, there has been an increase in the level of trust in the EU, whilst anti-establishment and anti-EU sentiments have become less significant. This phenomenon of national unity can be understood as a reflexive response to external hostility, particularly in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This was the final escalation of the Russia–Ukraine conflict after the annexation of Crimea in 2014. The present analysis will utilise unique comparative survey data, thereby facilitating a comparison across a total of 10 countries. Secondly, the unique nature of the panel datasets under consideration facilitates the analysis of potential shifts in attitude at the individual level.

Consequently, this study has concentrated on mainstream and right-wing populists associated with Euroscepticism, and from these theoretical assumptions, the initial hypothesis (H1) has been formulated as follows:

H1: Increased trust in the EU is accompanied by declining Euroscepticism among voters who moved from populist to mainstream parties, whereas right-wing populist supporters remain strongly Eurosceptic.

H2 is as follows:

H2: In times of crisis, such as the Ukraine war and the Covid-19 pandemic, there is a “rally around the flag” effect which leads to a higher level of trust in the supranational institutions, such as those of the EU, among voters of all parties.

3. Case Selection, Definition of Parties, Context, and Methodology

3.1. Case Selection

The present study uses individual panel data, which allow the analysis of the change of attitudes at the individual level. It adopts a distinctive approach, utilising a non-standardised measurement tool to facilitate the analysis of general visible trends concerning political party systems and, more specifically, populism in Europe.

In the context of the PRECEDE project, colleagues from the UK, the Netherlands, Italy, and Germany participated. Due to scheduled elections during the designated project period, significant countries were included. We followed a most different system design including countries from Northern and Western Europe (Germany, France, Spain, the Netherlands, UK, Sweden), Southern Europe (Italy, Spain), and Central/Eastern Europe (Romania, Hungary, the Czech Republic). The selected countries are distinguished by a variety of social, economic, and historical conditions. They exhibit a diverse array of welfare state models and political party systems, with distinct types of mainstream and populist parties present in each. The selected countries all had elections in the project period 2020–2023. All political systems have shown a decline in mainstream parties and a stronger influence of populist parties. In some countries populist parties were in government (Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands). We could use the dataset EVES2 from 2018, which was organised by the researchers in a former research project. In our final survey in 2023, all 10 countries are included. These are analysed in the 2023 analysis. Furthermore, the initial survey from the dataset EVES2 only consisted of a subset of countries, thus narrowing down the selection of countries for the panel regression. Additionally, panel attrition led to a reduced number of participants.

The study focuses on a variety of political systems and welfare state regimes (Continental, Southern European, Nordic, and Eastern European countries). The countries under scrutiny in this study are representative of a variety of populist parties, including left-wing populism (as seen in Spain, Germany, and France, with examples including Podemos, Die Linke, and La France Insoumise), right-wing populism (as seen in the Netherlands, Germany, Sweden, and France, with examples including the PVV [Party for Freedom], AfD [Alternative for Germany], the Swedish Democrats, and the Rassemblement National), and populist parties in government (as seen in the Czech Republic, Italy, and Hungary) and in opposition (as seen in Germany, Spain, and France). The level of European integration differs with the depth and duration of participation in mechanisms such as the Schengen and euro zones, yet as shown by Božina Beroš and Grdović Gnip for the case of Croatia, differentiated integration has remained a low-salience issue despite its practical importance for EU relations (Božina Beroš & Grdović Gnip, 2023). The UK is included as a former member state.

3.2. Mainstream, Right-Wing, Centrist, and Left-Wing Populist Parties: Definitions and Contexts

The present study sets out to compare mainstream parties with right-wing populist parties. The term “populist parties” is defined here according to Mudde (2004). Furthermore, right-wing populist parties have been observed to exhibit a pronounced xenophobic sentiment (see also Section 2 above). The identification of these parties was facilitated by the utilisation of the PopuList database (Rooduijn et al., 2016) and the ParlGov database (Döring & Manow, 2024). The right-wing parties identified were then verified using other databases: CHES (Jolly et al., 2022), POPPA (Coppedge et al., 2021), VDem (Lührmann et al., 2020), GPS

(Norris & Inglehart, 2019), EES Voter Study (Schmitt et al., 2024), and TIMBRO (Müller & Schnabl, 2020). Even though Berlusconi's Forza Italia is defined as a mainstream party in the PopuList, and thus we classify it as such, we acknowledge that it has affiliations with right-wing extremists.

In the following discussion, we deviate from extant research on governing and opposition parties. As Schraff (2021) and Mueller (1973) have demonstrated, a crisis constitutes a pivotal juncture for incumbent parties, frequently engendering a pronounced "rally around the flag" effect. In the context of external threats, governing parties and mainstream political parties have historically leveraged these exogenous shocks for their own benefit. In the following discussion, the development of the polycrisis and the strategies deployed in these countries, in addition to the party positions, will be described.

The spectrum of populist parties encompasses leftist parties such as Syriza, as well as far-right parties including Lega, Anexartiti Ellines (ANEL), the AfD, and Golden Dawn. Nevertheless, there are also far-left political parties, such as the non-populist Greek Communist Party (KKE). Some populist parties have been in existence for a considerable time, including La France Insoumise, Lega, Syriza, and ANEL. In the context of Europe, certain political parties, such as the Greek party KKE and the Greek neo-Nazi party Golden Dawn, are Eurosceptic but not considered populist.

In the ideational approach, populism is regarded as a thin-centred ideology. In addition to the established political parties, there is a presence of centre-populist parties, such as the Italian Five Star Movement (M5S), which occupy a more ambiguous position. These parties can be categorised as centrist populists, as opposed to those positioned at the extreme right of the political spectrum, such as Berlusconi's Forza Italia, which are not considered radical.

It is evident that right-wing and far-right populist parties particularly adhere to the notion of nativism, which is characterised by a synthesis of nationalism and xenophobia, often accompanied by a pronounced authoritarianism. In this instance, the relationship with the EU becomes a salient factor. Whilst the majority of radical right-wing populist parties are, at the very least, Eurosceptic, a proportion of these parties advocate for the exit option. Nevertheless, there are notable variations. Some of these parties began as pro-EU parties but later adopted a Eurosceptic stance (Mudde, 2007).

The political orientation of left-wing populist parties is characterised by a robust opposition to capitalism and a commitment to the pursuit of egalitarianism. In this section, though, we will focus on left-wing scepticism of the EU. The EU is widely regarded as a staunch proponent of neoliberal economic policies, with a notable absence of any radical social welfare initiatives. This perception positions the EU as a distinct entity, not aligned with the more progressive ideals associated with the concept of "social Europe." In recent years, a new left has emerged, encompassing a range of social and political movements, including environmentalism, feminism, participation, and the protection of minority rights. Conversely, in Eastern Europe, left-wing populist parties adopt an extremely nationalistic stance, accentuating social and economic inequality, and the pervasive anti-elite distrust that impacts their stance on the EU (March, 2012, p. 148).

Nevertheless, recent studies suggest that the relationship between populist attitudes and opposition to supranational integration in Europe may be more complex than was previously hypothesised. Notwithstanding the heterogeneity of Euroscepticism within populist parties, with right-wing populists often

focusing on issues of immigration and cultural identity (e.g., the Rassemblement National in France or Lega in Italy) and left-wing populists basing their critique of the EU on its neoliberal economic agenda and austerity policies, as demonstrated by Halikiopoulou et al. (2012) and Hobolt and Tilley (2016), the correlation between populist attitudes and trust in supranational institutions is influenced by both individual-level variables and external events, as evidenced by the examples of Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain.

3.3. Methodology

Two datasets are employed in this study: the PRECEDE3 2023 and EVES2 2018 surveys, which partially included the same people. Both waves include questions regarding the level of trust placed in international organisations, including the EU. Both of these surveys include the measures of populist attitudes and demonstrate the views of party supporter (demand side). The data are not open to the public at the time of writing.

In the comparative study conducted in 2023, survey research was utilised, drawing upon e-mail addresses retrieved from the Kieskompas voting advice application database since the 2010s. A total of approximately 16,300 citizens were included in the 10 countries: the Czech Republic (1,955), Germany (2,660), Spain (1,925), France (1,665), the UK (848), Hungary (1,934), Italy (1,448), the Netherlands (1,566), Romania (1,262), and Sweden (1,086). In each country, participants were representatively selected.

For the dependent variable, a trust scale is employed, utilising a 5-point Likert scale ranging from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*. The question concerning trust in Europe is as follows: “How much trust, if any, do you have in each of the following?—European Union.”

The classification of populist parties was determined by utilising the PopuList 2023 classification system, which divided the parties into two distinct categories: mainstream (non-populist) parties, and centre, left-, and right-wing populist parties. The propensity to vote (PTV) is used as a metric for the identification of party affiliation. The age of the subjects was divided into four categories: the Baby Boomer generation up to 1963, Generation X until 1984, Generation Y up to 1994, and Generation Z born after 1995. Regarding gender, 0 denotes male (reference group), and 1 denotes female. In the context of educational attainment, the range of codes utilised goes from 0, denoting minimal educational attainment and serving as a reference point, to 2, which denotes attainment at the level of higher education. The index of internal efficacy analyses the self-perception of political knowledge: As the numerical value increases, so too does the sense of ignorance and political marginalisation.

The research design follows a three-step logic. First, a binary regression is estimated for 2023 to model party affiliations (PTV) and assess how these affiliations influence trust in the EU, capturing differences in voter attitudes across our 10 countries. Second, an OLS regression is used to estimate the effect of a vector of covariates on trust in the EU, capturing between-country variation among citizens in the same year. Finally, a fixed-effect regression is applied to measure within-individual changes over time, focusing on how shifts in the voting behaviour and trust in Russia affect trust in the EU. This final step is conducted only for countries with sufficiently low panel mortality to ensure reliable estimates.

4. Empirical Results

The empirical results of our analysis of panel data demonstrate significant variations in levels of trust across European countries. This study seeks to ascertain whether individuals with a deep mistrust of the EU are disproportionately impacted by the ongoing Ukraine war. The present study employs a PTV linear regression and a trust logistic regression to examine the effects of the Ukraine war on trust in each country. The present study focuses on the variable of trust in Russia as a proxy.

4.1. *PTV and Trust in the EU in 2023*

In this section, we present a series of data points pertaining to the various political parties and levels of trust in Europe in 2023. In the initial phase of our analysis, we focus on a comprehensive set of descriptive data concerning all mainstream parties, ranging from left to right, including those of a populist nature. In this study, the criteria employed are derived from the populist paradigm (Rooduijn, 2015). The populist political landscape is characterised by the presence of two dominant types of parties: right-wing populist parties and left-wing populist parties. In addition to these, there is a modest representation of centre-populist parties.

In France, supporters of mainstream political parties demonstrate comparatively elevated levels of support for Europe and confidence in European institutions. Specifically, 10% of respondents expressed very high levels of trust, while 59% indicated high levels of trust. The level of trust in Europe is notably lower among left-wing parties, with a mere 36% of the populace expressing support. A somewhat higher figure of 41% is recorded among right-wing populist parties. Our survey conducted in Germany revealed that 66% of individuals who align with the mainstream parties expressed a high level of trust in the EU. In this segment, supporters of left-wing parties demonstrated a notable level of trust, with 39% of respondents expressing high levels of confidence. The percentage for supporters of the populist parties on the right wing is minimal, with a mere 2%. In the Netherlands, 71% of supporters of mainstream political parties expressed a positive sentiment towards the EU. This number is also notably high among supporters of left-wing populist parties, with 50% of them holding a favourable view. The result is even higher among supporters of right-wing populist parties, with 54% expressing a positive sentiment. In Sweden, support is primarily concentrated among the supporters of mainstream political parties. Finally, in the non-EU member state UK, in the dominant mainstream parties the EU is supported by 57% of the population. In contrast, in the small right-wing populist parties, the EU enjoys a significantly lower level of support. Over 70% of Italian mainstream political party supporters express a lack of confidence in the EU. Notably, even within the populist centre, which includes M5S, this figure stands at 55%. A survey has revealed that 24% of supporters of right-wing populist parties still have confidence in the EU. In Spain, the proportion of supporters of mainstream parties who expressed high or very high levels of trust was 67%. In contrast, among supporters of left-wing populist parties, this number was 53%. Nevertheless, a mere 25% of supporters of right-wing populist parties expressed confidence in the EU. In Hungary, among the smaller group of mainstream political parties, 88% of these supporters expressed a high level of trust in the EU. In contrast, only 50% of those who expressed a high level of trust in the ruling right-wing populist parties also expressed a high level of trust in the EU. In the Czech Republic, 79% of supporters of mainstream political parties expressed trust in the EU. In contrast, within the populist parties of the right wing, this figure is nearly 100% mistrust. A similar pattern is observed in the centre populist parties, where only 21% of their supporters expressed trust in the EU. In Romania, 64% of supporters of mainstream parties expressed trust in the EU. This figure is also high in the centre populist parties, with 65% of their supporters expressing trust. In contrast, in the right-wing populist parties, only 4% of their supporters expressed trust.

As demonstrated in Figure 1 (PTV and trust in the EU), supporters of the majority of mainstream political parties in Southern, Northern, and Western Europe, as well as Central Europe, exhibit a relatively high level of trust in the EU.

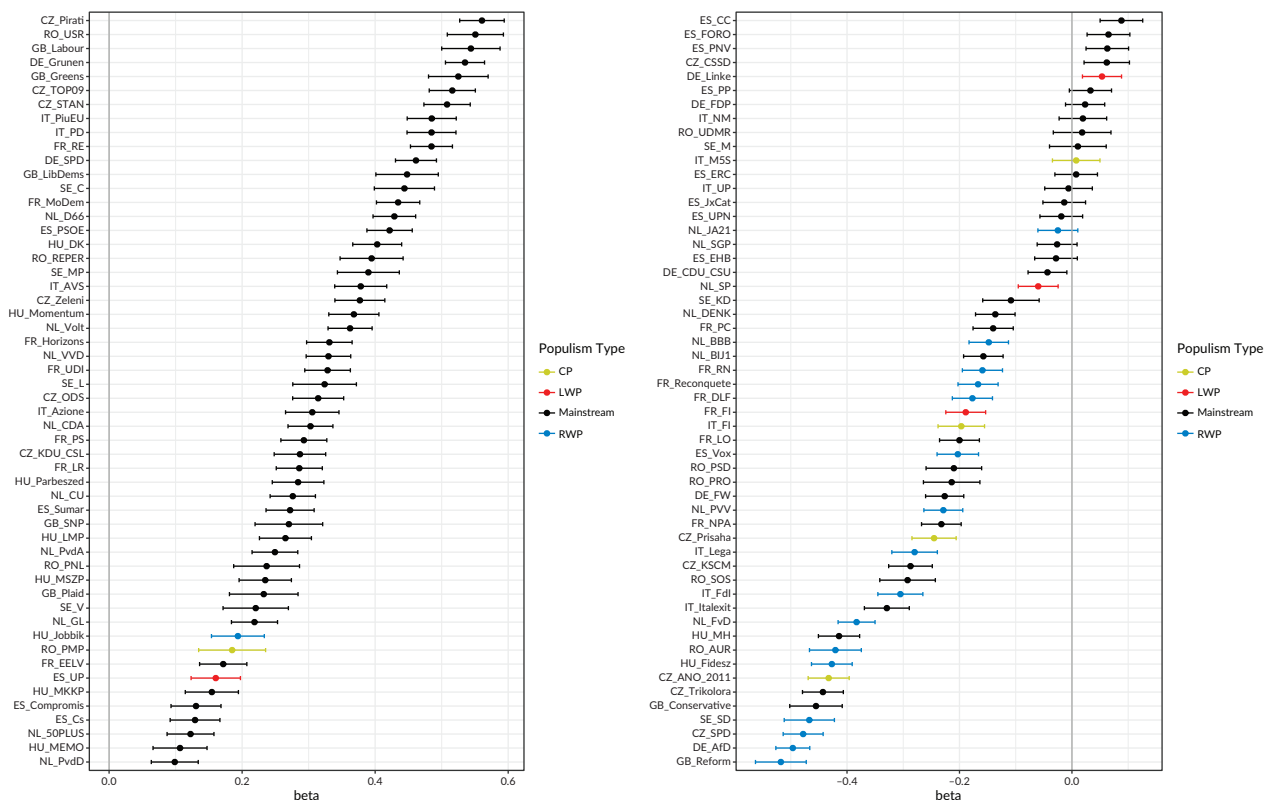


Figure 1. Standardized beta of binary linear regression of trust in the EU and propensity to vote for mainstream and populist parties in 2023. Notes: CP = centre populist; LWP = left-wing populist; RWP = right-wing populist.

A comparative analysis of the attitudes of voters of green parties reveals that those affiliated with the Pirate Party in the Czech Republic and the Green Party in Germany demonstrate a relatively high level of trust in the EU. This is a common occurrence for most green parties across Europe. Furthermore, it is evident that supporters of social democratic parties, such as the Spanish PSOE (Partido Socialista Obrero Español) and the German SPD (Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands), also have a high level of trust in the EU. The level of trust in the EU is significantly lower among supporters of left-wing populist parties, such as Die Linke in Germany and Podemos in Spain, as well as centre-populist parties, including M5S in Italy and Partidul Mișcarea Populară in Romania. The present study also investigates the attitudes of supporters of left-wing populist parties towards the EU. The data demonstrate that, while these supporters exhibit a lower level of trust in the EU than supporters of social democratic or green parties, their attitudes towards the EU are predominantly positive. The left-wing populist parties, including the Dutch Socialistische Partij and the French La France Insoumise, have expressed a lack of confidence in the EU due to their opposition to its neoliberal agenda.

The present study explores the correlation between support for right-wing populist parties and distrust of the EU. The analysis reveals a notable exception to this trend, as support for the Hungarian Jobbik party does not correspond with a lack of trust in the EU. The present study explores the levels of mistrust among

supporters of the following political parties: the AfD in Germany, the Social Democratic Party in the Czech Republic, the Swedish Democrats in Sweden, Fidesz in Hungary, the Alliance of Conservatives and Democrats in Romania, the Fratelli d'Italia in Italy, PVV in the Netherlands, Vox in Spain, and Rassemblement National in France. Moreover, supporters of certain mainstream parties harbour a degree of mistrust towards the EU. These parties encompass the German CDU/CSU (Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union), as well as the British Conservatives.

4.2. Regression Analysis Within the Countries

The regression analysis demonstrates a discrepancy between the countries in terms of trust in the EU (see Table 1). A notable correlation has been observed between gender and support for the EU among the French and Spanish populations. Specifically, there is a higher proportion of women expressing support for the EU in France and Spain compared to the Netherlands and Hungary, where a greater proportion of men demonstrate support and exhibit higher levels of trust in the EU. The present study seeks to explore the relationship between secondary and tertiary education on the one hand, and trust in the EU in the UK, Hungary, the Netherlands, and Sweden on the other. The results of the study indicate a positive correlation between the two variables in the four countries. Citizens who exhibit lower internal efficacy demonstrate a greater propensity to place their trust in Europe, and vice versa. The presence of disparate populist groups across Europe serves as a compelling indication of the pervasive influence of right-wing populism, with the notable exceptions of Hungary and the Netherlands. The concept of left-wing populism holds particular salience in Germany, Spain, and France, though its significance is comparatively diminished in the Netherlands.

An analysis of significant populism indicators, including anti-establishment sentiment and migration, reveals a robust negative correlation between the question dealing with anti-migration stance (Q36_core_populism_12), and most countries, except for the Netherlands and France, where no significant correlation is observed.

The same is true in relation to question 4 on populism and anti-establishment. Here, a strong negative correlation is evident in the Czech Republic, Germany, Spain, France, the Netherlands, and Sweden. However, in Hungary and the UK, a positive correlation is observed.

In the present study, the argument is advanced that trust in Russia and the evaluation of the Russo-Ukrainian war are relevant factors in the development of trust in Europe. It has been demonstrated that, with the exception of the UK, the topic of Russia is a highly significant predictor of levels of mistrust in the EU. There is an absence of data concerning levels of trust in Russia in France and Hungary. However, it is notable that the Hungarian Fidesz party is well known for its very positive attitude towards Russia and for its strong Eurosceptic tendency. Consequently, we argue that the results of this study align with the existing body of literature. In France, there is a greater degree of scepticism towards Russia, even among right-wing populist parties. Conversely, there is comparatively higher support for the EU among this demographic, in contrast to other populist parties in Europe. In conclusion, with the exception of Hungary, there is still a negative correlation between populist parties and trust in the EU. But we argue that the escalation of the Ukraine–Russia crisis and the Ukraine–Russia war triggered a “rally around the flag” effect in Europe, thus becoming an important factor in the EU’s support in 2023.

Table 1. Trust in the EU: OLS regression 2023.

	CZ	DE	ES	FR	GB	HU	IT	NL	RO	SE
(Intercept)	4.50*** (0.21)	4.03*** (0.07)	4.00*** (0.13)	3.70*** (0.12)	3.24*** (0.19)	3.34*** (0.22)	4.53*** (0.17)	4.00*** (0.14)	4.37*** (0.43)	4.62*** (0.16)
Gender	0.08+ (0.05)	0.00 (0.03)	0.11* (0.05)	0.17*** (0.04)	−0.01 (0.06)	−0.13* (0.05)	−0.07 (0.06)	−0.15** (0.05)	−0.13 (0.09)	0.07 (0.06)
Baby Boomer	−0.29+ (0.17)	−0.10+ (0.06)	−0.18+ (0.10)	−0.05 (0.08)	−0.14 (0.09)	−0.08 (0.07)	−0.19 (0.16)	−0.09 (0.09)	−0.23 (0.38)	−0.32*** (0.09)
Generation X	−0.24 (0.16)	−0.07 (0.05)	−0.18+ (0.10)	−0.11 (0.09)	−0.23* (0.09)	−0.34*** (0.08)	−0.11 (0.15)	−0.15+ (0.09)	−0.22 (0.38)	−0.41*** (0.09)
Generation Y	−0.18 (0.16)	0.00 (0.05)	−0.17+ (0.10)	−0.05 (0.09)	−0.31** (0.10)	−0.36*** (0.08)	0.04 (0.14)	−0.10 (0.09)	−0.01 (0.38)	−0.32*** (0.09)
Education	0.07+ (0.04)	0.00 (0.02)	0.05 (0.04)	0.02 (0.04)	0.14* (0.06)	0.12** (0.04)	−0.01 (0.05)	0.13** (0.05)	0.07 (0.06)	0.18*** (0.05)
Internal efficacy index	−0.26** (0.08)	−0.12*** (0.03)	−0.12* (0.06)	−0.07+ (0.04)	0.00 (0.06)	0.04 (0.05)	−0.10 (0.06)	−0.14* (0.05)	−0.21* (0.08)	−0.09 (0.05)
Centre Populism	−0.27* (0.11)						−0.07 (0.09)		−0.07 (0.11)	
Right-Wing Populism	−0.43** (0.14)	−0.53*** (0.05)	−0.27** (0.10)	−0.23** (0.07)	−0.64*** (0.09)	−0.03 (0.10)	−0.44*** (0.11)	−0.12+ (0.07)	−0.76*** (0.14)	−0.55*** (0.08)
Left-Wing Populism		−0.26*** (0.06)	−0.29*** (0.06)	−0.26*** (0.06)				−0.11 (0.16)		
Trust in Russia	−0.25*** (0.07)	−0.17*** (0.03)	−0.16** (0.05)		−0.06 (0.06)		−0.29*** (0.04)	−0.33*** (0.06)	−0.39*** (0.08)	−0.37*** (0.06)
Q36_core_populism_12	−0.29*** (0.03)	−0.17*** (0.01)	−0.05* (0.02)	−0.01 (0.02)	−0.34*** (0.03)	−0.25*** (0.03)	−0.19*** (0.03)	0.00 (0.02)	−0.33*** (0.04)	−0.10*** (0.02)

Table 1. (Cont.) Trust in the EU: OLS regression 2023.

	CZ	DE	ES	FR	GB	HU	IT	NL	RO	SE
Q10_populism_4	−0.20*** (0.03)	−0.22*** (0.01)	−0.24*** (0.02)	−0.30*** (0.02)	0.08** (0.03)	0.19*** (0.04)	−0.26*** (0.03)	−0.19*** (0.03)	−0.03 (0.04)	−0.26*** (0.03)
Num. Obs.	2,155	3,064	2,544	2,692	1,294	2,285	1,940	2,957	1,409	1,408
R ²	0.448	0.433	0.240	0.238	0.437	0.277	0.364	0.238	0.424	0.379
R ² Adj.	0.445	0.431	0.236	0.235	0.433	0.274	0.361	0.235	0.420	0.375
AIC	6,174.1	6,529.2	7,105.4	7,230.4	3,285.4	6,846.5	6,155.6	7,940.8	4,811.1	3,714.5
BIC	6,247.8	6,607.6	7,181.4	7,301.2	3,347.4	6,909.5	6,228.1	8,018.7	4,879.4	3,777.5
Log. Lik.	−3,074.033	−3,251.618	−3,539.709	−3,603.216	−1,630.686	−3,412.237	−3,064.822	−3,957.409	−2,392.565	−1,845.258
RMSE	0.68	0.62	0.72	0.75	0.68	0.76	0.70	0.64	0.78	0.74

Notes: ⁺ $p < 0.1$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$; generational age effects are in reference to Generation Z.

4.3. Trust in the EU: Panel Analysis 2018–2023

The two timepoints of the waves EVES2 (2018) and PRECEDE3 (2023) represent a time before the start of the war in Ukraine and the Covid-19 pandemic, and after the start of the war and the pandemic, respectively. Across most countries in the sample, the average within-person change in trust in the EU between the two waves is positive and statistically significant, suggesting a widespread “rally around the flag” effect in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The only exception is Italy, where no such significant increase is observed. We can also observe a significant positive change of trust in the EU for those participants who changed their voting behaviour by switching from a populist party (either left-wing or right-wing) to a mainstream party in all countries except Italy, indicating that political realignment toward the mainstream may coincide with a stronger attachment to supranational governance in times of crisis. An increased mistrust in Russia is positively correlated with trust in the EU in Italy. The OLS regression above suggests a strong positive correlation between the mistrust in Russia and trust in the EU, whilst the data show a consistent opinion towards Russia which cannot be analysed using a fixed-effect regression. Together, these patterns highlight not only the unifying effect of external threats on EU legitimacy but also the role of national context and political realignment in shaping political identification frameworks.

Table 2. Trust in the EU: Fixed-effect regression 2018–2023.

	DE	ES	FR	IT	NL
Back to Mainstream	0.10	0.29***	0.24***	−0.11	0.24***
Trust in Russia	−0.04	0.09		−0.14**	0.00
Time	0.12***	0.13***	0.22***	0.03	0.27***
Num. Obs.	2,010	1,681	1,453	1,244	2,684
R^2	0.820	0.751	0.832	0.817	0.844
R^2 Adj.	0.636	0.500	0.663	0.615	0.676
R^2 Within	0.047	0.079	0.057	0.033	0.140
R^2 Within Adj.	0.044	0.075	0.055	0.029	0.138
AIC	3,528.3	3,515.2	2,689.2	2,417.8	4,527.0
BIC	9,223.9	8,106.5	6,549.9	5,760.0	12,721.1
RMSE	0.35	0.42	0.37	0.38	0.34

Notes: ⁺ $p < 0.1$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

5. Conclusion

The present study uses a comparative survey in 10 countries, as well as individual panel data, which allows the analysis of the change of attitudes at the individual level from 2018 to 2022. A decline in populist attitudes at the voter level is evident, as evidenced by the election results until 2023. Recent data from the Eurobarometer survey indicate a general rise in confidence in the EU among the general public. It is possible to account for a significant proportion of the increase in support for the EU by introducing trust in Russia as a factor in the equation.

To summarise, there has been a decline in Euroscepticism during the Ukraine war, accompanied by an increase in EU-related trust since the late 2010s. The panel regression (Table 2) shows that among voters

who switched “back to mainstream” parties, within-person trust in the EU rises—significantly and positively in three of five cases (Spain, Italy, and the Netherlands)—which aligns with H1—that returning to mainstream parties is accompanied by declining Euroscepticism. H1 is also corroborated by both the binary indicators in Figure 1 and the multivariate OLS (Table 1): Right-wing populist parties are consistently negatively aligned with trust in the EU, with the notable exception of Jobbik. Table 1 largely replicates this pattern: The right-wing populist coefficient is significantly negative across countries, except in Hungary—likely driven by Jobbik rather than Fidesz—and in the Netherlands, where it is only borderline significant. Taken together, these results indicate that trust increases among mainstream returnees while right-wing populist supporters remain markedly Eurosceptic, with country-specific nuances. Furthermore, in the panel regression (Table 2), the consistently positive time coefficient indicates that average trust in the EU rises over the waves corresponding to these crisis periods. This pattern is not confined to a single party family but is observed among voters of both mainstream and populist parties, suggesting that external shocks can temporarily mute partisan divides in attitudes toward the EU. Concurrently, certain right-wing populist parties expressed opposition to the provision of support to Ukraine and instead voiced support for the Putin regime. Evidently, the degree of trust in the EU is somewhat diminished in Eastern Europe when compared with the levels observed in Western, Northern, and Southern Europe. It appears that the supporters of populist parties in this region do not adhere to the principles of right-wing populism in this particular context. In this instance, there is an additional decline in party voter congruence.

This study has a few limitations. Panel attrition may modestly affect representativeness, and the panel regression covers only five countries, limiting generalizability. Not all potentially relevant covariates (e.g., income) are included, leaving some scope for omitted-variable bias. Finally, given the observational design and specific modelling choices, results should be read as associative and somewhat specification dependent.

From the beginning of the Russia–Ukraine war in February 2022, the EU and the clear majority of its member states strongly supported the Ukrainian government. The Ukraine war had a positive effect on trust in the EU. A clear “rally around the flag” effect was observed, especially at the onset of the crisis. Evidence of this effect was observable in the fact that most diverse social groups (age, education, and gender) were represented. A survey of political party voters has revealed a predominant trust in the EU and a concomitant distrust of Russia. This is due to a prevailing sentiment of distrust towards Russia and its regime. It is conceivable that a similar sequence of events could occur in the event of subsequent crises. It appears that crises are conducive to the adoption of safety-first attitudes, and that they have a temporary mitigating effect on political party polarisation, at least about political culture. However, this is not the case in the context of elections, where populist parties are able to profit from their role as protest parties. The evidence presented indicates that populism is no longer a marginal phenomenon; rather, it has become a prevalent and enduring element within the broader context of European party systems. Nevertheless, the post-Covid environment gave rise to new tensions and triggered EU policies such as the Next Generation EU programme. Concurrently, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has led to a resurgence in the importance of NATO and EU collaboration on issues that extend beyond conventional policy domains, such as defence and military assistance. One potential solution to this issue of public dissatisfaction is to enhance inclusivity and encourage participation in various political systems. This, in turn, can lead to greater input legitimacy by democratic innovation. It is imperative to consider the legitimacy of output, as well as the distribution of economic and social outcomes, in order to achieve a high and equitable result and a higher trust in the EU.

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Conflict of Interests

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Data Availability

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