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Party support impacts individual salience and attitudes. Studying the politicisation of the Ukraine war with Austrian panel survey data

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how political party support shapes the politicisation of the Ukraine war among the Ukraine public via party cues. Special focus lies on how support for Russia-friendly parties – both on the far-left and far-right end of the political spectrum – diminish individuals' relative salience of the Ukraine war and impact their attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees. Using data from an Austrian panel survey (Values in Crisis), I show that the Ukraine war is highly salient for Austrians, second only to rising prices as a main policy concern. However, salience varies by party support: voters of the Russia-friendly far-right FPÖ and the Russia-friendly far-left KPÖ assign lower relative importance to securing peace in Europe as a policy concern compared to centre parties, which can shift attention away from the Ukraine war. Attitudes toward Ukrainian refugees are also polarised, with FPÖ and MFG supporters expressing more negative than average opinions, while KPÖ supporters do not differ from centre parties because of their emphasis on supporting refugees. By leveraging panel data, the study shows that party preference prior to the war (March/April 2021) predicts both subsequent issue salience and refugee attitudes, which further illustrates the impact of party cues.

KEYWORDS

Politicisation; salience;
polarisation; Ukraine war;
Austria; party cues

Introduction

Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine on February 24th of 2022 sent shockwaves throughout the world. The 'post-cold war illusion that Europe is free from war' (Hooghe et al., 2024, p. 460) ended abruptly, causing widespread anxiety and worries about nuclear war across Europe (Greenglass et al., 2024; Riad et al., 2023), as well as the largest refugee movements since 2015. As of December 2025, the UN records 5.9 million Ukrainian refugees worldwide.

It is plausible to assume that the Ukraine war is the most politicised issue in Europe. For an issue to be politicised, it must be salient and cause attitude polarisation (de Wilde, 2011, pp. 566–569; de Wilde et al., 2016, pp. 4–5). Politicisation research mostly focusses on the party level or political discourse, while the expansion of politicisation to the mass level receives less attention (Hutter & Grande, 2014, p. 1004; Zürn, 2016, pp. 166–170). Still, several studies confirm that politicised elite debates can increase salience and polarisation on the mass level, e.g. for EU integration (Grande & Hutter, 2016a) and immigration (Williams & Hunger, 2022).

Regarding the Ukraine war, however, the expansion of politicisation has not yet been studied. While polarisation regarding Ukraine has been studied on the party level (c.f. Fagerholm, 2025; Hooghe et al., 2024), the expansion of this debate to the mass level has not received the same level of attention. This article seeks to fill this gap. I argue that parties make issues salient for their supporters and cause polarisation because their supporters align their attitudes with the party. Consequently, my research questions are: Does party support predict individual salience of the Ukraine war? And do their party preferences predict their attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees?

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To answer these questions, I use data from the Austrian version of the Values in Crisis (VIC) panel (Aschauer et al., 2023). Austria is an interesting case because it occupies a special geopolitical position due to its neutrality. After World War II, the Western Allies sought to establish Austria as an independent country. But to regain sovereignty, Austria needed the consent of all Allies, including the Soviet Union. The beginning of the Cold War meant that the Soviet Union did not want Austria to join NATO and thus set the condition for Austria to remain neutral and not join any military alliances. This neutrality was consequently enshrined in the Austrian constitution in 1955 (Müller, 2024) and impacts the country's foreign politics to this day (Senn, 2023) by only allowing Austria to supply humanitarian aid but no direct military support (Janik, 2024). The ideal of neutrality still enjoys popular support (Phillips et al., 2025) because many individuals hope that it may prevent Austria from getting dragged into conflicts (Eder & Salinger, 2024) – a hope that some deem illusory (c.f. Nowotny, 2024). This makes Austria an interesting case because it might lead to unique patterns of politicisation of the Ukraine war.¹

The findings indicate that the politicisation of the Ukraine war has indeed expanded from the party level to the Austrian public. However, the relative salience of the war differs between supporters of different parties. Supporters of the far-right FPÖ and the far-left KPÖ attribute less relative importance to securing peace in Europe than other parties. Likewise, supporters of the FPÖ, Greens, the MFG and the SPÖ significantly deviate in their attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees from the average Austrian citizen, which leads to attitude polarisation. Taking advantage of the VIC's panel structure, I further show that party preferences from before the war predict both relative salience and attitudes towards refugees, which corroborates that party cues influence individuals' issue salience and attitudes.

Theory

The concept of politicisation

Politicisation can broadly be defined as making an issue relevant for political conflict (Wiesner, 2021, pp. 21–23). While several definitions of politicisation exist, most empirical studies follow the definition by de Wilde (2011) and de Wilde et al. (2016), who focus on three components: (1) salience, (2) attitude polarisation, and (3) public resonance.

First, politicised issues are salient. They must play an important role in political discourse and receive significant attention. Salience is often operationalised via mentions of an issue in newspapers, party manifestos or statements by political actors (de Wilde et al., 2016, p. 6). On the individual level, salience is measured by the relative importance of an issue in comparison to others (Williams & Hunger, 2022, pp. 548–549; Zürn, 2016, pp. 168–169).

Second, conceptualising politicisation as 'rendering something contested or controversial' (Wiesner, 2021, pp. 22–23) means that an issue is only politicised if it causes diverging attitudes (de Wilde, 2011, pp. 566–569; de Wilde et al., 2016, pp. 4–5). This polarisation can be observed on the party level if parties deviate significantly from one another (Grande et al., 2019, pp. 1451–1452) or on the individual level in public opinion research.

Third, the political conflict about the issue must gain public resonance (de Wilde, 2011, pp. 568–569), meaning that it must engage the broader public (de Wilde et al., 2016, p. 7). This expansion determines the degree of politicisation, as an issue cannot be considered widely politicised if it only engages a select few (Grande & Hutter, 2016a, p. 25; 2016b, pp. 11–12; Hutter & Grande, 2014, p. 1004). Hence, after a debate has expanded to the public, the issue should be salient for many individuals and attitudes about the issue should be polarised to a certain degree (Zürn, 2016, pp. 166–170).

The literature explains the expansion of politicisation to the public via party cues, which are heuristics sent out by parties to influence public opinion. Individuals mostly rely on cues for two reasons. First, using cues reduces the time and effort necessary to form opinions (Bakker et al., 2020, p. 1066). Second, individuals adapt to party cues to boost their alignment with the party as part of their social identity (Malka & Lelkes, 2010, pp. 159–162), which is 'that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group [...] together with the emotional significance attached to that membership' (Tajfel, 1974, p. 69). Individuals who support a party are more susceptible to that party's cues, and thus more likely to align their attitudes with that party (Bullock, 2011, pp. 500–503; Kam, 2005, pp. 170–175; Vranceanu & Lachat, 2021, pp. 9–14).

Party cues play an important role in achieving public resonance of an issue in two ways. First, party cues make an issue more salient for supporters of a party. For instance, Williams and Hunger (2022, pp. 553–558) show that the issue of immigration becomes more salient for the average citizen the more radical right parties emphasise it in their manifestos. Second, if different parties influence their supporters' attitudes in different directions, these diverging attitudes will lead to increased polarisation (Slothuus & Bisgaard, 2021, pp. 903–908). Indeed, Skytte (2021, pp. 1466–1470) shows that attitudes of party supporters diverge if they perceive more polarisation among parties.

The Ukraine war in Austrian discourse

Most political parties in Europe condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine and are in favour of supporting Ukraine (Hooghe et al., 2024, pp. 467–476). However, there is considerable polarisation among parties, mainly driven by Russia-sympathising parties on the far-right and the far-left (Fagerholm, 2025, pp. 802–806; Golosov, 2020, pp. 58–61).

The common ideological core of European far-right parties is xenophobic nationalism (Fagerholm, 2018, pp. 547–548) combined with Euroscepticism and anti-globalism. These attitudes resonate with Russia's nationalist and antiliberal policies. Many far-right parties also have direct ties to the Russian establishment (Braghiroli, 2023). Consequently, far-right parties are much more likely to put partial blame for the Ukraine war on the West or NATO and to object to sanctions against Russia because they put strain on the people of their own country (Fagerholm, 2024, pp. 840–843; 2025, pp. 802–806).

Far-left parties share an ideological core focussed on welfare, pacifism and anti-imperialism. The latter includes criticism of Euroatlanticism, such as NATO (Fagerholm, 2018, pp. 548–549; Holesch et al., 2024, pp. 5–7; Wagner, 2025, pp. 632–634). Consequently, far-left parties criticise Russia's imperialism but also put partial blame on NATO and the West for supposedly provoking Russia's invasion of Ukraine. They also oppose supporting Ukraine for fear of further escalation of the conflict (Fagerholm, 2024, pp. 840–843; Wondreys et al., 2025, pp. 704–712). On the other hand, their humanitarianism leads them to emphasise support for refugees from Ukraine (Wagner, 2025, p. 638).

Similar tendencies are observable on the mass level. Most individuals across Europe are supportive of further aid to Ukraine, specifically humanitarian aid and allowing inflows of Ukrainian refugees (see Figure OA1 in the Online Appendix). However, individuals from the right-wing and those with exclusively national identities show less support for Ukraine (Bojarskich et al., 2025, pp. 6–7; Eck & Michel, 2025, pp. 3098–3104; Stolle, 2024, pp. 224–229), and are less satisfied with EU sanctions against Russia (Truchlewski et al., 2023, pp. 1670–1672). Euroscepticism is another predictor of low support for Ukraine (Martín & Indelicato, 2025, pp. 1060–1062). Furthermore, supporters of far-right and far-left parties both attribute more responsibility for the war to Ukraine (Thomson et al., 2023, pp. 2493–2496).

Austria is no exception. On the party level, centre parties mostly support further aid for Ukraine, although their level of support is lower than in most other European parties (see Figure 3 by Hooghe et al. (2024, p. 469)). These centre parties include the conservative ÖVP, the social democratic SPÖ, the Austrian Greens, and the capitalist and culturally progressive NEOS. One possible explanation for the lower support is Austria's neutrality, which allows for humanitarian aid but not for any form of military support (Janik, 2024).

Austria's major far-right party is the Freedom Party (FPÖ). Its ideological core comprises of populist anti-establishment rhetoric, opposition to migration, welfare chauvinism and Euroscepticism (Hartleb, 2011, pp. 267–274). The anti-migration stance helped the FPÖ to gain widespread electoral support (28.9 percent in the 2024 national elections; c.f. Praprotnik, 2025). Like their European counterparts, the FPÖ opposes support for Ukraine. The party puts the blame for the war on Brussels and Biden's administration, and argues that Austria should maintain its neutrality and not support Ukraine (Heinisch & Hofmann, 2023, pp. 37–39). The party showed similarly Russian-friendly sentiments before the war (Belafi, 2017, pp. 371–376). For instance, the FPÖ defended Russia after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and is part of a formal partnership with Putin's party (Heinisch & Hofmann, 2023, p. 37).

Apart from the FPÖ, the right-wing MFG (*Menschen-Freiheit-Grundrechte*) formed in 2021 as a single-issue party that opposes vaccination mandates and all COVID-19 countermeasures. While the party enjoyed some local success, the MFG only reached 2.1 percent of national votes (Praprotnik, 2025), making it a minor party.

On the far-left, Austria has the Communist party (KPÖ). This party's ideology can be summarised as anti-capitalist, revolutionary and Marxist (Hartleb, 2011, pp. 274–277). While this party plays only a minor role in national elections (2.4 percent of votes in the 2024 national elections), they are very successful on the local level (e.g. 28.8 percent in the 2021 Graz local election, and 23.1 percent in the 2024 Salzburg local elections) by owning the issue of affordable housing (Weisskircher, 2019, pp. 153–162). In their party manifesto for the 2024 European Parliament election, the KPÖ emphasises Austria's neutrality and demands money be directed into the education, welfare and health system instead of national defence (KPÖ, 2024). These issue stances follow a long history of Russia-friendly and socially progressive policies (e.g. emphasis on welfare) in the KPÖ's brief history in parliament in the 1950s (Ennser-Jedenastik, 2023, pp. 84–88).

This article examines the effect of these party's stances on individuals' relative salience of the war and attitudes towards refugees. Previous literature implies that the Ukraine war is salient among the Austrian public. In qualitative interviews in Salzburg, individuals often raised the topic of the Ukraine war unprompted as a pressing issue (Aschauer & Heinz, 2025, pp. 105–106). Furthermore, Austria's energy dependency on Russia has become one of the most pressing concerns (Gutmann et al., 2023, pp. 294–296), leading to an increase in pessimism about the future between 2021 and 2022, especially among older and lower educated individuals, who lack the resources to cope with the economic consequences of the Ukraine war (Aschauer & Prandner, 2024, pp. 100–112). Furthermore, Etter et al. (2024, p. 148) suspect that the Ukraine war might have impeded the recovery of life satisfaction and mental health after the end of the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, the literature does not provide evidence for differences in relative salience between party supporters. On the one hand, the Ukraine war is such a ubiquitous topic that it is likely highly salient for the majority. On the other hand, parties may enhance the salience of other issues to the point where they outshine the relative importance of the Ukraine war. Indeed, parties are motivated to enhance salience for issues that benefit them during election campaigns or that are part of their ideology's core (c.f. Petrocik, 1996; Walgrave et al., 2012). Given that the majority is in favour of further Ukraine aid (Stolle, 2024; Figure OA1 in the Online Appendix), the FPÖ's and KPÖ's pro-Russian rhetoric might repel potential supporters. This would motivate both parties to enhance the salience of other issues instead (e.g. migration for the FPÖ, housing for the KPÖ), thereby overshadowing the war's relative salience for their supporters.

H1: FPÖ and KPÖ supporters are less likely to select the Ukraine war as a main policy concern than centre party supporters.

Unlike for salience, the literature does provide first evidence for differences in attitudes. Austrians on average are very negative towards migration (Aschauer, 2020, pp. 199–203; Czymara, 2020, p. 1317), but are more welcoming towards Ukrainian refugees than others (Dražanová & Geddes, 2023, pp. 138–140; Ulrich, 2025a, pp. 13–15). However, conservative individuals and those who oppose migration are still more negative towards Ukrainian refugees (Ulrich, 2025a, pp. 13–15). These results indicate that FPÖ supporters, who are both against migration and conservative (Ulrich, 2025b, pp. 233–235), should be more negative towards Ukrainian refugees than others. Far-left parties, on the other hand, emphasise welfare, progressivism and support for refugees, including Ukrainians (Wagner, 2025, p. 638). Consequently, KPÖ supporters should be more positive towards Ukrainian refugees.

H2a: FPÖ supporters show more negative attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees than centre party supporters.

H2b: KPÖ supporters show more positive attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees than centre party supporters.

The causal direction in the hypotheses is controversial as it is equally possible that individuals support a party because that party's stances are the best fit to their already formed attitudes (Abramowitz & Saunders, 1998; Downs, 1957; van Hauweert & van Kessel, 2018). Since the analysis in this article uses panel data (see below), this causal direction can be tested. If the assumption about the effect of party cues holds, party preference before the Ukraine war should predict relative salience and attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees.

H3: Supporting the FPÖ or the KPÖ before the war correlates with lower likelihood to select the Ukraine war as a main policy concern.

H4a: Supporting the FPÖ before the war correlates with more negative attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees.

H4b: Supporting the KPÖ before the war correlates with more positive attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees.

Data and variables

My analysis uses data from the Austrian version of the Values in Crisis Panel (VIC) (Aschauer et al., 2023). The VIC panel was launched during the COVID-19 pandemic to observe the development of value orientations during the health crisis. Research teams from 17 countries took part in the VIC panel. In Austria, three waves were conducted. Data for the first wave was gathered in May 2020, the second wave (VIC2) in March/April 2021, and the third wave (VIC3) in July 2022. Respondents were recruited with quota sampling to represent the Austrian population (c.f. Prandner & Seymer, 2024, for a detailed examination of the VIC panel's data quality). The data set further provides sampling weights that are applied in all analysis in this article.

Following politicisation literature (Williams & Hunger, 2022, pp. 548–549; Zürn, 2016, pp. 168–169), I operationalise individual relative salience by the relative importance individuals allocate to the Ukraine war. VIC3 features a list of ten policy goals (fighting increasing prices, securing peace in Europe, reforming the education system, boosting the economy, limiting migration, fighting climate change, fighting the pandemic, fighting crime, fighting terrorism, and reducing poverty). Respondents were asked to choose the three goals they deemed the most important for Austria. Hence, whether respondents selected 'securing peace in Europe' as one of their three most important policy goals will serve as my measure for salience.

While the 'most important issue' item is often used in politicisation research, it has been criticised for potentially mixing the salience of an issue with attitudes towards the issue (Wlezien, 2005). Furthermore, this item might underestimate the degree of salience because the fourth or lower ranked issues are, by design, not selected. A Likert scale would have been preferable. Still, the item allows me to determine if the Ukraine war is among the most salient issues for the individual.

To measure polarisation, I focus on attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees, as previous literature (c.f. Hooghe et al., 2024; Stolle, 2024) has applied the willingness to allow refugees in one's own country as a measure for relevant attitudes regarding the Ukraine crisis. VIC3 offers two variables for attitudes towards Ukrainians, both ranging between 1 'do not agree at all' and 5 'agree completely'. The first item asks respondents whether they agree that the state should be generous when examining Ukrainians' refugee applications. The second asks them whether they believe that Ukrainians receive too much money from the state. The items were recoded so that higher values signify more positive attitudes. Since both items correlate ($r = 0.50$), I calculated an average score. Higher values signify more positive attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees.²

Attitudes towards refugees from Ukraine are only one element of relevant attitudes. Hooghe et al. (2024) additionally study support for sending weapons to Ukraine, acceptance of higher energy costs, and supporting Ukraine's EU membership. Stolle (2024, p. 223) examines support for allowing refugees on the labour market, and sending troops to join the war. These different measures gain various degrees of support. Unfortunately, the VIC survey does not feature the necessary variables to study these differing elements of support for Ukraine. Nevertheless, this measure is in line with previous literature and allows for comparing this study's results to those of other literature.

I operationalise party support via a question that asks respondents to state which party they would vote for if a national election took place next Sunday (party preference).³ This question was asked in both VIC3 and VIC2.

The effectiveness of cues may depend on how many cues an individual receives. Hence, I control for media use and political interest to separate their effects from the influence of party preference. Political interest is measured by asking respondents about how interested they are in politics (1 'not at all interested' to 5 'very interested'). Media use is measured with items asking respondents how often they use different media to inform themselves about current affairs (1 'never' to 5 'several times daily'). I combine the use of public service TV and radio into one average score and do the same for private TV and radio. I also control for respondents' use of social media as an information source. Last, I control for necessary demographic variables: gender, age, educational level, and ease of getting by with one's household income.

2123 respondents were surveyed in VIC3. After excluding respondents with missing values in the above variables, the VIC3 sample contains $N = 1405$ respondents. T-Tests show that the final VIC3 sample does not differ significantly from the excluded respondents in self-reported ideology (left-right self placement), ease of getting by with household income or educational level. The valid cohort is slightly older (average of 47

instead of 44 years) and men are slightly overrepresented (54.0 percent vs. 49.0 percent). These differences will not bias the results substantially.

To test hypotheses H3, H4a and H4b, I construct a second sample (VIC23) that only includes respondents who participated in waves 2 and 3. A total of 1119 respondents participated in the waves VIC2 and VIC3, of which $N = 656$ reach valid values in all variables of interest. Again, the dropout does not differ significantly from the final VIC23 sample in self-reported ideology, gender composition, and financial difficulties. However, the VIC23 sample is older than the dropout (52 versus 43 years) and slightly lower educated. Still, these differences are unlikely to cause detrimental bias in the results. Descriptive statistics for the variables are listed in the Online Appendix (Tables OA1 and OA2).

Results

Salience

Figure 1 shows the relative importance of policy goals for Austrians. ‘Fighting rising prices’ is by far the most important one with 66.2 percent of respondents selecting it. ‘Securing peace in Europe’ ranks second with 37.0 percent. The fact that peace in Europe is the second most important policy goal shows that the Ukraine war enjoys high relative salience among the Austrian public, even surpassing climate change and migration in their relative importance.⁴

To test my hypotheses, I calculated logistic regressions with cluster robust standard errors based on the VIC3 sample. Whether respondents selected ‘securing peace in Europe’ as a main policy goal serves as the dependent variable. The models are built sequentially. Model 1 only controls for demographics, Model 2 adds media use and political interest, before Model 3 includes party preference. Table 1 reports the predictors’ average marginal effects (AMEs).

Table 1 shows that the Ukraine war is neither more nor less salient for women than for men. Higher education and a favourable financial situation are associated with higher relative salience of the Ukraine war in Models 1 and 2. However, both effects lose their significance after controlling for party preference. The war is more salient for older respondents, and this effect remains significant throughout. This result is in line with previous research (Gutmann et al., 2023, pp. 294–296). Frequent information from the public service media is associated with higher salience, but this effect also wanes after controlling for party preference. Private media use is associated with lower salience, and this effect remains significant in Model 3.

Party preference shows the strongest effects (Model 3). As expected, supporters of the FPÖ and the KPÖ select ‘securing peace in Europe’ far less frequently. Figure 2 displays the predicted probabilities to select this issue as an important policy goal for different party supporters. The red dashed line signifies the probability of the overall sample (37.0 percent) from Figure 1. Supporters of the Green party and of the ÖVP reach the highest probability, while the KPÖ and FPÖ select this policy goal far less often (27.9 percent for the FPÖ; 17.5

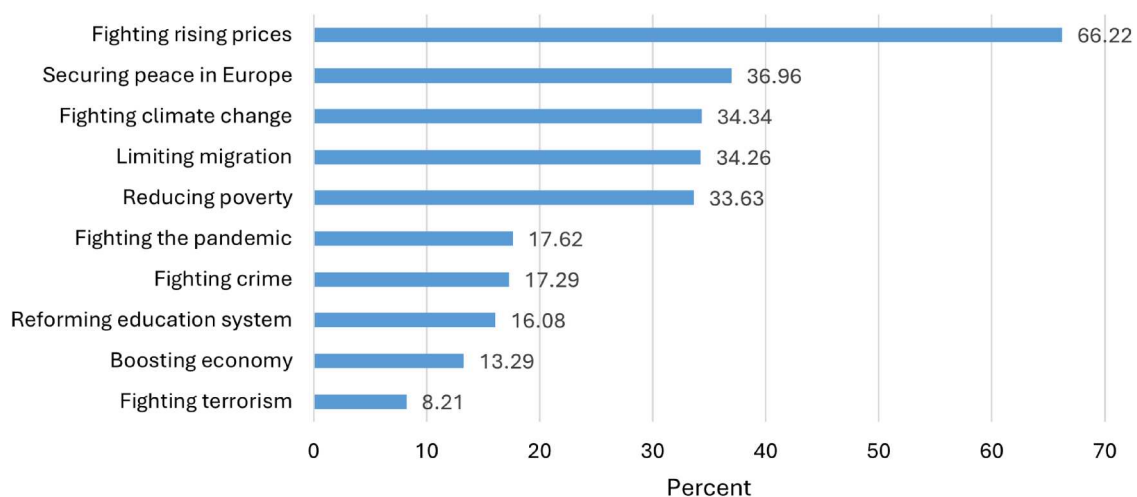


Figure 1. Share of respondents who choose each policy goal as a top 3 priority for Austria ($N = 1405$; VIC3).

Table 1. Results from logistic regressions to predict relative salience (AMEs).

		Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Gender: Female		−0.01 (0.03)	0.00 (0.03)	−0.01 (0.03)
Age (in years)		0.00*** (0.00)	0.00* (0.00)	0.00* (0.00)
Educational level (Ref: Compulsory school)	Completed apprenticeship	0.07+ (0.04)	0.07+ (0.04)	0.08+ (0.04)
	Vocational middle school	0.06 (0.05)	0.05 (0.05)	0.05 (0.05)
	General or vocational higher school	0.10* (0.05)	0.08+ (0.05)	0.06 (0.05)
	Academic education	0.14** (0.05)	0.11* (0.05)	0.09+ (0.05)
Ease of getting by with household income		0.04** (0.01)	0.03* (0.01)	0.02 (0.01)
Public service media use			0.03* (0.01)	0.02 (0.01)
Private media use			−0.04** (0.01)	−0.03* (0.01)
Social media use			0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)
Political interest			0.02 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)
Party preference (Ref: ÖVP)	SPÖ			−0.09+ (0.05)
	FPÖ			−0.18*** (0.05)
	Green			0.06 (0.07)
	NEOS			−0.05 (0.06)
	MFG			−0.11 (0.07)
	KPÖ			−0.30*** (0.06)
	Other			−0.32*** (0.08)
	Non-voters			−0.18*** (0.05)
N		1405	1405	1405
Pseudo-R ²		0.024	0.031	0.054

Standard errors in parentheses + $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

percent for the KPÖ). For the FPÖ, ‘securing peace in Europe’ only ranks fifth behind ‘Fighting rising prices’ (76.1 percent), ‘limiting migration’ (66.8 percent), ‘reducing poverty’ (28.7 percent), and ‘fighting crime’ (27.9 percent). For the KPÖ, ‘securing peace in Europe’ is in seventh place. Their top 3 policy goals are ‘fighting rising prices’ (68.4 percent), ‘reducing poverty’ (46.1 percent) and ‘limit migration’ (38.5 percent).⁵ These results indicate that each of the parties emphasises different sets of policy issues. The concrete composition of these top 3 concerns depends on the party’s ideological core. For the far-right FPÖ, this leads inflation, migration and crime to outshine the Ukraine war in its relative salience. For the far-left KPÖ, inflation, poverty and migration do the same. This way, Russia-friendly parties can shift attention away from the Ukraine war. These results thus support hypothesis H1.

Attitudes towards refugees

To test hypothesis H2, I calculate OLS regressions with cluster robust standard errors based on the VIC3 sample. The average score about attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees serves as the dependent variable. I built the models in the same sequential way as the models predicting salience. Table 2 lists the coefficients from the models.

Women and older respondents report more negative attitudes towards Ukrainians than men and younger respondents. Higher education and a better financial situation are associated with more positive attitudes. These effects remain significant in all models and are in line with previous research (Ulrich, 2025a, pp. 13–15). Consuming public service media correlates with more positive attitudes, while private media use is

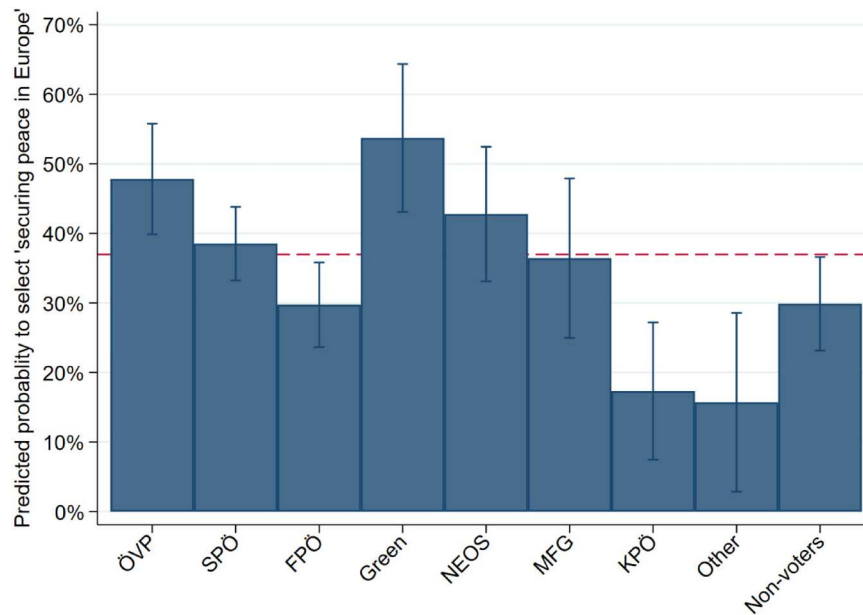


Figure 2. Predicted probabilities to select 'securing peace in Europe' as a main policy goal by party support (VIC3; $N = 1405$).

associated with more negative attitudes. Respondents with more political interest also report more positive attitudes.

As expected in H2a, Model 6 shows that supporters of the FPÖ are significantly less positive towards Ukrainian refugees than supporters of the ÖVP ($\beta = -0.53$; $p < 0.001$). MFG supporters are also more negative ($\beta = -0.38$; $p = 0.012$). Conversely, supporters of the SPÖ and the Greens are more positive than ÖVP voters. Contrary to H2b, KPÖ supporters are not significantly different from the supporters of the ÖVP.

These conflicting trends in attitudes subsequently cause polarisation. To examine which party supporters contribute most to polarisation, I build on Grande et al. (2019, pp. 1451–1452) who operationalised the contribution of each party to polarisation by their deviation from the attitude mean across all parties. Applying this idea to individual attitudes, party supporters that deviate the most from the sample mean contribute the most to polarisation. Figure 3 shows predicted means for the groups in party preference from Model 6. The red line marks the mean of the VIC3 sample. FPÖ supporters deviate most from the mean ($\Delta = -0.47$) in a negative direction, followed by the supporters of the Green party ($\Delta = +0.42$) who deviate in a positive direction. Below them, MFG ($\Delta = -0.32$) and SPÖ ($\Delta = +0.29$) supporters further contribute to polarisation. KPÖ supporters do not significantly contribute to polarisation.

In summary, as expected in H2a, FPÖ supporters are more negative towards Ukrainian refugees, which is consistent with their overall anti-migration attitude. These attitudes also align with those of other far-right parties in Europe. Contrary to H2b, KPÖ supporters do not show particularly positive attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees, which goes against other far-left parties in Europe. Whether the KPÖ is an outlier from other far-left parties is a question that deserves special interest in future studies.

Checking for causality

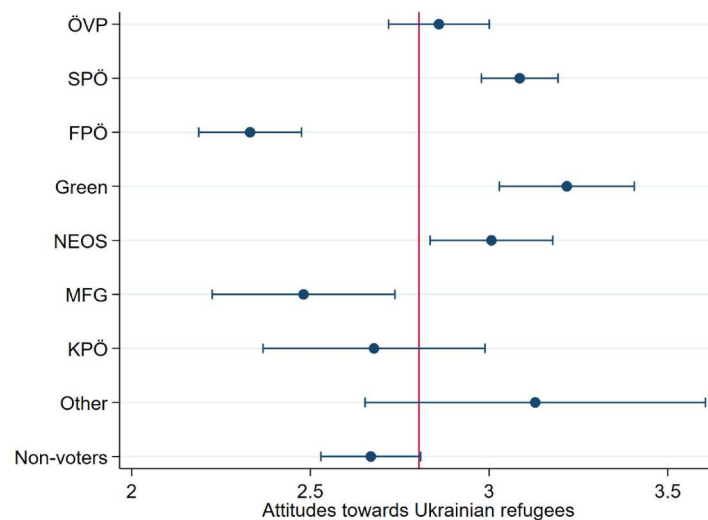
To test hypotheses H3, H4a and H4b, I recalculated Models 3 and 6 with the VIC23 sample ($N = 656$) and replaced the party preference from VIC3 with the party preference from VIC2 – before Russia invaded Ukraine.

Beginning with relative salience, Figure 4 displays the AMEs of Model 3 in the left panel, and the right panel shows the same model with the party preference from VIC2. The results from Model 3 are almost perfectly replicated with the VIC23 sample. Respondents who supported the FPÖ before the Ukraine war (VIC2), select 'securing peace in Europe' less often in VIC3. The same is true for those who supported the KPÖ before the war. These results corroborate hypothesis H3.

Table 2. Results from OLS regressions to predict attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees.

		Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Gender: Female		−0.26*** (0.06)	−0.21*** (0.06)	−0.20*** (0.06)
Age (in years)		−0.00 (0.00)	−0.01** (0.00)	−0.00* (0.00)
Educational level (Ref: Compulsory school)	Completed apprenticeship	−0.08 (0.09)	−0.11 (0.09)	−0.08 (0.09)
	Vocational middle school	0.11 (0.12)	0.09 (0.11)	0.09 (0.11)
	General or vocational higher school	0.28** (0.10)	0.20* (0.10)	0.17+ (0.10)
	Academic education	0.42*** (0.11)	0.30** (0.11)	0.23* (0.10)
Ease of getting by with household income		0.19*** (0.03)	0.15*** (0.03)	0.12*** (0.03)
Public service media use			0.18*** (0.03)	0.10*** (0.03)
Private media use			−0.14*** (0.03)	−0.10*** (0.03)
Social media use			−0.02 (0.02)	−0.02 (0.02)
Political interest			0.07* (0.03)	0.06* (0.03)
Party preference (Ref: ÖVP)	SPÖ			0.23* (0.09)
	FPÖ			−0.53*** (0.10)
	Green			0.36** (0.12)
	NEOS			0.15 (0.11)
	MFG			−0.38* (0.15)
	KPÖ			−0.18 (0.17)
	Other			0.27 (0.25)
	Non-voters			−0.19+ (0.10)
Constant		2.26*** (0.14)	2.28*** (0.18)	2.55*** (0.20)
N		1405	1405	1405
Adjusted R ²		0.094	0.131	0.193

Standard errors in parentheses

+ $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$ **Figure 3.** Polarisation in attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees between groups of party supporters.

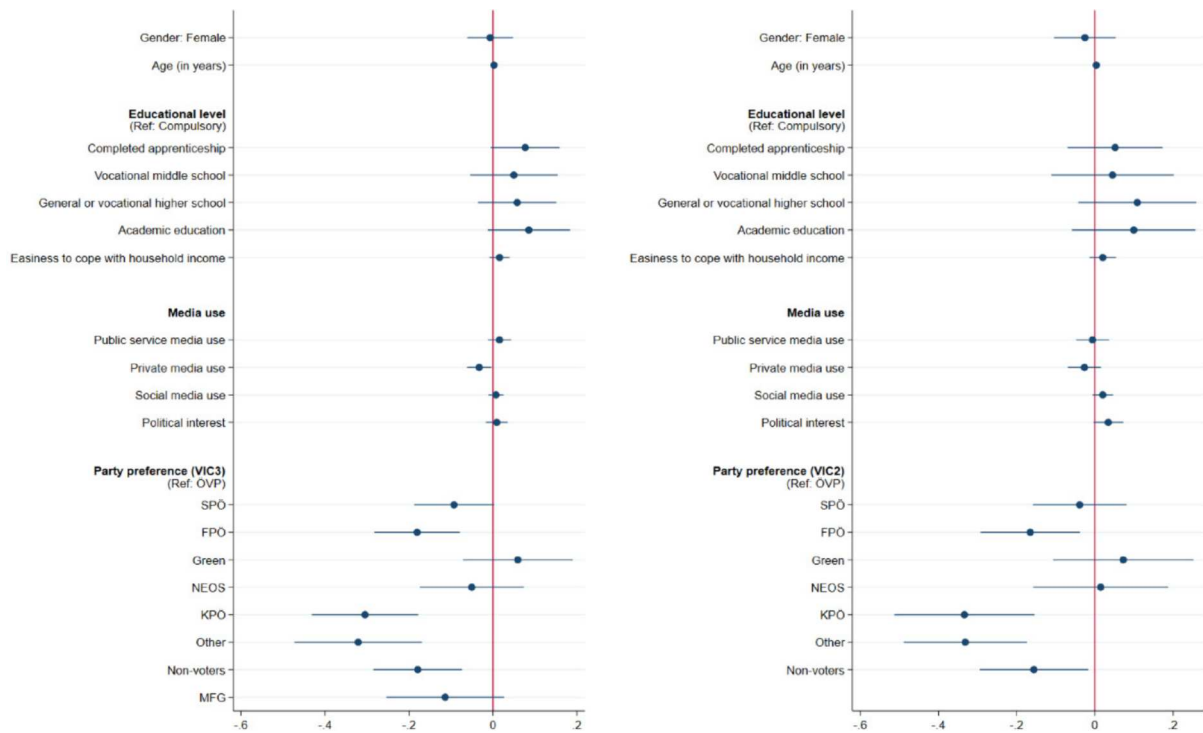


Figure 4. AMEs for predicting relative salience between the two samples: VIC3 (N = 1405) in the left panel, VIC23 (N = 656) in the right panel.

Similarly, [Figure 5](#) shows that the results from Model 6 are mostly replicated with the VIC23 sample. Respondents who supported the FPÖ before the war (VIC2) are more negative towards Ukrainian refugees in VIC3, corroborating H4a. The only striking difference between the two models in [Figure 5](#) is that the effect

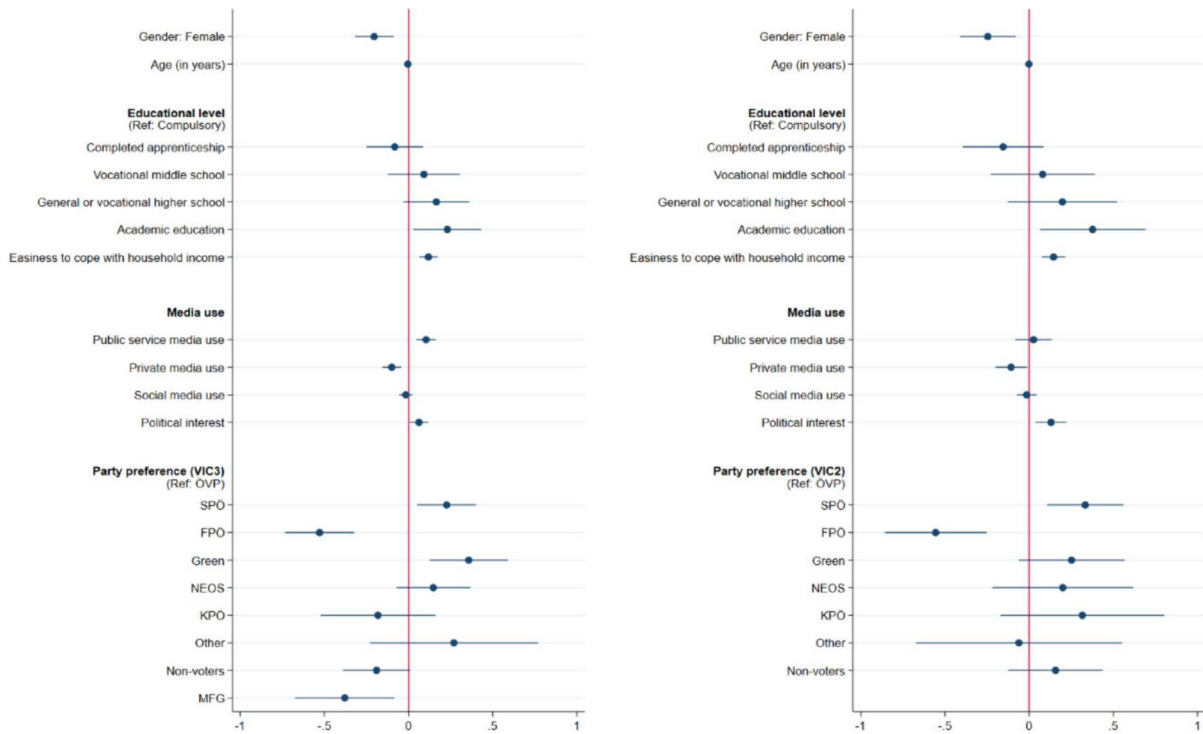


Figure 5. Estimates for predicting attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees between the two samples: VIC3 (N = 1405) in the left panel, VIC23 (N = 656) in the right panel.

of supporting the Green party in VIC2 is not significant. This difference may be due to individuals who support different parties in VIC3 than they did in VIC2. 28.6 percent of respondents changed their party preference between waves. The Green party has also lost a considerable share of their electoral support on the national level (13.9 percent in 2019, 8.2 percent in 2024). The same is true for the ÖVP (37.5 percent in 2019, 26.3 percent in 2024). The FPÖ, on the other hand, gained significant votes in the 2024 national elections (16.2 percent in 2019, 28.9 percent in 2024). The reasons for these voter shifts are manifold. The FPÖ emphasised economic strain in their campaigns, which mobilised many potential voters (Praprotnik, 2025) and dissatisfaction with the pandemic management of the ÖVP-Green coalition led to stark declines in political trust (Seymer & Ulrich, 2024).

In sum, party preference from before the war (VIC2) predicts relative salience and attitudes towards refugees in VIC3, which corroborates the assumption that parties use their cues to influence their supporters' attitudes.

Conclusion

This article examined whether the politicisation of the Ukraine war has spread to the Austrian public and whether the political parties have created polarised attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees via party cues. The results indicate that the politicised debate on the party level has indeed expanded to the public.

First, the Ukraine war is highly salient for the Austrian public. Securing peace in Europe is seen as the second most important policy goal, overshadowing migration and climate change. However, salience differs by party support. Supporters of the far-right FPÖ and the far-left KPÖ are less likely to select securing peace in Europe as a priority for Austrian politics than supporters of other parties. Both parties put more emphasis on issues that lie close to their ideological core (e.g. migration, crime, poverty), thereby overshadowing the relative salience of the Ukraine war. This could be part of a purposeful strategy of these Russia-friendly parties to shift attention away from the war.

Second, FPÖ- and MFG-supporters are more negative towards Ukrainian refugees than average, while Green- and SPÖ-voters are more positive than average. These conflicting attitudes contribute to polarisation, with FPÖ- and Green-voters contributing the most.

Last, leveraging the VIC survey's panel structure, I show that party preferences from March/April 2021 predict relative salience and attitudes about the Ukraine war, indicating that individuals indeed formed their attitudes in alignment with the party they support.

Taken together, this article shows how party support shapes individual's relative salience of the Ukraine war and attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees in Austria. The results contribute to prior politicisation literature by showing that politicisation on the party level expands to the public via party cues, thereby turning elite debates into widely politicised ones.

However, there are limitations that future studies can improve upon. First, as discussed in the methods section, the measure of relative salience is not ideal, as it might lead to underestimating the degree of relative salience. Thus, future studies should test the robustness of my results with more direct measures (e.g. Likert ratings of issue importance).

Second, I only focus on attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees. But these items do not capture support for Ukraine in its full complexity (see methods section). Unfortunately, the VIC data set does not provide further variables about the Ukraine war. Hence, future studies should examine whether my results hold for other attitudes as well.

Last, I focus on the effect of party preferences. However, there are other factors that may play a role in shaping salience and attitudes (e.g. human values, Euroscepticism, etc.). This is demonstrated by the arguably low share of explained variance in the models (up to 5 percent for relative salience, and around 20 percent for attitudes towards refugees). Hence, there are other important factors for future research to explore.

Nevertheless, this study highlights how political parties can shape their supporters' political attitudes through party cues and potentially contribute to increased polarisation in attitudes. In the context of the Ukraine war, these cues might determine the level of support that Ukraine and its citizens displaced by Russia's illegal invasion receive, making them an essential topic for future research.

Notes

1. The Online Appendix (Figure OA1) offers a descriptive analysis of Eurobarometer data about individuals' agreement with EU responses to the Ukraine war. Indeed, Austrians overwhelmingly agree with providing humanitarian aid and welcoming war refugees but agree less to the EU providing financial help to Ukraine or banning Russian state-owned media. Providing Ukraine with military equipment reaches the lowest agreement in Austria. In addition, Austrians are consistently located at the lower ends of agreement to all EU responses included in the Eurobarometer.
2. To test the robustness of my results, I have recalculated the analysis with both attitude items separately. Table OA3 in the Online Appendix lists the resulting regressions. The results paint a very similar picture.
3. This question includes an 'other party' category. The parties in this group exhibit considerable ideological diversity, as it includes fringe parties from the right-wing (*Team Kärnten*, *Bündnis Zukunft Österreich* (BZÖ), etc.), the left-wing (Volt, Austrian Pirate Party) and the centre (e.g. *Liste Fritz*).
4. I compared these results to data from three Eurobarometer surveys (2023; 2024; 2025). Detailed analyses are listed in the Online Appendix. The Eurobarometer corroborates that the Ukraine war is among the most pressing issues for Austrians (Figures OA2 and OA4) and that this relative salience is lower in Austria than in most European countries (Figures OA3 and OA5), which could be linked to Austria's emphasis on international neutrality.
5. Figure OA6 in the Online Appendix shows the ranking of policy issues for each of the party groups.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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