

Foreign threats to the nation and attitudes towards European security and defence integration: Differentiated responses within and across EU member states

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Abstract

The European Union faces serious international challenges that threaten the security of its member states. Are these threats a catalyst or obstacle for European integration in the defence and security domain? This paper studies this question at the public level. Theorizing the implications of threat perceptions yields rivalling hypotheses, suggesting that threats might have differential effects on different groups of citizens and could lead to both convergence and divergence of public opinion. Evidence from four European countries (France, Germany, Italy, UK) suggests that in three of these countries—Italy being the exception—perceptions of foreign threats induce EU sceptics to reconsider their opposition to further integration in the defence and security and defence domain. Threat perceptions tend to have a uniting effect in these countries, boosting support for European security and defence integration overall. The deviating case of Italy points to complexities in these relationships that are not yet understood.

Keywords

Threat perceptions; European security and defence integration; Euroscepticism; neo-functionalism; post-functionalism

Introduction

Several recent crises have shaken the European Union and its member states. From a neo-functionalist perspective, they have created functional pressures that may catalyse further integration. Accordingly, the past crises exposed the limited problem-solving capabilities of the EU and its member states. The threat of similar future crises creates the incentives needed for policy makers to overcome barriers of integration (see, e.g., Tosun et al. 2014; Schimmelpfennig 2014, Niemann & Ioannou 2015, who make these points with respect to the 2007 economic and financial crisis). Recent events also show, of course, that crises do not only create calls for European solutions but also opposition to increased European integration and support for more national-level decision making. Well in line with post-functionalist accounts of European integration, anti-EU rhetoric by both mainstream and fringe political parties has blossomed during the past crises, potentially constraining the ability of pro-EU governments to shape European integration and hence counteracting neo-functionalist pressures.

In the defence and security domain, there have been several events in recent years that qualify as generating pressures for more unification—or at least the perception of such pressures. While the crises in this domain—first and foremost the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014—were less fundamental than the recent economic, migration, or pandemic crises, they have sufficed to show that the European capability to respond to international threats is limited. The same is true for the capabilities of even its largest member states. In an increasingly two-polar international system dominated by China and the United States, in which the American and European interests seem to diverge, European integration might be the only way to salvage the influence of the old continent in the world. Consequently, many policy-makers, experts, and European Union officials argue that further integration in this domain would be the rational response: While each EU member is too small to handle global challenges effectively on its own, there is strength in numbers and in acting in unison (Riekeles 2015). In the words of the

European commission (2020), “[t]his is why at [the] European level we need to build the tools, infrastructure and environment in which national authorities can and do work together effectively to tackle shared challenges.”¹

Not everyone perceives or accepts these pressures for unification in the defence and security domain, of course, and even those who do might not consider them (equally) relevant when considering the question of more or less integration in the security and defence domain. As Bergmann points out (2019: 1254), scholars have raised strong doubts concerning the application of neo-functionalist logics in the area of ‘high politics’ (Hoffmann 1966: 882; cf. Niemann and Speyer 2018: 24). Indeed, many member states have so far been reluctant to relinquish control of one of the core features of state sovereignty. A case in point is Pesco, which was heralded as the wakening call of the ‘sleeping beauty’ of European integration, but even in the face of recent international turmoil has failed to deliver a substantial increase in security and defence integration.

As there are different potential reactions to crises and perceptions of international threat for integration preferences, the question is: which perspective is more appropriate? Do threats create a desire for European policy-making or a turn towards national solutions? Do they unify or divide? This paper contributes to answering these questions by studying how citizens’ perceptions of international threats are associated with preferences for European integration in the foreign and security domain. We ascertain whether there is a general association between threats and preferences, and look at variation of this association both within EU member states²

¹ https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/security-union-strategy_en

² We focus on two individual-level factors that might influence citizen responses to perceived threats. One is general attitudes toward the European Union and Europe. The question here is whether threat perceptions drive these groups farther apart or unites them. Second, political sophistication seems like another important factor to account for, as sophistication might influence how individuals think about this topic and what information they

and between member states. While the evidence presented here stems from cross-sectional data analysis, which impedes strong causal interpretations, the differentiated analysis nonetheless allows first tentative conclusions about whether perceptions of threat polarize or unite public opinion in this particular policy domain at the public level.

Analysing survey data collected in four large EU members (France, Germany, UK, and Italy) in the summer of 2019, we show that perceptions of international threat are associated with an increased willingness to cooperate at the European level in the defence and security domain. This association is present in all countries but Italy and mainly driven by EU opponents. Among French, German, and British EU opponents, we find that those who do not perceive international threats also oppose integration in the foreign and security domain, while those who do perceive such threats are much more positive. In fact, they hold similar views on this issue as general EU supporters do, whose attitudes do not vary with threat perceptions. This attitude pattern fits with a neo-functionalist account of attitude formation, where citizens react to perceived problem pressures with an increased taste for European integration, hoping to increase capabilities of handling large-scale foreign threats to the nation.

Theoretical analysis

Our core question asks about the implications that perceptions of international threats to national security have on public attitudes towards European integration (in the defence and security domain). Threat perceptions are understood here as beliefs that something (or someone or some group) challenges the national goal attainment or well-being (cf. Riek et al. 2006).

have available. For example, reasoning about functional pressures and how European integration might resolve them is not trivial, implying that the probability of this reasoning occurring might increase with political sophistication.

While there is a gap in theorizing with respect to this specific question, there are several relevant literatures that speak to it.

One strand of prior research focuses on the implications of threat perceptions for the cooperation between groups. As Conrad and colleagues (2018) summarize, individuals often react with feelings of distrust, hostility, and intolerance towards outgroups they perceive as threatening (Merolla et al. 2009, Sniderman 1975; Stouffer 1955; Sullivan et al. 1985, 1982), with greater favouritism towards the ingroup (Tajfel et al. 1971; Tajfel 1982; Tajfel and Turner 1979), and with an increased willingness to cooperate with ingroup members (Schaub 2017). At the same time, many scholars argue that the influence of threat perceptions on the willingness to cooperate is not the same for everyone but conditional on individual-level characteristics including personality, and political attitudes (Marcus et al. 1995), ethnocentrism (Kam and Kinder 2007), authoritarianism (Hetherington and Suhay 2011), and political party affiliation (Malhotra and Popp 2012). Hence, the effect of threat perceptions may not be uniform across the population but move individuals in different directions.³

Since this research focuses on the question how threat perceptions influence the cooperation with the outgroup that is perceived as threatening, it is not directly applicable to the question at hand—here we are interested in how perceiving a threatening outgroup is linked to the willingness to cooperate with third parties—other EU member states. This research is nonetheless valuable for our purposes, as it suggests that the definition of in- and out-groups

³ A more fundamental source of variation, which we do not consider here, is that the perception of threat itself is not uniform but dependent on individual characteristics. Citizens might exhibit different levels of threat perception in a given situation simply because their level of information varies. More fundamentally, people value—and fear—different things to different degrees, and may hence feel threatened by a given phenomenon to different degrees even if they have the same level of information. While some citizens value cultural homogeneity and hence feel threatened by immigration, for example, others value cultural heterogeneity and thus perceive no threat from immigration. Similarly, value priorities vary between individuals. Even if certain things are valued by everyone—life, freedom, and prosperity come to mind—people will navigate trade-off situations differently if their value priorities differ. In addition, even if the level of information and the things they value are the same, citizens may still react differently to the same stimulus because of trait-like differences in sensitivity.

might play a crucial role for cooperation attitudes in the European context. Accordingly, people who identify with both nation and Europe may exhibit increased cooperation at the EU level as the natural response because they define Europe as a relevant ingroup—even if the initial threat is perceived as directed towards the nation. People with an exclusive national identity, in contrast, may show an increased opposition to European integration in this domain when perceiving an external threat to the nation.

A similar response pattern may be expected when considering people's attitudes toward the European Union. Individuals who perceive foreign threats to the nation might be less supportive of European security and defence integration if they feel negatively toward the EU in general, while the opposite may hold for people who feel threatened but are positively predisposed toward the EU. Perceptions of threat might exponentiate the discomfort of having to cooperate in a disliked setting among EU opponents, while cooperation in this setting may be a source of comfort for EU supporters with high levels of threat perceptions.

Another literature starts from the notion that humans react to threats by trying to remove it (Nguyen/Ryan 2008). Following this line of thought, the crucial question for our research problem is whether people consider European integration in the defence and security domain as an effective tool to remove the threat. The functionalist logic sketched in the introduction suggests that this might be so. Accordingly, the perception of international threats creates and/or activates the belief that European cooperation is effective to address these threats. As these functionalist considerations are independent of general attitudes toward the EU—which might have been formed based on expressive rather than instrumental considerations (see below)—, they might induce EU opponents to become more sympathetic toward European security and defence integration as their level of threat perception increases. This thought process might be particularly likely to occur among political sophisticates. It is not easy to think through the implications of the crises and long-term developments of the international system and arrive at

the conclusion that European integration in the defence and security domain might be a sensible solution to the problem.

From yet another perspective, considerations about the effectiveness of European integration in the defence and security domain are likely determined by other attitudes. Against the backdrop of theories of motivated reasoning (Redlawsk 2002), for example, general attitudes toward the EU should be expected to colour considerations of effectiveness. EU opposition would then be accompanied by the belief that external threats just cannot be addressed effectively at the European level, while EU supporters might consider European cooperation to be a good way to address international problems. To complicate matters further, prior research suggests that many citizens do not look at the EU from a functionalist angle but rather consider it as an expression of their identity (Hooghe & Marks 2009). Perceptions of problem pressures do not feature in this account of attitude formation. This literature may be reconciled with the previous discussion, however, when considering who relies under what circumstances on which motive. A core finding from the decision-making literature is that the relevance of instrumental considerations varies with (perceptions of) how much is at stake (Diekmann & Preisendörfer 2003). If we understand the perception of threat as the perception that much is at stake, it follows that people who perceive high levels of threat rely on instrumental attitude formation towards the issue of European defence and security integration. People who do not feel threatened, in contrast, rely on expressive considerations. The affective intelligence literature (Marcus, Neumann & MacKuen 2000) argues similarly, namely that threats may increase attention to the subject matter and trigger more careful, instrumental reasoning about policy issues.⁴

⁴ Other psychological research suggests, however, that threat perceptions may induce a cognitive shutdown. Accordingly, perceptions of threat lead to simplified information processing, including an increased reliance on heuristics and the inability to differentiate (e.g., Trawalter et al. 2009).

Hypotheses

The preceding discussion implies two rivalling hypotheses with contradictory expectations how EU opponents react to the perceptions of international threats. From one point of view, reactions to international threats are strongly coloured by prior attitudes and identities, essentially increasing a polarization between citizens who support the European integration project and those who reject it. For the sake of brevity, at this point we generalize from the distinction between EU supporters and opponents on the one hand and people with different identity constellations on the other, and propose the following:⁵

Hypothesis 1: The preference for European policy-making increases with threat perceptions among Europhiles and decreases among Europhobes.

The alternative hypothesis draws on a functionalist logic. Accordingly, threat perceptions create and/or activate the belief that European integration is an effective way to deal with international threats. These instrumental considerations may override expressive motives and convince EU opponents to support integration in this policy domain. This logic implies that EU supporters will not differ in their attitudes depending on their level of perceived threat, as they should be generally supportive of further integration.

Hypothesis 2: The preference for European policy-making increases with threat perceptions among Europhobes. The preference is high among Europhiles irrespective of perceived threat.

Furthermore, since it might take some level of political sophistication to follow the functionalist logic, not all EU opponents might react to perceived international threats in the way specified

⁵ Empirically, we report findings for both—EU attitudes and identities. See the appendix for results on attachment to Europe as the interaction variable.

in Hypothesis 2. Rather, this might be limited to those who are able and/or willing to engage in these thought processes. Hence, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypotheses 3: Politically sophisticated EU opponents in particular should react as described in Hypothesis 2.

Data, Measures, and Methods

We ran two online surveys in the four largest EU member states in August/September 2019 to test our hypotheses. The survey in France, Germany and Great-Britain was implemented with Yougov, whereas the survey in Italy was conducted using the GfK panel due to technical reasons. In total, we surveyed 7,788 respondents (FR: 1,866; GE: 1,899; GB: 1,976; IT: 2,047).

We measure attitudes toward European security and defence integration with an item focussing on the preferred level of security and defence integration. Specifically, respondents were asked “how integrated would you like countries in the EU to be when it comes to defence and security matters?” (1 “Extremely integrated” – 6 “Not at all integrated”).

Perceptions of international threats to national security were measured using three items, tapping into 1.) International terrorism, 2.) Russia's territorial ambitions, and 3.) cyber-attacks on [country]'s computer networks. Respondents indicated the degree to which they saw these as threats to national security using a 7-point scale (1 “No threat at all” – 7 “Critical threat”). The three potential sources of threat are generally considered by European and national political actors, pundits, and experts to be core threats facing Europe today. The inter-item correlation is substantial in all countries ($r=.27$ or higher) and factor analysis confirms that the items capture

a cross-nationally equivalent latent international threat dimension.⁶ We computed a simple additive index from these items.

Table 1: Scaling of threat items

	Overall	France	Germany	UK	Italy
International terrorism	.54	.51	.53	.55	.59
Russia's territorial ambitions	.54	.55	.48	.56	.51
Cyber-attacks on [country]'s computer networks	.63	.60	.56	.60	.68

Note: Reported are EFA factor loadings (Promax rotation).

All variables were rescaled to range from 0-1 to facilitate the interpretation of the findings. Additionally, we control for political knowledge, creating an index of the answers on six factual knowledge questions about domestic and foreign politics, age, gender and education.

We analyse the four countries separately and are hence maximally transparent about potential inter-country variation in patterns. Note that we have not proposed hypotheses with respect to country differences in the attitude patterns. The argument forwarded focuses on the individual level and should, *ceteris paribus*, be present in all countries. Since empirically all else is never equal, however, it would not be surprising to find contextual variation in the way people think about EU integration and the degree to which threat perceptions matter in this process.⁷ But that does not imply that we should construct comparative hypotheses where prior theorizing is weak and, more importantly, the characterization of the boundary conditions difficult. Instead, we will treat the fact that we have data from four countries as an instrument to explore how

⁶ See the appendix. TBA

⁷ In a country like the UK, for example, European integration is a highly symbolic issues and public opinion polarised. Perceptions of international threat may not matter there, because attitudes toward the specific domain of defence and security integration are completely predetermined by symbolic EU attitudes. As another example, consider a situation in which national elites—Europhiles and Europhobes alike—are highly sceptical about the particular effectiveness of European security and defence integration. Even if threat perceptions matter for citizens in this country, they may not induce them to support more European cooperation in this domain because they do not see such a policy as very effective.

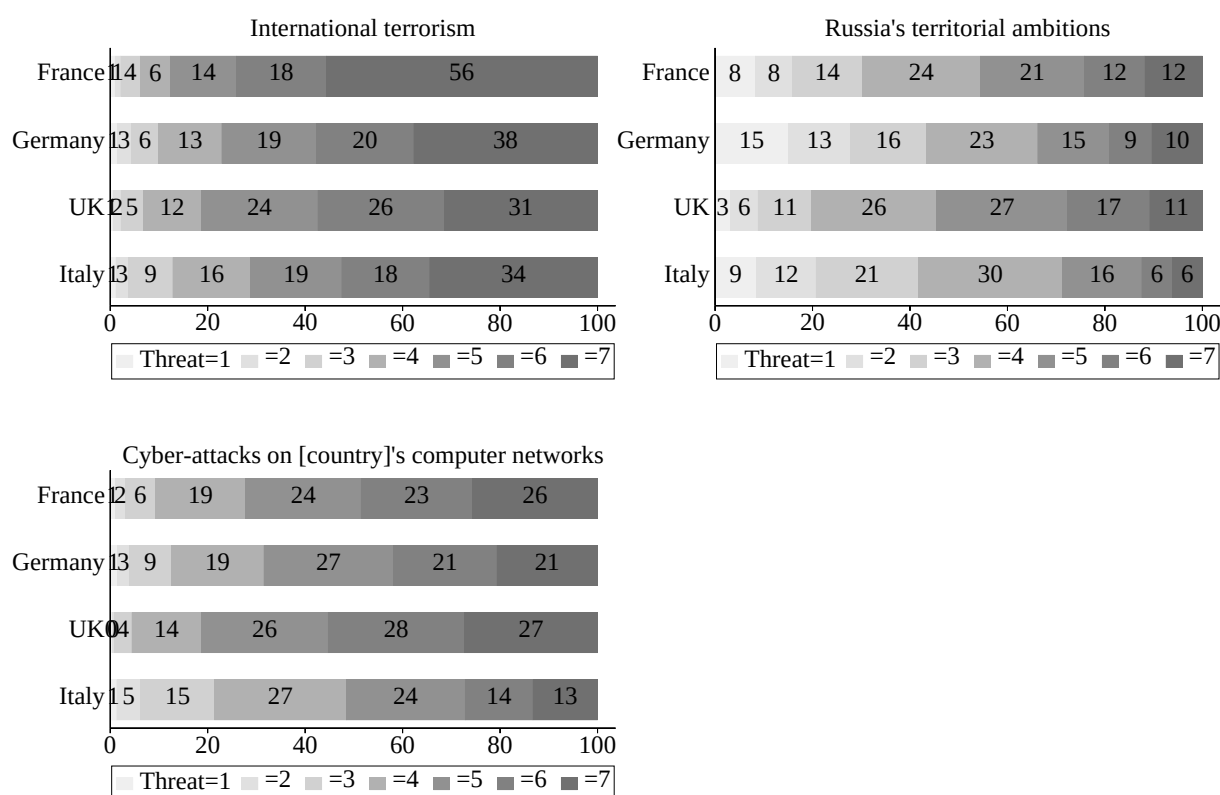
robust individual-level patterns are across contexts. The more consistent they are, the more relevant these findings and the less pressing the exploration of potential macro-micro interactions. If we do find relevant inter-country variation, however, it will be an important future task to explain it.⁸

Results

Descriptives

Perceived threat of cyber-attacks and, above all, terrorism is high in all four countries. Threat from Russia's territorial ambitions is significantly lower. The country-differences are moderate, the French are particularly worried about terrorism, the British about cyber-attacks, and Germans are markedly less concerned about Russia than citizens in the other three countries.

Figure 1: Distribution threat perceptions (raw distributions)



⁸ Methodologically, this task may best be tackled using a different (i.e. large-N) research design.

Note: Reported are raw univariate frequencies. Coding is 1 “No threat at all” – 7 “Critical threat”.

Regression analysis

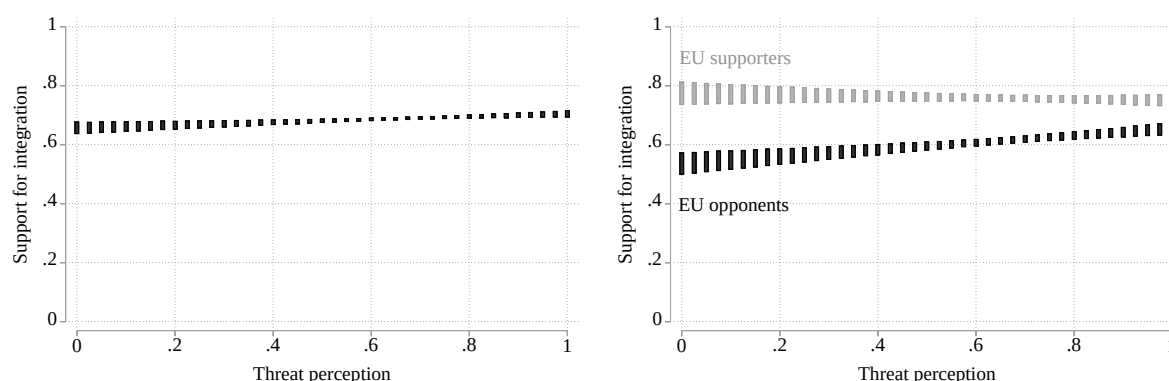
Aggregate analysis

We begin with the aggregate analysis, where the data from all four countries are analysed simultaneously. Figure 2 shows the average effects of threat perceptions on the two attitudes towards European security and defence integration (top row) and the effects conditional on general feelings toward the European Union (bottom row).⁹ Additional controls in these regression are postures toward cooperative internationalism and isolationism, political knowledge, socio-demographics (age, gender, education) and country dummies.

The findings suggest that the average association between threat perceptions and European defence attitude is weak to non-existent, but that this might be due to differential reactions of EU supporters and EU opponents. When differentiating between EU supporters and opponents, we find that the support for European defence integration does not change for respondents supporting the EU with increasing threat perception in general. For those being more sceptical of the EU, however, we find that support for defence integration increase among this group with increasing threat perception, as expected by our hypothesis. When perceiving fundamental threats, respondents being sceptical of the EU might still consider the EU as necessary to tackle the perceived threats.

⁹ To compute conditional effects, we specified an interaction term between threat perceptions and EU attitudes. Predictions are made for minimum and maximum values of EU attitudes.

Figure 2: Aggregate effects of threat perception on support for European defence integration and European-level decision making



Country-by-country analysis

Figure 3 displays the disaggregated results for the two-way interaction models separated by country. Given the evidence of conditional effects in the previous section, we skip showing the average effects of threat perceptions. The country-by-country analysis reveals several important findings.

First, in three of the four countries—Italy being the exception—we find the pattern from the aggregate analysis. EU opponents who do not perceive international threats also oppose integration in the foreign and security domain, while EU opponents who do perceive such threats are much more positive (cf. Figure 3). In fact, they hold similar views on this issue as general EU supporters do, whose attitudes hardly vary with threat perceptions at all. Importantly, the effect sizes are substantial. In France in particular, the attitude differences among EU opponents with low and high threat perceptions surmount to more than .3 points on the 0-1 scale (see Table 2). This pattern fits with a neo-functionalist account of attitude formation, where citizens react to perceived problem pressures with an increased taste for European integration promising to be better able to tackle large-scale international threats.

Italy is an outlier in that EU opponents do not differ in their attitudes depending on the level of international threat perceive. What is more, EU supporters who perceive international threats

are (slightly) more critical of European security and defence integration than EU supporters who do not perceive threats. We assume that there might be several reasons for these differences. Most importantly, it is to acknowledge that the Italian data stems from a different panel than the other three countries, with respondents already participating in an ongoing panel on security and defence attitudes. Additionally, there might be country-specific differences between these four countries, we do not consider fully in this study. With increased European integration it might well be that Italy's positions in security and defence policies is not as heavily recognized as the voices of France and Germany (and Great-Britain, which still was member of the EU when the study was conducted) and also Italy might be forced to bear a larger burden compared to the other countries, as it has happened in the migration crisis already (Conti/Di Mauro/Memoli 2020). This implies that the EU sceptical public in Italy would be less willing to push for increased integration in this policy field compared to the EU opponents in the other three country. Yet, as we are not able to test for this alternative explanation, we are going to discuss this issue in detail in the discussion.

Table 2 spells out the implications of these patterns for public opinion polarization in the four countries. In the penultimate column of the table, we see that differences between EU supporters and opponents are quite small if perceptions of threat are high, and the last column shows that these differences are much smaller than those who do not perceive international threats. Note that in Italy threat perceptions also decrease polarisation in these matters, it's just that Italian EU supporters converge to the lower level of EU opponents.

Figure 3: Support for European defence and security integration, by threat perception and EU attitude

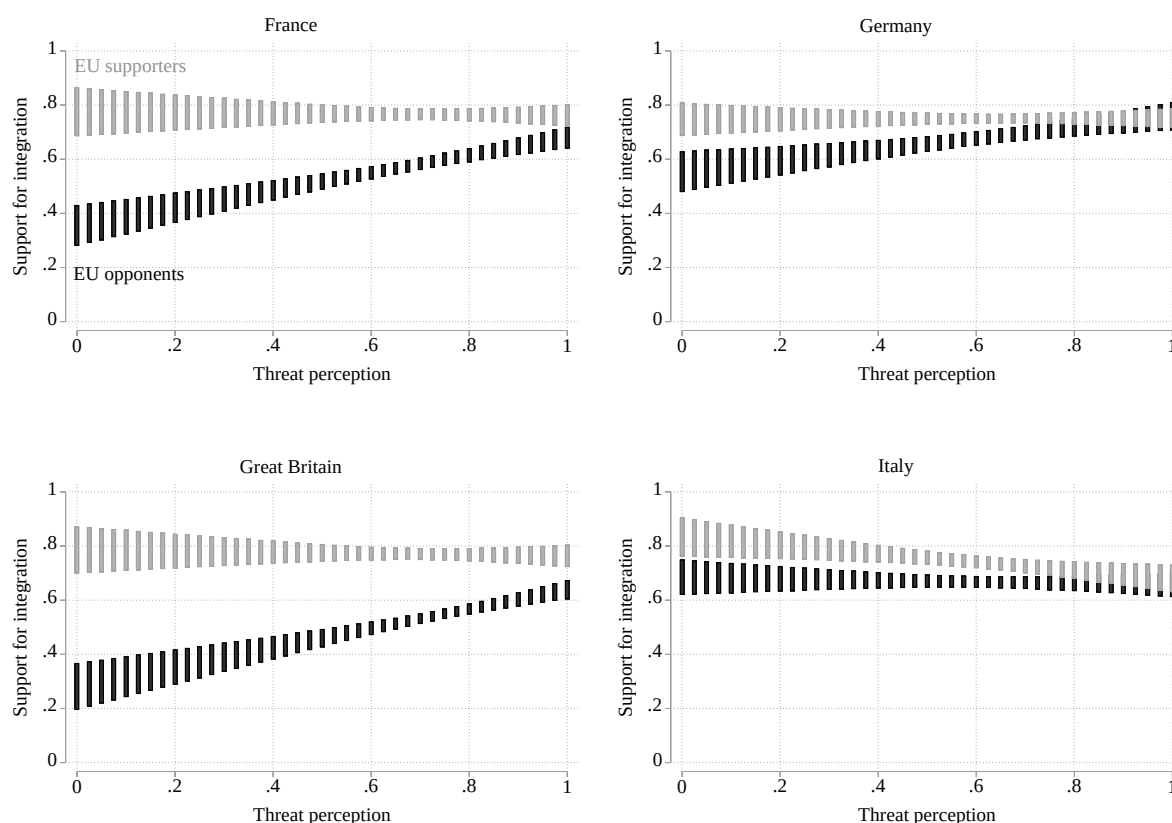


Table 2: Polarization

Support for integration							
	Low threat perception			High threat perception			
	EU opponent	EU supporter	Difference	EU opponent	EU supporter	Difference	Diff. in diff.
France	0.36	0.77	0.41	0.68	0.76	0.08	-0.33
Germany	0.55	0.75	0.20	0.76	0.75	-0.01	-0.21
Great Britain	0.28	0.79	0.51	0.64	0.76	0.12	-0.39
Italy	0.68	0.83	0.15	0.66	0.68	0.02	-0.13

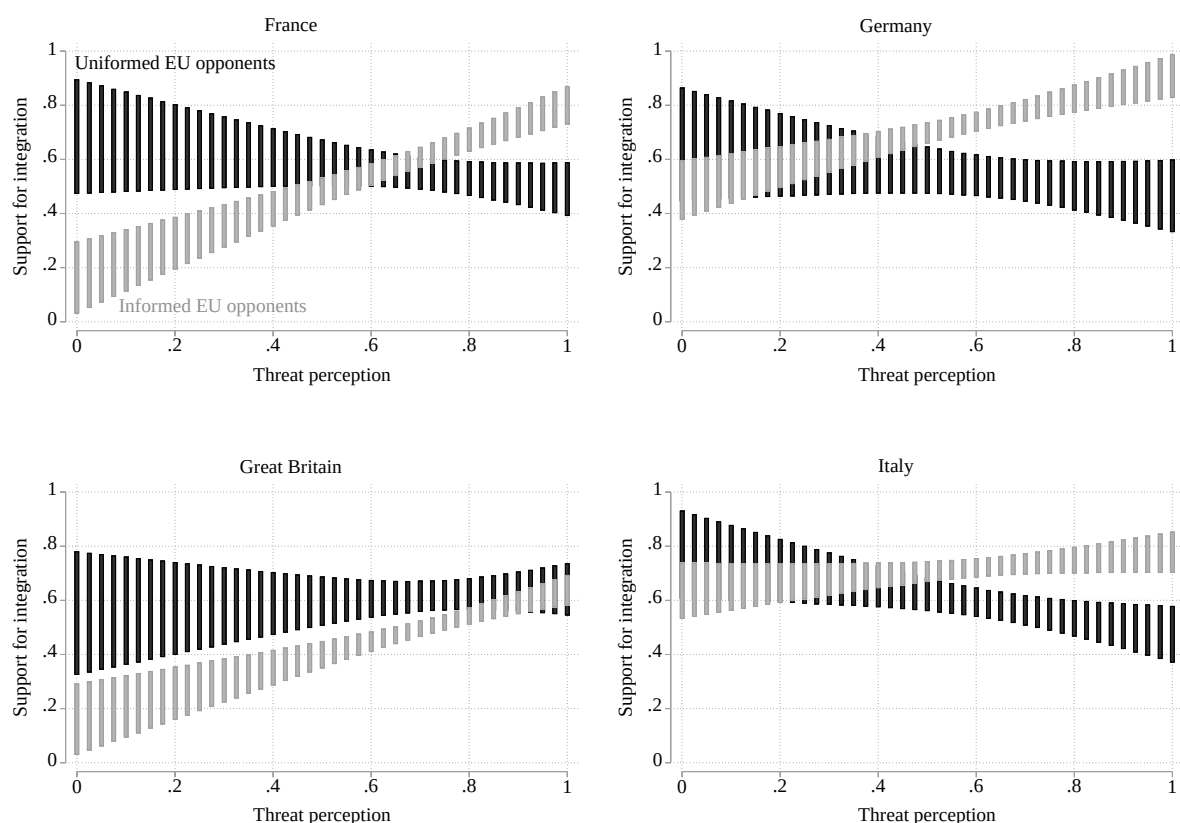
Notes: Reported are predictions from interaction models. Cf. Figure 3 and Figure 4 for same results.

3-way interaction with EU attitude and political knowledge

There is some evidence that the positive effect of threat perceptions among EU opponents is present only among those with high levels of political knowledge. We find this pattern more or less strongly in all four countries (see Figure 4). It is consistent with the notion that threat perceptions induce instrumental considerations about the effectiveness of working together that

override expressive considerations. That is because only the informed, who have a basic understanding of the basic power relations of the relevant international actors, should be able to realise that European cooperation is effective in handling global challenges

Figure 4: Support for European defence and security integration among EU opponents, by threat perception and political knowledge



Overall, the evidence for this additional interaction is weak, however, since there is substantial uncertainty in these estimates—which is not surprising, given that they are calculated from regression models with three-way interactions on a moderate sample size.

Discussion

The neo-functionalist interpretation assumes that threat perceptions make EU opponents reconsider European integration in the security and defence domain based on considerations regarding problem pressures and effective ways to solve them. These considerations were not explicitly measured in this study. Hence, the empirical patterns are reconcilable with this theoretical account but does not fully demonstrate it. Our empirical results show that EU opponents increasingly support EU integration when perceived critical international threats to national security at least in three (France, Germany, Great-Britain) out of the four countries covered in our analysis. Additionally, and following the neo-functionalist interpretation, those opposing the EU with high political knowledge are also more likely to support EU integration in security and defence policies when perceiving critical threats.

Our results show that this pattern does not show up systematically in all countries. For Italy, we find two interesting diverging pattern compared to the other countries. At first, with increased perceived threats EU opponents do not show stronger support for integration in security and defence policies and secondly, EU supporters even show lower support for EU integration in security and defence policies with increasing perceived support. This has important implications for further research examining the conditions under which people support EU integration on security and defence policies when taking into account general EU attitudes and perceived threat perception. What is additionally needed is a more fine-grained analysis of effectiveness considerations. Based on the findings presented here we would expect that the more EU opponents perceive international threats, the more they believe that integration in the defence domain is an effective tool to solve address them—and more effective than national solutions, perhaps.

The diverging results for Italy also show that it is important to take into account country-specific considerations when examining whether increased threat perception among EU opponents, but also supporters increases support for EU integration in security and defence policies. Among other considerations, one necessary argument to be taken into account is the possibility of significantly influencing security and defence policies when being integrated to the European level and additionally burden-sharing meaning who is responsible of taking care of the threats when they are actually materializing. Considering Italy these two aspects might play a role for both EU supporters and opponents to not show higher support for EU integration in security and defence policies, as Italy has experienced only low burden-sharing in recent crises touching upon security and defence issues such as uncontrolled migration to the European Union. Unfortunately, we are not able to empirically test these arguments, making it important for future research to take these considerations into account and also replicate our analyses using samples from other EU member states.

Summarizing, our results show that opponents of the EU are more supportive of policy specific integration when perceiving critical threats to national security in the biggest EU member states. From a neo-functionalist interpretation this implies that the EU can be considered as an effective mean to solve these crises. However, this pattern might not hold for all EU member states – especially those experiencing unresolved security crises at first hand – entailing that the EU should prove its effectiveness in solving security and defence crises in order to be recognized as relevant actor in this regard.

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