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High levels of support for European Union accession in Ukraine during the war in 2022

An analysis based on the ReUP study

DeZIM.insights Working Paper #6

High levels of support for European Union accession in Ukraine during the war in 2022. An analysis based on the ReUP study

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The relationship between Ukraine and the European Union (EU) has received increasing international attention in the context of Russia's war against Ukraine. Using data collected as part of the Resettlement of Ukrainians Panel Study (ReUP), we analyse in this DeZIM.insights working paper the drivers of three dimensions of support towards the EU: positive attitude, attachment, and support for EU accession. We relate support with different concepts such as communal identity and with sociodemographic variables such as age, education, and gender. We find that support among Ukrainians for EU accession is high and that overall attitudes towards the EU are positive. Our multivariate analyses reveal that communal identity and regional origins in particular appear to be drivers of an orientation towards the EU. Regarding sociodemographic variables, we find higher levels of support among the oldest age group (respondents aged 51 years and older) on all three levels, and a higher feeling of attachment with the EU among respondents with a university degree. Furthermore, while showing less support through attitudes and attachment, women are more strongly in favour of EU accession than men.

Bullet points:

- Overall, Ukrainians participating in the study show high levels of support for EU accession as well as positive attitudes towards the EU, with only slight group differences.
- 83 % of respondents are in favour of Ukraine accessing the EU. The level of support is the highest among respondents speaking Ukrainian at home (89 %), among respondents aged 51 or older (87 %) and among women (87 %). As recently as November 2021, before the war escalated, significantly fewer Ukrainians (58 %) were in favour of joining the EU.
- About 72 % of respondents have a 'fairly positive' or 'very positive' image of the EU. The attitude of the respondents towards the EU is more positive among Ukrainian speakers (77 % compared to 67 %) and among people aged 51 or older (79 % compared to 73 % and 71 %).
- A little under 40 % of respondents feel 'strongly attached' to the EU. Thus, attachment as a more long-standing, affective orientation appears to be less strong, which is not surprising as Ukraine is not formally part of the EU structure today.
- In total, the greatest group differences in policy preferences, attitudes and attachment can be identified between markers of communal identity (attachment with Ukraine as well as the language spoken at home), regional origins and age groups. With increasing attachment to Ukraine, support for EU accession increases significantly as well. Respondents living in western Ukraine, where relations with the West have historically been strong, show more support for and attachment to the EU. Furthermore, in contrast to previous studies, the age group socialised in the USSR (51 years and above) shows higher levels of EU support than younger people.
- Ukrainians who migrated abroad recently are slightly more in favour of EU accession, but their levels of support are not significantly higher than those of Ukrainians (still) living in Ukraine.
- Respondents with a university degree feel more attached to the EU than respondents without a degree.
- While showing less EU support through attitudes and attachment, women are more strongly in favour of an EU accession than men.
- Long-term monitoring is needed to see whether high levels of support persist or are a short-term development in the context of the war. In this context, the research work of Ukrainian researchers is particularly important.

In previous years, the importance of Ukraine as a strategic partner for Europe – and thus also the importance of including Ukraine in the European integration process – has been stressed by many (e.g. Hopko 2017). Torn between the enlarging EU and the increasingly hostile Russian state, Ukraine has long been at the borders of global democracy. The question of whether its future lies with Western Europe or with Russia has been an important point of demarcation for many years (e.g., Wipperfurth 2015; Munro 2007; Riabchuk 2007; Velychenko 2007).

Even though Ukraine is so far not a member of the EU or of NATO, it has long-standing relations with both. A first partnership-and-cooperation agreement with the EU dates back to the mid-1990s (Munro 2007), and with the Treaty of Amsterdam the European Council formulated a concrete strategy to strengthen its partnership (European Union 1997). However, the history of the partnership between the EU or NATO and Ukraine is a story of difficulties. Considering the perspective of the West and its relationship with Ukraine and Russia, the escalation in 2013/14, which centred on the Maidan Revolution and the Russian annexation of Crimea, ‘acted as a catalyst for greater unity’ (Bosse 2022; Onuch et al. 2018). However, until the Russian aggression of February 2022, the EU member states still appeared to be rather divided when it came to the topic of Ukraine and Russia. While Eastern European member states were in favour of more sanctions against Russia, others such as France, Germany and Italy pursued a more diplomatic way while trying to maintain economic relationships with Russia, especially regarding energy supply (Bosse 2022). Overall, not wanting to risk confrontation with Russia, the EU showed little ambition even to grant candidate status to Ukraine (Hopko 2017; Bosse 2022). Against this background, despite the long-standing relationship, Ukraine has only recently, in June 2022 – after Russia’s offensive in February of the same year (Bosse 2022) – become a candidate for membership in an unprecedented and symbolic act.

Also, in Ukraine there is no consistent picture of support for EU and NATO. This historical dividedness on the issue was shown, for example, in 2004. In the middle of that year, a military doctrine designating membership of the EU and NATO aroused such strong opposition that president Kutschma withdrew both plans shortly afterwards (Wipperfurth 2015). However, in the winter of the same year, the ‘Orange Revolution’ prevented the presidency of pro-Russian politician Yanukovich in favour of Yushchenko, who again declared EU accession as a political goal (Bühling 2018). The EU was subsequently involved in the Ukrainian reform process, and the institutionalisation of the strategic partnership was further advanced through various agreements in the following years. However, in 2013, Yanukovich, who was elected president in 2010, stopped an association agreement with the EU, which again triggered strong pro-EU reactions among the population and led to the ‘Revolution of Dignity’, or ‘Maidan Revolution’. This was followed, not only by the ousting of Yanukovich, but also by the Russian annexation of Crimea, and by separatist mobilisation and war in Donbas. These events resulted in ‘the most serious political standoff between Russia and the West since the end of the Cold War’ (Onuch/Sasse 2016), at least up to that point.

However, it is not only the political elite who were indifferent to the issue of the EU and NATO, but also the Ukrainian population itself. Previous studies in Ukraine have shown the dividedness of the Ukrainian population, with a rough division into supporters and opponents of joining the EU in 2005 (Munro 2007). For years, close dependence on Russia has certainly affected public opinion in Ukraine, with only 25 % supporting NATO membership in the early 2000s (e.g., Munro 2007). This might be due to Ukraine’s heavy economic reliance on Russia as well as its anxiety regarding possible military retaliations if Ukraine’s position were to move too strongly towards the West. Even in 2011, only one third of Ukrainians had a positive view of NATO, which was even less than in Russia (37 %; see Wipperfurth 2015; Pew Research Center 2011). However, as time has gone by, fewer people living in Ukraine regard their country as subordinate to Russia. Before the start of the 2022 war, in November 2021, 58 % of Ukrainians chose the EU when asked which international union the country should join if it could only join one. This compared to 21 % who answered in favour of joining a customs union with Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan. In a similar vein, 54 % of Ukrainians

supported Ukraine's accession to NATO (Center for Insights in Survey Research, 2021). This is a strong indication that since the 1990s the attachment of the Ukrainian people has shifted towards the West in both the economic and the military perspective. It seems plausible, after the Russian aggressions from 2014 onwards and the recent hospitality of neighbouring countries (Dollmann et al. 2022), that the group of supporters for EU and NATO accession has increased. However, a study from late 2018 that asked participants about their current strength of Ukrainian attachment compared to their attachment within the last 5 years found only a few changes (Barrington 2022). Currently however, studies from Ukrainian research agencies report that, in the event of a referendum, 86 % of the respondents in Ukraine would support joining the EU, and 83 % would support joining NATO (Rating Group 2022).

Regarding the support for the EU among Ukrainians, we do not know yet which individual factors currently drive EU support, nor whether there are substantial differences between societal subgroups that might lead to polarisation and division. It is important that the population's policy preferences match political developments, and that the Ukrainian people meet the political orientation towards the EU with a favourable attitude. However, this short-term attitude also needs to be supplemented by a long-term attachment that secures the tie between the country and the EU in the long run.

In this DeZIM.insights working paper, we analyse the drivers of Ukrainian support for the EU in terms of EU policy preferences, attitude, and attachment. These three concepts tap into different dimensions of EU support: attitude and policy preferences as rather short-term dispositions to evaluate the EU, and attachment as a rather long-standing affective orientation. Previous studies have shown that communal identity with Ukraine especially (attachment and language use), as well as regional ties and sociodemographic variables such as age, gender, and education (e.g., Barrington 2022; Munro 2007) matter when it comes to EU-related foreign policy preferences. We extend these analyses to the now-polarized context in the middle of the war, and we ask how communal identity, regional origin, and other sociodemographic factors affect EU support, and whether this impact is the same for different dimensions of EU support.

Data

We use data from a unique survey conducted in June 2022 as part of an international cooperative effort, led by an international team of scientists from Germany (Jörg Dollmann, University of Mannheim & DeZIM-Institute, Anna Hebel, GESIS – Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences, Sabrina Mayer, University of Bamberg & DeZIM-Institute, Steffen Pöttschke & Bernd Weiß, both GESIS), Qatar (Ingmar Weber, Qatar Computing Research Institute), and the UK (Ridhi Kashyap, Douglas Leasure & Francesco Rampazzo, all University of Oxford), and now named the Resettlement of Ukrainians Panel Study (ReUP). The aim was to test the feasibility of using social media recruitment for sampling participants for a panel structure in highly dynamic times of crisis. Participants for an online survey were recruited by using social media ads on Facebook and Instagram displayed between June 4th and 28th, 2022. Further information on the study design and setup will be published in a methodological paper, and will be linked here later. The approach is similar to the one described here (Pöttschke & Weiß, 2021). These ads were displayed in Ukrainian. More than 19,000 respondents took part in the survey, which was available in Ukrainian and Russian, with about two-thirds of them giving us permission to contact them again. Median survey time was 11 minutes. As this sample is not randomly drawn from the whole population, and is therefore possibly biased, we will not use the data to draw generalisations. Instead, we are mainly interested in the relationships between different concepts, such as communal identity, regional origin, and sociodemographic variables with the three dimensions of support for the EU. For more information on the sample, see Table 1 in the [Online Appendix](#).

We bring three different but related concepts into focus, each targeting a different dimension of support for the EU. At the level of short-term attitudes, we first take the dimension of EU policy preferences into account, by asking respondents to evaluate Ukraine's possible EU accession (using a scale ranging from 1='I strongly oppose' to 4='neither support nor oppose' to 7='I strongly support'). Second, we look at general attitudes towards the EU, using the question, 'Generally speaking, what image does the European Union evoke for you?'. This question relies on a fully verbalised 5-point rating scale (running from 1='a very negative one' to 3='neither positive nor negative' to 5='a very positive image'). Last, we measure the perceived attachment with the EU using a standard question for attachment, 'How strongly do you feel attached to the European Union?'. Again, this question relies on a fully verbalised 5-point rating scale (ranging from 1='not at all' to 5='very strongly').

Bivariate results

In the subsequent analyses, we present the results graphically (Figure 1). In this bar chart, the bars on the far left-hand side show the distribution of the three variables of EU support for the total population ('Total'). This is followed by a differentiation of the current place of residence of the respondents, distinguishing between people who live in Ukraine, people who live abroad, and people who live in Ukraine but who have the aspiration to migrate ('Mig Asp') in the next six months. On the right of this, the bars show a differentiation by the language respondents usually speak at home – Russian or Ukrainian – to see whether communal identity matters.¹ In the next bars, we differentiate between the age of the respondents comparing people aged from 18 to 30, from 31 to 50, and those who are 51 years old or older, to see whether age affects support. This is followed by a differentiation between people with no migration experience ('No mig') and those with internal migration experience ('Internal mig') since 24th February, 2022. Last, we offer a differentiation by gender.

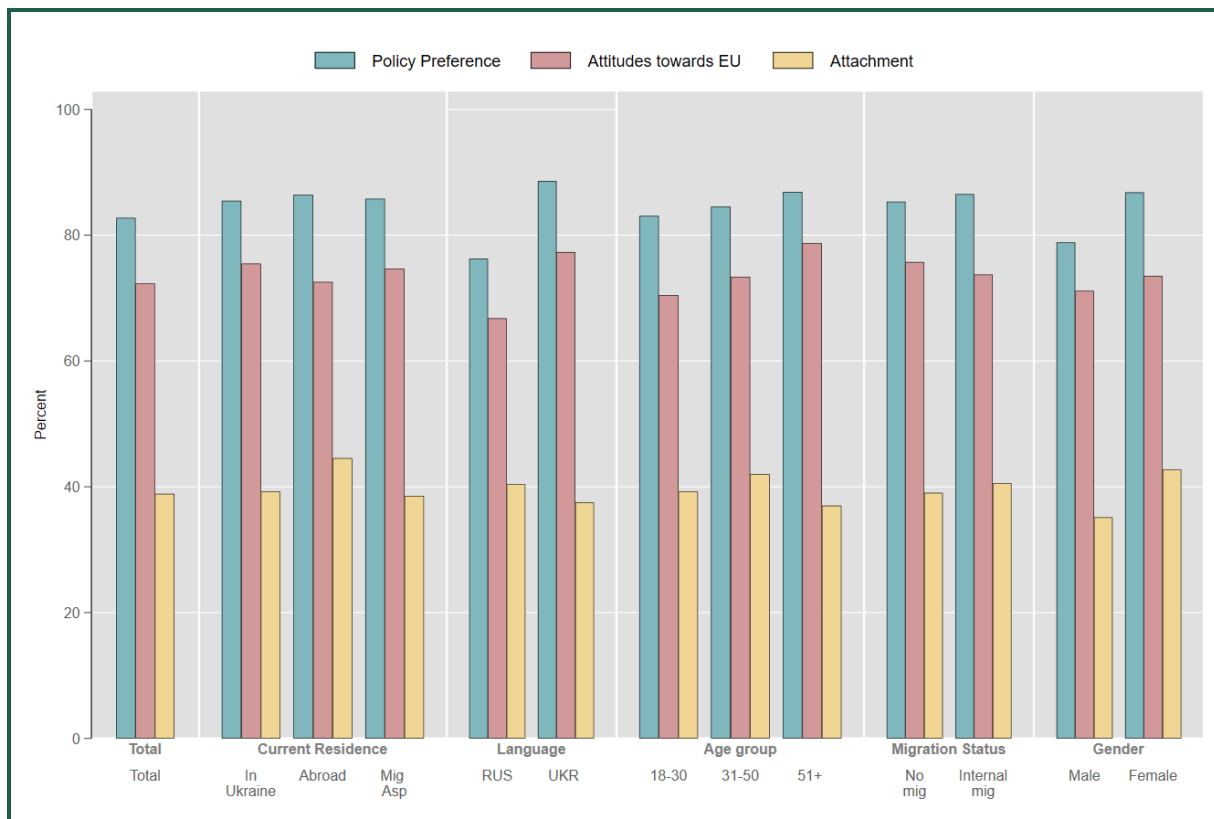
We dichotomize all three dependent variables for easier comparisons. We aggregate the values above the midpoint and display their shares only.

Very strong support for EU accession

Overall, support for Ukraine accessing the EU is very high among respondents from Ukraine, with 83 % in favour (green bar in the charts). The level of support is also very high among all of the subgroups we look at. There is almost no difference in support for EU accession between those still in Ukraine, those living abroad, or those aspiring to migrate in the next six months. We find differences between respondents speaking Russian at home (76 %) and those who speak Ukrainian, with stronger support for EU accession among those who speak Ukrainian (89 %), however the level of support among Russian speakers is also quite high. The level of support by age also varies little, with very similar levels of support among those aged between 18 and 30 years (83 %), 31 to 50 years (85 %), and those aged 51 or above (87 %). Small differences can also be found between those still living in Ukraine who have migrated internally after the escalation of the war (87 %) and those still staying at the same place (85 %). We find gender-based differences, with women more in favour of EU accession than men (87 compared to 79 %).

¹ While Russian dominates in the east and in the south of Ukraine, Ukrainian is the dominant language in central and Western Ukraine. Alongside this also runs a church schism that has repeatedly led to conflicts. While Russian-speaking believers mostly belong to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, native Ukrainian speakers mostly find themselves in the Ukrainian Orthodox or the Uniate Church (Wipperfürth 2015: 17; see also Barrington 2022 and Kulyk 2016).

Figure 1: Distribution of EU Policy Preferences, attitudes towards the EU, and attachment with the EU



Overall positive attitudes towards the EU

Slightly lower than EU policy preference, the image of the EU is in general still very favourable: about 72 % of respondents have a ‘fairly positive’ or ‘very positive’ image of the EU (red bars in the chart). As with EU policy preferences, the proportion of those with a positive image of the EU appears to be stable within subgroups, regardless of the migration status of a person (in Ukraine 76 %, abroad 73 %, or with aspirations to migrate 75 %) and slightly differs for the internal migration experience (internal migrants in Ukraine 74 %, others 76 %). Furthermore, we find again that the attitude of the respondents towards the EU is again more positive among Ukrainian speakers (77 compared to 67 %), as well as among people aged 51 years or older (79 compared to 73 and 71 %). Women only have a slightly more positive image of the EU than men (74 compared to 71 %).

Perceived attachment lags behind attitudes and policy preferences

With a little under 40 % of respondents who feel ‘strongly attached’ or ‘very strongly attached’ to the EU (yellow bars in Figure 1) this variable lags behind the share of people with a positive image of the EU and those who support accession to the EU. If we look again at the sample in a more differentiated way, we see that attachment to the EU appears to be a bit higher among Ukrainians living abroad than those respondents (still) living in Ukraine, as well as being higher than those who aspire to migrate in the next six months (45 compared to 39 and 39 %). In contrast to our observations above, we find a slightly higher proportion of Russian speakers (40 %) than Ukrainian speakers who feel attached to the EU (38 %). And regarding the age of the respondents, the middle-aged group (31 to 50, 42 %) shows a slightly higher percentage of people

who feel attached to the EU than their younger (18 to 30, 39 %) and older (51+, 37 %) counterparts. Looking at the gender of the respondents, the ratio appears again to be higher among women than among men (43 compared to 35 %).

At first sight, it seems counterintuitive that, for instance, Russian-speaking Ukrainians show a slightly higher attachment to the EU than Ukrainian speakers. However, such differences between language groups could well be due to the different social structural composition of these groups, and could thus be caused by other variables that are not accounted for in the bivariate analyses. To identify whether such differences cause the relationships we found in the bivariate analyses, we present the results of multivariate OLS regression models in the following section.

Communal identity, regional origin, and gender are important drivers for the different dimensions of EU support

The results of the multivariate analysis are presented below in the form of a coefficient plot (Figure 2). This plot displays the results of three OLS regression models that estimate the impact of the independent variables on the dimensions of EU support: EU policy preferences (green), attitudes towards the EU (red), and attachment with the EU (yellow). All dependent variables were normalised to the range of 0 to 1, with 0 for the lowest and 1 for the highest value, so that we can understand the coefficients as Average Marginal Effects, thus showing changes in percentage points while holding all other variables constant. Positive values for independent variables indicate that these variables positively influence the dependent variables, while negative values indicate that the independent variable influences the dependent variable in a negative way. For example, with increasing attachment with Ukraine from the lowest to the highest category, support for EU accession increases by about 12 percentage points.

Like Munro (2007) almost two decades ago, we see that communal identity and regional origins are strong drivers of an orientation towards the West. We find communal identity with Ukraine as an important driver for all three dimensions of EU support, of which both sub-facets matter: the self-reported feeling of an attachment towards Ukraine as well as the usage of Ukrainian as the language spoken at home.

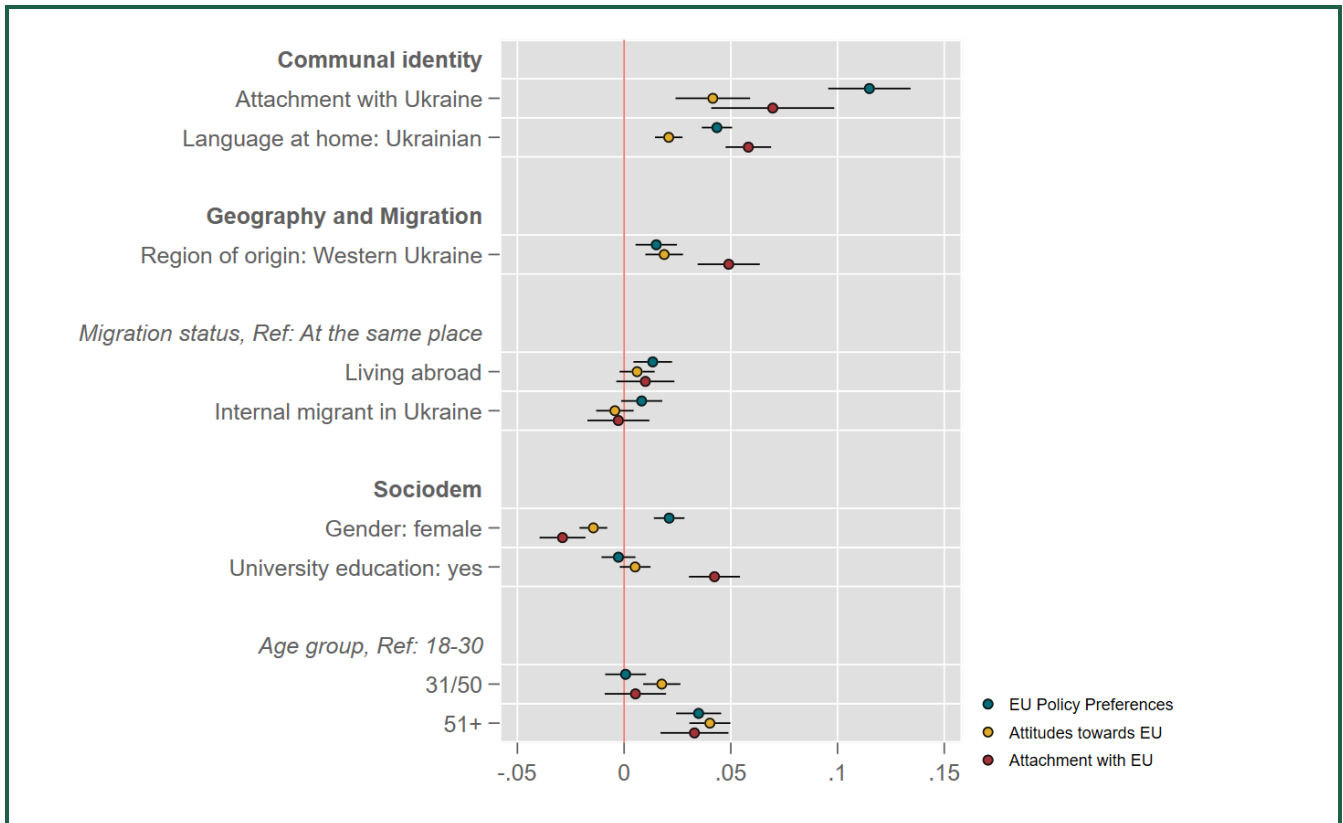
Also, those residing in Western Ukraine, or those who resided there before displacement, show more support for the EU, and they especially show higher attachment to the EU. This could be caused by the strong historical ties of Western Ukraine with the West. We only find a very minor impact of migration status, i.e., whether someone is living abroad or is an internally displaced person.

Regarding sociodemographic variables, we see an interesting pattern for gender, although the total effect sizes are rather small. Whereas women show less support towards EU through attitudes and attachment, they have higher preferences for EU accession than men by three percentage points, even when other factors such as attachment or age are controlled for. This could be connected to individual fears and concerns which were not part of our survey – for instance, the (actual or perceived) situation of women('s rights) in the EU versus Russia – and should be further examined in future research.

While we find almost no differences for the two age groups socialised after the fall of the USSR, the oldest age group (51 years or above) has higher levels of EU support for all three dimensions by about four percentage points. Contrary to previous findings, where age was correlated with support for Russia, older age groups now turn to the EU more than their younger counterparts do – at least in our sample. Last, we also look at formal education, which in the past was positively related to policy preferences towards the West (Munro, 2007). Differentiating between people with and without a university degree, we see hardly any differences of EU attitudes or policy preferences. However, attachment with the EU is about four

percentage points higher for those with a university education – the very people that had probably more contact to EU countries as part of their studies/work life and who would profit most from a strong EU.

Figure 2: Multivariate analysis – Impact of different factors on EU support



Note. Non-standardised regression coefficients with 95 % CI. Dependent variables are now used without aggregation. For the full model see the [Online Appendix](#), which also includes controls for sampling sources (Instagram, Facebook) at survey time. All independent and dependent variables are normalised to the range of 0–1. Western Ukraine is operationalised according to rating group and includes the eight oblasts Chernivtsi, Ivano-Frankivsk, Khmelnytskyi, Lviv, Rivne, Ternopil, Volyn, and Transcarpathia.

Conclusion

In this DeZIM.insights working paper, based on data collected for the ReUP project, we have looked at the drivers of Ukrainian support for the European Union in terms of EU policy preferences, attachment to the EU, and attitude to the EU. These three concepts reflect different levels of EU support. While policy preferences and attitude represent more short-term dispositions of evaluating the EU, attachment measures a longer-term affective orientation towards the EU.

Our analyses show that a large proportion of surveyed Ukrainians favours EU accession (83 %) and that attitudes towards the EU are generally positive (72 %). In this regard, we find only minor differences between groups. The perceived attachment to the EU lags behind the values for EU foreign policy preferences and attitudes, with slightly less than 40 % of the respondents feeling strongly or very strongly attached to the EU. Since Ukraine is still not a formal part of the EU, this value is not surprising, and might even be classified as being relatively high against this background. Further monitoring is necessary to evaluate whether, and to what extent, the affective attachment to the EU changes (or has already changed) in the context of the Russian invasion.

The greatest differences can be seen in the multivariate analyses when differentiating by communal identity and by the age of the respondents. Regarding communal identity, respondents who feel strongly or very strongly attached to Ukraine and those who speak Ukrainian at home tend to be more supportive of the EU. In addition, people living in the west of Ukraine have slightly higher scores than their neighbours in the east. Thus, we find – as Munro (2007) found almost two decades ago – that communal identity is a strong driver for EU support.

Regarding age, we find in multivariate comparison that respondents who belong to the oldest age group (51+) show stronger support for the EU than their younger counterparts for all three variables. In contrast, it makes no notable difference whether someone has a personal migration experience, either internal or abroad. In terms of gender, women show greater support at the policy level in the multivariate analyses, while men have a more positive image of the EU overall.

Since there are very few recent studies on EU support among Ukrainians, our findings might serve as a starting point for further, theory-based research. Going back earlier, Munro (2007) showed that a particular geographic origin from Western Ukraine (as a proxy for historical ties to different regions), and communal identity (in terms of identification as Ukrainian) are major drivers for supporting a turn towards the West. In contrast to our findings, however, Munro (2007) found that increasing age relates negatively to foreign policy preferences for Russia. Against the background of these different results, this point in particular should be examined in more detail in the context of future research.

In any case, we recommend to continue monitoring EU support in Ukraine in different dimensions, and to wait and see how public opinion in the country continues to develop in the context of the war, and in the context of the future situation in the eastern territories in particular. In this context, the research work of Ukrainian researchers is particularly important and can hopefully be supported accordingly in the context of international cooperation.

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