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Marko LOVEC\*

## SLOVENIAN ATTITUDE TO THE WAR IN UKRAINE: POLITICAL IDEOLOGIES, PUBLIC OPINION AND POLICY COSTS\*\*

*Abstract.* The purpose of this article is to explain the position held by Slovenia with respect to the war in Ukraine. The article draws on literature that stresses the importance of supply-side ideologies in explaining variations beyond the role of the international system, notably populism, Euroscepticism, radical ideologies and government–opposition dynamics, as opposed to demand-side attitudes and policy implications. Among post-socialist small countries, the stronger role of anti-systemic and anti-establishment actors and attitudes, together with the potentially stronger negative effects of war, make differences in positions more likely. Empirical study of the first 2 years of the war shows that the ideologies of the actors play a key role in explaining attitudes. Populist, Eurosceptic and far-right actors tend to be more pro-Russian, while differences exist among left-wing actors. However, anti-establishment sentiment mainly affected the dynamics between government and opposition, whereas the electoral performance of anti-system actors remained low, as can be explained by the still relatively pro-system attitude of the public and the war's limited impact.

**Keywords:** Slovenia, Ukraine war, ideology, political parties, public opinion.

### INTRODUCTION: LOOKING AT THE RUSSIA'S WAR ON UKRAINE WAR FROM OUTSIDE WESTERN EUROPE

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has called the international post-war order and European security architecture into question. Although the governments of European countries and EU member states are in a similar situation from the international system perspective (Martill and Sus 2024), they have not reacted in the same way due to different agendas pursued by government and opposition

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actors (Hooghe et al. 2024; Holesh et al. 2024; Schramm and Weiser 2024) as well as different public attitudes (Fernández et al. 2023; Stolle, 2024) and effects of the war (Bøggild et al. 2024). Previous research has largely focused on Western (Holesch 2024; Wurthmann and Wagner 2024) and bigger member states (Kapp and Fix 2024), leaving many Eastern and smaller member states neglected or studied only from a certain perspective (Kaniok and Hloušek 2023; Müller and Slominski 2024). The purpose of this article is to review general arguments found in the literature on the little-researched case of Slovenia. The article aims to expand the list of cases considered in the emerging literature and support further research on Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries.

According to the literature, supply-side ideology, especially anti-systemic ideologies like populism, Euroscepticism, radical ideologies, and opposition–government dynamics, is key to explaining differences in countries’ attitudes to the Ukraine war that go beyond the role of the international system (Hooghe et al. 2024; Stolle 2024; Fagerholm 2024). In comparison, demand-side factors such as public opinion and policy output variables like the impact of the war are considered less important (Hooghe et al. 2024). When it comes to small post-socialist CEE countries, the stronger role of anti-systemic and anti-establishment actors (Szczerbiak and Taggart 2024) and attitudes (Lovec 2019) along with the potentially stronger impact of the war (Mátyás 2024) may lead to more differentiated and pro-Russian attitudes.

The empirical study conducted for this research includes the positions of the main political parties on the supply side, opinion polls on the demand side and impact assessments on the output side, in the period between February 2022 and November 2024. The study shows that the ideologies of political actors have a valuable role in explaining attitudes. Populist, Eurosceptic, far-right and ‘old left’ actors tend to be pro-Russian, in line with the literature. In contrast, anti-establishment sentiment in the population has mostly affected the government–opposition dynamics since the electoral performance of anti-system and anti-establishment actors has remained low, a situation that can be explained by the relatively pro-system public opinion and limited impact of the war in the country.

Below, the literature, argumentation and case selection are presented, followed by a discussion of the results of the investigation of supply, demand and output variables. In the conclusion, the theoretical and practical relevance of the results is outlined.

## **SUPPLY, DEMAND AND THE IMPACT OF POLICY IN A POST-SOCIALIST SETTING**

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine on 22 February 2022 was a big shock for the international order and the security architecture in Europe. Although European countries are today in a similar situation with regard to the international system, considerable differences have been seen in how they view the war. One-third

of European countries have opposed at least one of the measures to support Ukraine, such as military support, financial aid and EU membership (Hooghe et al. 2024). Such differences depend on external factors like the (perceived) threat from Russia (Hooghe et al. 2024), proximity and existing relations (Stolle 2024), foreign policy stance and geopolitics (Kapp and Fix 2024; Martill and Sus 2024), and domestic factors such as the ideology and perceptions of political parties and the electorate (Hooghe et al. 2024; Fagerholm 2024; Holesch et al. 2024; Stolle 2024; Bøggild et al. 2024) coupled with the dynamics of party competition (Wurthmann and Wagner 2024; Stolle 2024). Finally, attitudes are also influenced by the direct costs of the war, such as higher energy prices (Stolle 2024; Bøggild et al. 2024).

The *supply side ideology* and, in particular, party ideology – understood as a coherent bundle of ideas that serve certain interests – have been identified as the most important factor in explaining attitudes to Russia's war on Ukraine (Hooghe et al. 2024; Stolle 2024). The importance ascribed to party ideology is consistent with the long-observed trend towards the democratisation and politicisation of foreign policy (Hooghe et al. 2024).

While the traditional divide between the political left and right does not play a clear role (Stolle 2024), anti-establishment and anti-system ideologies such as populism and EU scepticism (Hooghe et al. 2024; Fagerholm 2024) have been shown to be strongly associated with more pro-Russian attitudes. At the same time, when in government, many populist and EU-sceptic parties held moderate pro-Ukrainian positions (Hooghe et al. 2024). This points to the international system's role as well as the different roles of government and opposition. The weaknesses of democratic institutions, such as low trust in established institutions and strong polarisation, affect government–opposition dynamics by promoting less centrist and less system-friendly positions. Indeed, most countries with lower support for Ukraine exhibit greater polarisation between supporters of the incumbent party and the opposition party (Stolle 2024).

While both the far-right and far-left variants of populism are characterised by more pro-Russian positions, a clear correlation between EU scepticism and sympathy for Russia has only been found for far-right parties (Fagerholm 2024; Wurthmann and Wagner 2024).<sup>1</sup> On the left side of the political spectrum, there is a split between (a) the new left parties and the left parties from Northern Europe, and (b) the old left parties and the left parties from Eastern Europe, with the former being more critical and the latter more sympathetic towards Russia.<sup>2</sup> Studies of parties in the European Parliament established a difference between

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<sup>1</sup> The correlation between far-right EU scepticism and more pro-Russian positions can be explained by ideological characteristics these parties share with the Russian regime, such as nationalism, conservatism and authoritarianism.

<sup>2</sup> One possible explanation for this is the more sympathetic attitude of the old left and the left parties from Eastern Europe towards Russia, a successor of the Soviet Union and its anti-Western and communist ideology.

the traditional communist parties, which are more friendly to Russia, and the new left and democratic socialists, whose criticism of Russia has grown significantly (before the war, these parties were the least assertive towards Russia) (Holesch et al. 2024). Similar results were found for Germany (Wurthmann and Wagner 2024).

On the *demand side*, public opinion studies have shown that the war has, to some extent, increased support for liberal internationalism and its features like democracy, solidarity (redistribution), the European Union and even immigration, whereas authoritarian attitudes have declined (Steiner et al. 2023; Klymak and Vlandas 2024; Panchuk 2024). However, researchers also argue that the war has (temporarily) reinforced these trends rather than fundamentally changing the underlying attitudinal tendencies (Fernández et al. 2023). There is also a need for more longitudinal research.

Finally, previous research has revealed that support for Ukraine has not necessarily decreased because of economic concerns influencing *policy output*, but depends on the rhetoric and attitudes of national elites explaining the costs from the perspective of threats to democracy, international order etc. (Wurthmann and Wagner 2024; Bøggild et al. 2024). Nevertheless, the research has focused on wealthy Northern European countries like Germany and Denmark, and thus further research is needed to account for different national circumstances.

Research on CEE countries has looked at specific factors and individual cases, e.g., the international system, as with the case of Poland (Kapp and Fix 2024), on the long-term ideological motivations of political parties, as with the case of the Czech Republic (Kaniok and Hloušek 2023) and, with respect to Hungary, on the instrumentalisation of EU foreign policy to achieve gains in EU domestic policy through links between the EU's rule-of-law agenda and support for the Ukraine war packages (Müller and Slominski 2024). Meanwhile, broader patterns among the region remain unexplored in the emerging literature.

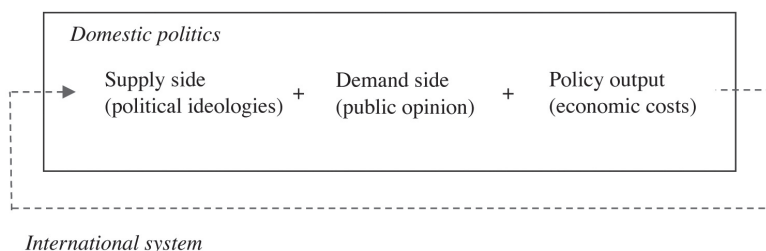
While the attitudes of individual CEE countries have been strongly influenced by their proximity to Russia and past relations (Poland and the Baltic countries) or the ruling regime's direct links to Moscow (Hungary), other countries such as the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Slovenia provide another opportunity to examine the role of regional context in determining the impact of supply-side ideology, demand side public attitudes and policy output variables in line with the mentioned literature.

Small post-socialist CEE countries are characterised by greater dependence on the international system and less resilience to international crises. Populist, Eurosceptic and radical actors and attitudes play a bigger role in these countries and in some cases are important state actors (Stanley 2017; Szczerbiak and Taggart 2024). Institutional problems like a low level of trust in established institutions and a high degree of polarisation limit the legitimacy of state actors (Gessler and Wunsch 2025). These countries' lower level of development and greater dependence on international trade and investment make them more

susceptible to external shocks (Arriola et al. 2023). One can therefore assume that a stronger role of anti-systemic and anti-establishment actors and attitudes as well as possibly stronger effects of the war will lead to bigger differences in terms of a stronger pro-Russian stance in the region.

The focus of this study is on Slovenia. It is a small post-socialist country and an open economy with a strong multilateral and EU-friendly orientation and good relations with all major powers, including Russia (Bojinović Fenko and Šabič 2014; 2017; Bojinović Fenko and Kočan 2022; 2023). The global and EU crises of the last decade and a half have led to declining support for domestic institutions and the EU (Lovec 2019) and brought considerable political instability (Fink Hafner 2024a; 2024b) as well as a shift in the traditional pro-EU orientation of the elites and the politicising of EU (Lovec and Bojinović Fenko 2020; Lovec, Kočan and Mahmutović 2022; Lajh and Novak 2024). The Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS), the main centre-right party led by Janez Janša, has moved towards conservatism and nationalism and occasionally espouses soft Euroscepticism. During his third government (2020–2022), Janša employed polarising rhetoric and tried to interfere in independent institutions (Mahmutović and Lovec 2024). The centre-left side of the political spectrum has been characterised by instability and the emergence of new radical left-wing actors such as Levica opposed to NATO and the EU's economic governance.

*Picture 1: MODEL EXPLAINING THE ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE RUSSIA'S WAR ON UKRAINE*



Source: own elaboration.

In the following, we look at supply-side variables – the positions of the main political parties on the Ukraine war and their performance at the 2022 parliamentary elections and 2024 European Parliament elections; demand-side variables – public attitudes regarding political actors and the Ukraine war based on European and national polls; and output variables based on available economic impact analyses and data (Scheme 1). We focus on the period between February 2022, when Russia invaded Ukraine, and November 2024, when Donald Trump won the US elections and the strategic calculus shifted towards a quick end to the war.

## **SUPPLY SIDE: PRO-RUSSIAN ATTITUDES OF FAR-RIGHT, POPULIST AND EUROSCEPTIC ACTORS WITH POOR ELECTION RESULTS**

The study of the supply side shows the importance of ideological features such as the 'hawkish westernism' of Janša's SDS and the 'defensive normativism' of Robert Golob's Freedom Movement, the two dominant parties in the period under observation, which can explain the variations in the attitudes of governments beyond the role of the international system. In line with other similar studies (Hooghe et al. 2024; Fagerholm 2024; Holesch 2024), populist and Eurosceptic parties on the hard right tend to be pro-Russian, while greater differences exist between old and new left actors, with the former being more pro-Russian. Second, the electoral defeats of the ruling parties reveal the role of anti-establishment, anti-system and polarised rhetoric in favour of the opposition parties, whereas the electoral results of the anti-system and anti-establishment parties remained low. Faced with dwindling support, the governing parties turned to more ideological positions, which did not prevent the mobilization of support for the opposition (in the case of the SDS in the 2022 parliamentary elections) or the demotivation of centrist voters (in the case of the Freedom Movement and the 2024 European elections).

In domestic political debates, foreign policy towards the Russian Federation was not very important before the war. After Russia started to pursue a more assertive foreign policy at the end of the 2000s, Janša's SDS, the liberal-conservative reform party at the time, became more cautious about strategic cooperation with Russia (Crnčec and Bojinović Fenko 2022). Later, these reservations continued, albeit Janša's SDS turned to nationalism and conservatism and established close relations with the pro-Moscow regime of Victor Orban in Hungary, as reflected in Janša's criticism of Putin's visit to Slovenia in 2016, 2 years after Russia's annexation of Crimea. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Janša's government was reluctant to engage in vaccine diplomacy with Russia (or China). In contrast, right-wing populist and Eurosceptic parties such as the Slovenian National Party (SNS) or the Party of the Slovenian Nation were openly Russia-friendly, as they saw Russia's nationalist and conservative regime as a counterweight to 'Western globalism', 'Brussels' dictates' and 'cultural progressivism' and advocated closer relations with Russia (Lovec, Kočan and Mahmutović 2022). Compared to centre-right parties, the centre-left parties were more open to friendly relations with Russia, even if they had reservations on a strategic level due to the repression of democratic forces in Russia and Russia's support for illiberal and authoritarian regimes in Europe. While parties close to the old left, such as DeSUS, were in favour of closer cooperation with the Russian regime, since they saw Russia as the largest Slavic state and a counterweight to US hegemony, new left parties like Levica, despite their opposition to NATO, did not hold a particularly positive attitude to the Russian regime as their progressive ideology contradicted Russian authoritarianism, nationalism and neoconservatism.

After Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Janša, who had little support at home during his third term in office due to his handling of the COVID-19 pandemic and interference in the media and civil society, became one of Ukraine's most vocal supporters. Janša used nationalist rhetoric, drew parallels with the Slovenian War of Independence and called for greater Western involvement (Government of Slovenia 2022a). He was one of the first Western politicians to visit Kyiv. Janša's position diverted attention away from his interference with the rule of law and saw him gain positive coverage in the international media (Mortensen et al. 2022). Janša probably also hoped to use the more reserved support for NATO and interventionism and the more positive attitude of centre-left actors regarding Russia to portray them as pro-Russian/anti-Western or to create a split between the centre-left parties. The centre-left opposition parties were critical of what they called Janša's "militant stance", but also condemned the Russian aggression as a violation of international norms and rules (N.D. 2022; G.K. 2022). At the same time, in the electoral campaign they focused more on Janša's interference in domestic institutions and his handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. At the April 2022 elections, Janša's SDS won the centre-right vote but failed to find a potential coalition partner, while the centre-left saw the strong mobilisation and concentration of the electorate on the newly established progressive-liberal Freedom Movement led by Robert Golob (Lovec 2023; Novak 2025). Voter turnout was the highest in two decades (70.97%) (DVK 2022). The Freedom Movement won the election in a landslide (34.45%, 41 seats), followed by Janša's SDS (23.48%, 27 seats), the New Slovenia – NSi (6.86%, 8 seats), the Social Democrats – SD (6.69%, 7 seats) and the Left (4.46%, 5 seats) (DVK 2022).

Populist and Eurosceptic parties on the hard right such as Resnica, the SNS and the Homeland League took an openly pro-Russian stance, while the softer Eurosceptic and anti-NATO party Levica condemned Russia's aggression and Western interference (G.K. 2022; Al. Ma., La. Da. 2022). Resnica achieved 2.86%, the SNS 1.49% and the Homeland League 0.18% (DVK 2022).

The Golob government (2022-), made up of the Freedom Movement, the SD and Levica, invoked compliance with international rules and norms such as respect for the UN charter, the non-use of means of aggression and respect for territorial integrity and continued to support Ukraine consistent with the policies of the majority of EU and NATO members (Volk 2022; 2024; Brglez 2022). Members of the Golob cabinet visited Ukraine several times, especially in the first year of the conflict (Table 1). Slovenia's donations to Ukraine placed the country around the EU average (Trebesch et al. 2024).<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Slovenian aid amounted to 0.4 of national GDP in the period from January 2022 to June 2024, of which 0.1% was bilateral aid and 0.3% multilateral aid (data extracted from Trebesch et al., 2024). Military aid accounted for 0.14% of national GDP. It consisted of 13 packages provided over the course of 2022, 2023 and 2024, some of which were already agreed during Janša's term of office. In the period from 24.2.2022–31.10.2023, Slovenia made it into the top 10 military donors in terms of the share of

Important visits and support measures by the Golob government were questioned by »pacifist« civil society groups, including prominent figures of the old left such as former presidents, academics and opinion-makers who blamed Western interference for the war and spoke out against military aid and in favour of peace negotiations (Table 2, see also Bebler 2023).

*Table 1: VISITS BY SLOVENIAN POLITICAL REPRESENTATIVES TO UKRAINE*

15. 3. 2022	Janez Janša visits Kyiv together with Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki and Czech Prime Minister Petr Fiala	Janša expresses strong support, says Western diplomats have fled, draws a comparison with the Slovenian War of Independence, says Russia cannot take Kiev, calls for a no-fly zone (Government of Slovenia, 2022a)
27. 7. 2022	Foreign Minister Tanja Fajon visits Kyiv	The total amount of NGO and state donations to date estimated at €8.8 million. Fajon calls for an end to the war as soon as possible and emphasises humanitarian issues. On her return, she discusses the attempts made on social media to justify the aggression. (Government of the Slovenia 2022b)
28. 11. 2022	Defence Minister Marjan Šarec visits Kyiv	Šarec expresses support for the liberation of Ukraine. To date, military support has included 35 infantry amphibious vehicles and 22 updated M55(S) tanks. Slovenia joins the EU Assistance Mission in Ukraine. (Government of the Slovenia 2022c)
27. 3. 2023	Opposition leader Janez Janša meets Ukrainian PM Denis Šmihal in Kyiv.	Janša describes western support as »Too little and too late.« (Al. Ma., G.C., MMC 2023)
31. 3. 2023	Prime Minister Robert Golob, together with Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenković, Slovakian Prime Minister Eduard Heger and Moldovan President Maia Sandu, visits Kyiv.	EU and NATO accession, post-war reconstruction and humanitarian aid discussed. Golob promised Ukraine support by all means in times of aggression. (Government of the Slovenia 2023)
2. 10. 2023	Fajon participates at an informal meeting of EU foreign ministers in Kiev.	
28. 6. 2024	President of the State Nataša Pirc Musar visits Kiev	Pirc Musar expresses political support, support by all means in times of Russian aggression and confirms Slovenia's commitment to the territorial integrity of Ukraine. Signing of the bilateral security agreement is delayed. (President of Slovenia, 2024)

Source: own elaboration (for data sources see references within the table).

donated heavy armour by donating 12% of its stock of heavy armour: 35 M80A (estimated value USD 25 million), 28 modernised T55 (estimated value USD 27 million) and 20 Valuk infantry fighting vehicles (A.Ž. 2024).

*Table 2: INFLUENTIAL OPEN LETTERS AND PETITIONS*

10. 6. 2022	An open letter to the government first signed by former presidents of the state Milan Kučan and Danilo Turk	The constitutional principle of peace policy, a culture of peace and non-violence, is referred to in the government coalition agreement. Against arms deliveries to Ukraine. The government should look for alternative ways to end the war. (G.C., AL. Ma., MMC, 2022)
13. 6. 2022	An open letter to the government entitled Ukrainian resistance must be supported by all means, first signed Luka Lisjak Gabrijelčič	A reply to the letter of 10.6., Slovenia should support the Ukrainian resistance by all means (G.C., AL. Ma., MMC, 2022)
19. 10. 2022	An open letter to government of Slovenia on war in Ukraine, first signed Spomenka Hribar and Aurelio Juri	Against uncritical loyalty to the USA. Reference to Article 124 of the Constitution on peaceful foreign policy. (Hribar and Juri, 2022)
16. 2. 2023	An open letter with the title Stop the war in Ukraine, the first signatories are Kučan and Turk	For a peaceful solution based on sovereignty, equality and security interests, including those of Russia (Dnevnik, 2023)
13. 7. 2023	An open letter to the state leadership, first signed by Aurelio Juri	Against the admission of Ukraine to NATO, which is counterproductive for ending the war (Juri, 2023)
19. 7. 2024	An open letter entitled Against war agitation and financing of a new war, first signed by Igor Ž. Žagar	A proxy war between the USA, the EU under the umbrella of NATO and the Russian Federation, which they were unable to defeat in the Cold War. (Žagar et al., 2024)

Source: own elaboration (for data sources see references within the table).

In the second year of the conflict, the frequency of visits and support actions decreased against the backdrop of protracted conflict and falling support for the government, as did the activities of civil society, which were now focused on the war in Gaza (Rizman et al. 2024; Veber 2024), but also used the atrocities in Gaza to highlight the West's alleged double standards and to reinforce the call for an end to the war in Ukraine through a negotiated agreement with Russia. Under pressure from civil society (Mladina 2024) and the left-wing part of the coalition, the Golob government decided a few weeks before the elections to recognise the independence of Palestine as Israel had repeatedly violated international law on a massive scale (Government of Slovenia 2024a).<sup>4</sup> Janša's SDS criticised the recognition of Palestine as an "act of support for terrorism" and part of "the leftist internationalist agenda", along with pacifist policy on Ukraine and (Brussels') pro-migration policy and green transition agenda (Al. Ma. G.K. 2024; Kočan and Lovec 2025).

<sup>4</sup> The bilateral security agreement between Slovenia and Ukraine (Government of the Slovenia 2024b) was only signed at the third attempt on 19 July 2024 by Golob and Zelenski on the sidelines of the EPC meeting.

European elections were characterised by the mobilisation of some left-wing voters, but fell short of the broad mobilisation at the national elections, and the fragmentation of the centre-left vote, in contrast to the more concentrated support for Janša's SDS in the centre-right (Novak 2024; Kočan and Lovec 2025). Voter turnout was 41.8% (over 10 percentage points more than at the last European election) (DVK 2024). The mobilisation was relatively low in active and younger parts of the population as shown by the low turnout in the 31–45 (32.24%) and 18–30 (35.27%) age groups, as opposed to 60+ (49.6%) and 46–60 (41.94%) (DVK 2024). The elections were won by the SDS-EPP (30.59%, 4 seats), followed by the Freedom Movement – RE (22.11%, 2 seats), Vesna-Greens (10.53%, 1 seat), SD-S&D (7.76%, 1 seat) and NSi-EPP (7.68%, 1 seat) (DVK 2024). Levica failed to clear the threshold to enter parliament (4.81%), as did Resnica (3.97%), DeSUS (2.22%) and Nič od naštetega (1.52%) (DVK 2024), which had challenged the Western agenda concerning the Ukraine war.

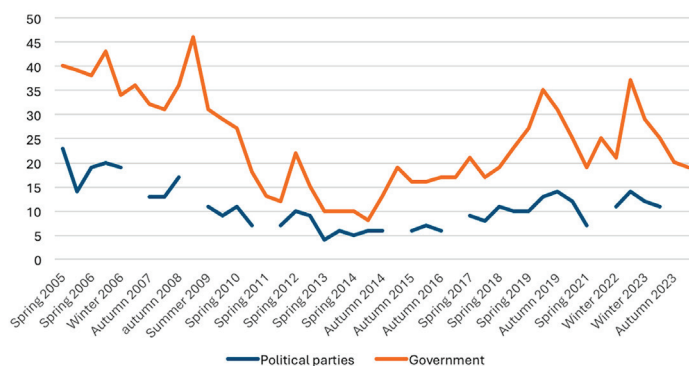
### **DEMAND SIDE: ANTI-ESTABLISHMENT, BUT STILL LARGELY PRO-SYSTEM ATTITUDES THAT MAINLY INFLUENCE THE GOVERNMENT–OPPOSITION DYNAMICS**

Investigation of the demand side shows that international developments such as protracted crises place a certain strain on support for state actors. As public opinion was still relatively pro-system and the perceived costs of the war were limited, anti-establishment attitudes largely affected the dynamics of government and opposition. A correlation between decreasing perceived direct costs of the war and decreasing support for Ukraine shows the stronger role of political attitudes as opposed to economic costs, while the correlation between decreasing support for governments and individual policies – in the context of relatively stable overall attitudes towards the Russia's war on Ukraine – shows the importance of general support for the government, the quality of democracy and the dynamics of government and opposition.

Opinion polls reveal that international crises have significantly undermined confidence in the government and political parties, favouring anti-establishment, anti-system and opposition forces. Crises like the global financial crisis (GFC) (2007–2008), eurozone crisis (2011–2012), migration crisis (2015–2016), the pandemic (2020–2021) and the war in Ukraine (2022–) were accompanied by declining trust in the government and political parties (Figure 1). National parliamentary elections and changes in government (2008, 2012, 2014, 2019, 2022) were generally followed by a sharp rise in trust in the government and political parties, followed by a sharp decline corresponding to the impact of the ongoing externally induced crisis. Moreover, there is a notable difference between (a) the GFC and the Eurozone crisis on one hand, and (b) the migration, pandemic and Eurozone crises on the other, with the former denoted by a negative and the latter by a positive trend in trust, as may be explained by the growing role of the politicisation of international issues, anti-establishment and anti-system forces

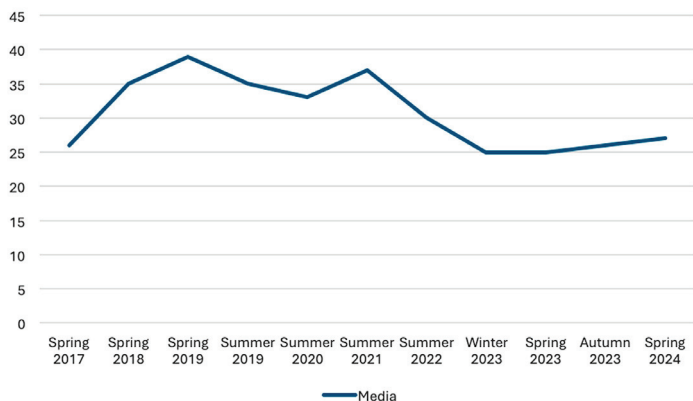
in the latter period (Lovec, Kočan and Mahmutović 2022; Novak and Lajh 2024). However, as the governments and political parties continued to face strong fluctuations in trust, the impact of the crises on the government–opposition dynamics was more significant. External shocks also had a negative impact on other institutions like the media (Figure 2), which indicate greater polarisation with the latter being closely related to the fragmentation of public space (Mahmutović and Lovec 2024).<sup>5</sup>

*Figure 1: SHARE OF RESPONDENTS WHO TRUST POLITICAL PARTIES AND THE GOVERNMENT IN SLOVENIA*



Source: own elaboration based on Eurobarometer 2024a.

*Figure 2: SHARE OF RESPONDENTS WHO TRUST THE MEDIA IN SLOVENIA*

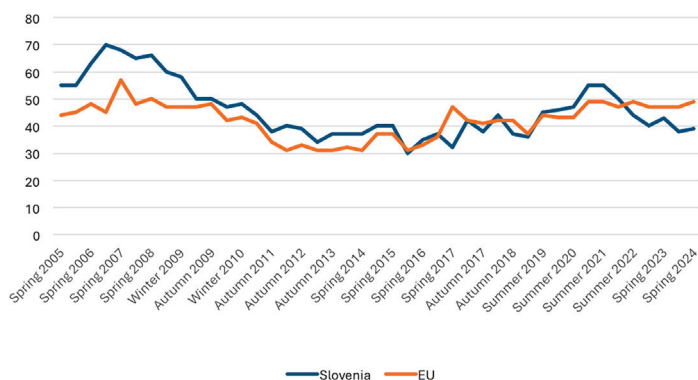


Source: own elaboration based on Eurobarometer 2024b.

<sup>5</sup> There were several reports of Russian propaganda and fake news especially in the social media. One example of this was news that Russia had offered Slovenia help after the severe floods in Slovenia in the summer of 2023.

Trust in international organisations such as the EU or NATO has not dropped as much as trust in national governments and political parties, indicating that pro-system attitudes remain relatively strong and that people primarily blamed the (ruling) national elites (Figure 3, 4). Against the background of the GFC and the crisis in the eurozone, trust in the EU fell considerably less in Slovenia than the EU average. During the migration crisis and the war in Ukraine, trust in the EU fell more than the EU average, which can be explained by the increasing role of politicisation, anti-systemic and anti-establishment forces, as explained above.<sup>6</sup> In contrast to trust in the EU, trust in NATO was generally lower in Slovenia. Still, trust in NATO was also quite stable. After an initial slump following the start of the war in Ukraine, trust in NATO has again risen to the level of trust in the EU, following Russia's successes on the front.

*Figure 3: SHARE OF RESPONDENTS WHO TRUST THE EU IN SLOVENIA AND THE EU*

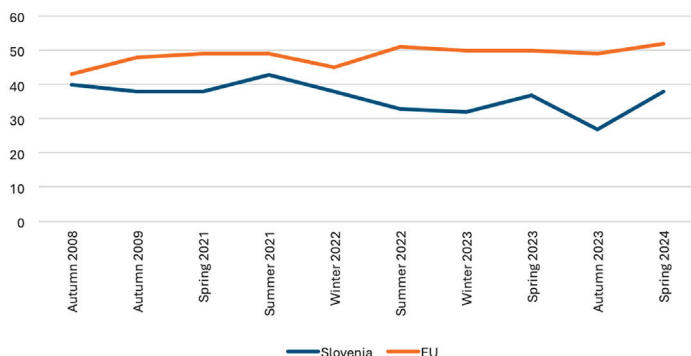


Source: own elaboration based on Eurobarometer 2024c.

The significance of the Ukraine war remained high throughout the entire period (Figure 5). Concerns about the direct effects of the war, such as energy supply and inflation, were replaced by general security concerns in the second and third years. Perceived concern and impact on life decreased from 70% and 45% to below 40% and 20% between March 2022 and March 2024 (Valicon 2024). This suggests that general political attitudes eventually became more important than direct economic costs.

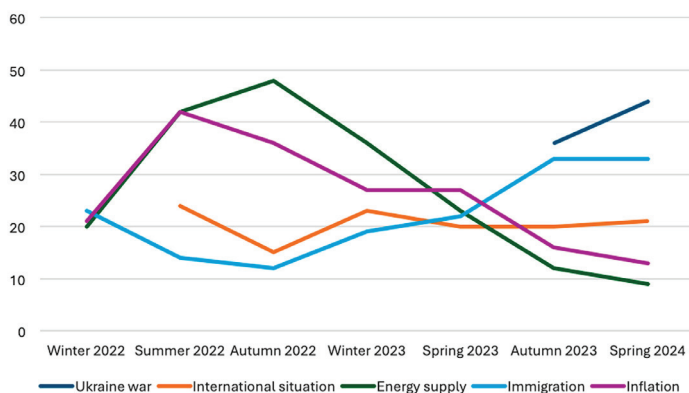
<sup>6</sup> In contrast to the migration crisis and the war in Ukraine, the COVID-19 pandemic led to increased support for the EU, which can be explained by the EU's better handling of the crisis, the tensions between the EU and the Janša government, and the broad domestic political mobilisation against Janša.

*Figure 4: SHARE OF RESPONDENTS WHO TRUST NATO IN SLOVENIA AND THE EU*



Source: own elaboration based on Eurobarometer 2024d.

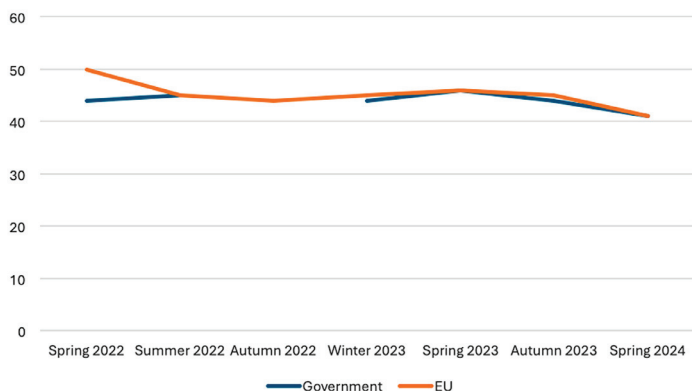
*Figure 5: MOST IMPORTANT ISSUES FACING THE EU ACCORDING TO SLOVENIAN RESPONDENTS*



Source: own elaboration based on Eurobarometer 2024e.

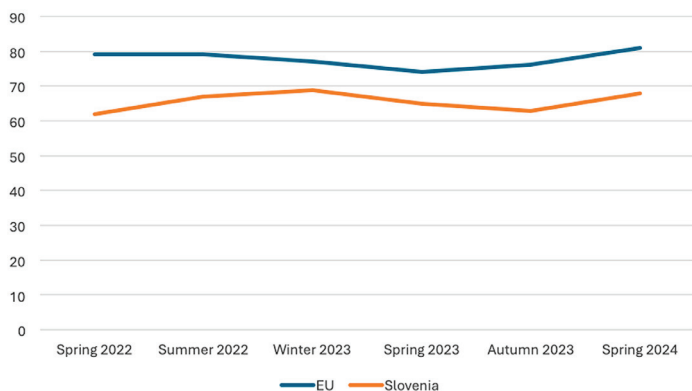
Satisfaction with the national and EU response to the invasion of Ukraine varied slightly during the Janša government and was at the same level during the Golob government (Figure 6), which is consistent with the tougher position of Janša (at the time) and the alignment of the Golob government with EU policy. Most people opposed the Janša government's measures, including his visit to Ukraine (50%), the closure of airspace by NATO and Slovenia (45%), the deployment of weapons (50%) and the return of the Slovenian diplomatic representation (around 50%) (Mediana 2022).

*Figure 6: SHARE OF RESPONDENTS WHO ARE SATISFIED WITH THE NATIONAL AND EU RESPONSE TO THE INVASION OF UKRAINE*



Source: own elaboration based on Eurobarometer 2024f.

*Figure 7: SHARE OF RESPONDENTS IN SLOVENIA WHO AGREE THAT RUSSIA'S INVASION IS A THREAT TO THE SECURITY OF THE EU/SLOVENIA*

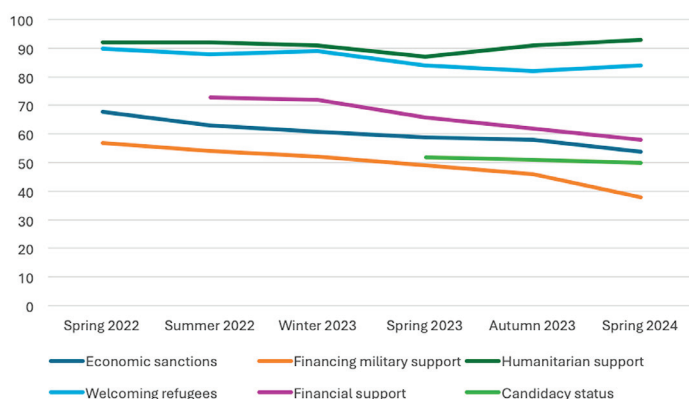


Source: own elaboration based on Eurobarometer 2024g.

Even though the general attitude to Ukraine was somewhat less positive than the EU average, public opinion was firmly on the side of Ukraine and viewed Russia as the perpetrator and a security threat. The protracted conflict led to growing scepticism regarding certain policies, while support for a joint EU response remained strong. In 2022, 44.1% of respondents blamed Russia for the conflict, 34.8% blamed Russia, Ukraine and the West, and 77.2% supported Ukraine (Ninamedia 2022). In another survey, Russia and the USA were blamed

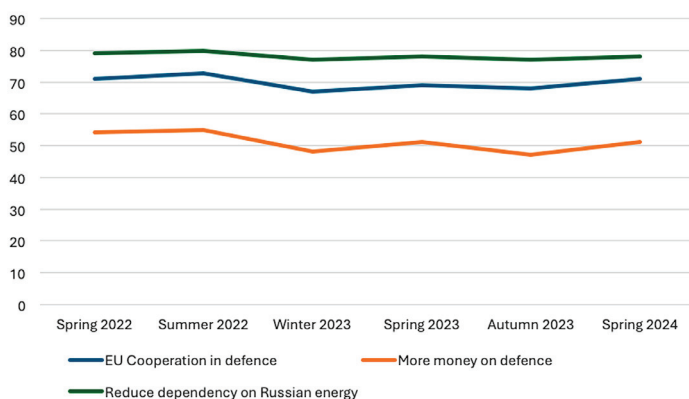
by 70% and 38% in March 2022, 62% and 48% in March 2023, and 66% and 45% in March 2024 (Valicon 2024). Russia's invasion was seen as a threat to the security of the EU by 80% of respondents and two-thirds saw it as a threat to Slovenia's national security (Figure 7). In the second and third years of the conflict, support for financial and military aid to Ukraine and for sanctions fell as these were increasingly a point of criticism of the government policy by the (old left) opposition actors, whereas support for humanitarian aid and aid for refugees remained high (Figure 8). At the same time, the majority of respondents supported the EU's joint response in terms of reducing dependence on Russian energy, greater defence cooperation and increased defence spending (Figure 9).

Figure 8: SUPPORT FOR THE POLICY ON UKRAINE IN SLOVENIA



Source: own elaboration based on Eurobarometer 2024h.

Figure 9: SUPPORT FOR THE EU POLICIES IN SLOVENIA



Source: own elaboration based on Eurobarometer 2024i.

## **POLICY OUTPUT: LIMITED ECONOMIC COSTS OF WAR**

Analysis of policy output relative to the economic costs of the war shows that Slovenia was more economically exposed to the war in Ukraine than the average EU member state. Still, the impact was limited to an increase in energy prices and inflation, especially in the first year of the war.

The Slovenian economy's total direct exposure to the war in Ukraine in terms of trade was estimated at 1.5%–2% of GDP, which places Slovenia in the group of relatively more exposed countries (Arriola et al. 2023; Hribernik 2023). In 2021, Russia accounted for 2.4% of total Slovenian exports and 1% of imports. Exports were particularly sensitive since imports could eventually be replaced by other sources. The most important exports were pharmaceutical and chemical products, while gas and oil accounted for two-thirds of imports. Dependence on Russia and Ukraine was especially high in the area of medical and pharmaceutical products as these two countries accounted for 12.5% of all direct exports (Hribernik 2023). Russia was also the fifth-most important destination country for Slovenian FDI (EUR 468 million, 6.1% of all FDI) and the most important destination country for FDI outside the countries of former Yugoslavia. Russia was among the top ten investors in Slovenia (EUR 515 million, 2.8% of all FDI; mainly in the steel industry, tourism, trade and banking) (Hribernik 2023).

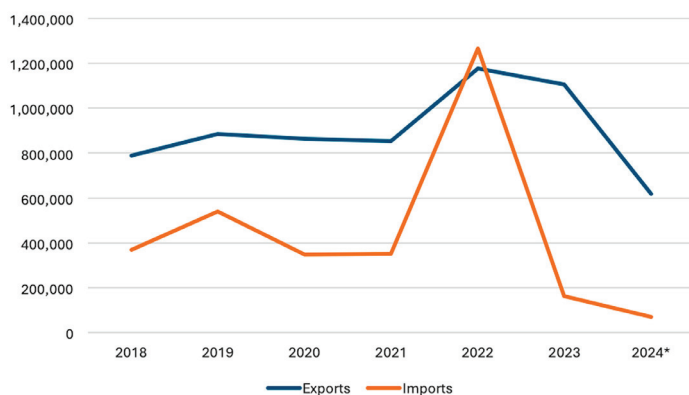
After the beginning of the war, the total value of exports and imports initially rose due to higher prices, re-exports and one-off transactions before the sanctions came into force at the end of 2022/start of 2023. Thereafter, imports decreased, especially of energy commodities, while exports were less affected because some export goods such as pharmaceuticals were exempted from the sanctions (Figure 10).<sup>7</sup>

Slovenia's total energy dependence on Russia before the war was around 18%, namely, below the EU average. Dependence on Russian gas was particularly high, with direct and indirect dependence estimated at over 75% (Eurostat 2023). Gas and electricity prices almost doubled over the course of 2022, reaching a peak in early 2023, followed by a decline. Oil prices also rose by 10%–20%. Annual inflation reached 9% in 2022 and fell to 7% in 2023, with energy prices being one of the biggest drivers alongside other commodities and food prices (SURS 2024b).

The number of EU citizens who fled Ukraine and were under temporary protection in Slovenia in July 2024 amounted to 9,475, putting Slovenia in the group of countries with a share of 0.25%–0.5% of the total population, below the EU average of 0.92% (Eurostat 2024). The immigration of Ukrainian nationals to Slovenia and the granting of protection status was not politicised by political actors and was supported by the public, as shown in the previous section.

<sup>7</sup> There were some changes in Russian FDI, e.g., the local branch of Sberbank was sold to NLB, while many other companies were not affected and even benefited from government subsidies to compensate for the high energy prices.

*Figure 10: BILATERAL TRADE BETWEEN SLOVENIA AND THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION (1000€)*



Source: own elaboration based on SURS 2024a. \*Provisional data.

## CONCLUSION: MORE POLARISED, LESS PRO-UKRAINIAN?

The war in Ukraine was a shock for the international post-war order and European security. However, not all countries reacted in the same way, thus highlighting the role of elements beyond the international system such as the ideologies of political actors, public opinion and the direct costs of the war. The aim of this article was to examine the case of Slovenia in order to better position the post-socialist small countries in CEE in the broader literature. The article builds on the literature that stresses the importance of supply-side political actors' ideologies, notably populism, Euroscepticism, radical ideologies and the dynamics between government and opposition (Hooghe et al. 2024; Stolle 2024; Fagerholm 2024). It was argued that in the context of small transition Eastern EU member states a stronger role of anti-establishment actors and attitudes coupled with stronger negative effects of war can reinforce pro-Russian attitudes.

The results of the empirical study for the period between 2022 and 2024 show that supply-side ideologies play an important role in explaining attitudes. Populist, Eurosceptic and far-right actors were more pro-Russian, while there were divisions between old and new left actors, which is consistent with the literature (Fagerholm 2024; Wurthmann and Wagner 2024; Holesch et al. 2024). The anti-system and polarising rhetoric of political actors largely fed into the government–opposition dynamics as populist and Eurosceptic parties only achieved limited results at the elections in the observed period. Analysis of the demand side showed that international developments like the ongoing crisis fostered anti-establishment, anti-system and polarising sentiments, which mainly impacted government and opposition dynamics against the backdrop of still

predominantly pro-system public attitudes. Finally, analysis of the policy output revealed that, despite the relatively high exposure compared to the average of EU member states, the economic impact was limited on energy prices and inflation.

The results show the particular vulnerability of Slovenia as a small post-socialist transition country to external shocks, which has thus far been reflected chiefly in government–opposition dynamics and less in a growing role of anti-system and anti-establishment actors, even if there are longer-term negative effects on political stability and the stability of the party system (Fink-Hafner 2024a; 2024b) as well as the trend of a growing role of anti-establishment and anti-system ideologies. Nonetheless, a higher level of polarisation may have had an impact on lower support for Ukraine, as also noted in other studies (Stolle 2024). In other CEE countries, the impact of a post-transition setting might be stronger due to more pronounced institutional quality problems and polarisation (Gessler and Wunsch 2025) together with the stronger direct effects of war (Mátyás 2024; Lovec and Mahmutović 2024). While certain developments on the supply and demand side appear to reinforce each other, future studies with more detailed process tracing could help to disentangle the supply- and demand-side effects.

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## **SLOVENSKI ODNOS DO VOJNE V UKRAJINI: POLITIČNE IDEOLOGIJE, JAVNO MNENJE IN STROŠKI POLITIKE**

**Povzetek.** Namen tega članka je pojasniti slovensko stališče do vojne v Ukrajini. Članek se opira na literaturo, ki poudarja pomen ideologij na strani »ponudbe« pri razlagi variacij, ki presegajo vlogo mednarodnega sistema, zlasti populizma, evroskepticizma, radikalnih ideologij in dinamike med vlado in opozicijo, v nasprotju z odnosom na strani »povpraševanja« in s posledicami politike. V kontekstu postsocialističnih majhnih držav močnejša vloga protisistemskih in populističnih akterjev in odnosov ter potencialno močnejši negativni učinki vojne povečujejo verjetnost diferenciranih stališč. Empirična študija prvih dveh let vojne kaže, da imajo ideologije akterjev ključno vlogo pri razlagi stališč. Populistični, evroskeptični in skrajno desni akterji so ponavadi bolj proruski, medtem ko so med akterji na levi razlike. Vendar pa je antiestablišmentsko razpoloženje vplivalo predvsem na dinamiko med vlado in opozicijo, medtem ko je volilna uspešnost protisistemskih akterjev ostala nizka; to je mogoče pojasniti s še vedno razmeroma prosistemskim odnosom javnosti in omejenim vplivom vojne.

**Ključni pojmi:** Slovenija, vojna v Ukrajini, ideologija, politične stranke, javno mnenje.