

Two functionalist logics of European Union polity formation under external threat: Evidence from a conjoint experiment

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Abstract

The Russian invasion of Ukraine challenged the European Union (EU) polity exceptionally, affecting many policy domains. We argue that the external threat triggers different logics of (in)security which can result in polity formation across policies. Two functionalist logics put pressure on the EU to centralize policies that (a) help it meet the geopolitical challenge set by Russia and (b) maintain unity among member states in the face of the challenge. We test this theory with a conjoint survey experiment in

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Germany, France, Italy, Poland, and Hungary, where we vary refugee, energy, costs of living, and defense policies. Our results show that there is strong solidarity for sharing the costs of refugees, which cuts across ideological and identitarian groups, and across countries. Other policy areas show more contentious support.

Keywords

EU integration, polity formation, Ukraine, conjoint, refugees, external threat

Introduction

The “bellicist” literature (Riker, 1964; Tilly, 1985) argues that external threats push polity sub-units to centralize in order to survive. Traditionally, this has meant that weak sub-units band together to more effectively face adversaries, by centralizing taxation and raising larger, more effective, armies. Historically, direct external threats have had a smaller impact on European Union (EU) polity formation, leading to a lopsided EU polity with high legal and regulatory powers and weak fiscal and coercive capacity (Kelemen and McNamara, 2021). The EU has faced external crises, which have pushed the polity to band together in solidarity, for example by adopting the Next Generation EU fund during the COVID-19 pandemic (Ferrera et al., 2023). External threats are unlikely to have the same effect on mature centralized European nation states as they had on feudal states. While polity centralization previously required only elite consensus, European democracies also require the buy-in of their publics.

In this article, we argue more broadly that external threats, particularly threats from other geopolitical actors, push polities to centralize policies unevenly, based on the vulnerabilities of the sub-units. Thus, an external threat need not (only) push for military centralization, but depending on vulnerabilities, may push the polity to centralize economic or other policies. The EU is a particular polity with strong sub-units, which means that many vulnerabilities are covered by the member states, who already have national armies and taxation. However, member states still need to band together in order to have more effective policy responses, such as sanctions. In order to maintain these policy responses, the polity as a whole needs to maintain unity among the sub-units who may be affected disproportionately. Maintaining unity implies support for common policies from the electorates of member states.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine is an external threat unlike any other that the EU has faced. What sets it apart is the fact that it comes from a geopolitical adversary, an actor with clear intentions of undermining the EU. It is threatening the polity itself. Other external threats do not threaten the polity itself in the same way. COVID, for example, while being a shock that threatened the EU economically and the health of its citizens, did not directly threaten the polity. COVID did not have intentions and did not have a foreign policy against the EU. It was a challenge to be faced with economic policy and scientific research. The Russian threat, on the other hand, emanates from a geopolitical contest. The EU needs internal unity and effectiveness of policy in order to counter the Russian threat.

We therefore ask in which ways the external threat shapes polity formation in the current crisis by looking at the demand side of politics. Saliency among EU citizens may act as a push factor for further EU polity formation or an enabling factor for EU political leaders who want to build further capacity at the EU level. How the external threat is perceived by individuals may shape the future trajectory of the EU polity by setting the limits on further integration (Hooghe and Marks, 2009). These limits are likely to be policy-specific, based on the vulnerabilities of the EU polity. The saliency of a given policy field can tell us where we might expect further centralization. Our design complements that of Oana et al. (2025), who look at attitudes towards energy sanctions, by putting those findings in context, and showing how attitudes vary when respondents are presented with a mixed political program as opposed to a single policy.

In order to investigate the impact of the threat on the demand side of crisis policy, we conduct a conjoint experiment in five EU countries (Germany, France, Italy, Poland, and Hungary) representing a great degree of heterogeneity in what regards their vulnerabilities to the threats posed by the invasion. We assign respondents political programs and vary two levels for each of four policy areas: refugee, energy, costs of living, and defense policies. In each policy area respondents receive a proposal that their home country should manage the policy area independently, or that EU member states should coordinate on the policy. We ask respondents to choose between randomly assigned political programs in order to estimate Average Marginal Component Effects (AMCE) for the level of coordination of each policy. The conjoint design allows us to see (a) which policy areas EU citizens want to see more EU coordination in (policy preferences), and (b) which policy area drives their choice of a political program (policy saliency). Our conjoint design allows us to compare policies instead of analyzing them separately. We can therefore see trade-offs in the complex set of choices that voters face.

Our results show that despite our expectations, EU citizens place the most weight in their choice of political programs on refugee policy. Across countries and across ideological and identity divides, respondents in our sample prefer to redistribute Ukrainian refugees at the EU level. Despite high media saliency and more direct impact on individuals' lives, energy policy and cost-of-living policies weigh less in respondent preferences. Both policies, together with military policy, show divides by country, ideology, and identity. During this crisis in the EU there is only consensus for refugees. Other forms of polity formation need to build their consensus before being enacted.

The multifaceted impact of external threats

The external threat argument stipulates that polities form through pooling of common resources due to perceived or real-existing external threats, such as wars or strategic competition. This theory was initiated in the early 1900s by Hintze (1975). Rational choice research on the origins of federalism and most prominently Riker (1964) picked up the argument, sustaining that federations are created due to wars. This argument was later taken up most famously by Tilly (1985, 1990), who argued that wars make states. Most recently, Kelemen and McNamara (2021) have reintroduced this argument which

stipulates that war impacts polity formation through the necessity to pool resources at the center, which overcomes sub-unit resistance to transfer powers.

External threats have never been entirely absent from EU polity formation (Cold War, Balkan Wars, etc.). However, no external threat by a geopolitical actor has so far challenged the EU the way Russia's invasion of Ukraine has now. The EU, together with the USA, has taken a clear adversarial position against Russian aggression, committing funds, weapons, and aid to Ukraine. However, several factors complicate the straightforward external threat argument in this case. The first is that the military threat is not a direct military threat to the EU polity. Bombs are falling on the EU's doorstep, not on EU member state cities. Nonetheless, the EU is deeply implicated in the conflict by providing military aid to Ukraine, imposing sanctions on Russia, and is in turn affected by the massive inflow of refugees and volatile energy prices (McNamara and Kelemen, 2022). More importantly, the EU is not a typical polity in that it already has strong sub-units with centralized powers for defense and welfare (Ferrera, 2005; Freudlsperger and Schimmelfennig, 2022). Moreover, the security guarantees of NATO may further diminish the demand for European level security, thus further diminishing the importance of the external threat, at least in the short term (McNamara and Kelemen, 2022). The jury is still out on whether the external threat will indeed prove pivotal for the centralization of the EU polity. Our polity formation approach allows us to study both integration and disintegration dynamics.

We add to the external threat argument by highlighting how such a threat can trigger policy centralization in domains other than defence. While centralization due to meeting an immediate threat follows a "bellicist logic," we argue that the war also threatens EU unity and solidarity, therefore triggering a "polity maintenance logic" whereby member states are incentivized to be solidaristic in order to preserve the integrity of the EU (Alexander-Shaw et al., 2023; Ferrera et al., 2021). The external threat can highlight specific policy vulnerabilities in a polity. The context of a geopolitical struggle pushes a polity to try and overcome these vulnerabilities in order to improve its geo-strategic position and gain an upper hand in the struggle. In the case of the EU, the Russian threat has highlighted several vulnerabilities that the polity needs to overcome in order to maintain a common front. These vulnerabilities vary in their importance and possible solutions. We consider each in turn and describe their characteristics and possible solutions, and therefore implications for polity formation. We consider two types of functional pressures in this crisis.

The first, in line with the "bellicist logic," is a *direct functional condition*, the *functional pressure to centralize a policy in order to meet the immediate threat* (e.g. a centralized army that is necessary to fend off aggressors). The second, following a "polity maintenance logic," is an *indirect functional condition*, a *functional pressure to maintain unity among sub-units* (e.g. providing compensation to MS who face higher costs from refugees or sanctions). We expect these functional conditions to have an impact on individuals' perceptions of the necessity to coordinate on policies, through cues from domestic elites and media salience.

Defence policy is the most obvious vulnerability of the EU. The EU lacks a centralized army, but rather relies on national armies, and NATO security guarantees, to protect their

own borders. While NATO security guarantees continue to act as a powerful deterrent to direct Russian aggression against the EU, the EU's weak military capacity does not allow it to project power beyond its borders.¹ More specific to this crisis, arming Ukraine is highlighting tensions between member states over which weapons to send and how to reimburse other member states. Overall, the fact that its security is guaranteed by NATO (apart from EU MS who are not currently in NATO), and that MS have developed national armies, implies relatively weaker pressure in this domain. There is no immediate pressure to centralize this policy in order to meet the EU's goals in this conflict, nor is centralizing it necessary in order to maintain unity among member states. We therefore find weak pressure for both of our functional conditions.

Refugee policy is another vulnerability that the conflict puts pressure on. Given the intense conflict over its 2015 refugee crisis, the influx of a much larger number of Ukrainian refugees would have been expected to exert pressure on member states. Burden-sharing of refugees is necessary in order for member states to not be overwhelmed with the number of refugees coming in from Ukraine, and is therefore vital to the EU's geopolitical goals. Burden-sharing is also vital in order to maintain unity among member states. Having only some member states take on the costs of refugees could push the EU in the same dynamic it faced in 2015 with disgruntled citizens voting in far-right nationalists that want to withdraw from common, polity, objectives. Sharing the costs of refugees is therefore vital for the EU to maintain unity for other foreign policies (sanctions, military aid, etc.). We thus expect high pressure for both the direct and indirect functional conditions.

Energy policy likewise meets both criteria. Energy was directly weaponized by Russia as a way of punishing the EU for its support of Ukraine, and to fight back against other sanctions. The EU therefore needed to find alternative sources of energy in order to maintain its energy independence and enact other types of sanctions. Rising energy costs and the possible backlash from EU consumers means that the EU also has pressure to share (or otherwise minimize) the costs from this energy transition. Thus we expect high pressure for both conditions.

The rising cost of living is another pressure point for the EU polity. Inflation hit the polity in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, mostly due to supply chain issues and increasing demand for scarce goods. Inflationary trends were exacerbated by the energy crisis and the overall economic fallout from the war. Managing rising prices in member states is not directly necessary for gaining an upper hand in the war. However, managing the different levels of prices among member states is vital to maintaining public support for EU and member state policies in the conflict. Therefore, we expect pressure on one of our two conditions: the indirect one. Table 1 summarizes our main argument regarding the two pressures for the four policy fields.

Policy centralization involves both elite decision-making (the supply side) and public demands or acceptance (demand side). The two are interlocked. Starting with the Maastricht Treaty public opinion put the breaks on further elite-driven integration as the era of permissive consensus gave way to a constraining dissensus (Hooghe and Marks, 2009). Elections propelled the far-right into the European parliament. It is, therefore, crucial to understand the demand side of EU integration by understanding how

Table 1. Summary of main argument.

		“Direct pressure”	
		Facing immediate challenge	
“Indirect pressure” Maintaining Unity	High	High Refugee policy Energy policy	Low Rising costs
	Low		Defense Policy

citizens evaluate different policy packages. Our functional logics translate into policy preferences at the individual level. While the exact mechanisms cannot be probed with our data, we point to several plausible channels. The first is a direct effect as individuals are made aware of policy necessities if they are informed about the dynamics of the war and the EU’s and their country’s involvement. A second mechanism is that EU citizens can be cued by their national elites who are constrained by the functional logic. Yet, a third mechanism could be one of general solidarity. The EU embarked on this geopolitical challenge together from the beginning, by coordinating sanctions and other policies. In light of this, EU citizens may expect that the aftermath of such policies, in particular their costs, also need to be coordinated.

Expectations—main effects

We formulate expectations with respect to two dimensions for each policy: *salience* and *direction*. While our functionalist logic informs our expectations about the direction of policy (EU or national level), we form expectations about salience based on media salience at the time of the experiment. Given that the crisis activates economic worries, especially in the wake of the COVID pandemic and given increasing inflation among European countries, we think economic factors will be the ones to tip the balance in terms of choice between randomly assigned political programs. The second reason is that as the war in Ukraine progressed into the winter 2022–2023, the media narrative was more focused on energy and the cost of sanctions and the public in several EU countries had mobilized against energy prices. By contrast, refugees (F1) and security concerns (F4) were more salient at the start of the conflict. Within the economic factors, individuals should be more inclined to consider as important factors that concern their own livelihood (F3), rather than factors that concern the wider state of the economy or more sociotropic considerations (F2). We note, however, quite high uncertainty regarding these expectations. The dynamic of the war and its consequences is constantly shifting, and therefore public preferences are difficult to predict. Moreover, we are not aware of any existing study testing for salience in this context.

H1 (salience): Rising costs will be considered the most important by respondents, followed by energy policy, defense, and lastly refugees.

We have more direct evidence, following our two functionalist logics, to form expectations about the *direction* of policy preferences for each policy. Refugees, as well as immigration policy in general, have been one of the most politicized and contentious policy areas in the EU since the start of the migration crisis in 2015. The 2015 crisis saw immense backlash from certain segments of the population and rise of far-right anti-systemic parties riding the wave of discontent. European governments, partly due to pressure from these parties, and partly due to a general lack of support for migrants and refugees, failed to reach agreements for resettlement at the EU level, defaulting first to the provision of the Dublin Regulation that refugees should be accommodated by the country through which they first entered the EU, later suspended. In the process they exacerbated conflict and divisions at the EU level (Kriesi et al., 2024). The same dynamic does not seem to be at play in the current Ukrainian refugee crisis. It seems that in the present crisis the far right is not mobilizing on this issue, and that there is widespread agreement among the elites and population in favor of receiving and supporting Ukrainian refugees (Moise et al., 2024). This gives support to our expectation that the functional logic translates into public opinion. We note the dual functional pressure exerted by refugees: on the one hand it is necessary for the EU to manage refugees as part of the conflict, while on the other costs need to be managed between member states. Given these initial high levels of support and lack of political contestation, we expect respondents to be more in favor of proportional burden-sharing (i.e. each EU member state should accommodate a proportional share of Ukrainian refugees) compared to a policy where refugees need to be accommodated in the country of first entry to the EU (Dublin Regulation).

H2 (direction, refugee policy): On average, for refugee burden-sharing, proportional allocation rather than Dublin Regulation will increase the probability of a political program being chosen.

With regard to a price cap on gas, our expectations follow our functional logic. Negotiating a common price for gas and formulating a common import strategy at the European level should offer higher market leverage than single countries could achieve on their own. However, this may differ based on the bargaining and fiscal capacity of a country (see below in discussion of heterogenous effects). Moreover, energy policy in particular has been the focus of collective EU decision-making since the war began. Energy sanctions on Russia were fiercely debated in European institutions and between member states, resulting in several rounds of sanctions, progressively cutting European markets from Russian fossil fuels. Retaliatory and preemptive actions by Russia to cut off energy supplies likewise contributed to the energy shortage and price hikes which hit European countries in the winter of 2022–2023. Given that such actions were taken at the European level, citizens may demand solutions and cost-sharing at the European level as well. Importantly, for the EU energy policy is an area of dual functional pressure: pressure to ensure a supply of gas in order to cut Russian geopolitical leverage, as well as pressure to maintain unity among member states in the face of

asymmetric costs. We note, therefore, also the high degree of politicization of sanctions and energy policy in countries such as Hungary.

H3 (direction, energy policy): On average, for the energy price cap, a common price compared to individual country negotiation will increase the probability of a political program being chosen.

Turning to the cost of living crisis, we note that it comes in the aftermath of the COVID crisis in which the public opinion showed high levels of cross-national solidarity (Ferrara et al., 2023; Kyriazi et al., 2023; Russo, 2023). Additionally, the NGEU sets a precedent for a European institutional response on solidarity which is fresh in the public's mind. On top of this temporal sequencing between the COVID-19 crisis and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the similarities between these crises are also important. Both crises have been perceived as external shocks affecting EU member states (more or less) symmetrically. In the public discourse both crises are held as responsible for rising inflation, COVID due to disrupting supply chains, and the Russian war in Ukraine being responsible for energy price hikes. Symmetric external shocks are more likely to lead to increased solidarity on the demand side (Ferrara and Kriesi, 2022). In addition, we argue that the Russian threat presents the additional element of a geopolitical struggle with an adversary which also thinks in strategic terms (unlike a pandemic). This additional element exerts a functional pressure for the EU to manage any asymmetry of costs-of-living, even if managing such costs is not directly necessary in the conflict.

H4 (direction, cost of living policy): On average, for cost of living, EU subsidy compared to country-level management of costs will increase the probability of a political program being chosen.

Thus, on our first three factors, we expect respondents to prefer European solutions. We do not expect this to hold for our final factor, military capacity. Following recent empirical evidence (Genschel and Schimmelfennig, 2022), we hypothesize that respondents would prefer to go for increasing national defence capacities, rather than creating new European ones. This is due to the speed at which the crisis is unfolding: it is easier and less costly to strengthen existing institutions than to create new ones. Nonetheless, we note that other recent findings suggest high support for EU-level foreign policy and capacity building (Wang and Moise, 2023). Ultimately foreign and security policy is an area with little EU competency, that is organized intergovernmentally, making it a least-likely case for further integration (Riddervold et al., 2021). Additionally, we argue that both sources of functional pressure are low, as the EU has external security guarantees and does not need to compensate member states in order to maintain unity.

H5 (direction, defense policy): On average, for defense capacity, increases in the national defence budget compared to a common EU defence fund will increase the probability of a political program being chosen.

Expectations—heterogeneous effects

We expect our main hypothesized effects to vary across countries and according to individual ideology and identity. In what follows, we extend the logic of our argument to according to these heterogeneities. Concerning country differences, following previous literature on refugee policy (Kriesi et al., 2024), we expect frontline states (such as Poland and Hungary in our case) to be more in favor of refugee reallocation.² On both energy price caps and cost of living subsidies, we expect to see differences stemming from bargaining power and fiscal capacity. Thus, respondents in countries such as Germany and France, that have both higher bargaining power and higher fiscal capacity should be more in favor of national solutions, while respondents in countries with weaker bargaining power and lower fiscal capacity should find EU solutions to yield higher utility (Beramendi and Stegmueller, 2020; Matthijs and McNamara, 2015; Schelkle, 2017; Walter et al., 2020). France, in addition to having higher fiscal capacity also has lower energy dependence on oil and gas, having a higher share of nuclear power in its energy mix. Lastly, for defense capacity, we expect countries that already have strong military capacity to prefer to invest at the national level (Genschel, 2022; Genschel and Schimmelfennig, 2022). We use two factors to consider whether a country has strong military capacity. The first is military expenditure as a share of GDP. Respondents in countries with higher military spending should prefer to increase national spending rather than contribute to EU-level spending since they might assume that they would be subsidizing other countries. The second is closeness to NATO, and therefore higher preference for NATO rather than EU security guarantees. Thus, respondents in countries like France, Poland, and Hungary, that spend more on the military and, in the case of Poland and Hungary, are closer to NATO, are expected to prefer increasing the national budget. Italy and Germany spend much less on defense and Italians are more skeptical of NATO. Thus we expect that they would prefer EU-level military spending.

H6a: On average, for refugee burden-sharing, respondents in frontline countries (Poland and Hungary) are more likely to choose proportional allocation compared to respondents in other countries.

H6b: On average, for the energy price cap, respondents in countries with higher fiscal capacities (Germany and France) are more likely to choose individual country negotiation compared to respondents in other countries.

H6c: On average, for cost of living, respondents in countries with higher fiscal capacities (e.g. Germany) are more likely to avoid socializing costs and choose country-level management of costs compared to respondents in other countries.

H6d: On average, for defense capacity, respondents in countries with a stronger military (France, Hungary, and Poland) are more likely to choose increases in the national defence budget compared to respondents in other countries.

We also expect preferences for EU-level policy to differ by individual ideology and identity. We expect that for all policies, those on the political right, and especially the far right, will prefer national level policy solutions. For military spending, we know that the right is more in favor of aggressive foreign policy (Wagner et al., 2017), and

at the same time more skeptical of EU level defense policy (Schoen, 2008). Furthermore, we also expect an individuals' perceived identity, as primarily or exclusively national or European, to influence their preference for policy programs at either the EU or the national level. The mechanism is straightforward: those identifying as European are more likely to trust decision-making at the EU level and perceive it as legitimate (Kaina and Karolewski, 2013).

H7 (ideological heterogeneity): On average, respondents from the right of the ideological spectrum and populist voters will prefer national solutions to European solutions, across all policies.

H8 (identity heterogeneity): On average, respondents with stronger national identities and less preference for EU integration will prefer national solutions to European solutions, across all policies.

Data and the experimental design

Design

To analyze the preferences and priorities of citizens towards different policy elements, we employ a conjoint design³ with forced choice (Hainmueller et al., 2014). For the conjoint module in the survey questionnaire, respondents are asked to make a choice between different political programs proposed by anonymous independent politicians (Politician A and Politician B). The program of each politician varies across a series of attributes—policy proposals in our case, each taking on different values. The conjoint itself presents packages varying across four attributes—policy proposals, that is refugees burden-sharing, energy policy, subsidizing rising living cost, and defence policy, closely following the actual debate on policy proposals relevant to our aforementioned hypotheses. Respondents were asked to choose between which of the two hypothetical independent politicians they prefer based on the multi-dimensional policy programs they offer. In total, respondents were offered four binary choice tasks and were, hence, randomly exposed to eight sets of policy programs in total, for each of which we obtain binary choice information (0 = politician not chosen; 1 = politician chosen). The combination of values of dimensions for each proposed program of a politician and the order in which respondents see proposals are randomized.

In the Online appendix, we summarize the attributes and possible values that are the basis of the conjoint set-up.⁴ All attributes have two levels, namely coordinated action at EU level, or uncoordinated at the member state level. The first attribute concerns refugees burden-sharing with the levels being “proportional allocation” and “Dublin regulation.” The second dimension captures energy policy-making with the levels of gas price negotiated EU or national level. The third attribute concerns how to deal with the rising living cost with the levels being “responsibility at the national level” and “burden sharing among member states.” The final, fourth attribute concerns how defence should be organized, distinguishing national, “increase national defense budget,” and EU-level options, “common EU defense fund.” As these scenarios were presented as political programs

Table 2. Conjoint experiment on four attributes.

Attributes	Levels
F1. Refugees	L1. All EU member states, including [COUNTRY], should be required to accommodate a proportional share of Ukrainian refugees. L2. Ukrainian refugees should be accommodated by the country through which they first entered the EU.
F2. Energy	L1. [COUNTRY] should be able to negotiate with gas suppliers the price of gas imports based on its own needs and ability to pay. L2. A common EU gas price and import strategy should be negotiated at the EU level.
F3. Rising costs	L1. [COUNTRY] should be responsible for helping only its own citizens to offset the rising costs of living, through the national budget. L2. All EU member states, including [COUNTRY], should share the burden of offsetting the rising costs of living through the common EU budget.
F4. Defense	L1. [COUNTRY] should increase its national defense budget independently, rather than contribute more to the common EU defense fund. L2. All EU member states, including [COUNTRY] should contribute more to the common EU defense fund, rather than increase their national defense budgets.

coming from hypothetical independent politicians none of the combinations included in the experiment are considered impossible. Table 2 shows all attributes and levels.

Data

The data for this study was collected as part of a survey conducted in five EU countries (Germany, France, Italy, Poland, Hungary) in the framework of SOLID-ERC research project. Interviews were obtained via CAWI methodology using the YouGov proprietary panel in all countries to recruit participants. The interviews were administered between December 14, 2022 and January 4, 2023 on national samples of about 2000 respondents per country, obtained using a quota design based on gender, age, macro-area of residence (NUTS-1), and education. The data collection was concluded upon the successful completion of the percentual balance of the quotas.

Our choice of countries reflects several important heterogeneities in the context of the current crisis and our selected policies. With respect to refugees, we have two countries on the front-line, bordering Ukraine (Poland and Hungary), one of which is also a destination state (Poland) while the other is a transit state (Hungary). Germany, together with Poland, is the largest destination state. Italy and France also represent destination states, with Italy coming out of its experience as a front-line state during the 2015 refugee crisis. Our countries also show important differences in energy dependence on Russia. For instance, at the time our survey was fielded, Hungary relied 100% on Russia to provide this gas, while Italy and Poland by contrast imported less than half of their gas from Russia. In terms of inflation, while Germany and Italy had inflation rates of 7.9 and 8.2%, respectively, in 2022, Hungary and Poland experienced inflation rates of

15.3 and 14.4%. Finally in terms of defence, the countries included here vary in their geopolitical positions and relation to Russia and hence in their vulnerability in the defence domain: Poland is bordering to the conflict zone and has been threatened by Russia; Germany, Italy, France are less proximate to the conflict itself, while Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orban has closer ties to Russia and a pro-Putin stance.

Statistical models

First, in order to understand which aspect of the political program of the politicians is considered relatively more important we will estimate individual-level part-worth utilities for each factor using a hierarchical Bayes (HB) method⁵. We follow theoretical literature of discrete choice modelling (Train, 2009) and recent applications (Allenby and Rossi, 1998; Oana et al., 2021) and adopt Bayesian procedures to estimate the parameters of a mixed logit model where we allow the coefficients to vary across the individuals. This approach combines prior distributions of the parameters with individual-specific choice data to estimate reliable posterior distributions for each individual. The part-worth utilities demonstrate the relative importance of each attribute, showing its importance relative to other attributes. The relative importance measure quantifies how heavily a particular attribute weighed on respondents' decision-making when choosing between the political program profiles in the conjoint experiment. We estimate this using part-worth utilities derived from the hierarchical Bayes model for each individual respondent's choices. A higher relative importance for an attribute indicates that respondents focused more on that policy dimension and it played a bigger role in determining their choice of program. The individual-level part-worth utility distributions show there is heterogeneity in preferences, but overall the relative importance measures allow us to gauge which specific policy areas were most salient and consequential versus which carried less weight in driving respondents' preferences between the hypothetical program bundles. In other words, the importance measure quantifies whether and how much a particular attribute (as compared to the other attributes) was the deciding factor when choosing between the different political programs of the politicians.

Second, our main goal is to estimate what policy of political programs proposed by a politicians causally increases or decreases the appeal of that politician, when varied independently of the other policy options included in the design. We will use the average marginal component effect (AMCE) introduced by Hainmueller et al. (2014). Additionally, conditional AMCEs will be used to assess the average effects of policy options in the vignette conditional on respondents' characteristics or attitudes measured in the survey, following the hypotheses below. We will present the results for conditional AMCEs with each grouping factor(s) separate as the other confounding variables are controlled by randomization which makes the groups probabilistically equal with respect to these potential confounding variables.

Results

We start with the overall relative importance of the four policy areas. As Table 3 shows, people consider the immigration burden-sharing as the most important feature, followed

Table 3. Relative importance of attributes (all respondents).

	Relative importance
Rising cost	3.7% [0.5%, 8.1%]
Energy	5.0% [0.9%, 9.2%]
Defence	6.6% [2.3%, 10.6%]
Immigration	84.6% [78.2%, 91.0%]

Note: 90% credible interval in parentheses.

by defence, and then energy policy.⁶ How to deal with rising living costs turns out to be the least important feature. This goes against our salience expectations in H1. Figure 1 shows the AMCEs for each level of each of our factors on political candidate choice, which confirms the finding of the HB analysis. While differences are marginal in most of the policy domains included, the results clearly point to a very strong effect of the immigration factor. Having a policy that proposes refugees to be proportionally distributed across EU member states increases with 12.51 percentage points the probability of that political candidate being chosen. While going against H1 in terms of factor importance, this strong effect strongly supports H2: respondents are indeed more in favor of burden-sharing in stark contrast to the 2015 refugee crisis dynamics. In terms of the other policy areas, respondents do not seem to have on average a significant preference for energy policy among the ones given, they seem to slightly prefer country level management of costs compared to EU subsidies for facing the cost of living (against H4), and they seem to slightly prefer a common EU defence fund to increases in the national defence budget (against H5).

In the following we turn to the potential effect heterogeneity. We start with cross-country difference. Table 4 shows the relative importance of the four policy areas in the five countries. The results reveal some interesting patterns. Refugee burden-sharing emerged as the most important policy feature in all five countries, with its relative importance ranging from 46.6% in Hungary to 64.2% in Poland. This indicates a strong concern across all countries about the distribution of responsibilities and costs associated with refugees. The second most important policy feature varied by country. In France, the rising cost of living was the second most important feature, accounting for 31.9% of the relative importance. This was followed by defence (12.8%) and energy policy (5.4%). In contrast, in Germany, the rising cost of living and defence were of nearly equal importance, accounting for 22.6% and 14.9% of the relative importance, respectively. Energy policy was the least important feature in Germany, with a relative importance of 7.5%. In Italy, the rising cost of living was the least important policy feature, accounting for only 17.0% of the relative importance. Energy policy and defence were of nearly equal importance, accounting for 17.5% and 17.1% of the relative importance, respectively.

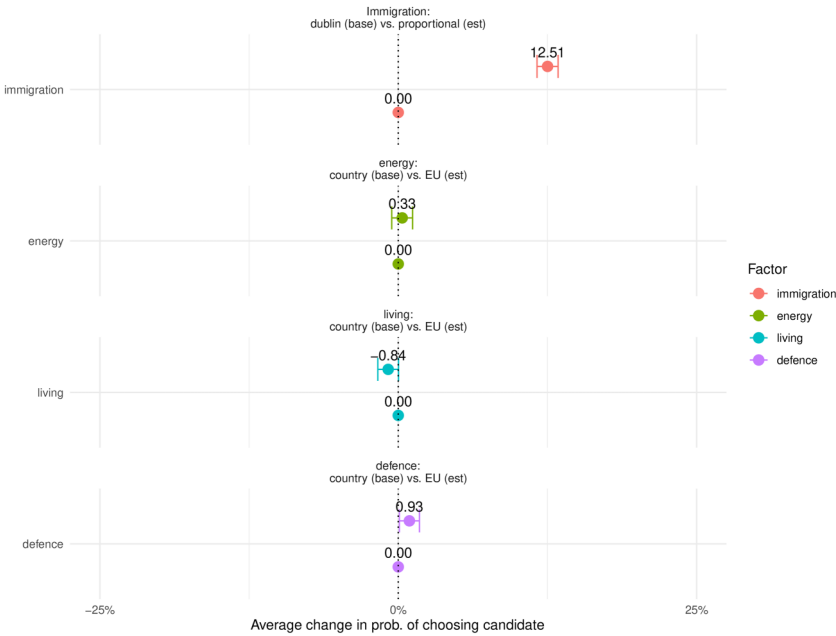


Figure 1. Main results.

Table 4. Relative importance of attributes (by country).

	Relative importance				
	France	Germany	Italy	Hungary	Poland
Rising cost	31.9% [24.5%, 39.0%]	22.6% [16.7%, 28.7%]	17.0% [13.2%, 20.7%]	21.2% [11.3%, 30.8%]	16.9% [11.5%, 21.7%]
Energy	5.4% [0.6%, 12.7%]	7.5% [1.2%, 14.0%]	17.5% [14.0%, 21.0%]	19.5% [8.3%, 29.8%]	3.9% [0.4%, 9.1%]
Defence	12.8% [5.0%, 19.7%]	14.9% [8.5%, 20.7%]	17.1% [13.4%, 20.1%]	12.8% [2.9%, 22.3%]	14.9% [9.6%, 19.9%]
Immigration	49.9% [42.0%, 57.9%]	55.0% [47.6%, 63.0%]	48.3% [44.2%, 52.7%]	46.6% [36.3%, 58.6%]	64.2% [57.7%, 71.0%]

Note: 90% credible interval in parentheses.

In Hungary, energy policy was the second most important feature, accounting for 19.5% of the relative importance, followed by the rising cost of living (21.2%) and defence (12.8%). In Poland, the rising cost of living was the second most important feature, accounting for 16.9% of the relative importance. This was followed by defence (14.9%) and energy policy (3.9%). In summary, while refugee burden-sharing was consistently the most

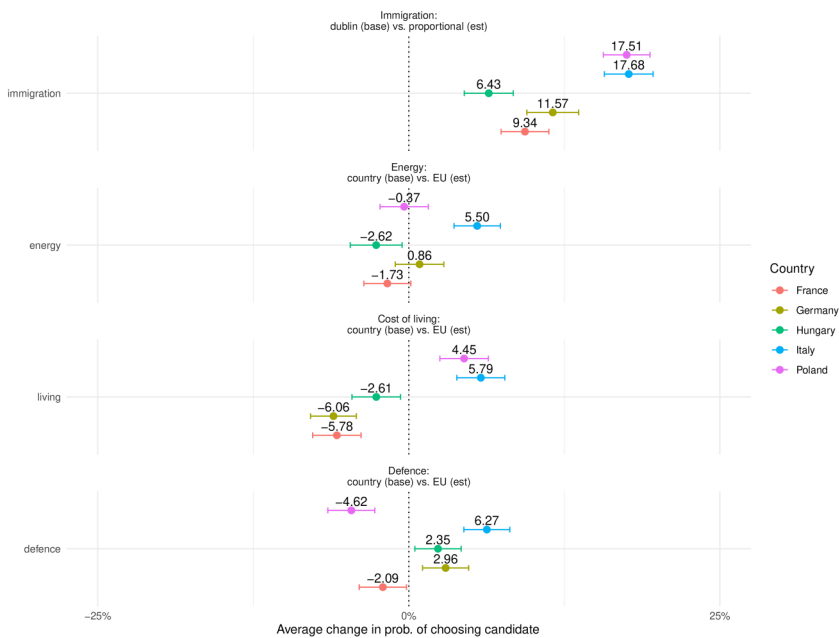


Figure 2. Country heterogeneity.

important policy feature across all countries, the relative importance of the other policy features varied significantly by country. This suggests that policy preferences are influenced by a complex interplay of national contexts and issues.

We then explore effect heterogeneity by analyzing the average effects of candidate policy features conditional on respondents' characteristics. Figure 2 displays the conditional AMCEs by the country of respondents. In terms of the first feature, immigration policy, we can see that respondents in all countries are strongly in favor of proportional allocation. While Poland, as a frontline state is the country where respondents are most in favor, Hungary has the smaller positive effect in favor of re-allocation. The outlier nature of Hungary in what regards immigration, while going against H6a, is less surprising given Orban's strong anti-immigration discourse from the 2015 refugee crisis onward. This was compounded during the war with his anti-Ukrainian discourse. Nonetheless, Hungarians are still supportive of re-allocation. Notably, France and Italy, which similarly to Hungary have a very low refugee burden (see the Online appendix), are also strongly supportive. In terms of energy policy, we can see that respondents in the country with the highest fiscal capacity in our sample, Germany, are mostly indifferent on the matter of a European price cap or individual country negotiations. By contrast, it is again Hungary that stands out as the only country where respondents are significantly less in favor of a European price cap, though with a small effect size of 2.6 percentage points reduction in the probability of choosing a candidate with this political program. This goes against H6b. When it comes to the cost of living crisis, H6c expecting that respondents in

Table 5. Relative importance of attributes (by ideology).

	Relative importance		
	Left	Center	Right
Rising cost	19.3% [16.3%, 22.2%]	1.8% [0.2%, 7.1%]	24.6% [19.9%, 29.3%]
Energy	18.2% [15.4%, 21.1%]	12.3% [6.8%, 17.0%]	18.8% [14.1%, 23.6%]
Defence	22.2% [19.2%, 25.1%]	15.3% [10.2%, 19.6%]	30.3% [25.6%, 35.0%]
Immigration	40.3% [37.1%, 43.7%]	70.6% [63.8%, 76.4%]	26.3% [21.3%, 31.2%]

Note: 90% credible interval in parentheses.

countries with higher fiscal capacities (Germany) are more likely to choose country-level management of costs is supported as respondents in Germany are 6% more likely to choose a candidate that supports a country-level management policy, with this being the largest effect among our countries of interest. Finally, regarding defence it is only Polish respondents that prefer a country-level increase in defence capacities. This partly supports H6d, as Poland has a strong army in terms of GDP expenditure (5th in the EU and highest out of our selected countries).

When it comes to ideological divide, we see a stronger contrast between ideological groups. According to the results in Table 5, refugee burden-sharing again emerged as the most important policy feature across all ideological groups, but its relative importance varied significantly. For the center group, refugee policy was overwhelmingly the most important feature, accounting for over two-thirds of the relative importance. This suggests a strong concern about refugee issues among centrist respondents. In contrast, for the left and right groups, while refugee policy was still the most important feature, its relative importance was notably lower. The second most important policy feature varied by ideological group. For the left group, defence was the second most important feature, followed closely by energy policy and then rising living costs. This indicates a relatively balanced concern across these three policy areas among left-leaning respondents. For the right group, defence was the second most important feature, accounting for just over a third of the relative importance. This was followed by rising living costs and then energy policy. In the center group, the other three policy features were far less important than immigration. Energy policy was the second most important feature, but it accounted for only a small fraction of the relative importance. This was followed by defence and then rising living costs.

Figure 3 presents results by ideological groups. We see here that H7 is strongly supported when it comes to energy policy, the management of the cost of living crisis, and defence policy. In all these three policy domains respondents on the right significantly prefer solutions at the national level compared to solutions at the EU level. EU solutions decrease the probability of choosing a politician with such a program by 4.7 to 8.3

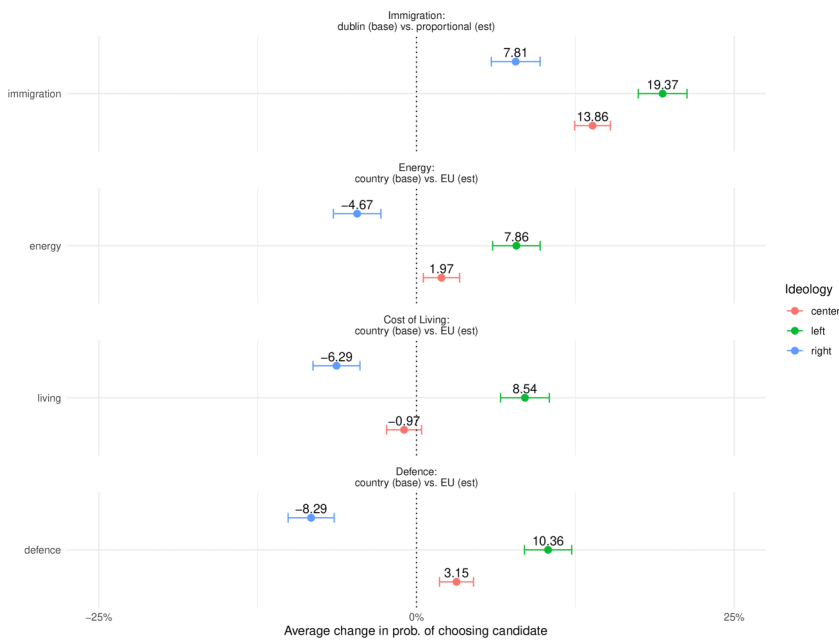


Figure 3. Heterogeneity in terms of ideology.

percentage points within the rightist group. We note that energy policy has the smaller negative effect of the three, and therefore the lowest dissensus among the right-wing. By contrast, politicians proposing European policy solutions increase the appeal of candidates among the leftist group. The only exception to H7 comes within the immigration policy domain where even respondents on the right prefer on average candidates supporting a proportional allocation of refugees, but less so that respondents on the left and center of the ideological spectrum. Importantly, even when we further break up the right-wing group and consider the far right, we still see support for a European solution to refugees.⁷ This result varies strongly by country (see Online appendix). The results indicate that while rightist respondents in Italy, as a frontline state in the 2015 refugee crisis, and Poland, currently the frontline state receiving the most Ukrainian refugees, are significantly in favor of resettlement, rightist respondents in France, Germany, and Hungary are indifferent between the two solutions.

Finally, we turn to how identity divides people’s preference. Again, we look at the relative importance of policy features among identity groups. Table 6 reveals a striking identity divide. For those who identify as European only, refugee burden-sharing was the most important policy feature, followed by energy policy, defence, and rising living costs. This suggests a strong concern about refugee and energy issues among this group. For those who identify as firstly European and then national, refugee policy was also the most important feature, but its relative importance was higher than in the European only group. This was followed by rising living costs, defence, and energy

Table 6. Relative importance of attributes (by identity).

	Relative importance			
	EU only	EU&Nat.	Nat.&EU	Nat. only
Rising cost	16.2% [8.4%, 23.5%]	18.2% [14.7%, 21.7%]	2.8% [0.3%, 7.7%]	39.0% [34.7%, 43.5%]
Energy	27.9% [20.5%, 35.4%]	19.4% [16.0%, 22.7%]	5.3% [0.8%, 10.1%]	23.9% [19.8%, 28.0%]
Defence	21.0% [14.0%, 27.8%]	20.5% [17.0%, 23.8%]	10.9% [5.8%, 15.4%]	27.6% [23.6%, 31.6%]
Immigration	34.8% [27.5%, 42.5%]	41.9% [38.1%, 45.8%]	81.0% [74.0%, 87.4%]	9.6% [4.5%, 14.1%]

Note: 90% credible interval in parentheses.

policy. For those who identify as firstly national and then European, refugee policy was overwhelmingly the most important feature, accounting for a significant majority of the relative importance. This was followed by defence, energy policy, and rising living costs. This suggests a strong concern about refugees issues among this group, with other policy features being far less important. For those who identify as national only, rising living costs was the most important feature, followed by defence, energy policy, and immigration. This indicates a strong concern about economic and defence issues among this group, with refugees being far less important. In order to test H8, we look at conditional AMCEs by respondents' identity in Figure 4. Similar to the results regarding ideology, we can see that respondents with national identity only prefer national solutions to European solutions, across all policies with the exception of immigration, lending only partial support to H8. Again, as in the case of ideology, this result masks important country heterogeneity (see the Online appendix) as respondents with exclusive national identities in France, Germany, and Hungary are at most indifferent on average between these policy options.

In summary, the results reveal several key findings. Contrary to expectations, refugee burden-sharing emerged as the most salient policy issue driving respondents' choices across all countries. Strong support for proportional allocation of Ukrainian refugees at the EU level cuts across ideological and identity divides, suggesting widespread solidarity. For other policies like energy, cost of living, and defense, the results showed more heterogeneity. Right-wing and exclusively national identity respondents significantly preferred national-level solutions over EU policies in these areas. Notably, energy policy shows less dissensus, both ideologically, and country-wise, compared to defence and cost-of-living. There were also notable country differences, with respondents in higher fiscal capacity states like Germany favoring national approaches to managing costs, while lower capacity states preferred EU-level solutions. Overall, the refugee issue, and to a lesser degree energy policy, stand out as areas of consensus for potential further EU integration, while defence and cost-of-living face more contentious politics among different national and ideological groups.

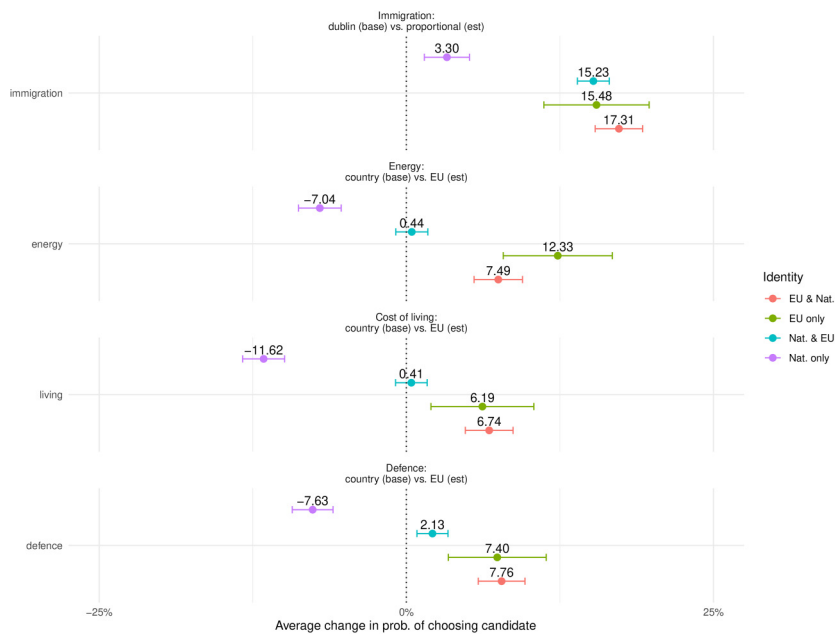


Figure 4. Heterogeneity in terms of identity.

Discussion

Whether citizens act as push factors for EU and national leaders to take action, or as an enabling factor for decisions that leaders would take anyway, our results support the idea that the EU is inside a window of opportunity for further polity formation, at least on the policy issues that we study. When choosing between political programs, voters are motivated by the solidarity-side of the external threat pressures. The shared experience of EU involvement in the conflict seems to have brought public opinion to new levels of solidarity, with a majority of respondents in all countries, and irrespective of ideological or identity divides, supporting sharing the burden of supporting refugees at the EU level. Other policy areas are less unanimous: respondents are either divided along the lines of territorial or functional (ideology and identity) cleavages. Nonetheless, even in those cases, we do not see a “hard dissensus,” as centrists and those with mixed identity still prefer European solutions, while the right and nationalists have weaker preferences for national policy than the left and those with EU-identity have for EU solutions, in particular for energy policy.

We find moderate support for our main argument that policy preferences vary according to the type of pressure faced by the EU in this particular crisis: a direct pressure stemming from the immediate challenge presented by each policy, and an indirect pressure of maintaining unity among member states (summarized in Table 1). As expected, we find the highest support for refugee and energy policy. Support for refugees cuts across

countries, including countries with very low number of refugees both in absolute terms and relative to the population (France, Hungary, and Italy; see the Online appendix), as well as ideological groups. Support for energy policy is less universal, but we see that it has less dissensus and is less polarized than defence and cost of living. Only Hungary has small negative skew on energy (Figure 2), while the right-wing is least negative about energy, compared to the other two policy areas (Figure 3). This corroborates findings from Oana et al. (2025), who find broad support for energy sanctions across ideological groups (although with some ideological differences), with little country heterogeneity. We see that defense is the most polarized, with the right-wing showing the most resistance, while left-wing has the second highest support (after refugees). Mader et al. (2024) suggest a further reason to be pessimistic regarding defense, as they show that support for common defence policies drops once the issue is politicized and costs are mentioned.

While we cannot explore the exact mechanism running from functional pressures to public opinion, we propose three that can be tested in future studies: (a) individuals receive direct information from the media regarding the dynamics of the war and the involvement of the EU and their own country; (b) EU citizens are cued by their national elites who are constrained by the functional logics; and (c) general solidarity as citizens expect the EU to compensate on policy areas where there is pressure.

Does this mean that the external threat will drive further polity centralization, as the “bellicist” literature suggests (Kelemen and McNamara, 2021)? Here we are more cautious. As expected, the military policy dimension showed more divided results. It weighed less heavily in respondents’ choices in all countries compared to other policies. However, we saw that right-wing individuals gave it the greatest relative weight in their decisions, which then fall on the national spending side. As we have argued above, we believe it unlikely that EU member states will build common capacity in the military domain at the expense of the national (or NATO) level. Nonetheless, our results suggest that there is room for maneuver and that the previously one-sided polity formation in the EU may now become more mixed between different policies. The EU may yet build further capacity, particularly of the type that involves *coordination mechanisms* at the EU level.

Conclusion

In times of crisis, the politics surrounding the formation of a democratic polity, however complex it may be, are driven by salient issues. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has made many issues salient or more salient than before, therefore activating certain demands for polity formation that will shape the European Union in the short and medium run. We identified several such salient issues: defence, energy, refugees, and cost of living. Our expectations about views on EU centralization of these policies were formed by the dual functionalist logic that EU faces in the conflict.

In contrast with other external shocks, such as COVID, the EU is facing a geopolitical adversary with strategic behavior in this crisis. Having taken a clear side in the conflict (McNamara and Kelemen, 2022), and having been indirectly under attack by Russia

(through energy policy), several vulnerabilities of the EU polity were pressured. The first, direct, functionalist logic meant that certain policy areas were directly relevant for the EU's strategy in the conflict in order to achieve its geopolitical goals. The second, indirect, functionalist logic meant that the EU needed to ensure public support within member states and avoid territorial conflict between member states, in order to maintain unity. Thus, the EU needs to ensure burden sharing for refugees, energy, and cost-of-living. Defence policy faces the fewest functional pressures since capacity exists at the national and NATO level (Genschel, 2022). We posit that these pressures translate into public support for centralizing specific policies. We tested these expectations using a conjoint design consisting of a forced choice study fielded in December 2022.

Our initial expectations were that the most salient issues would be the cost of living issue followed by energy policy, defense, and lastly refugees. Inflation has reached levels not seen for the last forty-five years (see the Online appendix) while energy prices put pressure on household budgets. Finally, defense should have been quite salient given the geopolitical implications of the Russian invasion in Ukraine for Europe, especially for Eastern European state. However, policies on refugees took the saliency crown, with respondents supporting a proportional distribution of Ukrainian refugees. A common EU refugee policy is thus more supported than a common EU energy policy, a common EU army or a burden sharing mechanism for the cost of living crisis.

Our study has several implications for the politics of EU polity formation in times of crises. For one thing, we point to a discrepancy between what the supply side and the media sphere may suggest is driving crisis politics, and what is really salient to European respondents. As Sojka et al. (2025) and Wang and Altiparmakis (2025) suggest, by showing that pro-European parties increase their rhetoric while far-right and euro-skeptic parties tone down their discourse on the war, this may be a pivotal moment where elites can harness the consensus on the demand side. However, there is a potential danger that policymakers are pushing European integration where it matters less for citizens while leaving most salient issues overlooked. Such a lack of "integration congruence" can be dangerous for policy legitimacy and long term polity formation. For another, the fact that refugee policy is the most salient helps us to qualify the story according to which polities are centralized through external threats. The policy of relocating refugees proportionally to a country's population is not conducive to a *centralized polity* but to polity that is ultimately a *coordination mechanism* that helps its constituent members shoulder crisis burdens in a common manner.

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Authors' contribution

The authors contributed equally to the article.

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Data availability statement

The data and replication code are available as part of the Supplementary Material at the DOI of the article.

Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. The EU does have a “mutual defense clause” in article 42(7) first invoked by French President Sarkozy after the November 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris. However, the clause commits member states to “aid and assistance” and does not constitute a true mutual defense clause, such as NATO’s article V (Mills, 2015).
2. See the Online appendix for a comparison of the relative and absolute refugee burden for the countries in our study.
3. We preregistered our study. Our pre-analysis plan can be downloaded from the following link: <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/api/access/datafile/6816987>
4. An example of a conjoint setting as received by the respondents can be found in the Online appendix.
5. The relative importance (RI) of each attribute is calculated based on the following formula:

$$RI_i = \frac{\hat{\beta}_i \times (Max_{level_i} - Min_{level_i})}{\sum_{i=1}^J \hat{\beta}_i \times (Max_{level_i} - Min_{level_i})}$$

where $\hat{\beta}_i$ indicates the estimate of attribute i and $Max_{level_i} - Min_{level_i}$ means the difference between the maximum and the minimum levels of attribute i . All attributes are effect-coded, -1 vs. 1 , for levels.

6. The Online appendix shows the part-worth utility for each policy area.
7. See the Online appendix.

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