



EU Integration and Differentiation  
for Effectiveness and Accountability

Policy Papers

No. 15

August 2021

# Public Opinion on an Ever More Differentiated EU

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This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 822622

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## Abstract

European integration has been accompanied by differentiation and debates on it are not new. Differentiated integration has received wide scholarly attention and there is a rich and diverse academic literature related to the concept. At the same time, there is the growing belief among European policymakers that more flexibility is needed within the complex EU machinery. To deal with the EU's unprecedented internal and external challenges, several European leaders have argued that differentiation could contribute to a stronger EU. Except for a few studies, the discussion has, however, paid little attention to public opinion. Drawing on the results of an opinion poll conducted between August and September 2020 in the 27 EU member states and four non-EU states, this policy paper addresses this gap in the current political debate. It examines the preferences on European integration among citizens in order to formulate options for differentiated integration as a policy choice. Against this background, the paper proposes a set of three policy recommendations for European policymakers: (i) foster knowledge of differentiated integration among European citizens, (ii) promote and reform the Schengen area and (iii) adopt a tailor-made approach to external differentiation.

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# Executive summary

Initially, differentiated integration (DI) was faced with resistance as it contrasted with the ideal of a uniform European integration process (Koenig 2015). Yet, over the years an increasing number of pragmatic pro-European experts and policymakers have endorsed the idea to respond to national backlashes in multiple member states and counter disintegration of the EU. Yet, so far, the political discussion has paid little attention to public opinion. Drawing on the results of an opinion poll conducted between August and September 2020 in the 27 EU member states and four non-EU states (the UK, Ukraine, Turkey, Norway),<sup>1</sup> this paper examines the prospect of differentiated integration as a policy choice by investigating the preferences on European integration among citizens. Against this backdrop, this paper advances a set of *seven findings* to contribute to the debate on differentiation as a policy choice in view of public opinion.

First, the paper highlights *deficient public understanding of differentiated integration*. Citizens seem uncertain about what to make of the various options for differentiated integration. Against this background, policymakers should promote information exchange and strengthen the dialogue with European citizens. Formats like the Conference on the Future of Europe should be used for this purpose. This will allow citizens to make more informed choices and question some of the populist rhetoric (Tortola 2019).

Second, *European integration and DI do not necessarily contrast*. In fact, supporters of European integration are also more likely to support DI. Viewed in the sense of an avant-garde, DI can be seen as a way out of a decision-making impasse, ultimately deepening integration. At the same time, the notion of flexibility attached to DI also resonates with those who oppose deeper integration.

Third, *public opinion of DI is not independent from governmental choices*. While there are no clear-cut geographic patterns regarding general support for DI, there is a remarkable match between elite stances and our public opinion data regarding several policy areas, such as preferences on the euro, financial solidarity or responsibility-sharing in the context of migration policy (see take-away number five). These findings are, of course, not indicative of any causal relationship between elite cues and public attitudes. However, they suggest that national political contexts matter for the formation of public opinion on differentiated integration.

Fourth, there is a *geographic divide regarding the support for deeper economic integration and the eurozone*. Citizens from Northern and Western countries seem to be less likely to support deeper economic integration than those from Southern member states. Meanwhile, Southern European citizens tend to be more sceptical of the benefits of the euro. This finding would have to be tested based on larger country samples for all EU member states.

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1 In this paper, countries are referred to by their official abbreviation: Austria (AT), Belgium (BE), Bulgaria (BG), Cyprus (CY), Czechia (CZ), Germany (DE), Denmark (DK), Estonia (EE), Spain (ES), Finland (FI), France (FR), United Kingdom (GB), Greece (EL), Croatia (HR), Hungary (HU), Ireland (IE), Italy (IT), Lithuania (LT), Luxembourg (LU), Latvia (LV), Malta (MT), the Netherlands (NL), Norway (NO), Poland (PL), Portugal (PT), Romania (RO), Sweden (SE), Slovenia (SI), Slovakia (SK), Turkey (TR), Ukraine (UA).

Fifth, the paper exposes *some lack of public support for Schengen* – a classic example of a policy area marked by differentiation. European citizens seem to be less aware of the benefits of Schengen and the link to their free movement rights. These doubts might have been fuelled by the mobility restrictions in the Schengen area imposed during the pandemic. In order to respond to this trend, European policymakers need to both promote the benefits of Schengen and the free movement of people, as well as engage in necessary reforms to provide clear rules and enhance transparency.

Sixth, the paper suggests that, on average, *EU citizens are sceptical of differentiation as a response to major challenges*. In times of crises, citizens want a strong and unified EU and less differentiation. Instead of exploring special arrangements for individual member states, policymakers should therefore focus on common European action, in particular regarding economic and migration-related crises.

Finally, *citizens from third countries diverge regarding their preferences on the scope and content of cooperation*. Ukrainian citizens seem to be most in favour of closer ties while opinions in Norway, the UK and Turkey are more divided. Aside from trade, which is generally considered to be the most beneficial area of cooperation, third-country citizens vary in terms of their policy-specific cooperation preferences. The EU should therefore replace its one-size-fits-all approach to partnerships with non-EU states and adopt instead a tailor-made approach to external differentiation.


## 1. Introduction and methodology

“United in diversity” is the official motto of the European Union.<sup>2</sup> European integration has been accompanied by differentiation, and debates on differentiated integration are not new. Due to subsequent enlargement rounds and growing preference heterogeneity, European integration has become differentiated, requiring a range of special arrangements for individual member states. In the framework of the EU IDEA project, differentiated integration (DI) is defined as any modality of integration or cooperation that allows states (members of the European Union and non-members) and sub-state entities to work together in non-homogeneous, flexible ways.

Recent political developments like Brexit have intensified the debate among experts on the desirability of differentiated integration in the EU. Thus, over the past years, differentiation has featured prominently in political debates. Yet, when it comes to deriving implications for DI as a policy choice, we are faced with a long-standing and unresolved debate on the balance between opportunities and threats. On the one hand, DI is associated with fears of a “split Europe”, especially since the eurozone debt crisis (von Ondarza 2013). On the other hand, experts have suggested that differentiation is not a threat to political unity (Tekin et al. 2019) as some mechanisms of differentiation could improve the EU’s efficiency and political legitimacy (Piris 2012). In recent years, differentiation has been advocated by pro-European leaders and EU policymakers. This shows that the concept is not solely used by Eurosceptics

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2 EU website: *The EU motto*, [https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/symbols/motto\\_en](https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/symbols/motto_en).



advocating an exit of their country from the EU (Leruth et al. 2019). Instead, pro-European leaders like French President Macron have argued that differentiation could contribute to a stronger EU (Macron 2017).<sup>3</sup> In its 2017 White Paper on the Future of Europe, the European Commission also highlights increased differentiated integration as a third scenario allowing those who “want to do more”, to do more (European Commission 2017).

Alongside academic and political arguments, a sound analysis of differentiation as a policy choice also requires a better understanding of how European citizens view differentiation. This is important at a time when the EU is seeking to involve citizens more directly in the discussion on the future of European integration through participatory formats such as the Conference on the Future of Europe. This paper explores linkages between citizens’ attitudes and the political debate on differentiation as a policy practice. The analysis of differentiation as a policy practice examines the reality of differentiation as a policy choice by European policymakers. The paper thereby also addresses a gap in the academic literature on differentiated integration (Leruth et al. 2019, Schimmelfennig et al. 2015, Dyson and Sepos 2010). Except for a few studies (Leuffen et al. 2020), the scholarly literature has paid little attention to the role of public opinion.

To examine the prospects of differentiated integration as a policy choice, this policy paper investigates the preferences on European integration among citizens. It presents and analyses the results of an opinion poll<sup>4</sup> conducted between 8 August 2020 and 28 September 2020 amongst citizens in the 27 EU member states<sup>5</sup> and four non-EU states.<sup>6</sup> Taken together, the weighted EU-27 sample (n=11692) is representative at the EU level. The brunt of the analysis therefore focuses on overall EU public opinion or comparisons between large groups of countries.

In addition, there are seven focus countries with sample sizes over 1000 observations which allow for some cross-country comparisons. They include the five EU members with the largest population size (Germany, France, Italy, Spain, Poland) as well as Belgium and the Netherlands as founding members. The UK, Ukraine, Turkey and

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3 “Let’s embrace the differentiations, the vanguard, the heart of Europe [...]. No State must be excluded from the process, but no country must be able to block those wanting to make faster progress or forge further ahead.”

4 The poll was conducted by Dalia Research/Latana across 27 EU member states, as well as the UK, Ukraine, Turkey and Norway. The sample of n=16331 was drawn across all 32 countries taking into account current population distributions with regard to age (16-69 years), gender and region/country. In order to obtain census representative results, the data were weighted based upon the most recent Eurostat statistics in the EU and UK and based upon Barro Lee for the non-EU countries. The target weighting variables were age, gender, level of education (as defined by ISCED (2011) levels 0-2, 3-4, and 5-8), and degree of urbanisation (rural and urban). An iterative algorithm was used to identify the optimal combination of weighting variables based on sample composition within each country.

5 Austria (202), Belgium (1,094), Bulgaria (159), Cyprus (21), Czech Republic (255), Germany (1,736), Denmark (129), Estonia (34), Spain (1,091), Finland (121), France (1,388), Greece (243), Croatia (100), Hungary (228), Ireland (108), Italy (1,331), Lithuania (62), Luxembourg (16), Latvia (46), Malta (15), Netherlands (1,118), Poland (1,103), Portugal (237), Romania (462), Sweden (218), Slovenia (51), Slovak Republic (124).

6 United Kingdom (1,388), Norway (1,085), Turkey (1,074), Ukraine (1,092).

Norway were selected as crucial case studies for non-EU countries with substantial links to the EU. At the same time these four countries represent different types of relations with the EU. The UK is a former EU member state, Norway has turned down EU membership in two popular referenda and Turkey is the accession candidate with the longest history with the EU, waiting for membership since the 1980s. By contrast, Ukraine has expressed the desire of joining the EU since the 1990s.<sup>7</sup>

Operationalising DI in the context of an opinion poll is not without difficulties due to the conceptual ambiguity surrounding the term. The terminology in use ranges from a “two- or multi-speed Europe”, a “Europe of concentric circles”, “variable geometry”, “core Europe” and a “Europe à la carte” to the Treaty instruments of “enhanced cooperation” and “Permanent Structured Cooperation” (Stubb 1996, Dyson and Sepos 2010, Holzinger and Schimmelfennig 2012, Hvidsten and Hovi 2015, Jensen and Slapin 2012, Leuffen et al. 2013). All these notions share the idea that member states integrate to different degrees within the EU and that the EU is faced with heterogeneity (Holzinger and Tosun 2019). According to the EU IDEA Conceptual Glossary, DI refers to “a process of integration in which the Member States, potentially joined by non-EU members, opt to move forward at different speeds and/or towards different objectives”.

In line with this definition, this policy paper makes a distinction between internal and external differentiation. *Internal differentiation* is understood as the differentiation among EU member states, while *external differentiation* refers to the selective policy integration of non-member states (Schimmelfennig et al. 2015). Experts have also referred to external differentiation beyond EU borders as “inducing-in”, providing non-member states with incentives to adopt EU rules (Holzinger and Tosun 2019).

To allow for an encompassing view of public preferences on DI, we included both questions<sup>8</sup> on general preferences on European integration and questions regarding specific examples of differentiation in three selected policy areas displaying different patterns of internal and external differentiation: (1) economic governance and eurozone; (2) foreign, security and defence policy; (3) Area of freedom, security and justice.

The closer examination of the polling results is structured around three sections. Section 2 of this paper focuses on public opinion on internal differentiation and outlines findings from the entire EU sample as well as the EU focus countries. Section 3 looks at public opinion on differentiation in the four selected third countries. Finally, based on the results of the opinion poll, section 4 formulates a set of policy recommendation on differentiation as a policy choice.

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7 The poll and paper were finalised before Ukraine was granted candidate status in 2022.

8 Alongside two horizontal questions, six targeted ones (two for each policy area) were included in the opinion poll. Moreover, specific questions were posed to citizens in non-EU states. See Annex.

## 2. Internal differentiation: Views from EU citizens

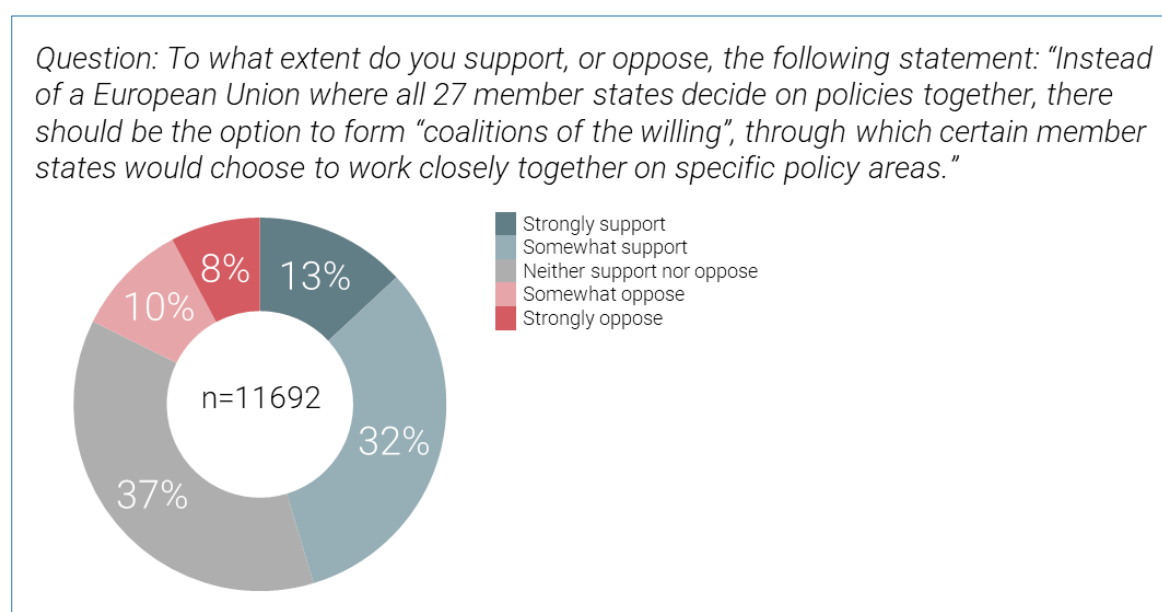
In the following, we present key takeaways regarding public opinion on differentiation within the EU. Section 2.1 starts by reviewing general patterns underlying support for DI. Section 2.2 addresses variation of public opinion across three policy areas. Finally, section 2.3 reviews public support of differentiation in crisis situations in these three policy fields.

### 2.1 Public support for DI and underlying patterns

The poll offers mixed results regarding general support for DI. In the questionnaire, support for “coalitions of the willing” was used to operationalise the concept of differentiation. Figure 1 shows that the largest share of respondents (45 per cent) somewhat or strongly support DI while 18 per cent indicate that they are somewhat or strongly opposed. With 37 per cent, a very large share of respondents claimed to be indifferent.

A closer look at the focus countries shows that cross-national variation for this item cannot be clearly attributed to national specificities. In the Netherlands (53 per cent), Belgium (50 per cent), France (49 per cent) and Poland (46 per cent), support for DI is above average. Germany (45 per cent) and Italy (44 per cent) are equal to or very close to the average. Support is lowest in Spain (37 per cent) where the share of respondents that claim to be indifferent is also highest (43 per cent).

**Figure 1** | Public support of differentiated integration

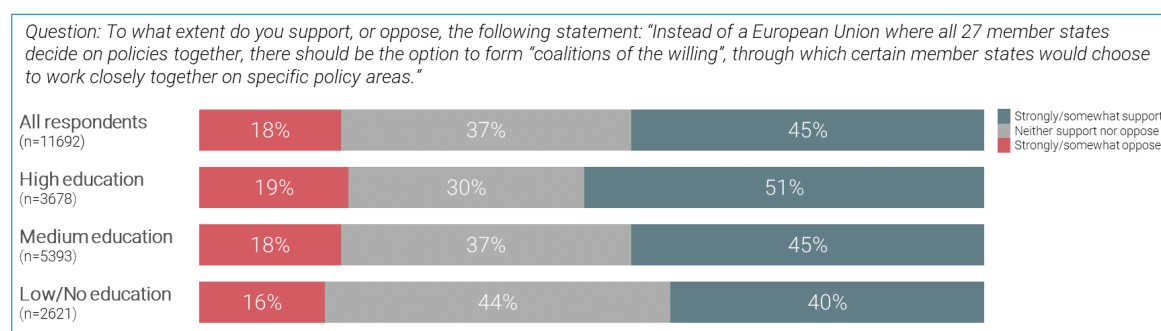




## 2.1.1 Limited understanding of the concept

The large share of agnostics may indicate a lack of understanding of the concept of DI/coalitions of the willing. This interpretation is backed by the finding that both support for DI and indifference correlate with the degree of education (see Figure 2). Fifty-one per cent of the respondents with high education support the option of “coalitions of the willing” while 19 per cent oppose it. Support is lower among respondents with medium education (45 per cent) and low or no education (40 per cent). This is in line with previous research showing that highly educated citizens are more supportive of differentiation (Leuffen et al. 2020: 13). At the same time, less educated respondents are more likely to be indifferent to DI. Even so, the fact that the share of agnostics is above 30 per cent across all categories indicates that there is a broader lack of understanding of the concept of DI among citizens.

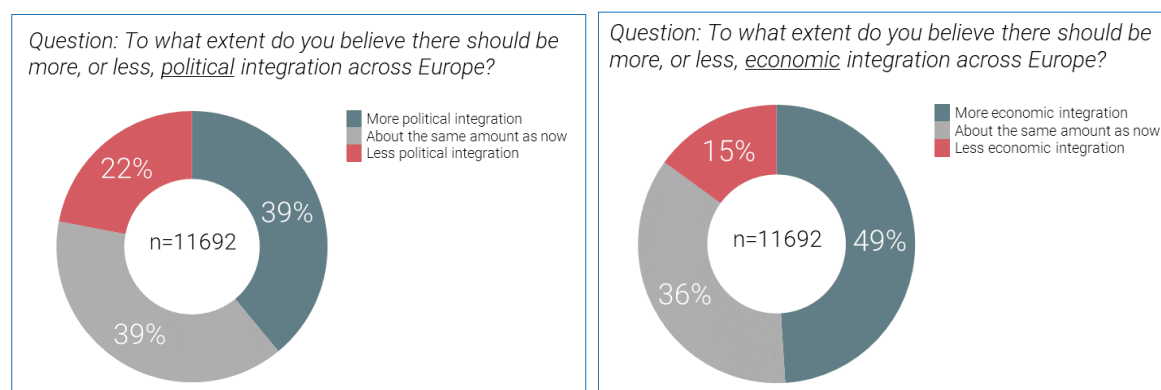
**Figure 2** | Public support of DI according to the level of education



## 2.1.2 Support of DI and general attitudes towards integration

Aside from the large share of agnostics, the poll reveals interesting linkages between support for differentiation and general attitudes towards European integration. The results show that support for political (39 per cent) and particularly economic integration (49 per cent) is relatively high (see Figure 3).

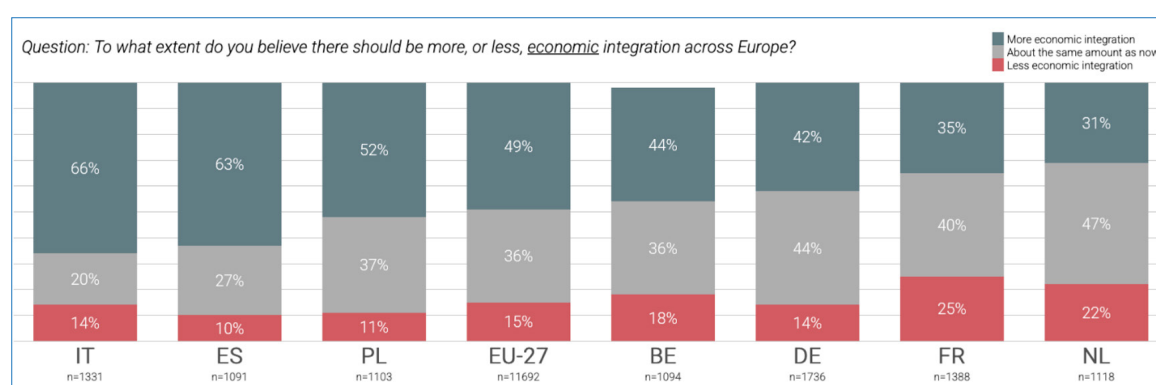
**Figure 3** | Public support for political and economic integration





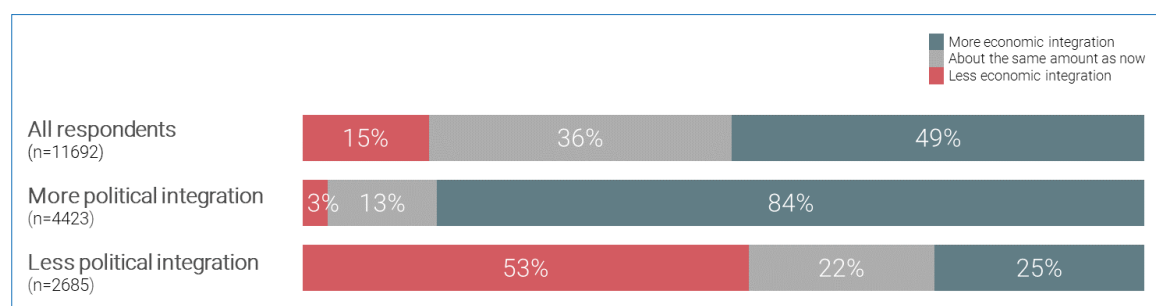
Regarding economic integration, a look at selected EU member states reveals an interesting geographic divide. Citizens from Southern European member states such as Italy (66 per cent) and Spain (63 per cent) are far more likely to support further economic integration than those in Northern and Western countries such as Belgium (44 per cent), Germany (42 per cent), France (35 per cent) and the Netherlands (31 per cent) that tend to prefer the status quo. This could be related to the fact that citizens associate deeper economic integration with the notion of financial solidarity (Miró 2022). These findings would have to be tested based on larger country samples for all EU members.

**Figure 4** | Public support for economic integration



Unsurprisingly, there is a significant correlation between support of political and economic integration. As Figure 5 shows, 84 per cent of the respondents who are in favour of more political integration are also supportive of further economic integration.

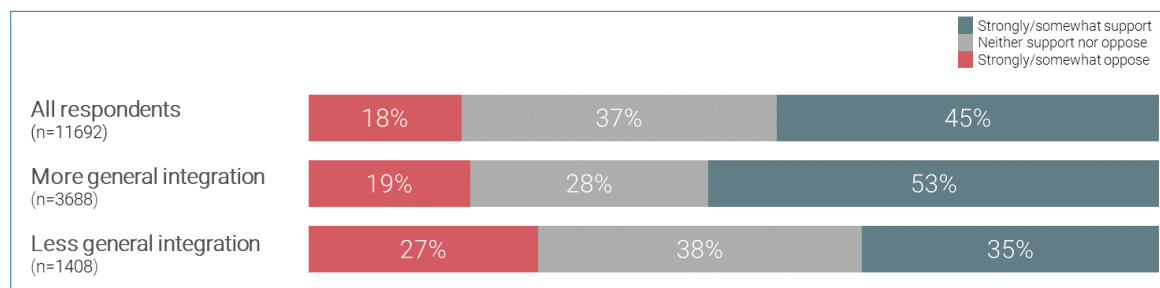
**Figure 5** | Correlation between public support for political and economic integration



More interestingly, the results show that supporters of European (political and economic) integration are also more likely to support differentiation. As seen in Figure 6, 53 per cent of the respondents who indicate support for more general integration also favour DI. The share of supporters of differentiation is substantially lower (35 per cent) among those wanting less integration. On the one hand, these findings indicate that there is no contradiction between deeper integration and more differentiation. Supporters of integration may see differentiation as a second-best option if integration at 27 fails due to preference heterogeneity. On the other hand,

differentiation also resonates with more than one third of opponents of integration, and less than a quarter of respondents in this category oppose it. These citizens may instead see the benefits of the flexibility that DI offers. This mirrors the fact that both Eurosceptic and Europhile policymakers promote DI as a policy choice.

**Figure 6** | Correlation between public support for European integration and DI



## 2.2 Public opinion and variation across policy areas

Aside from general attitudes towards DI, the survey included policy-specific items to track preference variation from one policy area to the other. Many policy areas contain some form of differentiation. We chose the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) and Schengen area as classic examples of policy areas marked by differentiation (De Somer et al. 2020). We also included EU defence policy as an area where we have seen emerging patterns of both internal and external differentiation.

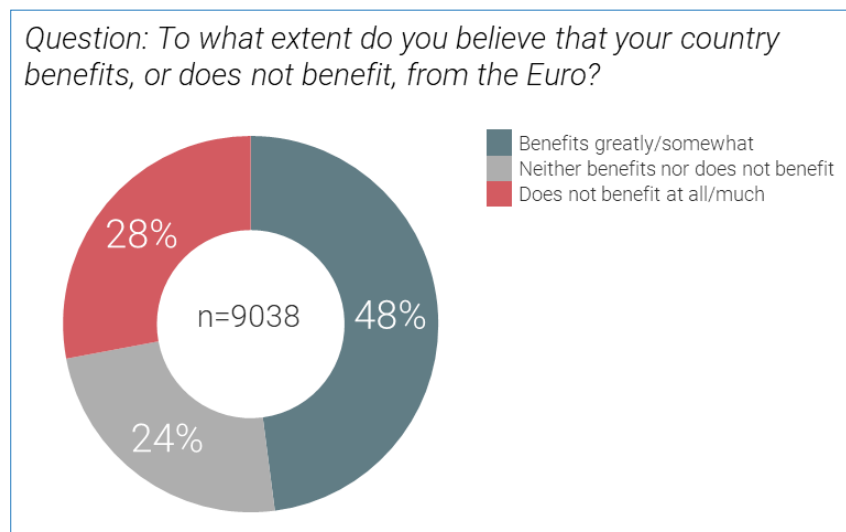
### 2.2.1 The EMU

All EU member states are legally committed to join the euro, except for Denmark which has a permanent opt-out. Sweden has a de facto opt-out. It is legally bound to join but intentionally avoids meeting the economic convergence criteria for joining the eurozone due to a negative referendum result on the question (Pilati and De Angelis 2020). As other EU member states have so far not met the convergence criteria, only 19 EU member states are part of the eurozone. Experts commonly refer to this as the “multi-speed” European economic area model (Sandholz 1993).

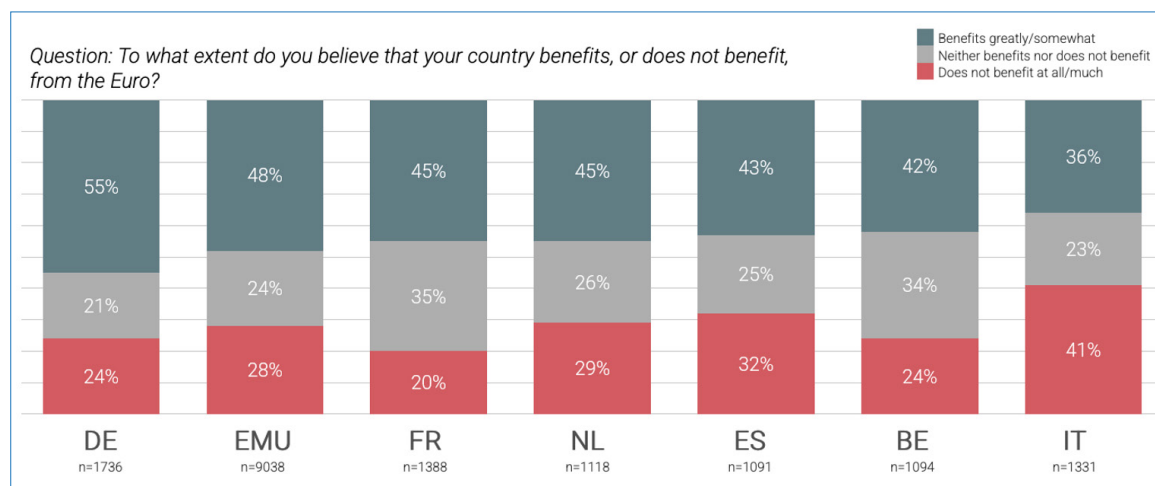
The EMU-related questions in the opinion poll were addressed to citizens from both eurozone and non-eurozone countries.<sup>9</sup> We will discuss the results separately in the following section. Figure 7 shows the responses from eurozone countries. With 48 per cent the largest share of respondents thinks that their country benefits from the euro. However, almost one third believe that their country does not benefit much or at all from the common currency.

<sup>9</sup> The opinion poll weighted: European Union – weighted average for the 27 member states; eurozone: BE, FR, IT, LU, DE, AT, ES, PT, IE, NE, FI, EL, EE, SI, CY, MT, SK, LV, LT (n=9038); non eurozone: BG, CZ, DK, HR, HU, PL, RO, SE (n=2654).

**Figure 7** | Eurozone opinion



**Figure 8** | Opinion on benefits from the euro in eurozone countries

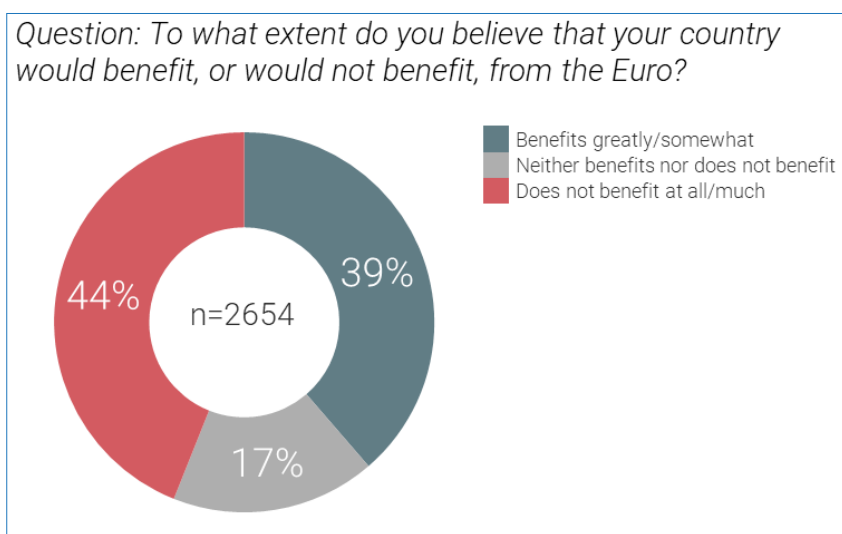


Among the focus countries (see Figure 8), only Germany (55 per cent) is above the EMU average concerning a positive view of the benefits from the euro. Citizens in Southern European countries like Italy (41 per cent) and Spain (32 per cent) have doubts about the euro's benefits (see Figure 8). This could be a consequence of the financial and sovereign debt crises. The eurozone crises triggered a reshaping of the EMU and experts have pointed out that the austerity reforms imposed by the EU in exchange for assistance were conceived as too restrictive by the publics in Southern European countries like Greece, Spain and Italy (Pilati and De Angelis 2020). Meanwhile, we also see relatively large shares of citizens doubting the benefits of the euro in Northern member states such as the Netherlands (29 per cent).

Citizens of EU member states that do not belong to the eurozone are more sceptical of the benefits of the euro (see Figure 9). Forty-four per cent of the respondents believe that their country would not benefit from joining the euro, as compared to 39 per cent who have a more positive assessment. In the focus country Poland, 53 per

cent of respondents indicate that they do not believe in the benefits of the euro as compared to 34 per cent that believe it would benefit their country.

**Figure 9** | Opinion on benefits from the euro in non-eurozone countries



## 2.2.2 Schengen

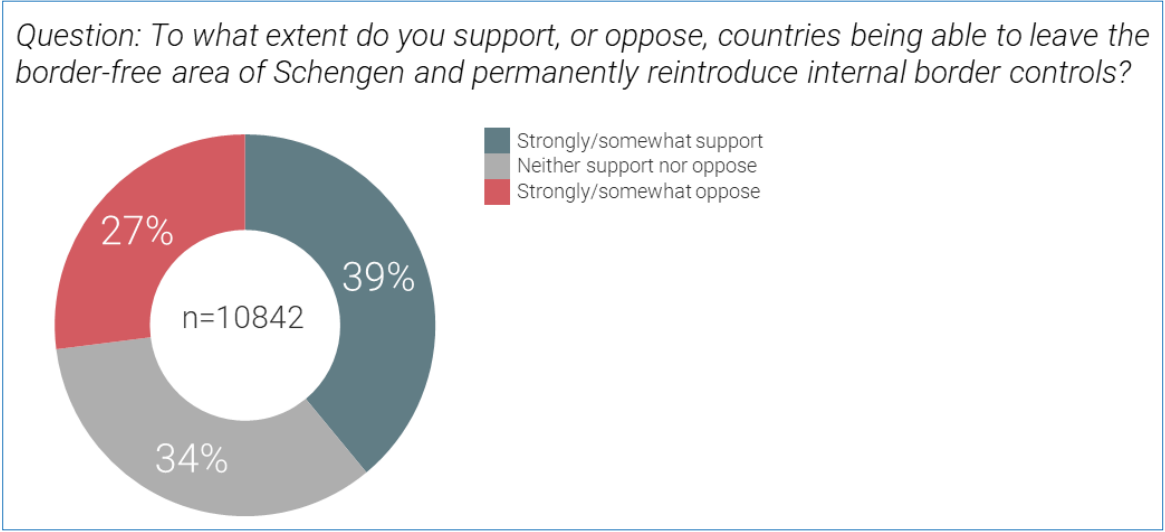
Schengen is another classical example of DI. There are 26 Schengen states<sup>10</sup> including four non-EU states (Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland) and excluding five EU members (Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Ireland and Romania).<sup>11</sup> Schengen was designed to gradually abolish internal borders while simultaneously strengthening controls at the external borders in accordance with a single set of rules. At the same time, the Schengen system allows for a certain degree of flexibility and enables its members to temporarily reintroduce internal border controls when faced with a serious threat to public policy or internal security (De Somer et al. 2020).

To measure support for Schengen as a model of DI, citizens were asked whether they support the option of being able to leave the Schengen area and permanently reintroduce internal border controls. The results show that 39 per cent of respondents support an exit option while 27 per cent oppose it (see Figure 10). Pointing towards lack of public support for Schengen, these results seemingly contrast with a range of public opinion polls showing that EU citizens consider free movement to be the most valued public good offered by the EU (e.g., Garton Ash et al. 2021). The 2020 EU Citizenship Report even shows that support for free movement was at its highest (European Commission 2020).

<sup>10</sup> DE, AT, BE, CZ, DK, EE, FI, FR, GR, HU, (IS), IT, LV, (LI), LT, LU, MT, NL, (NO), PL, PT, SK, SI, ES, SE, (CH).

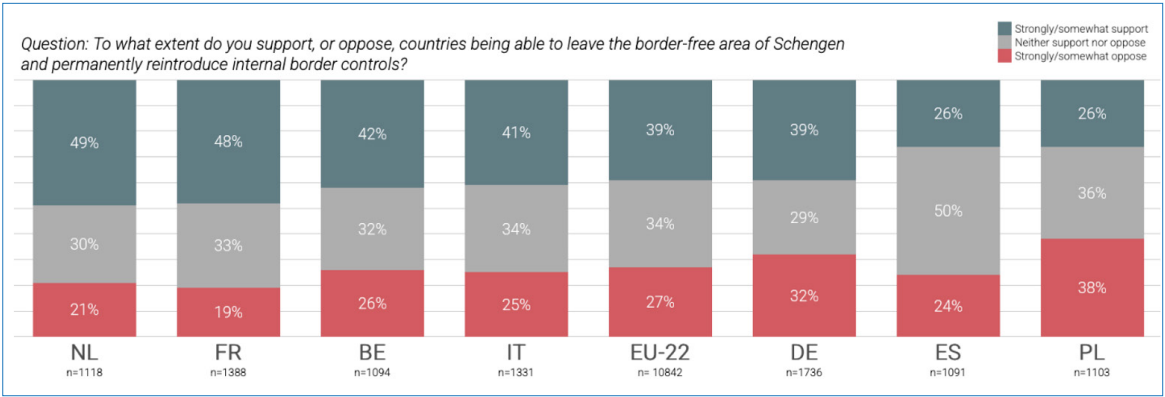
<sup>11</sup> Bulgaria, Croatia and Romania are in a transition process of joining the Schengen Area and are already applying the Schengen *acquis*.

**Figure 10** | Public support for Schengen



This apparent paradox should be seen in the context of the pandemic. The poll was conducted at a time when most member states had reintroduced temporary border checks to contain the virus. In fact, 18 of the 26 Schengen countries re-established controls at their borders with other Schengen countries (Schade 2021, De Somer et al. 2020). These measures were not necessarily in breach of the Schengen Borders Code (SBC), which allows members to temporarily reintroduce internal border controls under well-justified conditions (Carrera and Luk 2020). Respondents might not have been aware of the flexibility within the Schengen system, nor of the implications of its disintegration for free movement. This would also explain why 34 per cent of respondents neither supported nor opposed the reintroduction of internal border controls at the time of the survey. The relative indifference, possibly based on a lack of understanding of the link between Schengen and free movement rights, could pose a risk for Schengen going forward.

**Figure 11** | Public support for Schengen in selected EU member states



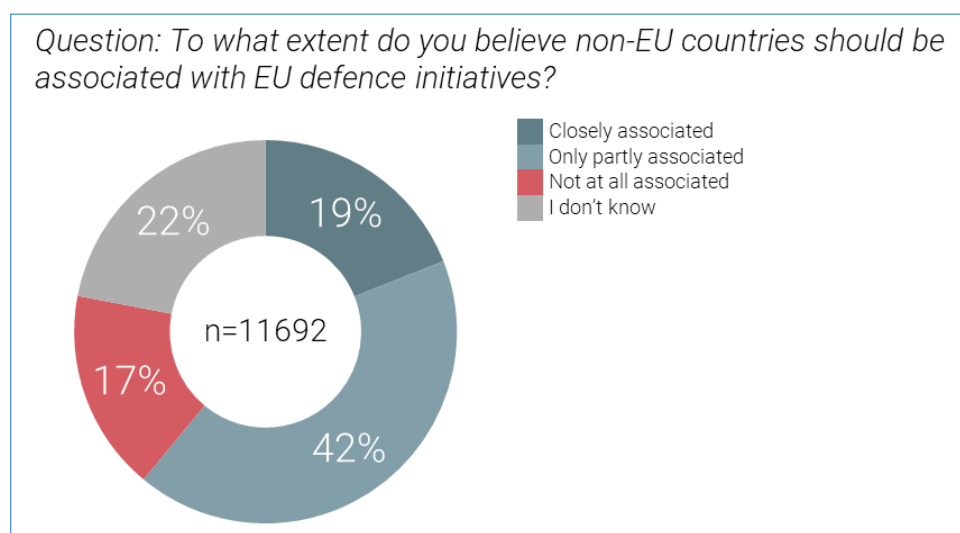
When looking at the focus countries, no clear explanatory patterns can be discerned (see Figure 11). Interestingly, the share of Polish respondents opposing an exit option and the restoration of border control (38 per cent) is well above the Schengen-22 average of 27 per cent. Once again, this could be related to the pandemic context,

which drove the restoration of border controls at the time of the survey. In mid-March 2020, the sudden closure of the Polish borders led to unprecedented traffic jams and prevented significant cross-border movements of freight and people (Schade 2021).

### 2.2.3 EU defence policy and cooperation with third countries

As mentioned in the introduction, cooperation with non-EU member states in specific policy areas, referred to as external differentiation, is common (Biscop 2017). Association with third countries has been a topical issue in the field of defence in recent years regarding hallmark initiatives such as Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the European Defence Fund (EDF). The question of to what extent or how closely non-EU countries should be associated was controversially discussed among member states.

**Figure 12** | Public support for DI in defence

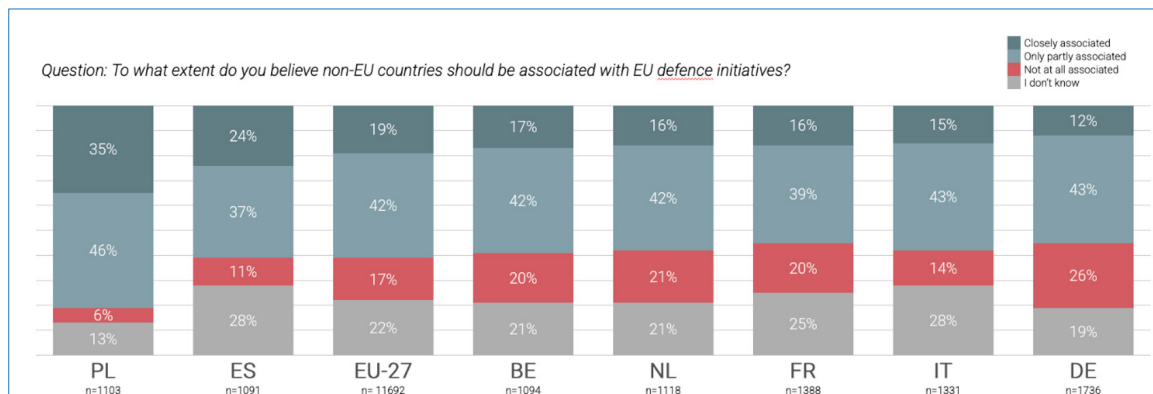


The polling results indicate that a total of 61 per cent of EU citizens favour external differentiation, and thus some form of association of third countries, in the field of defence. However, as shown by Figure 12, the largest share (42 per cent) support partial rather than close association. This matches the political compromises for PESCO and the EDF, which allow for association but under relatively strict conditions. Seventeen percent oppose any form of association.

A closer look at the focus countries (see Figure 13) shows that there is little variation in terms of the support for the association of third countries across Spain (61 per cent), Belgium (59 per cent), the Netherlands (58 per cent), France (55 per cent), Italy (58 per cent) and Germany (55 per cent). Poland constitutes an outlier with 81 per cent of respondents favouring partial or close association and only 6 per cent oppose it. These findings match the Polish elite's preference for the association of third countries, notably the US and the UK, to the EU's defence initiatives, displayed also in the negotiations on third country participation in the EDF and PESCO (Brudzińska

et al. 2020).

**Figure 13** | Public support for DI in defence in selected EU member states



## 2.3 The differentiation-integration nexus in times of crises

It has become a commonplace to say that Europe is forged in crises. In fact, the poll results show that for major challenges, EU citizens favour a common European response, as compared to a differentiated approach by only a group of member states. The opinion poll focused on three types of challenges: economic crises, international conflicts and migration flows.

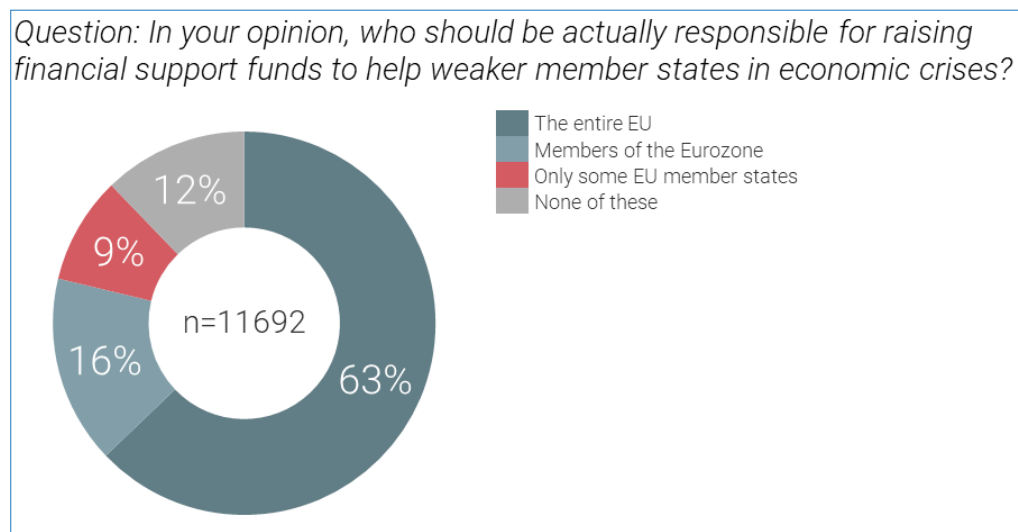
### 2.3.1 Economic crises

Figure 14 shows that regarding economic crises, 63 per cent of respondents believe that the EU should be responsible for raising joint funds to support weaker states that are faced with economic difficulties. Sixteen per cent believe that this task should fall to the eurozone and only 9 per cent believe that financial support should be provided only by some member states. The polling results could reflect the debate regarding economic recovery from the pandemic.

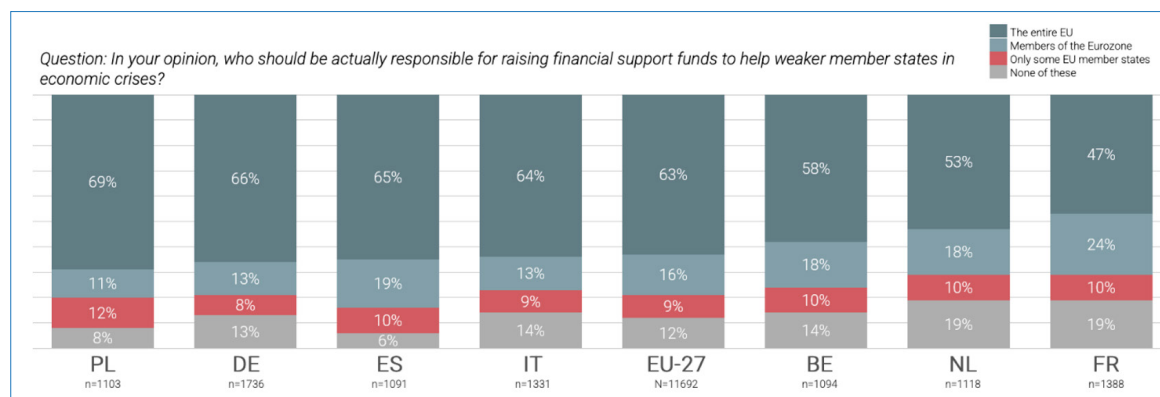
Figure 15 shows that respondents from Poland, Germany, Spain, Italy and Belgium deviate only slightly from the EU average and thus believe the entire EU to be responsible for raising financial support. France deserves a closer look: only 47 per cent of respondents believe that the entire EU should raise financial support in economic crises while almost a quarter believe that only the eurozone countries should be responsible. The contrast with Germany is stark where 66 per cent view this as an EU responsibility and only 13 per cent as a eurozone responsibility. This difference could be related to France's traditional positioning in favour of a two-speed Europe, centred on the eurozone (with its own budget), which Germany and others tend to oppose (Popławski 2017).



**Figure 14** | Public support for joint financing



**Figure 15** | Public support for joint financing in selected EU member states



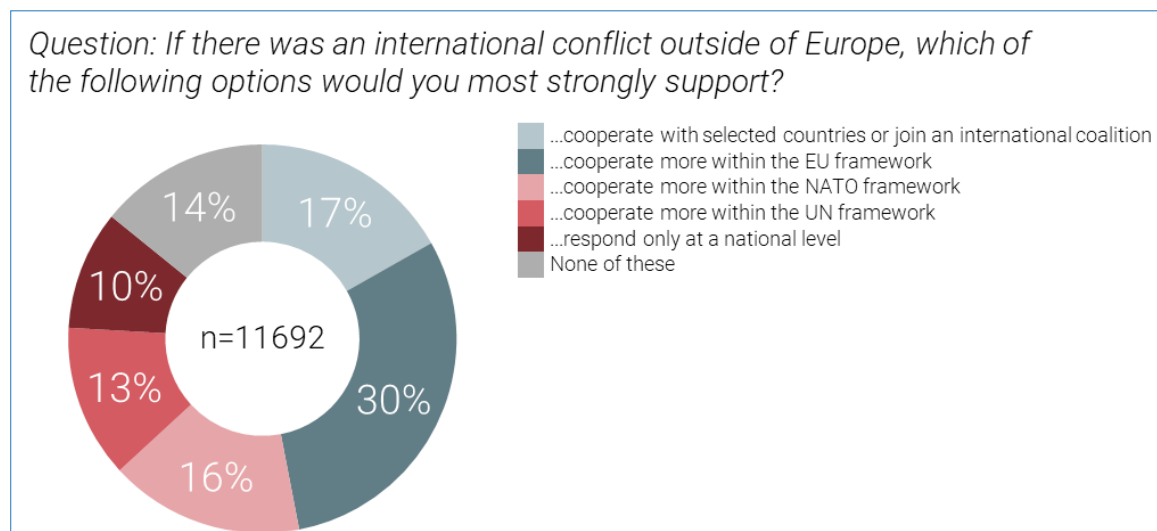
## 2.3.2 Security-related crises

In recent years, we have seen an increasing number of crisis management operations outside established alliances and frameworks. Nonetheless, the poll showed that joint EU operations are the preferred option for EU citizens. As Figure 16 highlights, 30 per cent of the respondents support a European response to an international conflict. Coalitions of the willing come second with 17 per cent. Sixteen percent support NATO-led operations and only 13 per cent opt for the UN framework. The least favoured option is a national response, which only 10 per cent support.

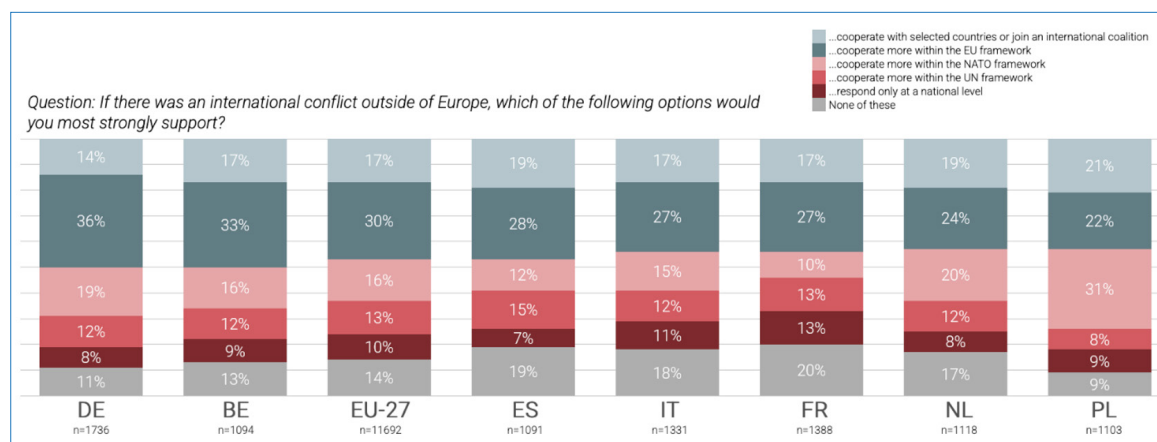
As seen in Figure 17, there is not too much variation across focus countries (from 14 per cent in Germany to 21 per cent in Poland) regarding DI in crisis management, i.e., coalitions of the willing. Support for an EU framework is slightly more varied. It is above average in Germany (36 per cent) and Belgium (33 per cent). Support is lowest in Poland (22 per cent), which reflects its sceptical stance towards an EU role in security and defence. Meanwhile, support for NATO-led missions is highest among Polish respondents (31 per cent), followed by two other traditional pro-NATO

countries: the Netherlands (20 per cent) and Germany (19 per cent). Support for the NATO option is lowest among French respondents (10 per cent), again mirroring the elite's long-standing scepticism towards the Alliance.

**Figure 16** | Public preferences for international conflict response



**Figure 17** | Public preferences for international conflict response in selected EU member states

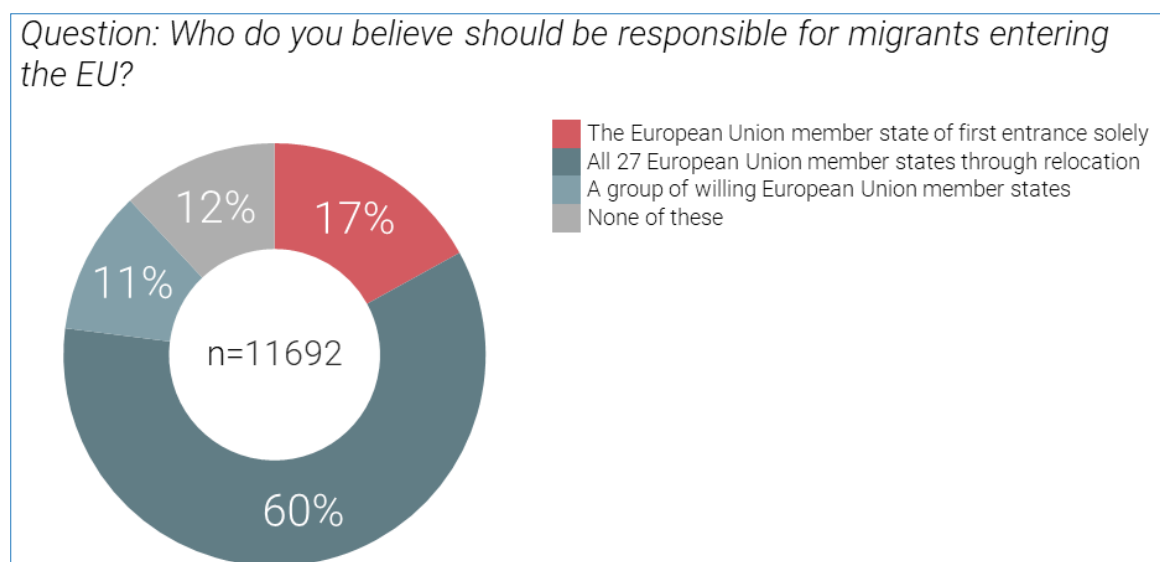


### 2.3.3 The so-called “immigration and refugee crisis”

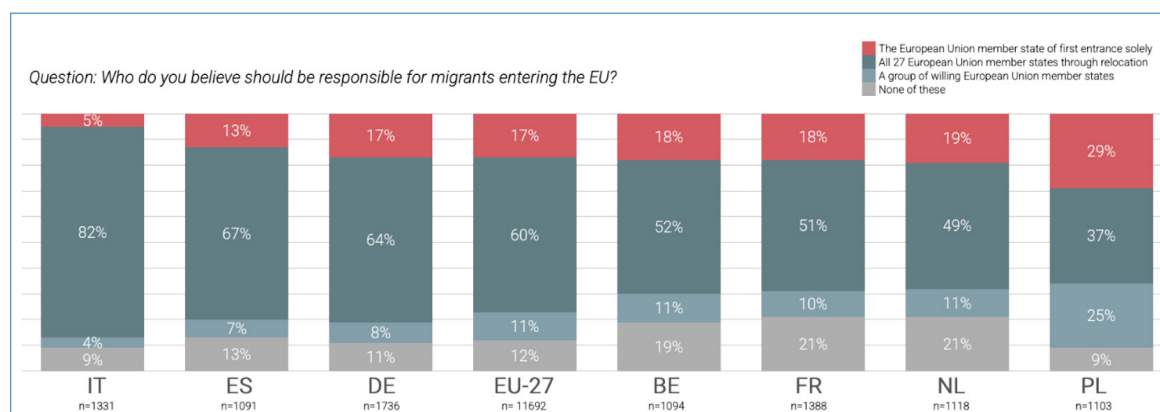
Migration represents another important global challenge that has raised the question of DI (Szymańska 2019). As outlined by the academic literature, “Refugee and migrant policy [...] require deeper integration through EU-wide agreement on principles of treatment, accompanied by more differentiated integration regarding the modalities of implementation” (Schmidt 2020: 2). A core issue is the question of the responsibility for incoming migrants. On this issue, respondents were offered three options: responsibility of the EU as a whole, responsibility of the EU member state of first entrance, or responsibility of a group of willing member states.

Figure 18 shows that on average 60 per cent of the respondents opt for an EU-27 response to migration. Seventeen per cent believe that the responsibility should be borne by the state of first entrance only. Only 11 per cent of respondents choose the option of a smaller coalition of the willing.


**Figure 18** | Public preference on the responsibility for migrant management



**Figure 19** | Public response to migration in selected EU member states



A more detailed look at the focus countries (see Figure 19) suggests that there is an important difference between respondents from the so-called frontline states and countries less affected by migratory flows. Very few respondents from Italy (5 per cent) and Spain (13 per cent) believe that the state of first entry should be solely responsible for the management of migrants. They overwhelmingly favoured an EU-wide response through relocation (Italy: 82 per cent and Spain: 67 per cent). German respondents (64 per cent) are also strongly in favour of a common EU response. In all three countries, support for coalitions of the willing is below average. Respondents from Belgium (52 per cent), France (51 per cent) and the Netherlands (49 per cent) are slightly less in favour of a common response and more inclined to see the responsibility with the states of first entrance or with coalitions of the willing.



Polish respondents stand out as being least in favour of an EU-wide response (37 per cent). Almost one third of Polish respondents believe that the state of first entry should bear the sole responsibility. They are also most likely to support a response led by a coalition of member states (25 per cent). This is line with the position of the Polish government, which has rejected a binding EU relocation mechanism for migrants, leaving voluntary coalitions of the willing as the default option.

The results regarding crisis-driven EU policymaking show two things. First, the strong public support for EU responses is consistent with academic findings, according to which “concatenating crises in key areas over the past decade, such as money (eurocrisis), borders (immigration and refugee crisis), security (terrorism and the neighbo[u]rhood)” have deepened European integration (Schmidt 2020: 2). This applies more to the economic domain and somewhat less to migration and security. Second, the analysis of the focus countries reveals significant cross-national differences where public opinion tends to match long-standing elite preferences. We cannot derive any clear causal relationship between elite cues and public attitudes. However, these findings suggest that national political contexts matter for the formation of public opinion on differentiated integration.

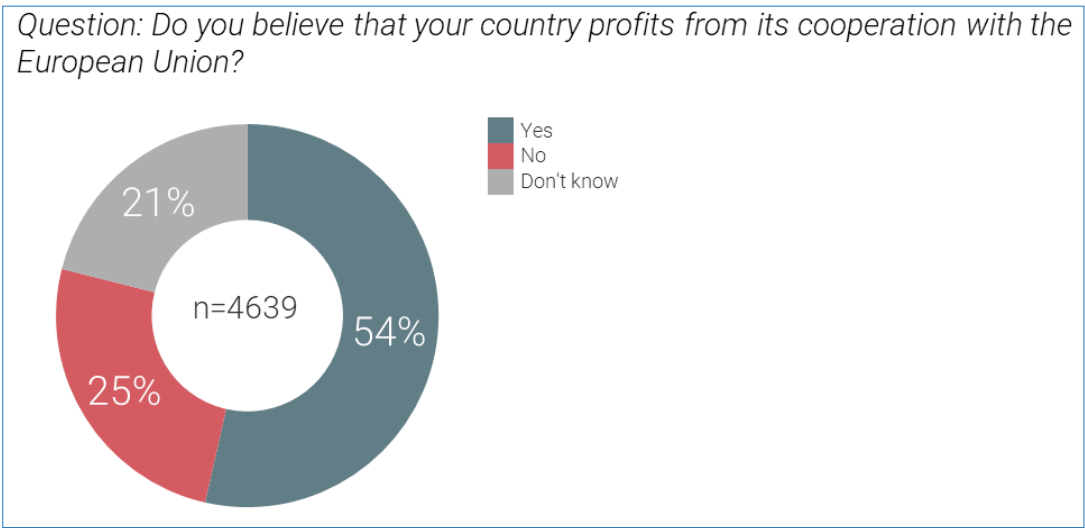
### **3. An external perspective on differentiation: Views from non-EU citizens**

External differentiation can be defined as “third countries’ various levels of alignment and/or intense familiarisation with particular sections of the EU’s *acquis communautaire* without access to the EU’s central decision-making bodies” (Turhan 2018: 46). This can occur either unilaterally with the third country adapting its national policies or it can be induced by the EU. Multiple forms of flexible cooperation between EU member states and third countries exist. External differentiation can range from the association of a non-EU state through an Association Agreement to issue-specific ad hoc cooperation. In contrast to the previous section that examined the views of citizens in EU member states, this third section focuses on public opinion in third countries. In particular, it provides insights into the views of citizens from the following four non-EU countries: the UK, Ukraine, Turkey and Norway.

#### **3.1 General support for cooperation with the EU**

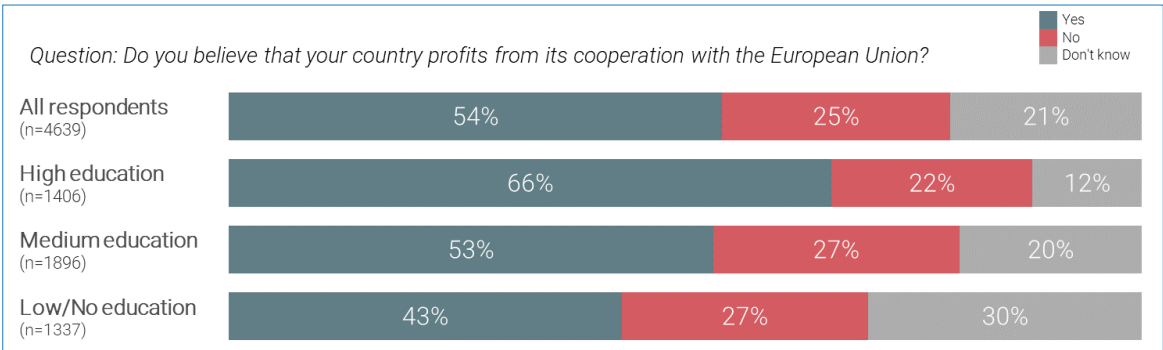
As Figure 20 underlines, on average more than half of citizens in the four non-EU countries we surveyed believe that their country benefits from cooperation with the EU, while only a quarter do not see the benefits.

**Figure 20** | Public opinion on the benefits of cooperation with the EU



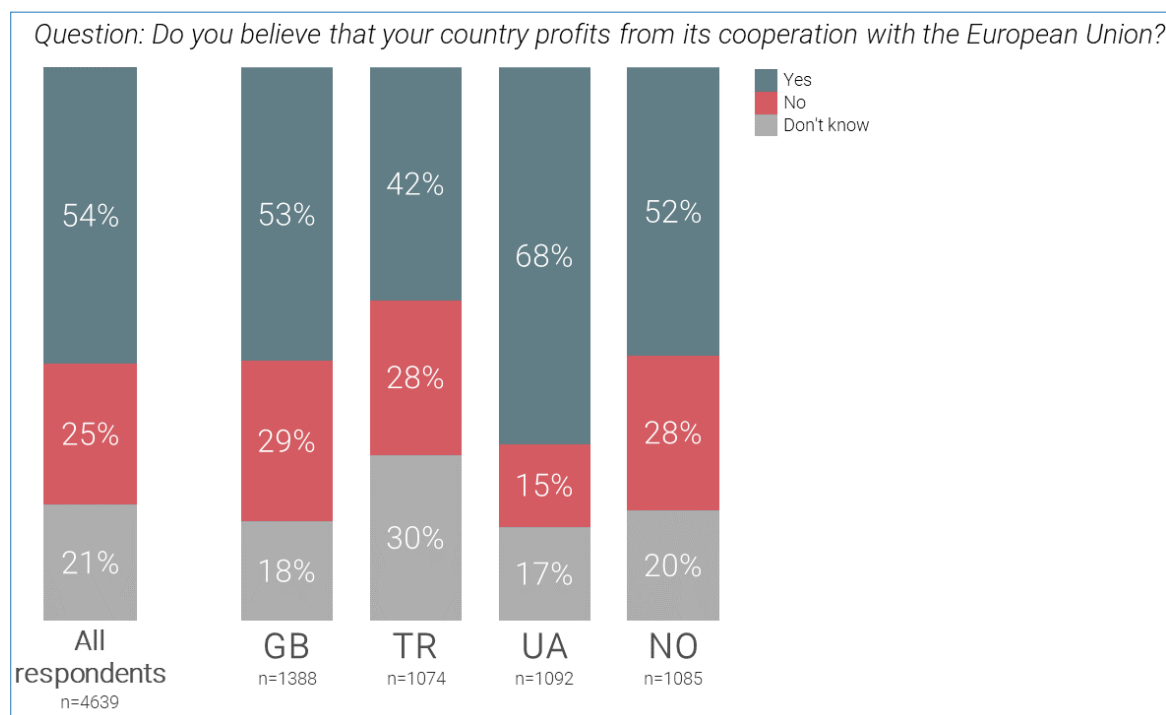
Interestingly, education again seems to be an important predictor of support for DI (see Figure 21). Two thirds of the people with high education believe in the benefits of cooperation with the EU, while only 53 per cent of respondents with medium education and 43 per cent with low/no education support closer cooperation with the EU. This matches our findings for EU citizens regarding the positive correlation between education on the one hand, and both deeper integration and DI on the other.

**Figure 21** | Public support for EU cooperation according to the level of education

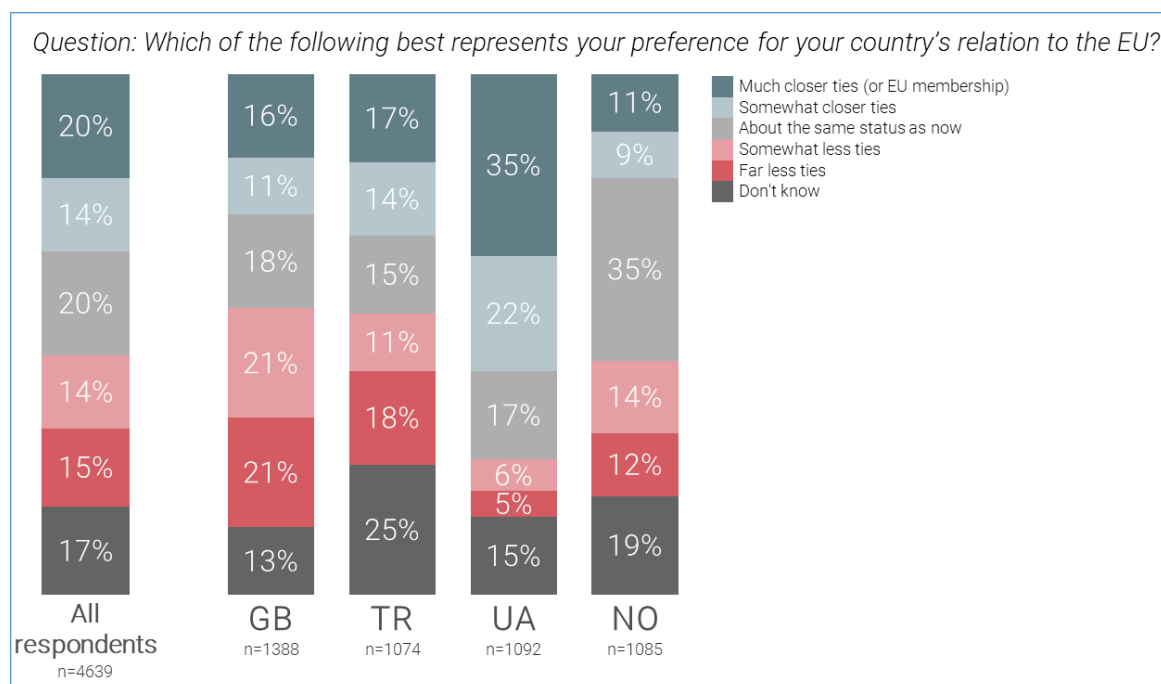


A comparison across third countries shows that attitudes diverge. As shown by Figure 22, the public opinion in Ukraine is the most positive (68 per cent) and it is the least positive in Turkey (42 per cent). Almost one third of respondents from the UK, Turkey and Norway do not believe that there are benefits from cooperation with the EU. What is interesting in the case of the UK, is that 53 per cent of respondents continue to view cooperation with the EU as beneficial, even after the 2016 Brexit referendum. This might indicate that British citizens desire Brexit accompanied by closer cooperation with the EU.

**Figure 22** | Public support for EU cooperation in four selected non-EU states



**Figure 23** | Level of public support for EU cooperation in four selected non-EU states



There are also differences in the public opinion of the four countries on the question of intensity of ties with the EU (see Figure 23). While 35 per cent of the respondents in Norway believe that their country's relations with the EU should remain on the same course, 57 per cent of Ukrainians want closer ties with the EU. These differences reflect the different types of relationship with the EU. Norway is associated with the EU through its membership in the European Economic Area, which grants Norway

access to the EU's Single Market. Following two negative referendums in 1972 and 1994, Norway's application for EU membership has been frozen. Although it would be eligible for membership, Norway is not seeking EU accession. By contrast, Ukraine, which is a partner in the EU's Eastern Partnership, is "actively seeking a perspective of EU membership" (Aydın-Düzgüt et al. 2021: 12).

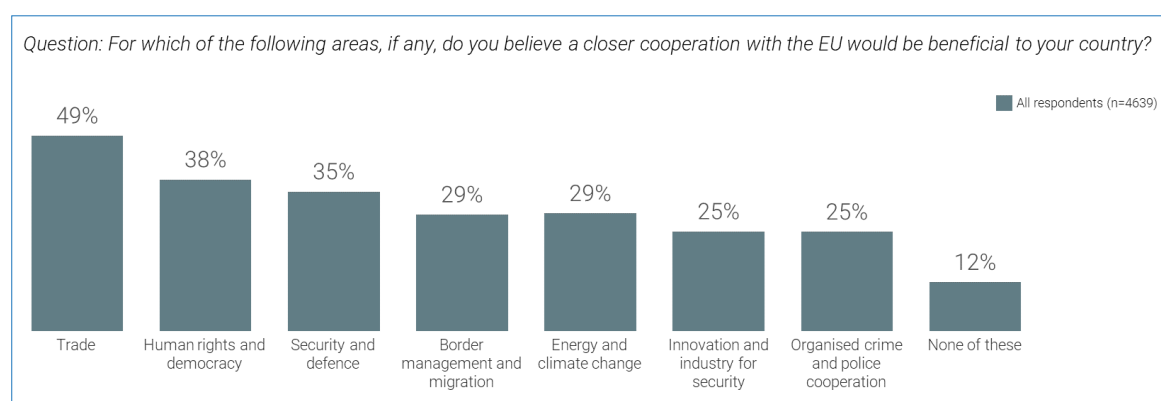
One fourth of the Turkish respondents answer "don't know" to the question of the benefits from EU cooperation. Turkey has been an official candidate for EU membership since 1999. Yet, Turkey and the EU have grown apart in recent years and the accession process has been dragging, leading to frustration among Turkish citizens. In addition, the relationship between the EU and Turkey has suffered ever since Cyprus joined the EU (Tekin 2021). The combination of unfulfilled promises and an increasingly difficult political relationship might explain the big share of "don't know" responses.

In the British case, we can observe an interesting contrast between the large share of those who see cooperation with the EU as beneficial (see above) and the 42 per cent who support looser ties with the EU. This contrast shows that the UK–EU relationship is what experts have described as a "unique instance of differentiation, given that it starts from a process of disintegration" (Aydın-Düzgüt et al. 2021: 11).

## 3.2 Variation across policy areas

Aside from differences regarding the scope of cooperation, the poll also reveals interesting differences regarding policy areas. Figure 24 highlights that 49 per cent of respondents consider trade the most beneficial policy area for closer cooperation with the EU. Human rights and democracy rank second (38 per cent) followed by security and defence (35 per cent).

**Figure 24** | Benefits of EU cooperation in specific policy areas



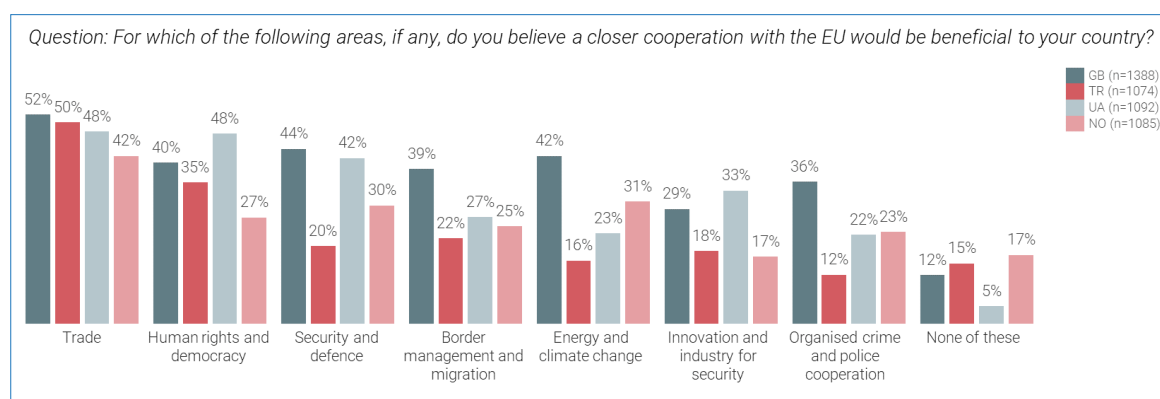
While trade remains cooperation issue number one across all third countries, there are some interesting differences regarding other areas of cooperation (see Figure 25). Significant shares of respondents in Ukraine (42 per cent) and the UK (44 per cent) see the benefits of cooperation with the EU in security and defence. In the case of Ukraine, this is likely to reflect public concern after Russia's annexation of



Crimea and invasion of the Donbas. Ukraine not only holds annual consultations with the EU on that matter, but also has a Framework Participation Agreement with the EU governing its participation in the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). The significant public support in the UK for cooperation with the EU on security and defence matters is more surprising given the current position of the British government. Following Brexit, UK–EU cooperation has mainly centred on trade, and the UK–EU Trade and Cooperation Agreement does not cover foreign and defence policy cooperation. In security and defence, the current British government is more likely to seek bilateral agreements with single EU member states rather than engaging with the EU-27 through CSDP.

Unsurprisingly, 39 per cent of respondents from Turkey consider border management and migration an important area of cooperation. This shows that the Turkish public is well aware that in the area of asylum policy, the EU has “become dependent on Turkey halting the flow of migrants towards Europe” (Comte 2020: 4). Meanwhile public opinion in Norway (31 per cent) considers energy and climate an important area of cooperation with the EU.

**Figure 25** | Benefits of EU cooperation in specific policy areas in four non-EU states



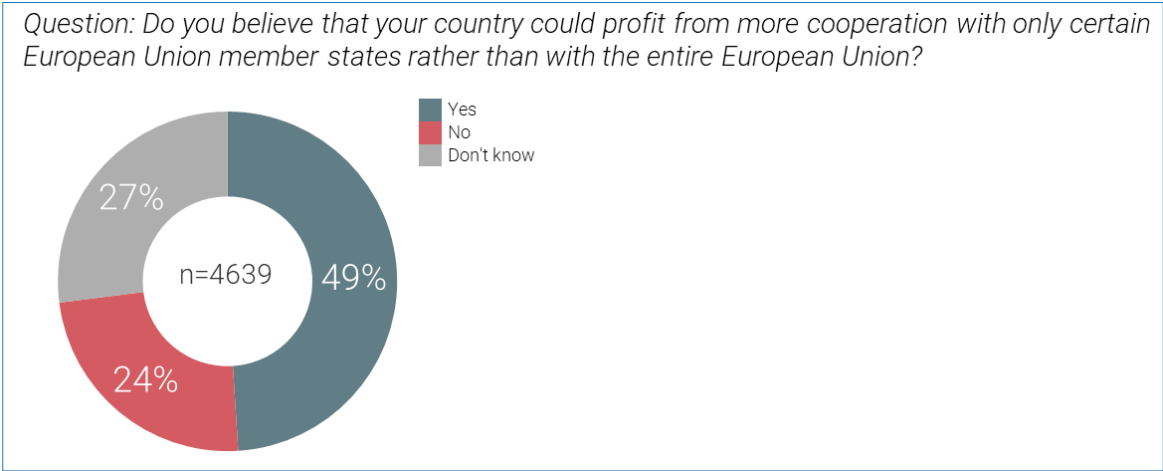
### 3.3 Cooperation with selected EU countries

In addition to cooperation formats with the EU-27, third countries often cooperate with EU member states in bilateral or multilateral formats. As seen in Figure 26, 49 per cent of respondents from the four non-EU countries believe that their country could benefit from closer cooperation with only some EU member states. On average, support is only slightly lower than support for cooperation with the 27 as a whole.

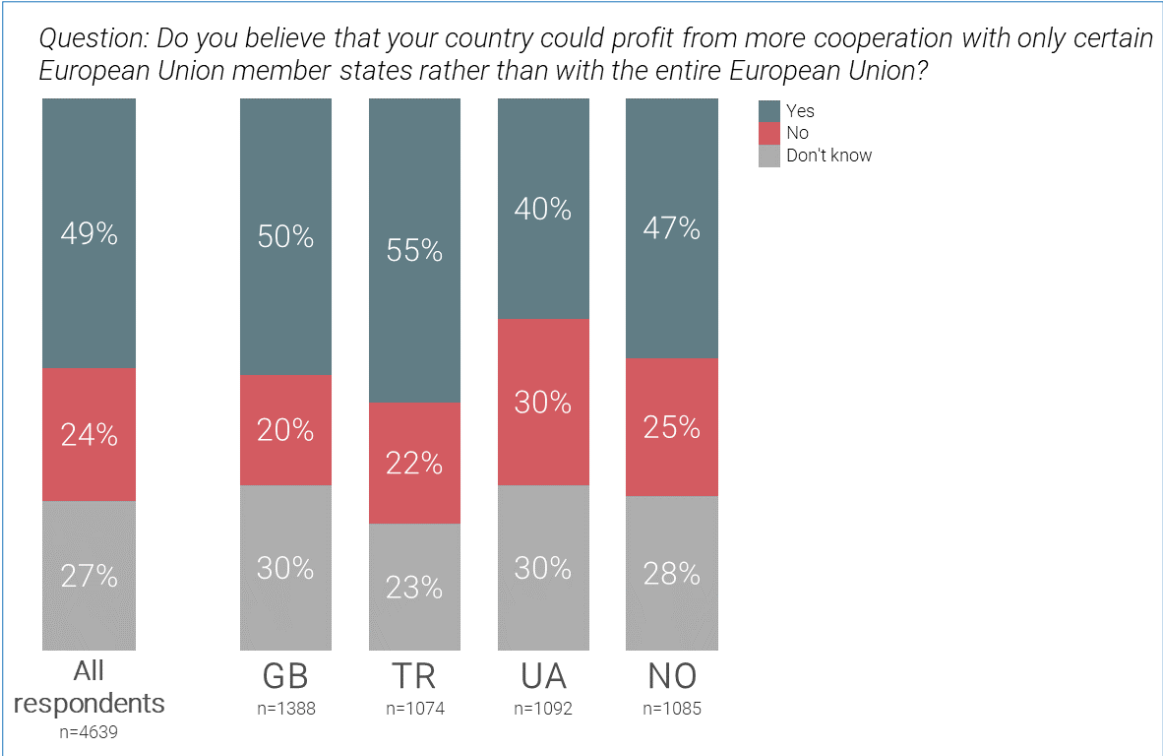
Support for cooperation with single member states is particularly high in Turkey (55 per cent) and the UK (50 per cent) (see Figure 27). In the area of foreign and defence policy, the UK has experience in cooperating with single EU member states like France and Germany in flexible groups outside of the EU framework such as the E-3 format (Aydın-Düzgit et al. 2021: 4). In Ukraine and Norway, 25 to 30 per cent of the respondents oppose differentiated cooperation. An equal share opted for “don’t know”. This could indicate that, as with citizens of EU member states (see section 2), there is a lack of knowledge on the concept of differentiation among citizens of

non-EU states.

**Figure 26** | Public support for differentiated cooperation with single EU member states



**Figure 27** | Public support for differentiated cooperation with single EU member states in non-EU states



## Conclusion and policy recommendations

Overall, the poll offers interesting insights into EU public opinion on DI and differences across member states, third countries and policy areas. Seven findings stand out:

*Citizens are not well informed about DI* and are often agnostic. There is a positive correlation between the level of education and support for DI, while the number of agnostics decreases with the level of education. This mirrors previous findings (Leuffen et al. 2020). The fact that the share of agnostic respondents was much lower in more concrete questions regarding single policy areas also highlights that the framing of DI is crucial and likely to impact the respondents' assessment.

Second, *supporters of European integration are also more likely to support DI*. This underlines that integration and DI do not necessarily contrast. Viewed in the sense of an avant-garde, DI can be seen as a way out of a decision-making impasse, ultimately deepening integration. At the same time, the notion of flexibility attached to DI also resonates with those who oppose deeper integration.

Third, *public opinion of DI is not independent from governmental choices*. There were no clear-cut geographic patterns regarding general support for DI. There was, however, a match between elite and public opinion regarding single policy areas, for instance regarding preferences on the euro, financial solidarity or responsibility-sharing in the context of migration policy (see take-away number five).

Fourth, there seems to be a *geographic divide regarding support for deeper economic integration and the eurozone*. Citizens from the Northern and Western European focus countries are less likely to support deeper economic integration than those from Southern ones. Meanwhile, Southern European respondents are more sceptical of the benefits of the euro. This finding would have to be tested based on larger country samples for all EU member states.

Fifth, *European citizens seem to be less aware of the benefits of Schengen and the link to their free movement rights*. These doubts might have been fuelled by the mobility restrictions in the Schengen area imposed during the pandemic.

Sixth, *in crisis situations citizens want a strong and unified EU and less differentiation*. There was particularly high support for common action regarding economic and migration-related crises. However, there was also important national variation, with citizens from countries most affected by these crises being most in favour of common responses.

Finally, *citizens from third countries diverge regarding their preferences on the scope and content of cooperation*. Ukrainian citizens seem to be most in favour of closer ties while those of Norway, the UK and Turkey are more divided. Aside from trade, which is generally considered to be the most beneficial area of cooperation, third-country citizens vary in terms of their policy-specific cooperation preferences.

On the basis of these findings, the following three policy recommendations aimed at differentiation as a policy choice in view of public opinion can be formulated:

*Foster knowledge of differentiated integration:* The opinion poll revealed a lack of understanding of differentiation among European citizens. Thus, European policymakers need to better explain options for differentiated European integration. This is all the more important as DI can be perceived as furthering deeper integration through the avant-garde, or as being divisive and promoting fragmentation among member states. Decision-makers viewing DI as a path towards deeper integration could resort to more accessible formulas such as the one used in the Commission White Book process: “those who want more do more” (European Commission 2017: 11).

*Promote and reform Schengen:* A worrying trend exposed by the opinion poll is that there is a lack of public support for Schengen and the EU’s achievement in terms of free movement. European policymakers therefore need to better explain Schengen’s differentiated integration mechanisms and promote its benefits, and at the same time push for necessary reforms (Schade 2021). These reforms should be aimed at maintaining Schengen’s flexibility, while strengthening the coordination and information-exchange mechanisms (De Somer et al. 2020).

*Adopt a tailor-made approach to external differentiation:* The opinion poll has underlined that a one-size-fits-all approach to the EU’s partnerships with non-EU states is not suitable. Instead, an overhaul of the EU’s external partnerships is needed. European policymakers should formulate a differentiated menu tailored to the needs of its different partners. While trade cooperation is already quite well established, cooperation patterns in other fields such as security and defence have often been marked by a piecemeal approach. The Strategic Compass on Security and Defence could represent an opportunity to design a more strategic partnership menu providing new incentives for enhanced partnerships.

To conclude, this paper and the respective survey represent a contribution to the growing, albeit still limited scholarly debate on the DI and public opinion. Our findings point towards a significant impact of the national context when it comes to public opinion on concrete examples of DI. Future research should therefore review our findings based on larger country samples allowing for comprehensive cross-country analysis. In addition, the survey was conducted during the initial months of the pandemic, which might have skewed results, for instance on Schengen / border restrictions as well as regarding financial solidarity within the EU. These factors should be considered when comparing our results to those of forthcoming surveys.

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# Annex: Questionnaire

## I. Questions for citizens in 27 EU member states

Title: Q1 - European political integration

*To what extent do you believe there should be more, or less, political integration across Europe?*

More political integration

About the same amount as now

Less political integration

Title: Q2 - European economic integration

*To what extent do you believe there should be more, or less, economic integration across Europe?*

More economic integration

About the same amount as now

Less economic integration

Title: Q3 - Differentiated integration/Support of closer cooperation between some member states

*To what extent do you support, or oppose, the following statement: "Instead of a European Union where all 27 member states decide on policies together, there should be the option to form 'coalitions of the willing', through which certain member states would choose to work closely together on specific policy areas."*

Strongly support

Somewhat support

Neither support nor oppose

Somewhat oppose

Strongly oppose

Title: Q4 - Eurozone opinion

*To what extent do you believe that your country benefits, or does not benefit, from the euro?*

Benefits greatly

Benefits somewhat

Neither benefits nor does not benefit

Does not benefit much

Does not benefit at all

Title: Q4 - Non-eurozone opinion

*To what extent do you believe that your country would benefit, or would not benefit, from the euro?*

Would benefit greatly

Would benefit somewhat

Neither would benefit nor would not benefit

Would not benefit much

Would not benefit at all

Title: Q5 - Joint financing support

*In your opinion, who should be actually responsible for raising financial support funds to help weaker member states in economic crises?*

The entire EU

Members of the eurozone

Only some EU member states

None of these

Title: Q6 - International conflict response

*If there was an international conflict outside of Europe, which of the following options would you most strongly support? EU member states should...*

cooperate with selected countries or join an international coalition

cooperate more within the EU framework

cooperate more within the NATO framework

cooperate more within the UN framework

respond only at a national level

None of these

Title: Q7- Defence initiatives

*To what extent do you believe non-EU countries should be associated with EU defence initiatives?*

Closely associated

Only partly associated

Not at all associated

I don't know

Title: Q8 - Migrant responsibility

*Who do you believe should be responsible for migrants entering the EU?*

The European Union member state of first entrance solely

All 27 European Union member states through relocation

A group of willing European Union member states

None of these

Title: Q9 - Schengen support

*To what extent do you support, or oppose, countries being able to leave the border-free area of Schengen and permanently reintroduce internal border controls?*

Strongly support

Somewhat support

Neither support nor oppose

Somewhat oppose

Strongly oppose

## II. Questions for citizens in four non-EU states

Title: Q1 - Present cooperation with the EU

*Do you believe that your country profits from its cooperation with the European Union?*

Yes

No

Don't know

Title: Q2 - Relation to EU

*Which of the following best represents your preference for your country's relation to the EU?*

Far less ties

Somewhat less ties

About the same status as now

Somewhat closer ties

Much closer ties (or EU membership)

Don't know

Title: Q3 - Benefits of EU cooperation in specific policy areas

*For which of the following areas, if any, do you believe a closer cooperation with the EU would be beneficial to your country? (Select all that apply)*

Security and defence

Border management and migration

Organised crime and police cooperation

Trade

Innovation and industry for security

Energy and climate change

Human rights and democracy

None of these

Title: Q4 - Differentiated integration/Support for closer cooperation with some EU member states

*Do you believe that your country could profit from more cooperation with only certain European Union member states rather than with the entire European Union?*

Yes

No

Don't know



EU Integration and Differentiation  
for Effectiveness and Accountability

**Differentiation has become the new normal in the European Union (EU)** and one of the most crucial matters in defining its future. A certain degree of differentiation has always been part of the European integration project since its early days. The Eurozone and the Schengen area have further consolidated this trend into long-term projects of differentiated integration among EU Member States.

A number of unprecedented internal and external challenges to the EU, however, including the financial and economic crisis, the migration phenomenon, renewed geopolitical tensions and Brexit, have reinforced today the belief that **more flexibility is needed within the complex EU machinery**. A Permanent Structured Cooperation, for example, has been launched in the field of defence, enabling groups of willing and able Member States to join forces through new, flexible arrangements. Differentiation could offer a way forward also in many other key policy fields within the Union, where uniformity is undesirable or unattainable, as well as in the design of EU external action within an increasingly unstable global environment, offering manifold models of cooperation between the EU and candidate countries, potential accession countries and associated third countries.

EU IDEA's key goal is to address **whether, how much and what form of differentiation is not only compatible with, but is also conducive to a more effective, cohesive and democratic EU**. The basic claim of the project is that differentiation is not only necessary to address current challenges more effectively, by making the Union more resilient and responsive to citizens. Differentiation is also desirable as long as such flexibility is compatible with the core principles of the EU's constitutionalism and identity, sustainable in terms of governance, and acceptable to EU citizens, Member States and affected third partners.



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This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 822622