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Attitudes Toward the Response of the EU to the Russian Invasion of Ukraine: The Role of Empathic Concern, Identification With the EU, and the View That Ukraine Is Part of the European Community

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Abstract

The response of the European Union (EU) to the Russian invasion of Ukraine included sanction packages, military support to the Ukrainian military, and humanitarian help and protection for the Ukrainian refugees. The current study aimed to investigate whether identification with the EU, feelings of sympathy toward Ukrainian people, and the view that Ukraine is part of the European community are associated with attitudes toward the EU'S measures to respond to the war in Ukraine. Data from the Flash Eurobarometer 506 were used. Exploratory factor analysis revealed three homogeneous dimensions of attitudes toward the EU measures: Sanctions against Russia, Support for Ukrainians, and External support in armed conflict. Regression analyses showed that Sanctions against Russia and External support in armed conflict were best predicted by the view that Ukraine is part of the European community, while (humanitarian) Support for Ukrainians was best predicted by feelings of sympathy toward Ukrainian people.

Keywords: war, Ukraine, Russia, attitudes, sanctions, empathy, identification, sense of community

Public impact statement

The present research offers a unique insight into the psychological factors associated with the EU's measures in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. This study suggests that the beliefs that Ukraine is part of the EU community, feelings of sympathy towards Ukrainian people, and to a lesser extent identification with the EU are associated with attitudes toward the EU'S measures to respond to the war in Ukraine.

Attitudes Toward the Response of the EU to the Russian Invasion of Ukraine: The Role of Empathic Concern, Identification with the EU, and the view that Ukraine is part of the European community

On 24 February 2022, the Russian Federation (hereafter referred to as Russia) officially attacked Ukraine and the conflict remains ongoing at the time of writing. The European Union's (EU) response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine was considered unprecedented. Specifically, the EU has devised sanction packages that include diplomatic and economic sanctions, support to the Armed Forces of Ukraine (e.g., arms and military equipment), and support measures such as the right to live, study, work, access healthcare, and housing in the EU for three years for Ukrainian people.

Little is known about the factors associated with EU citizens' attitudes toward the EU's response to the war in Ukraine. Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), the theory of psychological sense of community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986), and the empathy-altruism hypothesis (Batson, 1991) provide a meaningful framework with which to identify factors associated with EU citizens' attitudes toward the EU's response to the war in Ukraine. According to social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), a common identity provides the basis for normative consensus, social influence, and agreement with ingroup norms. Based on the social identity theory of influence in groups also known as the referent informational influence theory (Turner, 1991), social influence and conformity to group norms result from the process of social identity and self-categorization. Therefore, identification with a superordinate group, in this case, the EU has the potential to increase individual support for EU policies such as the sanction packages. In line with predictions from social identity theory, the identification with the EU should increase the support for the sanction packages devised by the EU (Hypothesis 1).

The theory of psychological sense of community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986) posits that a feeling of belonging to the same community can intrinsically motivate feelings of personal responsibility for the benefit of the community members. For instance, a psychological sense of global community can predict

a global sense of social responsibility (Prati et al., 2021). There is evidence that a sense of belonging to a broader global community is associated with increased individual support for international humanitarian assistance (Alvarez et al., 2018). Therefore, the extent to which EU citizens view Ukraine people as part of the European community should be associated with positive attitudes toward the EU's response to the war in Ukraine (Hypothesis 2).

Finally, the empathy-altruism hypothesis (Batson, 1991) posits that an other-oriented emotional response elicited by the welfare of other people in need (also called empathic concern) stimulates a motivational state which directs the person toward the goal of increasing their welfare (i.e., altruistic motivation). The empathy-altruism hypothesis can explain aid that extends beyond the boundaries of the ingroup. There is evidence that the empathy-altruism hypothesis proved useful for understanding support for humanitarian aid (e.g., Tiltay & Torlak, 2020). Thus, in line with the empathy-altruism hypothesis, it is possible to hypothesize that the extent to which EU citizens feel sympathy toward Ukrainians is positively associated with support for the sanction packages devised by the EU (Hypothesis 3).

Method

Data and Methods

Data on citizens' attitudes toward the EU's response to the war in Ukraine were derived from the Flash Eurobarometer 506 (European Commission, 2022) including 26,053 participants from 27 EU countries. Supplemental Table S1 gives the list of countries and number of participants from each country.

Participants were asked to the extent to which they agree (i.e., "For each of the following measures that have been announced by the EU to respond to the war in Ukraine, please tell me if you approve them or not") with the following seven statements:

- Economic sanctions against Russia.

- Sanctions against wealthy Russians (oligarchs).
- Financial support to Ukraine.
- Financing the purchase and supply of military equipment to Ukraine.
- Providing humanitarian support to the people affected by the war.
- Banning state-owned Russian media from broadcasting in the EU.
- Welcoming in the EU people fleeing the war.

Moreover, participants were asked to provide their agreement to one sentence regarding European identity (“I feel more European since the war in Ukraine”), one sentence concerning sympathy for Ukrainians (“I feel sympathy towards Ukrainians”), and two statements ($r = .74$) regarding the view that Ukraine belongs to the European community (“Ukraine is part of the European family” and “Ukraine should join the EU when it is ready”).

The participants rated the extent to which they agree with all these statements on a scale from 1 (*Fully approve*) to 4 (*Fully disapprove*). The volunteered “don’t know” responses were converted to missing values. All items were reverse coded such that higher scores indicate greater approval or agreement. Supplemental Table S2 displays scores on the study variables for each country, while Supplemental Table S3 reports descriptive statistics and correlations for study variables.

Results and Discussion

Exploratory Factor Analysis

The SMT, parallel analysis, comparison data, and the difference in RMSEA with a 0.015 cut-value supported the determination of three factors. The three-factor solution (EFA) provided a good fit to the data, $\chi^2(3) = 42.892$, $p < .001$, CFI = .999, TLI = .995, RMSEA = .023. A total of 83% of the variance was explained by EFA. The variance explained by each factor of the rotated three-factor solutions was, respectively, 62%, 14%, and 7%. Table 1 shows the factor loading and communality (h^2). The levels of communality can be considered high. Each item loaded saliently on only one factor and all items had

negligible (<0.30) cross-factor loadings. The three-factor solution appeared theoretically meaningful. The first factor, Sanctions against Russia, includes attitudes toward economic sanctions against Russia, sanctions against wealthy Russians, and banning state-owned Russian media from broadcasting in the EU. The second factor, Support for Ukrainians, comprises attitudes toward financial support to Ukraine, providing humanitarian support to the people affected by the war, and welcoming in the EU people fleeing the war. Finally, the third factor, External support in armed conflict, includes only one item concerning attitudes toward the financing of the purchase and supply of military equipment to Ukraine. The reliability (ω) for the first two subscales was, respectively, .86 and .83. Taken together, the EFA solution can be considered acceptable.

Regression Analyses

Table 2 displays the results from regression analyses. After controlling for relevant sociodemographic covariates (i.e., age, gender, education, and occupation), Ukraine in the European community, sympathy for Ukrainians, and European identity were significantly associated with Sanctions against Russia, Support for Ukrainians, and External support in armed conflict. However, when looking at the effect size, findings varied. Partial epsilon squared ($\hat{\epsilon}_p^2$) was chosen as a measure of standardized effect size. Small, medium, and large effects correspond to .01, .06, and .14, respectively. The extent to which EU citizens view Ukraine people as part of the European community was the strongest predictors of Sanctions against Russia and External support in armed conflict, while identification with the EU had small-to medium-sized positive relationships with Sanctions against Russia and External support in armed conflict. This pattern of findings seems to suggest that the violation of the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine was viewed by a portion of participants as aggression toward a large European community. Such aggression may justify a defensive war against the aggressor and the purchase and supply of military equipment to Ukraine. The process of moral disengagement can make violent conduct personally and socially acceptable by moral justification (e.g., by interpreting it as serving morally

justified or socially worthy purposes). There is evidence of a positive association between moral disengagement and support of military force (e.g., Grussendorf et al., 2002; McAlister et al., 2006).

Empathic concern toward Ukrainian people (i.e., feelings of sympathy) was the strongest predictor (with a large effect size) of Support for Ukrainians. The findings of the study provide support for the empathy-altruism hypothesis (Batson, 1991) over the Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and the theory of psychological sense of community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986) regarding the value of providing humanitarian support and welcoming in the EU Ukrainian people fleeing the war.

Some limitations of the current study should be acknowledged. The observational design of the study does not allow the establishment of causal inferences. In addition, the responses of participants might not be immune to measurement biases such as social desirability, self-presentation, and response styles.

Conclusion

The EU's measures in response to the Ukraine war are instruments to maximize the negative impact on Russia's economic base and its ability to wage such war. While there is a debate in the literature as to whether and when individual, economic and diplomatic sanctions are effective, the present study examined to what extent identification with the EU, feelings of sympathy toward Ukrainian people, and the beliefs that Ukraine is part of the EU community are related to support for these measures. The findings of the present study suggest that the theory of psychological sense of community is useful to understand support for the EU's Sanctions against Russia and External support in armed conflict, while the empathy-altruism hypothesis is useful to understand (humanitarian) Support for Ukrainians.

Table 1*Factor Loadings of the Items Regarding Attitudes Toward the EU's Measures in Response to Russia's**Invasion of Ukraine*

	Sanctions against Russia	Support for Ukrainians	External support in armed conflict	h^2
Economic sanctions against Russia	0.861	0.041	0.017	0.812
Sanctions against wealthy Russians (oligarchs)	0.901	0.003	-0.098	0.704
Financial support to Ukraine	0.081	0.632	0.270	0.695
Financing the purchase and supply of military equipment to Ukraine	-0.003	0.386	0.719	0.851
Providing humanitarian support to the people affected by the war	-0.004	0.840	-0.157	0.638
Banning state-owned Russian media from broadcasting in the EU	0.649	-0.011	0.171	0.593
Welcoming in the EU people fleeing the war	-0.084	0.881	0.001	0.682

Note. h^2 = communality. Absolute factor loadings greater than |0.40| are in bold face and retained for that factor.

Table 2

Regression Analyses Predicting Sanctions against Russia, Support for Ukrainians, External Support in Armed Conflict

Predictors	Sanctions against			Support for Ukrainians			External support in armed		
	Russia						conflict		
	<i>b(SD)</i>	95% CI	$\hat{\epsilon}_p^2$	<i>b(SD)</i>	95% CI	$\hat{\epsilon}_p^2$	<i>b(SD)</i>	95% CI	$\hat{\epsilon}_p^2$
Gender			.001			.003			.007
Male	—	—		—	—		—	—	
Female	-0.04 (0.01)	[-0.05, -0.02]		-0.05 (0.01)	[-0.06, -0.03]		-0.13 (0.01)	[-0.16, 0.11]	
Non-binary or undisclosed	0.02 (0.08)	[-0.13, 0.18]		0.02 (0.06)	[-0.09, 0.13]		-0.13 (0.10)	[-0.32, 0.06]	
Occupation			.003			.003			.001
Self-employed	—	—		—	—		—	—	
Employee	0.10 (0.01)	[0.07, 0.13]		0.02 (0.01)	[0.00, 0.04]		0.06 (0.02)	[0.02, 0.09]	
Manual worker	0.03 (0.02)	[-0.02, 0.07]		-0.07 (0.02)	[-0.10, -0.04]		0.04 (0.03)	[-0.01, 0.10]	
Employed	0.07 (0.02)	[0.04, 0.10]		0.01 (0.01)	[-0.01, 0.03]		0.04 (0.02)	[0.01, 0.08]	
Refusal	-0.02 (0.03)	[-0.08, 0.03]		-0.06 (0.02)	[-0.10, -0.02]		-0.03 (0.03)	[-0.10, 0.03]	

Education (age when completed)			.001		.003			.000	
Up to 15 years	—	—	—	—	—	—	—		
16-19 years	-0.04 (0.03)	[-0.09, 0.01]	0.03 (0.02)	[-0.01, 0.06]	-0.02 (0.03)	[-0.09, 0.04]			
20 years and older	-0.07 (0.03)	[-0.12, -0.01]	0.06 (0.02)	[0.03, 0.10]	-0.02 (0.03)	[-0.09, 0.04]			
Still in education	-0.08 (0.03)	[-0.14, -0.01]	0.04 (0.02)	[0.00, 0.09]	0.03 (0.04)	[-0.04, 0.11]			
Never been in education	-0.05 (0.04)	[-0.13, 0.03]	-0.01 (0.03)	[-0.06, 0.05]	0.02 (0.05)	[-0.07, 0.12]			
Don't know	-0.04 (0.04)	[-0.11, 0.03]	-0.03 (0.02)	[-0.08, 0.02]	0.03 (0.04)	[-0.05, 0.11]			
Refusal	-0.17 (0.05)	[-0.26, -0.07]	0.01 (0.03)	[-0.06, 0.07]	-0.06 (0.06)	[-0.17, 0.05]			
Age	0.00 (0.00)	[0.00, 0.00]	.002 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	[0.00, 0.00]	.006 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	[0.00, 0.00]	.000
Ukraine in European community	0.41 (0.01)	[0.40, 0.42]	.146	0.26 (0.00)	[0.25, 0.27]	.131	0.57 (0.01)	[0.55, 0.58]	.194
Sympathy for Ukrainians	0.27 (0.01)	[0.26, 0.29]	.061	0.37 (0.00)	[0.36, 0.38]	.208	0.21 (0.01)	[0.19, 0.23]	.028
European identity	0.14 (0.01)	[0.13, 0.15]	.037	0.02 (0.00)	[0.01, 0.02]	.001	0.18 (0.01)	[0.17, 0.20]	.043

Note. *b* = unstandardized estimates; *SD* = standard deviation; *CI* = confidence interval.

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