

# The Russian Invasion of Ukraine and European Citizens' Trust in the Armed Forces: Shaken Not Stirred(?). A Research Note

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## Abstract

Major, national security-related events such as terrorist attacks, insurgencies, conflict, and war impact citizens' institutional trust levels since they affect (in) security sentiments and risk perceptions. The Russian invasion of Ukraine is universally regarded as an important defining event for European security with wide-ranging and long-lasting repercussions. The present paper contributes to the existing and expanding literature on the effects of invasion by examining how it impacted European citizens' trust in the armed forces. To this effect, it uses data from two Eurobarometer surveys that were conducted immediately before the invasion and a few months later, while the initial fierce fighting was still underway. The sample comprises 35 countries and a total of 48,049 observations. Findings from logistic regression models and mediation analysis reveal a modest reduction in trust, pointing to an accountability effect, but mediators partially reduce and offset this negative effect.

## Keywords

armed forces trust, Russian invasion, Ukraine, logistic regression, mediation analysis

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## Introduction

Institutional trust, described by Delhey and Newton (2005) as citizens' belief that a country's institutions will not, at worst, knowingly or willingly do them harm, and will, at best, act in everybody's interests, includes trust in the state's security apparatus, such as the armed forces and the police. Allowing for the inevitable variations across countries, public opinion polls invariably report that citizens express high levels of trust in the armed forces (*inter alia*: Biehl, 2023; Molendijk, 2024; Solar, 2022; Tiargan-Orr & Eran-Jona, 2016). The extant literature indicates that a cohort of demographic characteristics, ideological and political orientations, individual traits, and preferences determines citizens' levels of institutional trust and trust in the armed forces in particular (*inter alia*: Abouzzohour & Yousef, 2023; Bae & Lee, 2025; Biehl, 2023; Choi & Yu, 2018; Choulis et al., 2021; Dempsey & Thoroddsen, 2005; Kull & Destler, 1999; Solar, 2022).

Several studies have shown that, along with such determinants, institutional trust can be affected by events that influence citizens' (in)security sentiments and risk perceptions. Examples include the recent pandemic, terrorist attacks, civil strife, insurgencies, conflict, and war. Reported findings indicate that such events can shape and influence voting behavior, policy preferences, values, and behavioral attitudes toward state institutions (*inter alia*: Arvanitidis et al., 2016; Berrebi & Klor, 2008; Bove & Di Leo, 2020; Bozzoli & Müller, 2011; Deglow & Sundberg, 2021; Geys & Qari, 2017; Hall & Werner, 2022; Harding & Nwokolo, 2024; Mader, 2024; Yavetz et al., 2025).

As observed by Deglow and Sundberg (2021), the impact that such major security-threat-generating events exert on citizens' institutional trust levels is described via two competing hypotheses. The *rally round the flag hypothesis* suggests that during periods of crisis and security threats, institutional trust increases through augmented patriotism, confidence, and support for the government and national security institutions (*inter alia*: Baker & Oneal, 2001; Lutz, 2002; Hetherington & Nelson, 2003). However, as pointed out by Hetherington and Nelson (2003), although institutional trust surges following security-related events, for instance, terrorist attacks, the increase tends to be short-lived. Over the long run, as the immediate impact of such a security event gradually fades away, individuals tend to revert to their prior criteria—social, economic, and political—with which they evaluate state institutions.

On the other hand, the *accountability effect hypothesis* suggests that failure on the part of the state and its security apparatuses to either prevent or adequately and effectively respond to a security challenge, for instance, a terrorist attack or an insurgency, is viewed as a failure to accomplish their primary mission. As a result, citizens “punish” the state and its security institutions by withdrawing trust and support (Aleksovska, 2021; Deglow & Sundberg, 2021).

The Russian invasion of Ukraine was an important defining event for European security with wide-ranging, momentous political, economic, and strategic ramifications as discussed by Gioe and Styles (2024). Expectedly, its effects are addressed by

a steadily expanding literature (*inter alia*: Anghel & Džankić, 2023; Biscop, 2024; Bosse, 2022; Håkansson, 2024; Molendijk, 2024; Ünaltdilar et al., 2025). A strand of this literature focuses on how the invasion impacted European citizens' political and policy preferences, attitudes, and institutional trust levels (*inter alia*: Economou & Kollias, 2023; Gutmann et al., 2023; Hernández & Ares, 2023; Klymak & Vlandas, 2025; Mader, 2024; Mader et al., 2024; Schleeauf et al., 2025; Steiner et al., 2023). Allowing for the inevitable variation of findings that stems from the different methodologies and samples used in the empirical analyses, the results appear to support the hypothesis that external threats and security-related events that affect threat perceptions, in this case, the invasion of Ukraine, led to greater trust and support toward EU policies for collective defense and security. For example, Mader (2024) and Mader et al. (2024) find more favorable attitudes toward enhanced integration in terms of collective defense and security policies. The findings reported by Klymak and Vlandas (2025) show that the Russian invasion increased trust in politicians, political parties, and national parliaments, indicating a rally-around-the-flag effect. Less pronounced are the reported findings by Fernández et al. (2023) showing that the 2022 Russian invasion heightened rather than fundamentally altered underlying trends with respect to citizens' attitudes toward European integration in the security and defense domains. From survey data among EU university students, Steiner et al. (2023) report that the 2022 invasion of Ukraine consolidated their attachment to the EU and that they were more appreciative of the benefits that deepening European integration could yield. Albeit using the 2014 Russian aggression toward Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea as the point of reference for their respective analysis, the findings of Gehring (2022) and Kiratli (2024) also reveal an increase in trust levels toward EU institutions and greater support for common policies.

The present paper contributes to the existing literature on the effects of the 2022 Russian invasion by examining how it impacted European citizens' trust in the armed forces that constitute the pillar of countries' national defense. To this effect, we use data from two Eurobarometer surveys. One was conducted immediately before the February 2022 invasion, and the second one, a few months later, while the initial fierce fighting on the Ukrainian fronts was still underway. The data and the methodology employed to probe into the issue at hand are presented in the section that follows. The results are presented and discussed in Section 3, while Section 4 concludes the paper.

## **Data and Methodology: A Primer**

As noted above, to examine how citizens' trust in the armed forces was affected by the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, we draw data from two Eurobarometer surveys. The first—Eurobarometer survey 96.3—was conducted between January and February 2022, that is, just before the invasion. The second—Eurobarometer survey 97.5—was conducted between June and July 2022, while the initial fierce fighting

was going on and European countries and citizens were adjusting to the new security realities brought about by Russian irredentism.

The sample used in the empirical investigation that follows in the next section consists of 35 countries<sup>1</sup> and a total of 48,049 observations. The variables used in the estimations and their respective description are shown in Table 1. The dependent variable is citizens expressed trust in the armed forces. Eurobarometer respondents are asked whether they tend to trust or tend not to trust the armed forces. Two independent variables are introduced in the estimated models to capture the effect of the Russian invasion. The first indicator is a dichotomous variable denoting whether the respondent was interviewed after the onset of the invasion. The second indicator measures the distance (in kilometers) between Kyiv, the capital of Ukraine, and the capital city of each respondent's country of residence. This variable seeks to account for possible spatial variations in the conflict's perceived impact. As shown by Lewis and Topal (2023), geographic proximity to a conflict can accentuate emotional engagement, threat perceptions, insecurity sentiments, and hence, in our case, affect expressed trust in the armed forces. Klymak and Vlandas (2025) address a related question, namely, whether proximity to the war in Ukraine affects political trust in European countries. They examine two opposing mechanisms that can affect trust. On one hand, citizens of countries that are not directly involved in the conflict may exhibit a "rally-round-the-flag" response driven by heightened perceptions of external threat. Geographic proximity to the conflict zone accentuates such a response. However, on the other hand, negative economic externalities and adverse political consequences of the war may reduce political trust. Their evidence is consistent with a rally-round-the-flag effect. They postulate that Europeans perceive the war in Ukraine as a greater threat to domestic institutions when they are closer to the conflict area. Their reported results indicate stronger effects on political trust in countries nearer to Ukraine than in more geographically distant countries. In a similar vein, the results reported by Onderco and Tago (2026) also indicate that distance from a conflict zone is important in shaping public attitudes since geographic proximity increases citizens' risk perceptions. On the other hand, studies also report findings indicating that generalized trust is reduced during periods of conflict through the erosion of social cohesion. This effect appears to be more pronounced in countries with geographical proximity and exposure to a conflict zone (De Luca & Verpoorten, 2015; Fiedler, 2023). Spatial proximity may accentuate citizens' insecurity and can generate a conflict imminent reaction that augments trust in the country's military. In line with previous studies such as the above, the distance from Kiev variable introduced in the models estimated herein aims to capture potential spatially related differences in the exerted effect on trust in the armed forces. Intuitively, one would expect geographic proximity to accentuate the effect of the invasion and the war through the generation of greater insecurity. However, greater insecurity can spur a rally-around-the-flag effect or, via the accountability hypothesis, a reduction in trust.

In addition, the models incorporate a battery of control variables capturing the demographic characteristics, socioeconomic status, and political self-placement of

**Table 1. Definition of Variables.**

Variable names	Definition
Dependent variables: Trust in institutions and policy preferences	
Trust: armed forces	1: Respondent tends to trust the armed forces, 0: Respondent tends not to trust the armed forces
Independent variables	
Age	Age in years (15–94 years of age)
Males	1: Respondent is male, 0: Otherwise
Marital status: married/living together	1: Respondent is married/living with a partner, 0: Otherwise
Marital status: single	1: Respondent is single/living alone, 0: Otherwise (Reference category, omitted from regressions)
Marital status: divorced/widowed/separated	1: Respondent is divorced/widowed/separated, 0: Otherwise
Higher educational status	1: Respondent belongs in a high educational class (level 6 and above in ISCED educational classification), 0: Otherwise
Employment status: employed	1: Respondent is self-employed/manager/other white-collar, manual worker, 0: Otherwise
Employment status: unemployed	1: Respondent is unemployed, 0: Otherwise (Reference category, omitted from regressions)
Employment status: out of labor force	1: Respondent is a house person/retired/student, 0: Otherwise
Good household financial situation	1: Respondent's household current financial situation is "very good/rather good," 0: Respondent's household current financial situation is "rather bad/very bad"
Life satisfaction	1: Respondent is "very satisfied/fairly satisfied" with daily life, 0: Respondent is "not very satisfied/not at all satisfied" with daily life
Political interest	1: High political interest, 0: Medium/low political interest
Political self-placement scale: left	1: Respondent belongs on the left of the political self-placement scale, 0: Otherwise
Political self-placement scale: center	1: Respondent belongs on the center of the political self-placement scale, 0: Otherwise (Reference category, omitted from regressions)
Political self-placement scale: right	1: Respondent belongs on the right of the political self-placement scale, 0: Otherwise
Good general country situation	1: Respondent states that the current general situation of the country is "very good/rather good," 0: Respondent states that the current general situation of the country is "rather bad/very bad"
Satisfaction with democracy in country	1: Respondent is "very satisfied/fairly satisfied" with the way democracy works in own country, 0: Respondent is "not very satisfied/not at all satisfied" with the way democracy works in own country
Satisfaction with democracy in EU	1: Respondent is "very satisfied/fairly satisfied" with the way democracy works in own country, 0: Respondent is "not very satisfied/not at all satisfied" with the way democracy works in own country
War dummy	1: Respondent interviewed after the invasion, 0: Respondent interviewed before the invasion
Distance	Km distance between the capital of each country in the sample to the capital city of Ukraine (Kiev)
EU-27 group	1: Country is a member of the EU-27, 0: Otherwise
Neighboring group	1: Country is neighboring to Ukraine and/or Russia or is a former East European country, 0: Otherwise
NATO group	1: Country is a member of NATO, 0: Otherwise

Note. All data on individual characteristics and personal preferences are drawn from the Eurobarometer surveys 96.3 (18.01.2022–14.02.2022) and 97.5 (17.06.2022–24.07.2022).

respondents. All have been shown by the extant literature to influence public attitudes and preferences and social and institutional trust levels, albeit with varying degrees of influence that, among others, depend on the sample used (*inter alia*: Alesina & La Ferrara, 2002; Citrin & Stoker, 2018; Kim et al., 2022; Kołczyńska, 2020). For example, the findings of Bornand and Klein (2022) show that socioeconomic inequalities affect evaluations of public institutions and policy objectives and institutional trust levels. In the case of the armed forces, Solar (2022) reports results indicating that higher levels of political awareness and civic engagement are strongly associated with trust in the armed forces. The variables' mean values, both for the entire sample and for each of the two Eurobarometer surveys used herein, are shown in Table 2.

Given that respondents expressed trust in the armed forces is a binary variable—tend to trust or tend not to trust—we opt to estimate logistic regression models with heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors, where  $y$  is the dependent variable of trust in the military and  $x_{\kappa}$  denoting the multiple independent variables included in the model—demographic characteristics, life satisfaction, socioeconomic status, and political self-placement—that have been shown in the extant literature to affect and determine institutional trust levels. Hence, in equation (1) below,  $x$  denotes the set of  $\kappa$  independent variables with the main variables of interest for our purposes here being the “*war dummy*” and the “*distance*” indicators:

$$P(y = 1|x) = G(\beta_0 + \beta_1 \cdot x_1 + \dots + \beta_{\kappa} \cdot x_{\kappa}) \quad (1)$$

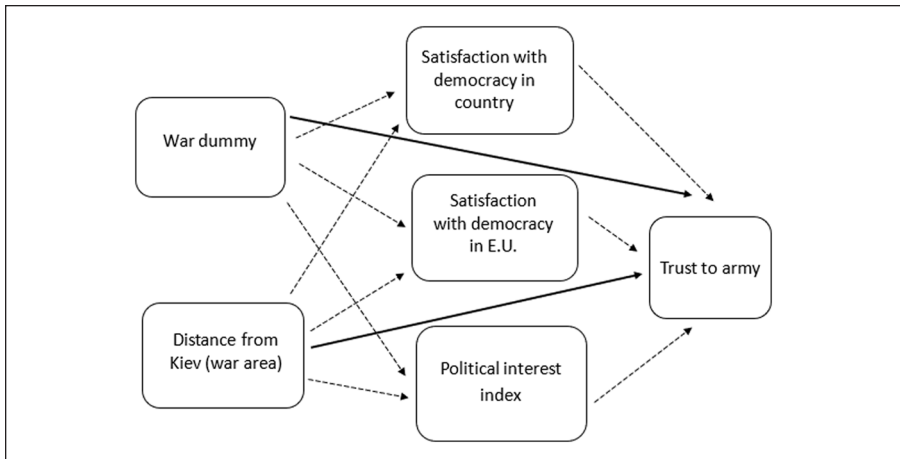
Methodologically, the models are estimated for the entire sample of the 35 countries as well as subsamples. Specifically, one of the estimated subsamples consists of the EU-27 member-nations, and a second one includes all European North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member states. Moreover, in line with the previous discussion on the potential effect that geographic proximity can exert on trust in the military, two additional subsamples were estimated. One consisting of countries neighboring either Ukraine and/or Russia, and the other where all non-neighboring countries are included. This methodological approach allows for the examination of whether the effect on trust in the armed forces varies across country sub-groups, depending on their institutional membership or their spatial proximity to the conflict area.

However, there could exist possible mediating pathways of individual stances that affect the Russian invasion-armed forces trust relationship examined here. It has been shown that individual perceptions and stances regarding a country's institutional performance and political socialization exert a significant effect on the levels of institutional trust (Abouzzohour & Yousef, 2023). A relatively under-researched mechanism affecting institutional, and specifically trust in the armed forces, is citizens' perceptions of their country's democratic functioning and how those perceptions shape trust in institutions. For example, Çakır and Şekercioğlu (2015) provide evidence that the level of democracy mediates the relationship between individual

**Table 2.** Descriptive Statistics, Mean Values.

Variable names	Total sample	Wave 1 (18.01.2022– 14.02.2022)	Wave 2 (17.06.2022– 24.07.2022)
Trust: armed forces	0.775	0.783	0.768
Age	49.508	49.553	49.464
Males	0.491	0.494	0.488
Marital status: married/living together	0.652	0.654	0.650
Marital status: divorced/widowed/separated	0.141	0.140	0.142
Higher educational status	0.297	0.319	0.276
Employment status: employed	0.589	0.585	0.593
Employment status: out of labor force	0.368	0.372	0.363
Good household financial situation	0.756	0.769	0.744
Life satisfaction	0.845	0.842	0.848
Political interest	0.179	0.164	0.193
Political self-placement scale: left	0.299	0.302	0.295
Political self-placement scale: right	0.300	0.299	0.301
Good general country situation	0.578	0.591	0.564
Satisfaction with democracy in country	0.682	0.683	0.682
Satisfaction with democracy in EU	0.663	0.653	0.673
War dummy	0.503		
Distance	1935.096		
Observations	48,049	23,882	24,167

political awareness and confidence in institutions. They argue that politically engaged and informed citizens are more likely to appreciate institutional functioning in a democratic regime. While previous empirical research has not examined directly the relationship between satisfaction with democracy and trust in the armed forces, relevant findings suggest some possible pathways for the observed relationship. Some studies underline the importance of institutional characteristics, in the sense that the general government system performance and the perceived effectiveness of institutions under a democratic regime can subsequently affect trust in the military (Chen, 2025). Solar (2022) reports findings indicating that trust in a country's military is positively correlated with support for democracy and individual political ideology. Reported findings in the extant literature suggest that higher-quality democratic governance fosters greater public trust in institutions generally, through increased national unity and social cohesion, which also spills over to public perceptions concerning the armed forces (Werner, 2022). On the other hand, under weak democratic regimes and specific political conditions, reduced institutional performance can spur a surge in trust in the armed forces, mostly grounded in its legitimation as a non-partisan actor in domestic politics. Hence, as the findings of Accorsi and Krebs (2024) indicate, dismay and falling trust in partisan state institutions can augment



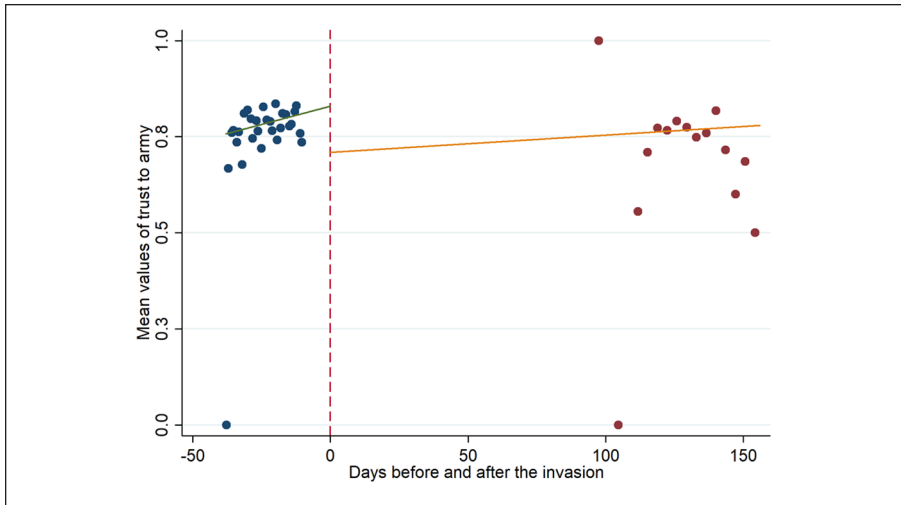
**Figure 1.** Conceptual Model on the Mediating Mechanisms Between War Onset and Armed Forces Trust.

trust in the country’s military as a non-partisan institution assigned with the mission of protecting the nation’s security.

To allow for possible mediation mechanisms such as the ones reported by Abouzzohour and Yousef (2023), that have the potential to influence the Russian invasion’s effect on armed forces trust, the Kohler–Holm–Breen (KHB) mediation model is used in the empirical analysis. The KHB model approach has grown quite popular in recent years, in the fields of political and social sciences (Kohler et al., 2011). The KHB estimation model is appropriate for categorical data and has been found to perform remarkably well in binary logistic regression models (Smith et al., 2019). This will allow us to examine whether individual stances, as depicted by respondents’ satisfaction with democracy in their own country and in the EU, as well as individual political interest, mediate the relationship of interest. Figure 1 presents the conceptual model that will be examined. The solid arrows depict the direct effect of the 2022 invasion on trust in the military, while the indirect/mediated effects are indicated by the dashed lines.

## Findings and Discussion

Figures 2 to 5 illustrate the evolution of the mean values of trust in the armed forces (in %) for the entire sample, as well as for subsamples based on geographic proximity, EU, and NATO membership. The “day zero” denotes the first day of the invasion. The pattern of responses differentiates substantially before and after the onset of the attack for the majority of the groups analyzed in the study. For the full sample, a modest decline in the average level of trust in the armed forces is evident

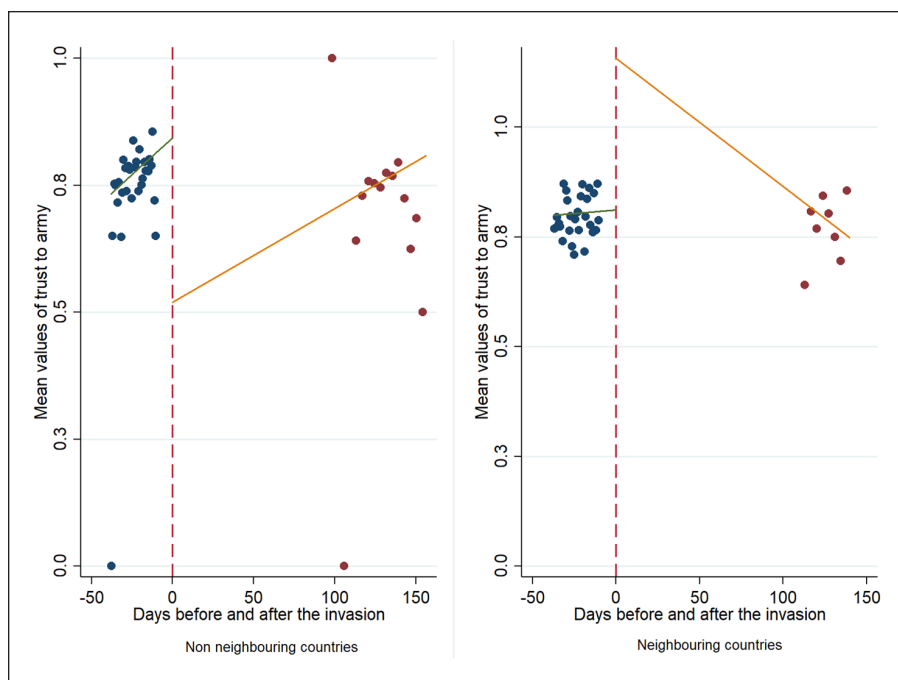


**Figure 2.** Mean Responses of Trust in Armed Forces (in %), by Day of Interview.

immediately following the invasion. While trust in the military gradually recovers over time, the pace of increase remains slower compared to the pre-war period (Figure 2). A more pronounced shift is observed among countries neighboring Ukraine and Russia in comparison to the other country groups. Prior to the war, trust in the armed forces displayed an upward trend; however, following the initiation of hostilities, this trajectory reversed, with average trust levels exhibiting a marked decline (Figure 3). A similar pattern emerges when disaggregating the entire sample by EU membership. Specifically, while trust in the armed forces continues to increase among respondents from EU member states following the onset of the conflict, a declining trend is observed among respondents from non-EU countries (Figure 4). In contrast, the armed forces trust trajectory appears relatively similar regardless of NATO membership status, suggesting that NATO affiliation does not substantially alter the temporal dynamics of trust in the armed forces (Figure 5).

Following the graphical representations of the dependent variable in the two Eurobarometer surveys, we turn to Table 3, wherein the results of the logit regression models estimating the determinants of trust in the armed forces for the full sample are shown. Table 4 reports the corresponding estimates for the subsamples, that is, NATO and EU members, countries neighboring to Ukraine and/or Russia compared to non-EU, non-NATO, and non-neighboring countries, respectively. All the results are reported in odds ratios (OR).

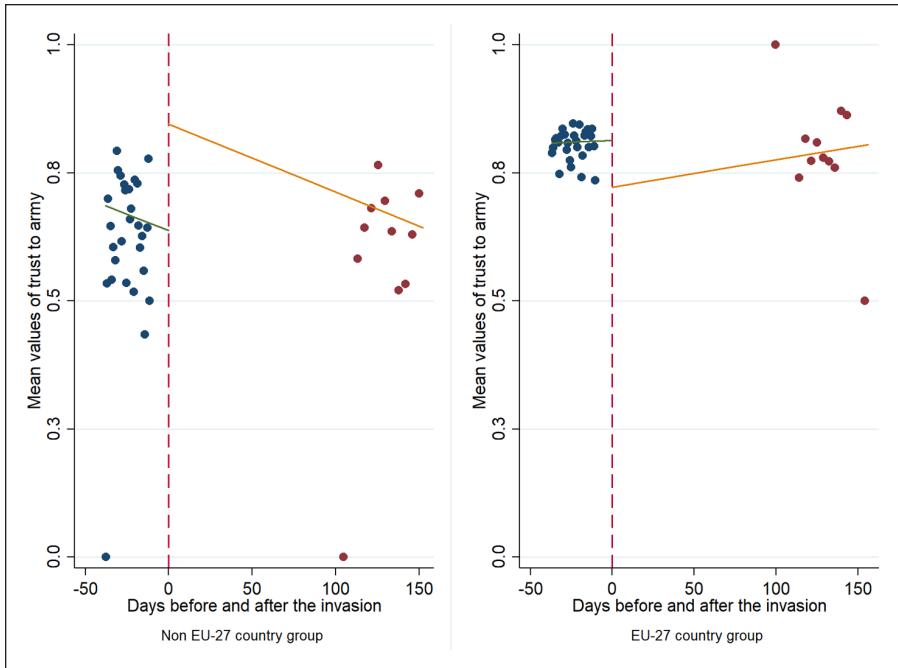
Starting with the broader determinants of trust in the armed forces, the results reported in Table 3 indicate that individual political orientations appear to exert a moderate influence on trust in the armed forces. Politically engaged respondents exhibit 9.2% lower odds of trusting the armed forces, relative to their less politically



**Figure 3.** Mean Responses of Trust in Armed Forces (in %) by Proximity Status and by Day of Interview.

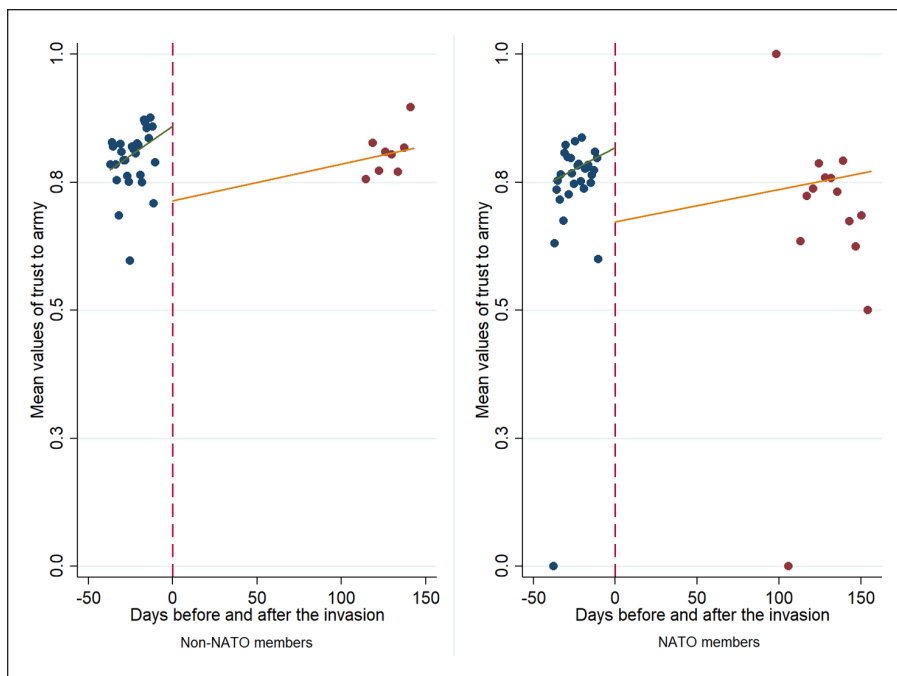
involved counterparts. Ideological self-positioning across the left-right scale of the political spectrum also appears to be an important determinant of trust. As one would intuitively expect, the results differ depending on the respondent's political self-placement. On the one hand, individuals identifying with the political left of the spectrum display 28.3% lower odds of trusting the armed forces, whereas those self-positioned on the right side of the political spectrum have 12.5% higher odds of expressing trust in the armed forces.

Individual economic status also emerges as a significant determinant of armed forces trust. Across the entire sample, a better self-reported financial situation is associated with 54.6% higher odds of trusting the armed forces (Table 3). However, other indicators of socioeconomic position, such as educational attainment and employment status, do not appear to exert a statistically significant effect on armed forces trust. On the other hand, higher levels of life satisfaction are positively associated with trust in the armed forces, increasing the odds of expressing trust by 40.9%. Finally, older respondents exhibit higher odds of expressing trust compared to younger individuals, although the magnitude of this effect remains relatively small and thus of limited substantive significance. Noteworthy is that respondents'



**Figure 4.** Mean Responses of Trust in Armed Forces (in %) by EU Membership Status and by Day of Interview.

perceptions of democracy, both at the national and EU levels, also appear to shape trust in the armed forces in a consistent and robust manner. Specifically, higher levels of satisfaction with the functioning of democracy within one’s own country are associated with a 40.6% increase in the odds of expressing trust. Likewise, greater satisfaction with democracy at the EU level corresponds to an even stronger effect, with the odds of trusting the armed forces increasing by 87.8% (Table 3). Worth pointing out is that the effect and importance of *Satisfaction with democracy in country* and the *Satisfaction with democracy in EU* variables remain consistent across all estimated subsamples, as can be seen in Table 4. For example, *satisfaction with democracy* at the country level is associated with a 41.7% increase in the odds of trusting the armed forces in the EU members’ subsample, while the respective effect for respondents in non-EU member countries is associated with a 36.7% in the odds of expressing trust. Likewise, *satisfaction with democracy at the EU level* is linked to a 94.1% increase in the odds of trusting the armed forces in the EU member states, and a 67.3% increase in non-EU member states. A broadly similar pattern is also observed when comparing the NATO and non-NATO subsamples (Table 4). For example, in NATO member states, satisfaction with national democracy increases the odds of trusting the armed forces by 38.3%, while in non-NATO countries the respective



**Figure 5.** Mean Responses of Trust in Armed Forces (in %) by NATO Membership Status and by Day of Interview.

increase reaches 50.1%, and satisfaction with democracy at the EU level increases the odds of expressing trust by 100.4% among NATO members.

Focusing on the two variables of interest, that is, the ones capturing the effect of the invasion on the levels of armed forces trust, the onset of the war (*War dummy*) is associated with a 7.6% decrease in the odds of trusting the armed forces across the entire sample, as the war dummy coefficient indicates (Table 3). Similarly, as the findings reported in Table 4 show, respondents residing in countries sharing a border with Ukraine and/or Russia exhibit 12% lower odds of trusting the military following the outbreak of the war. In contrast, this effect is not statistically significant for the Eurobarometer respondents residing in non-neighboring countries. A reduction in the odds of trusting the armed forces is also observed in the case of the EU member countries, where a 13.2% decrease in the odds of trusting the armed forces is indicated by the coefficient of the war dummy. On the other hand, in the case of respondents residing in non-EU-27 countries, the onset of the conflict is associated with an 8.3% increase in the likelihood of trusting the armed forces. A similar finding emerges in the case of NATO member states, where respondents in NATO members display 13.2% lower odds of trusting the forces following the armed conflict onset,

**Table 3.** Determinants of Individual Trust in the Armed Forces, Logit Models.

Independent variables	Dependent variables
	Trust in armed forces
<i>Coefficients are expressed in Odds Ratio</i>	
Age	1.006***
Males	1.013
Marital status: married/living together	1.030
Marital status: divorced/widowed/separated	1.067
Higher educational status	1.035
Employment status: employed	0.987
Employment status: out of labor force	1.053
Good household financial situation	1.546***
Life satisfaction	1.409***
Political interest	0.908***
Political self-placement scale: left	0.717***
Political self-placement scale: right	1.125***
Good general country situation	1.333***
Satisfaction with democracy in country	1.406***
Satisfaction with democracy in EU	1.878***
War dummy	0.924***
Distance	0.997***
Country dummies	Yes
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.14
Wald chi-squared	5,920.48***
Observations	48,049

Note. Regressions are estimated with heteroskedasticity—robust standard errors. Statistical significance is denoted by \* $p < .1$ ; \*\* $p < .05$ ; \*\*\* $p < .01$ .

whereas respondents in non-NATO countries exhibit a 14.3% increase in the respective odds, pointing to a “*rally-around-the-flag*” effect.

The reduction in the odds of trusting the armed forces both in the NATO and EU-27 samples is consistent with the *accountability effect hypothesis*. It probably captures respondents’ dissatisfaction with the state security apparatuses, in this case, the military, for failing to effectively deter Russian irredentism and the invasion of Ukraine. One can postulate that this failure represents lower than expected, inadequate performance compared to embedded expectations. Given that the invasion represented a large shock to the security of European countries, it may have triggered a withdrawal of trust in the institution, that is, the military, assigned with the mission to produce national security. Moreover, this reduction of trust in the armed forces in both the EU-27 and NATO subsamples may be associated with the fact that the military aggressiveness of resurgent Russia, coupled with the waning US commitment

**Table 4.** Determinants of Individual Trust in the Armed Forces in the Country Groups, Logit Models.

By neighboring status		
Determinants of trust	Neighboring countries to Ukraine and Russia	Non-neighboring countries to Ukraine and Russia
Political interest	0.820***	0.948
Satisfaction with democracy in country	1.555***	1.331***
Satisfaction with democracy in EU	2.081***	1.783***
War dummy	0.883***	0.931***
Distance	1.021***	0.996***
By EU membership status		
Determinants of trust	EU-27 member countries Non-EU-27 member countries	Non-EU-27 member countries
Political interest	0.918**	0.854***
Satisfaction with democracy in country	1.417***	1.367***
Satisfaction with democracy in EU	1.941***	1.673***
War dummy	0.868***	1.083*
Distance	1.008	0.997***
By NATO membership status		
Determinants of trust	NATO member countries	Non-NATO member countries
Political interest	0.922**	0.863**
Satisfaction with democracy in country	1.383***	1.501***
Satisfaction with democracy in EU	2.004***	1.541***
War dummy	0.868***	1.143***
Distance	0.996***	1.001***

Note. Regressions are estimated with heteroskedasticity—robust standard errors. The rest of the covariates are those depicted in Table 3. While the estimated effects of these covariates are not reported due to space considerations, they are similar to those of the full-sample model. Statistical significance is denoted by \* $p < .1$ ; \*\* $p < .05$ ; \*\*\* $p < .01$ .

over European security, put the spotlight on Europe's weak defense preparedness, raising questions over its ability to project credible military deterrence (*inter alia*: Biscop, 2024; Gioe & Styles, 2024; Kofroň & Stauber, 2025; Ünaltdilar et al., 2025).

The coefficient of geographic proximity variable (*Distance*) for the entire sample, that is, the distance between a respondent's capital city and Kiev, indicates a slight

decrease in the odds of trusting the armed forces (Table 3). However, the magnitude of this effect is effectively negligible. On the other hand, in the neighboring countries sample, the *Distance* coefficient indicates a 2.1% increase in the odds of trusting the armed forces, while for the non-neighboring group, a quantitatively marginal albeit statistically significant reduction is the case (Table 4). The *Distance* variable coefficient in the case of the EU-27 group is not statistically significant, while for the non-EU members, the recorded decline in the odds of expressing trust in the military is once again negligible in size, as is, in the case, with the NATO members. The effect is reversed in the non-NATO member group, but in both cases, it is quantitatively marginal and, for all intents and purposes, practically negligible (Table 4).

As mentioned in the preceding section, we now proceed with the mediation models. Table 5 presents the results of the KHB mediation analysis, conducted for the full sample as well as for subsamples of spatial proximity to the conflict zone and EU and NATO membership. For the full sample of the 35 countries, the onset of the war is associated with a 6.5% decrease in the odds of expressing trust in the armed forces. When controlling for the mediating factors—namely, satisfaction with democracy at the national and the EU levels, and individual political involvement—the direct effect of war on trust reaches an 8% reduction in the odds. The combined indirect effect of the three mediators results in a 1.5% increase in the odds of trusting the armed forces, partially offsetting the direct negative impact of the war. This indicates that these mediators operate as suppressors, mitigating the negative impact of war on trust in the armed forces. The lower panel of Table 5 further decomposes the contribution of each mediator to the overall effect of war on armed forces trust. The results indicate that political involvement amplifies the negative effect of war on armed forces trust, accounting for an additional 4.87% decrease in the odds. In contrast, satisfaction with democracy—both at the national and the EU levels—appears to counterbalance this negative effect, operating as a factor that mitigates the erosion in armed forces trust because of the invasion. At the same time, while the effect of distance upon trust seems to be mediated by the three confounders, the effects are rather negligible in most cases.

A broadly similar pattern is observed for both neighboring and non-neighboring countries. In neighboring countries, the total effect of the war results in a 12.5% decrease in the odds of trusting the armed forces. However, after accounting for the mediators, the direct effect reaches a 14.3% reduction in trust. For non-neighboring countries, the total effect is estimated at a 6.1% decrease, with the direct effect rising to 7.2%, after controlling for the mediators. These results imply an indirect effect of 1.8% for neighboring countries and 1.1% approximately for non-neighboring countries. While the overall structure of the direct and indirect effects remains similar across both groups, the effects are more pronounced in neighboring countries. For both subsamples, political involvement exacerbates the decline in trust due to the war, while individual satisfaction with democracy both at the country- and the EU-levels tends to moderate these negative effects.

**Table 5.** KHB Mediation Models on the Direct and Indirect Effects of Trust in the Armed Forces.

<i>Full sample</i>		
	<b>War dummy</b>	<b>Distance</b>
Estimate of total effect	0.935***	1.000***
Estimate of direct effect	0.920***	1.000***
Estimate of indirect effect	1.015***	1.000
% effect explained by mediators:	<b>War dummy</b>	<b>Distance</b>
Via: Political interest	4.87%	-0.95%
Via: Satisfaction with democracy in country	-5.48%	9.62%
Via: Satisfaction with democracy in EU	-23.23%	11.28%
<i>Neighboring countries to Ukraine and Russia</i>		
	<b>War dummy</b>	<b>Distance</b>
Estimate of total effect	0.875***	1.000
Estimate of direct effect	0.857***	1.000
Estimate of indirect effect	1.018***	1.000
% effect explained by mediators:	<b>War dummy</b>	<b>Distance</b>
Via: Political interest	4.28%	-3.07%
Via: Satisfaction with democracy in country	-3.54%	46.54%
Via: Satisfaction with democracy in EU	-15.64%	4.84%
<i>Non-neighboring countries to Ukraine and Russia</i>		
	<b>War dummy</b>	<b>Distance</b>
Estimate of total effect	0.939**	1.000***
Estimate of direct effect	0.928***	1.000***
Estimate of indirect effect	1.011***	1.000
% effect explained by mediators:	<b>War dummy</b>	<b>Distance</b>
Via: Political interest	3.50%	-0.28%
Via: Satisfaction with democracy in country	-4.60%	3.37%
Via: Satisfaction with democracy in EUEU	-17.93%	9.39%
<i>EU-27 member countries</i>		
	<b>War dummy</b>	<b>Distance</b>
Estimate of total effect	0.881***	1.000***
Estimate of direct effect	0.861***	1.000***
Estimate of indirect effect	1.020***	1.000
% effect explained by mediators:	<b>War dummy</b>	<b>Distance</b>
Via: Political interest	2.33%	-0.71%
Via: Satisfaction with democracy in country	-4.86%	7.08%
Via: Satisfaction with democracy in EU	-15.44%	16.21%

(continued)

**Table 5.** (continued)

*Non-EU-27 member countries*

	<b>War dummy</b>	<b>Distance</b>
Estimate of total effect	1.068	0.999
Estimate of direct effect	1.075	1.000
Estimate of indirect effect	0.994	1.000
<b>% effect explained by mediators:</b>	<b>War dummy</b>	<b>Distance</b>
Via: Political interest	-6.21%	25.75%
Via: Satisfaction with democracy in country	-3.86%	-168.04%
Via: Satisfaction with democracy in EUEU	0.43%	292.45%

*NATO member countries*

	<b>War dummy</b>	<b>Distance</b>
Estimate of total effect	0.881***	1.000***
Estimate of direct effect	0.866***	1.000***
Estimate of indirect effect	1.015***	1.000
<b>% effect explained by mediators:</b>	<b>War dummy</b>	<b>Distance</b>
Via: Political interest	1.72%	-1.47%
Via: Satisfaction with democracy in country	-2.49%	12.78%
Via: Satisfaction with democracy in EUE	-14.02%	-1.36%

*Non-NATO member countries*

	<b>War dummy</b>	<b>Distance</b>
Estimate of total effect	1.152***	1.000***
Estimate of direct effect	1.142***	1.000***
Estimate of indirect effect	1.010***	1.000
<b>% effect explained by mediators:</b>	<b>War dummy</b>	<b>Distance</b>
Via: Political interest	-6.54%	-2.66%
Via: Satisfaction with democracy in country	5.60%	8.28%
Via: Satisfaction with democracy in EU	7.05%	19.29%

Note. Entire sample and sub-groups. Estimated effects are measured in odds ratios. Regressions are estimated with heteroskedasticity—robust standard errors.

Statistical significance is denoted by \* $p < .1$ ; \*\* $p < .05$ ; \*\*\* $p < .01$ .

Similarly, significant mediating effects are observed for EU member countries. The total effect of the war on armed forces trust results in an 11.9% decrease in the odds of trusting the armed forces. However, after accounting for the mediators, the direct effect reaches a 13.9% reduction in the odds of expressing trust. This suggests that the indirect effect of the mediators is a 2% decrease in the odds of trust. Notably, the most substantial contributions come from satisfaction with democracy, both at

the national and EU levels, which appear to amplify the negative impact of the war on expressed trust. In contrast, political involvement tends to moderate the relationship, mitigating the negative effects. No significant mediating effects are detected for non-EU countries.

Finally, similar patterns are observed for NATO member countries, where democratic stances further reinforce the negative effects of the war on armed forces trust, while individual political engagement alleviates these effects. Specifically, the war decreases the odds of trusting the military by 11.9% for respondents in NATO member countries. After controlling for the mediators, the direct effect becomes even more pronounced, with a 13.4% reduction in the odds of trusting the armed forces, resulting in an indirect effect of 1.5%. In contrast, a reverse pattern emerges for non-NATO member countries. Here, the onset of the war is associated with a 15.2% increase in the odds of trusting the armed forces. After accounting for the mediators, the total effect is slightly lower, at 14.2%, leaving an indirect effect of 1%. In this case, the war's effect on strengthening expressed trust is further facilitated by satisfaction with democracy, while individual political involvement counteracts this trend, exerting a dampening effect on the relationship.

As broad general observation, the mediation analysis for both the entire sample of the 35 countries as well as the three groupings, indicates that the initial negative effect that the invasion exerts on expressed trust in the armed forces is partially offset by the mediators used. But this reduction in the negative effect as captured by the *War dummy* coefficients albeit statistically significant, is rather small in terms of magnitude.

## Concluding Remarks

Building on the extant literature that examines how the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine affected European citizens' policy preferences and stances toward the EU, the paper examined how the onset of the armed aggression affected reported trust in the armed forces. To probe into the issue, it used data from two Eurobarometer surveys conducted before and after the invasion. The sample consisted of survey respondents residing in 35 countries and a total of 48,049 observations. Given the binary nature of the dependent variable—tend to trust or tend not to trust the armed forces—logistic regression models were estimated for both the entire group of countries as well as sub-groupings formed in terms of NATO or EU membership and whether the countries are neighboring to Ukraine and/or Russia.

Apart from the usual cohort of determinants of institutional trust suggested by the extant literature, two variables were introduced in the estimations to capture the effects of the invasion on expressed trust in the armed forces. A *war dummy* and a *distance* variable that is the distance between the Ukrainian capital, Kiev and the capital city of the country where each Eurobarometer respondent resides. Allowing for the expected variations across the subsamples, the findings appear to be quite consistent.

The impact of the Russian invasion on expressed trust in the armed forces for the entire sample points to a negative effect (Table 3). This result suggests an accountability effect whereby perceived inability of the state and its security apparatuses to either deter or adequately and effectively respond to the security challenge posed by Russian irredentism is viewed as a failure to accomplish their primary mission. As a result, citizens withdraw their trust and support (Deglow & Sundberg, 2021). This appears to be more pronounced in the case of EU and NATO member states. A cautious and tentative explanation for this finding is that it possibly captures respondents' dismay and dissatisfaction toward national security institutions, the armed forces in particular, to deter Russian irredentism, and hence a lower-than-expected and inadequate performance compared to embedded perceptions and expectations. Moreover, to the extent that the Russian aggression generated insecurity among European citizens, this may have triggered a withdrawal of trust in the institution assigned with the task and mission to produce and protect national security. As previously noted, an additional tentative explanation for this decline of trust in the military is the fact that the geopolitically resurgent Russia and the concomitant security challenge this poses for European security, brought to the fore Europe's weak defense preparedness, raising questions over its ability to project credible deterrence. In fact, it is this weakness, along with the waning long-term US commitment over European security that spurred the rapid implementation of policies such as Readiness 2030, a strategic defense initiative aiming to enhance military capabilities and Europe's strategic autonomy (*inter alia*: Biscop, 2024; Fernández et al., 2023; Gioe & Styles, 2024; Ünaldirar et al., 2025). This cautious assertion is supported by the fact that the reduction of trust in the military is also evident for neighboring countries that could potentially find themselves facing a future Russian aggression (Kofroň & Stauber, 2025).

However, as the mediation analysis using the KHB model revealed, this negative effect seems to be partially offset by mediators. Satisfaction with democracy, both at the national and the EU levels, emerged as an important mediator of the negative effect on expressed armed forces trust. Although, to the best of our knowledge, no previous studies have specifically examined the mediating role of satisfaction with democracy when it comes to citizens' trust in the military, our finding accords with previous studies showing that higher satisfaction with democracy also enhances institutional trust (*inter alia*: Newton & Norris, 2000; Schmidhuber et al., 2021; Warren, 1999). As reported in the relevant literature, higher levels of satisfaction with democracy reflect individual perceptions concerning the functioning of the government and its institutions that include the armed forces (*inter alia*: Çakır & Şekercioğlu, 2015; Chen, 2025; Solar, 2022). Hence, satisfaction with democracy both at the national and EU levels can enhance trust in the armed forces or, in our case, act as a mediator that absorbs the negative effect the Russian invasion had.

Finally, the results concerning the other institutional trust determinants that were introduced in the estimations were in line with reported findings in the relevant literature (*inter alia*: Citrin & Stoker, 2018; Hout & Bieibly, 2009; Kull &

Destler, 1999; Mizrahi & Krup, 2025; Shy, 2009). Specifically, political self-placement on the left-right scale of the spectrum emerges as a significant determinant of trust in the armed forces (Table 3). The odds of expressing trust in the military are lower for respondents self-placed on the left of the political scale and higher for respondents self-placed on the right. Similarly, expressed trust in the armed forces is positively influenced when respondents report a good financial situation for their household, life satisfaction, and satisfaction with the general situation in the country in which they reside.

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