

**TARTU UNIVERSITY**  
**Faculty of Social Sciences**  
**Johan Skytte Institute of Political Studies**

**Daria Kovalova**  
**Migration and EU enlargement attitudes: Analysis of public opinion**

**MA thesis**

**Supervisor: Piret Ehin**

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## **Authorship Declaration**

I have prepared this thesis independently. All the views of other authors, as well as data from literary sources and elsewhere, have been cited.

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*Daria Kovalova, 19.05.2025*

## **Abstract**

The European Union's consideration of further enlargement has reemerged as a significant geopolitical question following Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, raising questions about the factors that influence public support for admitting new member states. This study investigates the relationship between public attitudes toward migration and support for EU enlargement, examining whether negative perceptions of migration correlate with lower willingness to expand the Union. The research employs multilevel logistic regression analysis utilizing Standard Eurobarometer survey data from all 27 EU member states, examining three dimensions of migration attitudes: perceptions of intra-EU mobility, attitudes toward immigration from outside the EU, and beliefs about immigrants' societal contributions. The empirical analysis confirms a significant relationship between migration attitudes and enlargement support, with attitudes toward external immigration demonstrating a stronger association with enlargement preferences than perceptions of immigrant contributions. Pronounced regional variation emerged in this relationship, revealing an East-West divide where Western European countries displayed strong positive correlations between favorable views of external immigration and enlargement support. In contrast, Central and Eastern European nations exhibited weaker or even negative correlations. The findings indicate that while addressing migration concerns is necessary for building enlargement support, broader attitudes toward European governance and integration play a more determinative role in shaping citizens' preferences regarding the Union's expansion. These results contribute significantly to post-functionalist integration theory by demonstrating how cultural and identity considerations increasingly structure European integration attitudes, providing crucial insights for policymakers navigating the complex terrain of public opinion as they consider the EU's future institutional boundaries.

## Table of Contents

<b>1. Introduction.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>2. Theoretical background.....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>2.1. EU Enlargement: From Process to Politics.....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>2.2. Migration as a Defining Political Cleavage in Contemporary Europe.....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>2.3. The Migration-Enlargement Nexus: Theoretical Interconnections.....</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>3. Methodology.....</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>3.1. Data.....</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>3.2. Method.....</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>4. Empirical results.....</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>4.1. Descriptive Analysis of Migration Attitudes and Enlargement Support.....</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>4.2. Immigration Attitudes and EU Enlargement: A Multilevel Analysis.....</b>	<b>44</b>
<b>5. Conclusion.....</b>	<b>68</b>
<b>List of sources.....</b>	<b>71</b>

## List of Tables

Table 1. Sample characteristics and distribution .....	33
Table 2. Public opinion on immigration in the EU.....	41
Table 3. Comparison of three multilevel logistic models with increasing sets of predictors.....	47
Table 4. Multilevel logistic regression results: predictors of support for EU enlargement.....	52

## List of Figures

Figure 1. Support for EU enlargement by member states.....	40
Figure 2. Distribution of political self-placement on the left–right ideological scale (EU-27) ....	42
Figure 3. Satisfaction with democracy at the EU and national level .....	43
Figure 4. Logistic regression results: predictors of further EU enlargement support.....	45
Figure 5. Bias-corrected predicted probability by immigrants contribute positively .....	50
Figure 6. Bias-corrected predicted probability of immigration of people from outside the EU...	51
Figure 7. Country-level baseline odds of EU enlargement support.....	57
Figure 8. Country-level random intercepts (with 95% CIs) .....	58
Figure 9. Country-specific odds ratios for immigrants contribute positively .....	60
Figure 10. Random slopes for immigrants contribute positively .....	61
Figure 11. Country-specific odds ratios for immigration of people from outside the EU .....	62
Figure 12. Random slopes for the immigration of people from outside the EU.....	63
Figure 13. Country-specific odds ratios for immigration of people from other EU member states .....	64
Figure 14. Random slopes for the immigration of people from other EU member states .....	65
Figure 15. Heat map: immigration attitude cross-countries.....	66

## 1. Introduction

The European Union has gone through several rounds of enlargement over the years, and each time it welcomes new members, it changes significantly. These expansions have not merely increased the number of member states, they also have fundamentally reshaped the EU's institutional dynamics and the very conception of European identity. Consider this: each wave brings in countries with their distinct histories, economic systems, and cultural values. The 2004 Eastern enlargement was especially game-changing (Pollack, 2009). When the Czech Republic, Estonia, Cyprus, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia joined, they were still, for the most part, catching up economically and democratically with Western European standards. This sparked some heated debates over whether they were prepared and what would happen next. These expansions did more than just change the appearance of Europe's map, as they also fundamentally altered the EU's identity (Mach, 2011). The Union evolved from a relatively homogeneous club of Western European nations to a diverse community spanning nearly an entire continent, with all of the complexities that entails. This transformation has strengthened the EU in many ways, but it has also introduced new challenges that still need to be figured out and addressed (Triandafyllidou, 2011; European Commission, 2025).

Migration is one of the most common concerns raised when the EU discusses expansion. People were concerned before and after the major 2004 expansion about waves of workers migrating from new Eastern member states to wealthier Western countries. News headlines in France, Germany, and the United Kingdom warned about Polish plumbers and Slovakian construction workers "taking jobs" from locals (Field, 2005). These fears were particularly strong in the older, wealthier member countries, where many citizens saw newcomers as a threat to their national identity and public resources (Barysch, 2006). Some politicians fuelled these fears for political gain, portraying Eastern European migrants as potential drains on welfare systems or threats to domestic wages (Houchard, 2013). What is interesting is how these fears manifested differently across countries. The United Kingdom and Ireland immediately opened their labour markets to new member states, while Germany and Austria imposed temporary restrictions (Kahanec, 2012, p. 44). This resulted in uneven migration patterns that reinforced some stereotypes. The question of how many people would relocate, where they would go, and what effect they would have become central to discussions about the consequences of enlargement.

So, what influences how people feel about migration? Researchers have looked into this question from different angles, and they have discovered that it is far more complicated than just economics. Early studies focused primarily on job competition and wages, implying that people oppose immigration because they are concerned about their livelihoods (Borgonovi & Pokropek, 2019; Conzo et al., 2021; Dražanová et al., 2024; Finseraas et al., 2018; Javdani, 2020; Kawalerowicz & Szulkin, 2023; Kayran, 2022). However, newer research demonstrates that cultural factors are frequently more powerful. Dražanová and Gonnot's (2023) study indicates that Europeans prioritise preserving national identity, cultural cohesion, and "European" values over purely economic concerns. Similarly, Kocijan and Kukec discovered in 2021 that cultural anxieties have a significant impact on how people form opinions about migration issues. What is fascinating is how these attitudes differ between social groups. People with higher education and urban backgrounds are more welcoming to migrants, whereas those with less formal education or from rural areas frequently express reservations. These distinctions are not arbitrary; they reflect deeper divides in how people perceive globalisation and social change.

One of the EU's core principles is free movement, which allows EU citizens to live and work in any member state. However, it has become increasingly politicised over time. What began as a technical policy has become a flashpoint for debates over European identity. Vasilopoulou and Talving's (2019) research revealed an unexpected finding: many citizens in wealthy member states see internal EU migration as a threat rather than an opportunity. This is especially true when people feel more exposed during economic downturns or political crises. The distinction between internal EU mobility and migration from outside the EU has also become blurred in public discourse. Politicians will sometimes deliberately combine these various types of movements to advance specific narratives. It is striking that a principle which ought to be regarded as a fundamental right, the freedom to move within the EU, has become so contentious. The practical application of this principle varies greatly depending on which EU passport you hold. While a Dutch professional moving to Germany faces few challenges, a Romanian worker may face suspicion or discrimination, despite having the same legal right to mobility (Adam et al., 2021, p. 753). These contradictions reveal deeper tensions in Europeans' perceptions of belonging and community within the EU's integrated space.

According to research, people's attitudes towards migration vary across generations. Schmidt's (2021) study found that different age groups in Western European countries have

different perspectives on migration, shaped by the historical events they witnessed and the media narratives they encountered. Younger Europeans who grew up with freedom of movement are more likely to have positive attitudes than older generations who remember a Europe with strict national borders. These generational differences contribute to what scholars now refer to as a "new political cleavage" based on migration attitudes (Van Der Brug & Rekker, 2021, p. 779). This divide cuts across traditional left-right politics, resulting in unlikely alliances and splintering established political families. Migration has evolved into a defining issue, revealing deeper values about openness versus closure, diversity versus homogeneity, and globalism versus nationalism. Political parties are increasingly aligning themselves along this axis, with some emphasising cosmopolitan values and others advocating for stronger borders and cultural protection. This restructuring of political competition centred on migration attitudes is one of the most significant shifts in European politics in recent decades, influencing everything from election results to policy priorities.

Migration concerns go far beyond movement within the EU's borders. The 2015 migration crisis, in which over a million people sought refuge in Europe, significantly increased public concern about asylum seekers and immigrants from outside the EU (Connor, 2016). Suddenly, Europeans were confronted with questions about the continent's relationship with its neighbours, humanitarian responsibilities, and ability to integrate newcomers from various cultural backgrounds. The work of researchers such as Simonovits and Tausch demonstrates how external migration has become a focal point for fundamental debates about European identity, security priorities, and Europe's role in the world. Different member states responded to the crisis in starkly different ways, revealing deep divisions in their migration management strategies (Tandon, 2022). Countries like Germany initially adopted welcoming policies (Drewski & Gerhards, 2024, p. 101), whereas others, such as Hungary, constructed border fences (AFP, 2015). These differing responses reflected more than just practical considerations. They embodied competing visions of what Europe represents and what values it should defend. The aftershocks of 2015 continue to shape how Europeans think about migration, with long-term implications for national politics and EU cooperation in areas ranging from border management to development aid.

Starting from 2005, the European Union experienced a period of "enlargement fatigue" (Walldén, 2017, p. 10). This term encapsulates the declining political and public willingness within the European Union to accept new member states, typically emerging after major rounds of

accession. It is rooted in concerns over institutional capacity, cultural and economic pressures, and a lack of a renewed integrative vision for the EU, often exacerbated by fears of globalization, migration, and a perceived democratic deficit (Szołucha, 2010, p. 2). As a result, enlargement lost political momentum and debates about future accessions were subordinated in many EU capitals. However, in 2022, this dynamic started to change rather dramatically (Bonomi & Rusconi, 2023, pp. 6-7). Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, geopolitical urgency revived the EU enlargement policy. On February 28, 2022, Ukraine applied for EU membership; in June 2022, it was given candidate status (European Commission, 2022). Following suit, Moldova applied in March 2022 and got candidate status in June 2022 (European Commission, 2022). Bosnia and Herzegovina was granted candidate status in December 2022, joining other aspirants who had long yearned for advancement, including Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia (European Commission, 2022). These events sparked public and political discussions on the viability, appeal, and schedule of future expansion once more. The European Commission underlined that enlargement was a strategic need connected to European stability and resilience rather than only a technical one (European Commission, 2022). Thus, questions concerning public support and national attitudes about admitting new member states reemerging at the forefront of EU political debate indicated a fresh relevance of the enlargement agenda.

*My research question is: What is the relationship between attitudes towards migration and attitudes towards further EU enlargement in current EU member states?* However, most studies I have seen focus on how EU enlargement has affected attitudes towards migration, essentially asking whether allowing in new countries made Europeans more anti-immigrant. In this thesis, I am turning the question around. I would like to investigate how current attitudes towards migration may influence support for further EU enlargement. Instead of asking whether enlargement increases anti-migration sentiment, I am looking into whether anti-migration sentiment undermines support for enlargement. This is a significant shift in perspective because it acknowledges that public opinion on migration does more than just react to EU policies; it has the power to actively shape what is politically feasible for the EU's future development. Hence, this thesis aims to investigate whether people who express concerns about immigration are more likely to oppose allowing new countries to join the EU, even if those countries meet all of the formal requirements for membership. This reversed relationship has not been studied as thoroughly, but it could explain why expansion has slowed dramatically since 2013, despite several candidate

countries actively pursuing membership. Understanding this dynamic could provide valuable insights into future enlargement constraints.

Why is this question important? The EU's ability to expand is determined not only by the readiness of candidate countries but also by the willingness of citizens in existing member states to welcome them. Even if a country meets all of the technical requirements for membership, known as the Copenhagen criteria (stable democracy, a functioning market economy, and the ability to implement EU law) (Emmert & Petrović, 2014, p. 1400), the process can stall if there is insufficient public support. It has been seen to play out in the Western Balkans, where the accession process has taken years despite progress on formal requirements. Enlargement has become politically risky for leaders in current member countries, particularly when public opinion is sceptical. This dynamic creates a paradox: the EU promotes democratic values in candidate countries while occasionally failing to reward their democratic progress with membership due to internal political constraints. Understanding how migration attitudes affect enlargement support helps to explain this contradiction. It also has strategic implications for the EU, because if migration concerns are a contributing factor to enlargement fatigue, directly addressing those concerns may be required to revitalise the enlargement agenda. Without this understanding, the EU risks making promises to candidate countries that it cannot politically keep.

The main question driving my research is straightforward: What is the relationship between people's attitudes towards migration and their support for further EU enlargement? *My hypothesis is that negative attitudes towards migration are linked to lower support for allowing new countries into the EU.* This makes intuitive sense: if you are concerned about immigration in general, you may also be concerned about the potential migration that could result from the EU's border expansion. People who are concerned about immigrants "taking jobs" or "changing the culture" may see enlargement as another path to undesirable demographic change. This connection is not always rational or evidence-based, especially when it comes to public opinion, perceptions trump reality. Citizens, for example, may oppose Turkish membership not because of objective assessments of Turkey's readiness, but because they are concerned that it will result in increased Muslim migration to their country. I am not saying these fears are justified, as many of them are based on exaggerated threats or stereotypes, but they are still politically powerful. Testing this hypothesis will help to determine whether migration attitudes act as a constraint on the EU's ability to expand, even if expansion serves other strategic goals.

To test my hypothesis, I am using data from the Standard Eurobarometer survey (European Commission, 2025), which asks citizens in all EU member states about their attitudes towards various EU-related issues, such as migration and enlargement. The Eurobarometer is ideal for this purpose because it asks consistent questions across time and countries, allowing for meaningful comparisons. My analysis employs multilevel logistic regression with the inclusion of all member states, as this technical approach will enable me to account for differences between countries while focusing on individual attitudes. This is significant because attitudes towards migration and enlargement vary greatly among member states. For example, opinions in Poland may differ significantly from those in France, reflecting different historical experiences, economic conditions, and even geographical placement. My model accounts for these structural national factors, allowing me to isolate the relationship between migration attitudes and enlargement preferences on an individual basis. I am also incorporating controls for other variables that may influence enlargement support, such as age, education, gender, and general attitudes towards some possible policies. This comprehensive approach enables me to determine whether the link between migration attitudes and enlargement support is strong or merely a statistical anomaly.

This study contributes to two important fields that were not communicated enough in the last years: migration attitudes research and European integration support studies. While both topics have been extensively studied separately and somewhat together, but only concerning information prior to 2004, there has been surprisingly little research linking them directly during recent times. My research fills this gap by looking at how attitudes in one domain (migration) affect positions in another (enlargement) and using the newest available data for this. This connection is essential because it explains why public opinion on seemingly unrelated issues may limit the EU's ability to pursue certain institutional developments. Understanding these links sheds light on the complex dynamics of legitimacy in European governance. Beyond academic contributions, my findings have practical implications for how EU leaders should approach future enlargement rounds. Suppose migration concerns are truly undermining support for expansion. In that case, policymakers may need to address them directly, either through improved communication about enlargement's actual effects on migration or through policy changes that reassure citizens about migration management. This study provides a more nuanced picture of the challenges facing European integration by emphasising how cultural anxieties about migration may constrain the EU's institutional evolution.

Here is how the rest of my thesis progresses. In the Second Chapter, I delve into the theoretical literature on migration attitudes and EU enlargement, examining the various frameworks that scholars have used to understand each topic and identifying potential connections between them. Chapter Three describes my dataset and methods in detail, including how I measure key concepts such as migration attitudes and enlargement support, as well as the statistical approaches I used to test my hypothesis. In Chapter Four, I discuss my empirical findings, specifically what the data shows about the relationship between migration attitudes and enlargement preferences, including any variations across countries or demographic groups. Chapter Five concludes by summing up and also considering what my findings mean for EU policy and future research. I consider the implications for the EU's enlargement strategy, particularly for candidate countries currently in the accession process. I also propose areas for future research that could build on these findings, particularly studies that look at how framing and political communication about migration issues affect public support for EU expansion. Throughout the thesis, I emphasise the practical implications of these findings for the future of European integration.

## **2. Theoretical background**

Public attitudes toward migration have become increasingly influential in shaping political discourse across the European Union (EU), especially in relation to the question of future EU enlargement. In recent decades, there has been a shift in the discourse on EU enlargement. In the '90s and early 2000s, EU enlargement was viewed as a strategic and normative project aimed at fostering democracy, economic development, and regional stability. After the “big bang” enlargement in the 2000s, there was an extensive discourse of “enlargement fatigue”, and any possible future expansion was often seen by the public as a potential gateway for increased immigration. This literature review explores the evolving scholarly discussion on EU enlargement and migration, emphasizing how public perceptions of migration influence attitudes toward the accession of new member states.

The chapter is structured in three parts. The first section provides an overview of the concept of EU enlargement, discusses the literature on public attitudes towards EU enlargement, tracing its historical evolution, and highlights the role of public opinion in legitimizing the process. The second section reviews the literature on attitudes towards migration in the EU, identifying key factors such as economic concerns, cultural identity, media framing, and political ideology. Finally, the third section focuses on how these two areas - migration and enlargement - intersect in public discourse and academic research. This section also provides an analysis of previous works that have explored the relationship between migration scepticism and opposition to future EU enlargement. By synthesizing the findings from the first two sections of this chapter, this section lays the groundwork for a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics between attitudes towards migration and attitudes towards enlargement that are taking place in European public opinion. This section also discusses how the researchers saw the relationship between these concepts, what methodology they used, and what results they obtained. Equally as important, it looks into the strengths and weaknesses of these studies and how this master's thesis fills a gap in the literature.

### **2.1. EU Enlargement: From Process to Politics**

In this paper, I conceptualize Enlargement as the accession of new member states to the European Union. Accession to the EU requires fulfillment of the Copenhagen criteria, which cover

political, economic, and institutional readiness for membership. Heritier and Rhodes (2023) note that enlargement has evolved from a technocratic, elite-driven strategy to a more politically competitive, citizen-driven process in which institutional capacity and public support play a key role. This shift can be explained by the exploitation of the issue by Eurosceptic parties, along with other topics such as migration, cultural identity, sovereignty, and economic issues. More specifically, Eurosceptic parties have deliberately presented enlargement as a threat to national interests by contending that new member states would drain financial resources, boost job competition, and possibly compromise cultural homogeneity, inspiring public opposition against what was once thought to be a rather technical process (Hooghe & Marks, 2018; Vasilopoulou, 2018).

First of all, it is important to highlight the history of the EU's enlargement prior to shifting the focus to the factors that influence support or opposition attitudes to enlargement nowadays. Historically, enlargement has occurred in waves, each driven by a combination of political aspirations and economic considerations that were connected with the EU's vision of itself as an economic union and normative power. The European Union was founded initially as the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1957, and consisted of six members, namely Germany, France, Belgium, Luxembourg, Italy, and the Netherlands. The first enlargement took place in 1973, when the United Kingdom, Ireland, and Denmark joined the Union, reflecting the growing economic and political cooperation of Western Europe. Next, Greece, Spain, and Portugal became members in the 80s, extending the EU's democratic and economic influence to Southern Europe. This enlargement was seen as a strategic tool to promote democracy in countries preceded by right-wing authoritarian regimes. The collapse of the Soviet Union brought about significant changes to the enlargement agenda. In 1995, Austria, Finland, and Sweden joined the EU, and the most transformative wave came when the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) joined the EU in the 2000s. The "big bang" of enlargement in 2004 was marked by the accession of ten new countries, followed by Bulgaria and Romania in 2007 and Croatia in 2013. Thus, through enlargement, the EU explicitly aims to consolidate peace, promote democracy and market economies in post-authoritarian or post-conflict regions, along with strengthening European unity (European Commission, 2020).

However, due to these accessions, many concerns over economic disparities, institutional capacity, and migration have arisen. The concept of “enlargement fatigue” began to gain traction in EU society (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005; Zielonka, 2006; Zielonka, 2007) and was exploited by Eurosceptic politicians and parties (Bonomi & Rusconi, 2023). Overall, it led to a slowdown in expansion efforts. The stalled accession processes of the Western Balkan states (Bieber, 2020) and the complex dynamics surrounding Turkey's EU candidacy (Müftüleri-Baç, 2018) illustrate the increasing difficulty of enlargement in the modern era. Moreover, the Eastern Partnership project was created in 2009, which was essentially about supporting and promoting democracy in the EU's Eastern neighbors, such as Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus (later withdrawn), Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, without granting them candidacy, let alone membership (Crombois, 2019; Bosse, 2019). Thus, the topic of enlargement was not on the agenda, and it returned to the agenda as a reaction to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, forcing the EU to start behaving like a geopolitical actor and to perceive enlargement as a strategic step. Nevertheless, this topic is highly dependent on political will, people's support, absorption capacity, etc., not to mention the candidates' compliance with the Copenhagen criteria.

Central to scholarly discussions on “enlargement fatigue” is the EU's absorption capacity, its ability to integrate new members without impairing its institutional coherence. Qorraj et al. (2024, p. 6) highlight the dual nature of this concept: from the perspective of candidate countries and from the EU's side. On the one hand, limited political stability and weak institutions threatened to hinder the effective absorption of EU norms and funds. On the other hand, the EU has expressed skepticism towards incorporating states with persistent structural deficits. Gidişoğlu (2007, p. 125) notes the vague and inconsistent usage of the term “absorption capacity,” warning that such ambiguity may allow political actors to delay or delegitimize enlargement under the guise of technical concern and be co-opted by populists to justify resistance to enlargement, feeding into broader Eurosceptic narratives.

Taydas and Kentmen-Cin (2007) investigate utilitarian and identity theories in order to explain support/opposition to EU enlargement. The authors cite two factors, namely, fear of losing cultural identity and fear of economic constraints, as predictors of supporting or opposing EU enlargement (Taydaş & Kentmen-Çin, 2017, pp. 3-5). The authors caution that “neither the utilitarian, nor identity approach in isolation is capable of accounting for attitudes to enlargement”

(Taydaş & Kentmen-Çin, 2017, p. 11). The study also showed that lower-skilled and economically insecure citizens are more likely to oppose enlargement, especially when they associate new member states with potential labour market competition. Interestingly, the Central and Eastern EU countries, while less economically developed than the Western EU countries, view enlargement more positively due to recent experience with accession and perceived economic gains (Vasilopoulou & Talving, 2019). The same is stated in the 2023 report by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), which says that while new members tend to support enlargement, skepticism is more prevalent in older member states, especially when it is linked to concerns about migration. This difference between older and newer member states suggests a changing discourse on EU enlargement, where historical experiences and perceived benefits of EU membership significantly influence public attitudes.

Public opinion has become an important component of the EU enlargement process and should be in line with elite-driven decision-making, according to Schmidt (2020), as she argues that for significant political initiatives like EU enlargement to be sustainable, public support and what political elites negotiate must match each other. Recent research shows that public support for enlargement varies considerably across Member States and is shaped by concerns about immigration, economic competition, and cultural identity (Tamvaki, 2008; Raines, Goodwin, & Cutts, 2017; Jones, 2023). De Vreese and Boomgaarden (2005, p. 72) found that fear of immigration is a particularly strong predictor of opposition to enlargement, and citizens who perceive migration as a threat are much less likely to support the admission of new members. Given that, unlike enlargement, the topic of immigration and cultural identity gained momentum following the 2015 immigration crisis and is currently one of the most discussed topics in the EU, increasingly exploited by right-wing populist parties, the linking of immigration and enlargement creates a need to explore the interconnectedness of these concepts.

## **2.2. Migration as a Defining Political Cleavage in Contemporary Europe**

Migration refers broadly to the movement of people across borders, including both intra-mobility and immigration from outside the country. In the EU context, this encompasses the free movement of EU citizens between member states as well as the entry of third-country nationals for work, study, or asylum. The European Barometer distinguishes between “immigration of

people from other EU member states” and “immigration of people from outside the EU”, as the attitudes towards these two groups may vary. This duality is central to EU politics: internal mobility is a fundamental EU right, while managing external migration involves EU-wide policies on borders, asylum, and integration. Thus, migration in the EU context is multifaceted, covering economic migration, family reunification, refugee flows, and the freedom of movement that is core to the European project. In this master’s thesis, I look at both attitudes towards migrants from inside and outside the EU.

A range of individual and contextual factors shapes public attitudes toward migration. Messing and Ságvári (2019) have researched attitudes towards migration, aiming to investigate which factors and groups of people will likely have more positive or negative attitudes toward migrants. Regarding socio-economic factors, their study shows that individuals with lower education, skills, or economic security often express more anti-immigrant sentiment, consistent with fears of labor market competition (Messing & Ságvári, 2019, pp. 16-18). In contrast, according to Vasilopoulou & Talving (2019, pp. 815-817), those who are highly educated and economically well-off tend to be more welcoming toward immigrants. Cultural and identity factors are equally significant, as people who feel their national identity or values are threatened by outsiders may develop negative views, whereas more cosmopolitan individuals are generally positive (McLaren, 2002, p. 560). Evidently, political cues and media also influence attitudes. For instance, when migration is emphasized in public discourse (often in crisis contexts) or the government leads a strong anti-migration campaign, it can heighten perceived threats (De Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2005, p. 72). Moreover, right-wing parties are more supported by those who have negative attitudes toward migrants. Also, those who feel insecure or distrustful in society tend to have more hostility towards migrants (Messing & Ságvári, 2019, p. 34).

Growing concerns about migration are increasingly reflected in public opinion across the European Union. These concerns are often rooted in perceptions of competition over limited resources such as welfare, housing, and employment. Right-wing populist narratives frequently amplify these anxieties by depicting immigrants as threats to national identity and social cohesion. According to the "ethnic competition thesis," individuals may support far-right parties as a reaction to perceived competition from immigrants over scarce resources (Rydgren & Ruth, 2011, p. 209). Empirical studies in Sweden and Italy provide support for this hypothesis, showing that higher

concentrations of immigrants are associated with increased support for radical right parties (Belardo, 2019, p. 27; Gil, 2022). In Austria, the Freedom Party (FPÖ) has exploited fears of "Islamization" and the so-called "Great Replacement" theory to consolidate its support, prompting mainstream parties to adopt more restrictive immigration policies (Hafez, Heinisch, & Miklin, 2019). Similarly, in Germany, the Alternative für Germany (AfD) has been classified as an extremist party in particular due to its rhetoric linking migrants to crime and cultural decline (Escritt & Hansen, 2025). These developments reflect a broader European trend in which public opinion, shaped by right-wing narratives, increasingly associates migration with social threats, influencing both political discourse and policy making.

Media narratives in the European Union have played a central role in shaping public perceptions of migration, often emphasizing themes of criminality, cultural threat, and competition for limited resources. Research by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) shows that media coverage frequently highlights incidents involving migrants in the context of violence or crime, reinforcing negative stereotypes (UNHCR, 2015, p. 5). During the 2015 refugee crisis, for example, media outlets across Europe often focused on isolated criminal acts committed by migrants, overshadowing broader humanitarian perspectives (UNHCR, 2015, p. 6). According to the European Parliament (2021), such patterns of reporting have been linked to the spread of disinformation campaigns, which exploit public fears of ethnic replacement and societal decline. Furthermore, the portrayal of migrants in the media has been criticized for lacking nuance, often failing to distinguish between asylum seekers, refugees, and economic migrants (IOM, 2019, p. 12). These oversimplified and negative representations contribute to a homogenized image of migrant populations. Beyond shaping public opinion, these narratives provide right-wing populist parties with rhetorical ammunition to promote anti-immigration agendas, thereby reinforcing social divisions and influencing migration policy at both national and EU levels.

The European Barometer shows that immigration is one of the most critical issues for many EU countries, especially when it became a top concern in 2015 as a result of the refugee crisis (European Commission, 2015a; European Commission, 2015b). The reports reveal that in Spring 2015, immigration emerged as the predominant concern at the EU level, with 38% of respondents identifying it as a significant issue. By Autumn 2015, this percentage had risen to 58%, indicating the intensified public apprehension during the refugee crisis. While populist radical right parties

and politicians exploit the topic of immigration in the context of Eurosceptic rhetoric, left-wing and mainstream parties maintain an emphasis on more comprehensive integration efforts. The large influx of Eastern European workers following the 2004 EU enlargement (D'Auria, Mc Morrow, & Pichelmann, 2008, p. 2), combined with the 2015 refugee crisis, heightened public concerns about immigration in the UK. These developments contributed to the rise of the UK Independence Party (UKIP), which capitalised on concerns about national identity, welfare pressure, and border control (Ford & Goodwin, 2014). UKIP's growing influence brought immigration to the forefront of political debate, influencing the Conservative Party's decision to hold the 2016 Brexit referendum (Goodwin & Heath, 2016). More broadly, migration now routinely dominates campaign agendas, media coverage, and public discourse, indicating that what was once a policy area is now a core political cleavage (Dennison & Geddes, 2019). Moreover, studies like Cherkas (2020), Stockemer et al. (2018), and Ringlerova (2021) show that attitudes toward migration correlate with attitudes toward European integration itself – a negative view of one often reinforces a negative view of the other.

Similarly, to Taydas and Kentmen-Cin (2007), who examine utilitarian and identity theories as factors explaining support for/opposition to EU enlargement, Anne-Marie Jeannet (2020) proposes economic threat theories and cultural threat theories as factors explaining support for/opposition to migration. The research shows that less educated and skilled people or economically vulnerable locals may fear that the influx of immigrants will jeopardize their employment or put a strain on public services. Therefore, they have a more negative attitude towards migrants and support a stricter border policy. By contrast, highly skilled individuals in strong economies tend to be more pro-immigration, as they face less competition and may even benefit from migrant labour. Studies have shown that perceptions of migration are highly dependent on whether migrants are viewed as economic contributors or burdens (Dustmann & Preston, 2007).

On the other hand, cultural approaches posit that attitudes on migration depend on identity, values, and perceived cultural threat. Different languages, religions, or customs of immigrants create a fear that the presence of immigrants could erode the host country's cultural cohesion (McLaren, 2002). This aligns with social identity theory and notions of symbolic threat, where immigration triggers anxiety about “who we are” as a nation (Citrin & Sides, 2008; Sniderman et

al., 2004). In Europe, cultural threat often outweighs pure economics in predicting attitudes – attachment to national identity or ethnic prejudice can strongly drive anti-immigrant views. In numerous works, Charlotte Cavailé and Anja Neundorf (2015; 2016; 2022) stated that material self-interest and cultural values jointly shape public opinion. Neither framework alone fully explains attitudes, as evidenced by mixed findings (e.g., economic fears may be profound in one country, and cultural considerations in another). Consequently, an integrated view recognizing economic and cultural drivers provides the best insight into Europeans’ stance on migration (Hainmueller & Hopkins, 2014).

Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and theories of ethnocentrism (Kinder & Kam, 2009) explain how perceptions of migration are shaped by group identity, leading to in-group favoritism and out-group discrimination. These perspectives help account for the growing anti-immigration sentiment in various EU member states, particularly in the aftermath of the 2015 refugee crisis. Right-wing populist parties have increasingly framed migration as a threat to national identity, sovereignty, and security, influencing public attitudes and policy responses (Wodak, 2015; Mudde, 2019). Wodak (2015) analyzes how such parties employ discursive strategies, like scapegoating, dramatization, and appeals to a "pure people", to construct narratives of fear that legitimize exclusionary policies. Mudde (2019) further elucidates that the far right's core ideology revolves around nativism and authoritarianism, framing immigrants as existential threats to a homogeneous nation-state. This framing resonates especially in contexts where migration is linked to symbolic threats and cultural anxiety rather than material concerns. As a result, migration becomes politicized not just as a policy issue but as a perceived challenge to the imagined national community.

Attitudes toward migrants vary significantly across Europe, with regional patterns reflecting historical, economic, and social contexts. Generally, Western and Northern European countries that have longer traditions of immigration and stronger economies tend to exhibit more tolerant attitudes on average. In contrast, some Central and Eastern European countries show higher levels of opposition to immigration. For example, public opinion data show that countries like Spain, Ireland, or Sweden often have more positive views of immigrants, while countries like Hungary or Czechia register more negative sentiments (Gallup, Inc., 2017). This distinction can also be explained by the fact that Western European countries are more economically developed

and have less fear of losing sovereignty and cultural uniqueness than Central and Eastern European countries that joined the EU in the 2000s (Raik, 2004). In contrast, Banai et al. (2022, p. 196) state that there are some regional variations, but long-term trends show the emergence of collective public opinion in the EU.

Studies such as those by Bansak et al. (2016) and Heath and Richards (2019) show that public attitudes toward migration in Europe are shaped significantly by distinctions between different types of migrants, particularly between refugees and economic migrants. Data from the European Social Survey repeatedly shows that refugees tend to elicit more humanitarian sympathy compared to economic migrants, who are often seen as relocating for jobs or improved living standards. This distinction was particularly evident during the 2015 refugee crisis, when many Europeans first showed sympathy for those fleeing conflict in Syria and other countries since they understood their moral obligation to accept migrants. Reflecting Germany's openness to welcome prominent numbers of Syrian refugees, Chancellor Angela Merkel famously said in August 2015, "We can do this" ("Wir schaffen das") (Mushaben, 2017). However, as numbers grew, the distinction between a refugee and an economic migrant grew hazy in public debate, and issues about security and integration became more central, as best shown by Viktor Orbán's language characterising migration as an "invasion" endangering European Christian values (Krekó & Enyedi, 2018). Policy reflects these attitudes through different legal regimes, such as the Common European Asylum System for refugees and the Blue Card Directive for skilled labour migrants (Thielemann & Hobolth, 2016), as well as ongoing debates on how to classify entering migrants from particular areas like West Africa or the Western Balkans (Crawley & Skleparis, 2018). Reform discussions on the Dublin Regulation in 2016–2018 concentrated on divisive classification issues (Zaun, 2018). While there is theoretical support for refugees, mass movements like that in 2015 can still generate a reaction, especially when public suspicions centre on some people labelled as rather opportunistic economic migrants. Therefore, the refugee against economic migrant contrast still mainly determines the complexity of public and policy reactions to migration in Europe.

The outbreak of the full-scale war of Russia on Ukraine in February 2022 triggered the largest refugee crisis in Europe since World War II, with millions of people forced to flee their homes, primarily seeking asylum in EU countries (Euractiv, 2023). In marked contrast to the

response to previous migration experiences, such as the 2015-16 crisis, the EU quickly activated the Temporary Protection Directive, granting Ukrainians immediate rights to housing, work, and social security, in a move that demonstrates unprecedented openness (Åslund, 2022, p. 6). This policy change reflected initial public solidarity and humanitarian support across member states (UNHCR, 2025). Initially quite favourable, attitudes towards these refugees were shaped by geopolitical context, opinions of the war, and predispositions to immigration (Moise, Dennison, & Kriesi, 2024, p. 18). This positive reception resulted in a brief "spillover effect", whereby attitudes towards other refugee groups improved momentarily (Moise et al., 2024, p. 15). Though support stayed rather high in all three years, research indicates that these attitudes are dynamic and that integration issues and possible "war fatigue" clearly show a declining trend (Moise et al., 2024, p. 21; Consolini, 2025). This crisis has challenged the narrative of a "fortress Europe", positively demonstrating the EU's ability to respond on a large scale, while also highlighting the dynamic and complex nature of public attitudes towards migration (Novotný, 2022). Most recent research indicates that barriers to integration remain, and public opinion is evolving even if formal protection is extended until 2026, highlighting the long-term implications for EU migration policy and public sentiment (The Economist, 2025; Mentzelopoulou & Orav, 2025).

Public opinion also varies based on the cultural and geographic origin of migrants; for instance, migrants from the Global South tend to provoke more negative reactions than those from European countries, as was seen with Ukrainian refugees starting from 2022. The European Social Survey data shows that increased immigration from culturally distant regions correlates with heightened opposition (Schmidt, 2021). This suggests a perceived hierarchy of "deservingness" in which genuine refugees, skilled migrants, and refugees from Europe are viewed more favorably than irregular, low-skilled economic migrants or non-European refugees (Kyriakidou, 2021; Blachnicka-Ciacek et al., 2021).

In sum, attitudes toward migration have emerged as a significant political cleavage shaping the trajectory of EU politics and policy. What was once a technocratic policy domain is now a core fault line dividing publics and parties across Europe. Immigration encapsulates a bundle of conflicts – economics vs. culture, openness vs. closure, globalism vs. nationalism – that realign political competition beyond the traditional left-right axis. Scholars observe an "GAL-TAN" cleavage (Green/Alternative/Libertarian vs. Traditional/Authoritarian/Nationalist) in Europe, with

immigration at its center (Kurella & Rapp, 2025; Dassonneville, Hooghe, & Marks, 2024; Marks, Attewell, Rovny, & Hooghe, 2021). Those on one side see migration as an enrichment and advocate for inclusive, multi-ethnic societies and deeper European integration; those on the other side perceive migration as a threat and push for national sovereignty and stricter border controls. This divide has been cemented by events like the 2015 refugee influx and the Brexit saga, which demonstrated how powerfully migration attitudes can influence collective decisions. Importantly, this cleavage transcends individual events – it represents a durable structuring of political attitudes. Issues of migration now consistently correlate with party preferences, referendum outcomes, and public trust in the EU.

Furthermore, the migration cleavage interlocks with debates on democracy and globalization, often symbolizing broader concerns about change and control in a globalized world (Marks et al., 2021; Börzel & Risse, 2018). As a result, the EU finds itself navigating an environment where migration attitudes constrain policy options (e.g., limiting ambitious refugee-sharing plans) and compel leaders to address citizens’ cultural anxieties alongside economic arguments. Looking ahead, managing migration is not just about the policies for entry and integration, but about bridging a profound split in European societies. In the literature, this is sometimes described as Europe’s new cultural conflict, akin to a “culture war” over the soul of Europe. In conclusion, migration has become a defining political cleavage in EU affairs – one that will continue to influence public opinion, electoral outcomes, identity debates, and the very cohesion of the European Union in the years to come.

### **2.3. The Migration-Enlargement Nexus: Theoretical Interconnections**

As aforementioned, migration in the context of the European Union can be understood as the movement of people across national borders. This encompasses both mobility within the EU, which is based on the fundamental principle of free movement, as stated in Article 21 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union and Article 45 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, and immigration from outside the EU, which is regulated by governments at both the national and EU levels (European Commission, n.d.). In particular, Lauren McLaren's (2002) work was the spark that ignited scholarly attention in the connection between migration and European integration. People's hostility towards the process of European integration is often driven by

greater fears related to cultural identity and the possible degradation of the nation-state through migration, as suggested by McLaren, who was the first to investigate how perceptions of cultural threats affect people's attitudes towards the EU. McLaren's findings indicate that people's hostility is often driven by greater fears than simply considering the benefits and costs of the process. The findings of this study have made a significant contribution to the field by highlighting the significance of taking into account cultural risks as a fundamental element that influences sentiments towards the European Union. In addition to this, it set the framework for potential future research that investigates the entire influence of migrant sentiment on the political dynamics of the EU, as well as the policy measures that are utilised to respond to this sentiment.

Views of immigration, especially when migration is seen through the prism of cultural or identity-based risk, progressively affect popular attitudes towards European integration and enlargement. According to Jeannet (2020), negative sentiments of extra-EU immigrants are more closely linked to those of opposition to further EU enlargement concerning intra-EU mobility. Her studies reveal that who is migrating, especially when immigrants are perceived as culturally alien or damaging to national identity, rather than migration itself, promotes suspicion. Usually, enlargement provokes questions about religious and ethnic diversity, and it is offered as a gateway for culturally or religiously "othered" populations to become politically problematic.

The media have always been a very important player in the political field, easily influencing people's opinions and views. This was and is no exception in this context of migration topics. The media's influence emphasizes the emotional and symbolic component of migration sentiment, maneuvering on people's emotions and fears. Media coverage of the potential increase in immigration rates and the speculative implications it could have heightens tensions further, thereby lowering support for European integration, as De Vreese and Boomgaarden (2005) point out. Their study reveals how immigration can be a masking problem, used metaphorically to convey more general worries of Europeanization and loss of sovereignty. Though immigration is not the primary focus of EU policy-making, its mediated portrayal as a security or cultural threat sets off emotional reactions that ultimately compromise support for the EU's goal. In the framework of enlargement, this is especially relevant since expected future migratory flows are sometimes presented as negative or erratic.

Still, the nature and force of this link change in line with the national background. While anti-immigration policies correlate with hostility against European integration in Western and Northern Europe, Kentmen-Cin and Erisen (2017) discover that this link is somewhat weaker in Eastern Europe. Less wealthy member states have economic problems, including employment competition and welfare, rather than identity-based issues, implying that a one-size-fits-all public opinion model is inadequate. This study supports a more context-sensitive paradigm, together with Jeannet (2020), who also stresses the part macroeconomic conditions play in reducing opinions towards unlimited migration. These results expose how differently structural variables (such as GDP and labour markets) and symbolic dynamics (such as national identity and media narratives) shape attitudes towards EU enlargement and migration varying throughout the EU.

According to Dennison and Geddes (2019), migration has become one of the most politicised issues in contemporary European politics. This has led to a significant shift in the way political discourse is discussed, and electoral competition is conducted at the same time. As a result of the refugee crisis that took place in 2015, the significance of immigration became more prominent, and it became a primary concern for several countries that are members of the European Union (Jeannet, 2020). Dennison and Geddes (2019) state that populist and radical-right parties have become increasingly open in their use of anti-immigration rhetoric as a means of mobilising political support. These parties have portrayed migration as a crisis or an existential threat to the cohesiveness of society and the national identity of the nation under consideration. This type of politicisation was evident in situations such as the United Kingdom, where an increase in intra-EU migration following the enlargement in 2004 contributed to immigration becoming a significant political issue, which ultimately led to the establishment of UKIP and demands for a vote on Brexit (Hobolt, 2016). Migration, which was primarily seen to be a socio-economic policy concern in the past, has evolved into a key political cleavage, which influences party platforms, voter alignment, and general political dynamics within the European Union (McLaren, 2002; Jeannet, 2020). This trend depicts how migration evolves into a political split.

Debates about European Union enlargement sometimes act as a front for more basic issues about migration. Oftentimes, people base their opinions on familiar cues, one of which is immigration, due to the lack of thorough knowledge of candidate countries or the technicalities of accession (Toshkov, Kortenska, Dimitrova, & Fagan, 2014). When asked about the possibility of

accepting new member states, people often assess the idea through the prism of possible arriving immigrants. Survey studies, for example, show that attitudes about expansion are much influenced by candidates' apparent "otherness" (Toshkov et al., 20, page 34). This suggests that, instead of considering the geopolitical or institutional elements of the situation, the general public usually links changes in the EU with an increase in the immigration count. This leads to more often characterizing preferences for expansion as expressions of concern about immigration. Politicians and the media often support this trend by framing enlargement in terms of migration issues (jobs, border control, cultural change), so further erasing the line separating the two subjects. This suggests that resistance to the growth of the European Union can serve as a symbolic stand-in for resistance to immigration, especially in times when migration is an obvious issue in the United States.

Turkey's long-standing EU candidature is one possible illustration of how cultural fears and migration issues shape attitudes towards enlargement. The prospect of significant migration and Turkey's reputation as culturally far from "core" Europe have driven especially strong public opposition to Turkish accession (Ruiz Jiménez & Torreblanca, 2007). Polls taken among EU members mid-way through the 2000s revealed general concerns about Turkey's membership greatly increasing immigration flows into wealthier member states (Ruiz Jiménez & Torreblanca, 2007). For those opposing Turkey's admission, this expected flood turned into a potent weapon. Added to the mistrust were cultural and religious differences; many Europeans felt that Turkey basically "does not belong" in Europe and voiced comments on the cultural differences that were too great. By underlining that opposition to Turkey's EU bid is driven more by identity-based threats than by merely economic considerations, scholarly studies underline the symbolic aspect of enlargement debates (Kirişçi & Ekim, 2016). The Turkish case illustrates how a candidate country might become the focus of attention for more general issues, drastically reducing public support for enlargement.

Media coverage greatly shapes the public's perception of migration with EU enlargement. Sometimes, national media highlight the migration effects of enlargement using alarmist narratives that distort public opinion (De Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2005; Shahini, 2024). For example, Western European media routinely voiced concerns about possible job losses and welfare burden resulting from Eastern European immigration before the 2004 enlargement, thus strengthening

negative correlations (Shahini, 2024). On the other hand, balanced coverage presenting both enlargement advantages and challenges tends to neutralise media effects since contradictory messages reduce general impact (De Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2005). Media coverage also raises issues of salience; thus, migration becomes a major factor in public evaluation of enlargement (Toshkov et al., 2014). Media framing, therefore, greatly influences public acceptance of enlargement, hence underlining the need for objective reporting.

Populist and Eurosceptic parties routinely and deliberately link migration issues to the discussion on EU enlargement to appeal more to their potential voters. For instance, anti-EU, right-wing, and far-right parties routinely raise concerns about mass immigration using issues of national sovereignty and cultural identity to justify their rejection of EU enlargement (Kirişci & Ekim, 2016; Toshkov et al., 2014). The Brexit referendum highlighted this phenomenon; campaigners presented Turkey's possible EU accession as a direct threat of uncontrolled immigration, so leveraging public anxieties to generate anti-EU attitudes (Kirişci & Ekim, 2016). Nationalist politicians across Europe regularly present enlargement as a precursor to cultural disturbance and loss of sovereignty, so boosting Euroscepticism and putting pressure on mainstream parties to adopt limited enlargement policies (Toshkov et al., 2014; Shahini, 2024). As such, migration-enlargement rhetoric has grown to be a crucial part of Eurosceptic political tactics.

Survey data repeatedly shows clear links between views on migration and support for EU enlargement. Studies and Eurobarometer polls reveal that those who view immigration negatively disproportionately oppose more enlargement (Toshkov et al., 2014). Cross-national studies verify anti-immigrant sentiment as a strong predictor of opposition to enlargement, independent of income, education, or general EU sentiment (Toshkov et al., 2014). Moreover, opinions of immigration hazards, either cultural or financial, correlate closely with enlargement uncertainty, a trend shown in both older and younger EU member states (Toshkov et al., 2014). Emphasising a shared evaluative dimension between the two concerns, survey research has explicitly linked restricted migration attitudes to low enlargement support (Toshkov & Kortenska, 2015). Although correlation does not prove causation, legislators acknowledge migration attitudes as consistent markers of possible public responses to future enlargement proposals.

Restoring confidence in the enlargement process depends on addressing public migration issues, given the shown link between migration and enlargement attitudes. Policymakers support

increasing openness by clearly stating accession criteria and stressing transitional protections, including temporary migration restrictions (Shahini, 2024). Studies using economic data reveal that migrants mostly occupy jobs that EU residents are not interested in, thus filling severe labour shortages. This and related data are crucial in helping to allay social tensions and job competition concerns (Shahini, 2024). Promoting successful narratives of cultural integration can also help to alleviate public concerns about cultural hazards. Through strengthening the rules of law and governance in candidate nations, enlargement helps to foster stability rather than importing social issues, thereby convincing people that it contributes to stability rather than social problems (Shahini, 2024). Rebuilding public support for enlargement depends on directly addressing migration-related problems; hence, integrated policy approaches seem to be necessary for effective plans of European expansion.

The noted link between migration attitudes and support for EU enlargement follows important theoretical and pragmatic relationships. From a theoretical perspective, this link supports the claims of post-functionalist integration theory, which points out that the issues of European integration are progressively being observed on cultural and identity levels rather than only on economic or technocratic ones (Hooghe & Marks, 2009; McLaren, 2002). Thus, enlargement is not only a political issue of practical character but also a symbolic mirror of solidarity and group identity in Europe (Risse, 2010). Practically, this link means that if migration-related problems are not resolved by thorough integration and migration policies, future attempts at EU enlargement may face notable public opposition (Toshkov et al., 2014; Shahini, 2024). On the other hand, good management of this link via policy decisions and open communication could greatly increase EU legitimacy, thus enabling more seamless future enlargements (Shahini, 2024).

Based on this theoretical foundation and the above empirical findings, my thesis hypothesizes that negative attitudes towards migration, both external and internal, are negatively correlated with public support for the future enlargement of the European Union, suggesting that higher levels of immigration scepticism among EU citizens are associated with lower support for admitting new member states.

### **3. Methodology**

This section will highlight the methodological framework of this study. Thus, the purpose of this section is to give a comprehensive description of the data that will be used in the research and its source. The second important point for this chapter is to highlight the method chosen to study the impact of attitudes towards migration on public support for the future enlargement of the European Union. The focus will also be on the operationalization of the study's key concepts and a discussion of what limitations can and will arise in the implementation of this study. To test my hypothesis, I use survey data from various countries that make up the European Union to find out how people's views on migration are related to their attitudes towards the possible future accession of new member states to the European Union. Particular attention is paid to the way the main variables of interest were applied to ensure transparency and consistency of the research design. This section starts with a description of the cases that were chosen for this research, my preferred source of data, and its quality and reliability. Next, the chapter will move on to a detailed explanation of how independent and dependent variables will be measured. At last, I will explore possible weaknesses of this research and its components.

The focus of this analysis is on all EU member states, as their populations and the opinions of Europeans are directly related to the idea of this study. After all, they are direct players in decision-making on the future of possible EU enlargement, and they also experience the political and social consequences of EU migration policy. The study of public opinion in a context where migration and enlargement are politicized and institutionalized processes can be done by examining attitudes towards them in the context of the European Union. This study is interested in answering and identifying possible connections between public attitudes towards migration and the processes of possible future enlargement. This will be achieved by analyzing individual-level data from all EU member states.

#### **3.1. Data**

The Eurobarometer survey series, an official public opinion monitoring tool of the European Commission, European Parliament, and other EU institutions, is the primary source of data for this study. Originally designed to "reveal Europeans to themselves," Eurobarometer, launched in 1974, has developed into a vital tool for comprehending public attitudes on EU-related

concerns as well as more general political and social issues. Its long-standing legacy, consistent application, and extensive thematic coverage make it especially suited for monitoring public opinion trends among EU members. It is one of the two most popular surveys (the second is the European Social Survey), which are extensive surveys widely used in the literature and research on the EU and public opinions of its population. Twice a year, this study depends on a subset of the Standard Eurobarometer, which asks numerous questions about migration, knowledge of the EU, and endorsement of various spheres concerning the EU, with European integration and enlargement being one of them. Every year, starting from the 1990s, they also conduct Flash Eurobarometer, telephone interviews, which focus on a narrower topic for the survey compared to the Standard one.

The Eurobarometer surveys are organised at a particular level to guarantee that the methodology is consistent and that the results can be compared across countries. The Standard Eurobarometer typically conducts surveys with a minimum of one thousand individuals aged 15 and older from each member state of the European Union. This is accomplished through the utilisation of a multistage, stratified random sampling approach. In nations with populations of less than one million, it is necessary to have a sample size of at least five hundred individuals in order to conduct research properly. Surveys are carried out by conducting face-to-face interviews in the homes of respondents. These interviews are carried out using techniques known as Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing (CAPI). It is important to take note that all surveys are conducted in the national languages. This is done to ensure that all respondents have a complete comprehension of the questions that are going to be asked. The respondents are chosen through a process of random selection, and the results are weighted to ensure that they are representative of both the demographics and the geography of the populations being surveyed. The Eurobarometer can function as a reliable instrument for analysing public sentiments across the European Union and for determining both national and cross-national trends throughout historical time. This is made possible by the robust design of the Eurobarometer. It is also important to note that Eurobarometer, while including all EU countries, always divides Germany into West and East, thus making the number of items in the country list 28, not 27, even though it is the real number of Member States as of 2025.

As I indicated above, the Eurobarometer survey is one of the most often used, reliable, and high-quality data sources. It has many benefits: its methodologically transparent and uniform standards, systematic design, and extensive geographical coverage help to create its credibility. These criteria allow for comparative studies both at the level of EU member states and at the individual level, as well as for comparing data over time. Rigorous sampling methods were used in the survey, and careful weighting processes were used to ensure that the results were representative of the national population. Due to the high reputation of the Eurobarometer data, it is often used in peer-reviewed studies that examine attitudes towards migration, European identity, and EU integration procedures (Vasilopoulou & Talving, 2019; De Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2005; Dražanová et al., 2020). Using the Eurobarometer data, for instance, a landmark study by Claes H. de Vreese and Hajo G. Boomgaarden (2005) convincingly examines public support for European integration and opinions towards immigration. This demonstrates how pertinent and strong polling is for challenging public opinion changes in complexity. While no data source is free from limitations, in the case of the Eurobarometer, the methodological rigour and consistency inspire great confidence in the validity and generalisability of the conclusions of this study.

Drawn from the Standard Eurobarometer poll, this representative sample of 26,416 respondents from all 27 member states of the European Union offers a basis for analysing these politically important concerns. Table 1 provides an overview of the sample characteristics for all 27 EU member states included in the analysis. It presents the total number of respondents per country, their proportion relative to the full sample, gender distribution, average age, and educational background, such as the number of respondents with and without higher education. According to the survey methodology, larger member states typically include around 1,000 respondents to ensure statistical validity. Smaller states, including Cyprus (507), Luxembourg (506), and Malta (500), use proportionately adjusted samples, though. Table 1 also shows the demographic composition with a modest female majority (53.9%) and a mean age of 52.27 years. These results reflect the European population structure that is aging. The educational attainment patterns show that 25.5% of respondents have higher education degrees, meaning they have either a bachelor's degree or a master's or doctoral degree, while 74.5% do not. This suggests that a generally representative cross-section of European society that captures various socioeconomic viewpoints on these controversial policy domains is portrayed.

Table 1. Sample characteristics and distribution

Country Code	Sample Size (n)	% of Total Sample	Female (n)	Male (n)	Mean Age	Higher Education (n)	No Higher Education (n)
AT	1009	3.82	527	482	51	140	869
BE	1006	3.81	499	504	45	320	686
BG	1046	3.96	533	513	51	261	785
CY	507	1.92	283	224	51	177	330
CZ	1026	3.88	519	505	51	244	782
DE-E	415	1.57	209	206	51	63	352
DE-W	1143	4.33	550	593	52	222	921
DK	1001	3.79	488	511	58	256	745
EE	1001	3.79	547	451	46	292	709
ES	1001	3.79	537	464	49	205	796
FI	1000	3.79	462	531	57	417	583
FR	1004	3.8	537	463	50	247	757
GR	1011	3.83	544	67	51	265	746
HR	1003	3.8	636	365	47	142	861
HU	1019	3.86	583	436	51	183	836
IE	1003	3.8	521	479	51	337	666
IT	1070	4.05	520	547	51	172	898
LT	1005	3.8	651	354	57	440	565
LU	506	1.92	264	240	51	168	338
LV	1008	3.82	650	358	57	256	752
MT	500	1.89	261	239	56	111	389
NL	1067	4.04	504	560	53	488	579
PL	1004	3.8	602	402	52	184	820
PT	1000	3.79	552	448	54	170	830
RO	1038	3.93	582	456	49	150	888
SE	1013	3.83	462	544	62	358	655
SI	1004	3.8	570	434	56	209	795
SK	1006	3.81	569	435	52	180	826
EU Total	26416	100.0	14162	12211	52	6657	19759

Note: Data represent national subsamples from 27 EU member states. Mean age is rounded to the nearest whole number. Educational attainment reflects whether respondents have completed higher education. Country codes follow the ISO 3166-1 alpha-2 standard (e.g., AT = Austria, BE = Belgium). DE-E and DE-W refer to Eastern

and Western Germany, respectively. The author's calculations are based on Eurobarometer 101.3 (European Commission, 2025).

### **Operationalisation of variables**

Within this investigation's context, the study's dependent variable is operationalized through one of the questions in the Standard Eurobarometer survey (European Commission, 2025). The question poses the following inquiry to the respondents: "What is your opinion on each of the following statements? Please tell for each statement whether you are for it or against it". The authors of the questionnaire go on to propose some EU policies, one of which is "Further enlargement of the EU to include other countries in future years". According to the phrasing of this question and the proposed options for answering, namely "for" and "against," it constitutes a binary variable.

For the purpose of this study, the independent variable is presented as the attitude toward migration. It is based on selected questions from the Standard Eurobarometer questionnaire. The three questions that are used as a representation of the independent variable are as follows:

- Please tell me whether each of the following statements evokes a positive or negative feeling for you? Immigration of people from other EU Member States;
- Please tell me whether each of the following statements evokes a positive or negative feeling for you? Immigration of people from outside the EU;
- For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you strongly agree, tend to agree, tend to disagree, or strongly disagree: Immigrants contribute positively to (our country).

Answers for the first two questions are rated on an ordinal scale from "very positive" to "Very negative" with "Moderately positive" and "Moderately negative" in between. For the third question, the answers offered to the respondent also look like an ordinal scale, namely "Strongly agree," "Somewhat agree," "Somewhat disagree," and "Strongly disagree." During the study, the data were recoded into binary values, with two positive options from the questionnaire responses coded together as one and two negative options coded as zero. These three questions are included separately, rather than combined into a single index, as this approach allows us to identify

differences between them in terms of their impact on attitudes towards EU enlargement. It also allows for the identification of possible additional nuances at the level of the EU as a whole and of each country individually concerning attitudes towards immigration within the EU and from other countries that are not part of the Union.

Also, in the course of the study, a number of control variables were used to build the model for data analysis. The choice of variables was, to some extent, based on previous studies' experience. Thus, referring to Taydas & Kentmen-Cin (2017), age, gender, level of education, and personal wealth were used. In the course of the work, the last factor, personal wealth, did not show sufficient effectiveness and did not add any explanatory power to the trial model, so it was not included in the final model. However, some other items were included in the final model, mainly questions about the respondents' position on whether their country should help refugees, about their opinion on several ideas, such as a common European policy on migration, the free movement, asylum system, and borders. These variables, like the previous ones that represent the independent variable, were recoded into binary, with two positive options from the questionnaire responses coded together as one and two negative options as zero. There were several reasons for including these indicators as control variables. Some of them are sociodemographic, such as age, gender, and education, which will give a more complete picture. The variable that presented education was formed, as binary, based on whether respondents had higher education, in one of three degrees: bachelor's, master's, or doctorate. Some are related to the main topic of the study and the independent variable, but they include certain shades of data that were already beyond the scope of the study. Therefore, there was not enough reason to add them as part of the independent variable. However, their inclusion in the overall model allowed for a broader understanding of the topic under study. The last two indicators, on the left-right scale and satisfaction with democracy in the European Union as a whole and in the respondent's own country, which was also recoded as a binary variable, are standard for focusing on political research and have to some extent already been included in the section of standard statistical indicators.

Despite its advantages, survey results have particular limitations, even if they help to evaluate opinions about migration and EU enlargement. Respondents who express ideas they believe to be socially acceptable rather than their actual beliefs may show social desirability bias (Grimm, 2010). Standardised survey questions could oversimplify complex points of view and

under-represent the subtleties of people's opinions on many issues, including those addressed in this study, such as migration and European integration (Einola & Alvesson, 2021). Variability in responses to questions in different cultural and national contexts can lead to extra measurement error, which can affect comparability between countries (King, Murray, Salomon, & Tandon, 2004). Furthermore, a weakness unique to this study is that the use of a single database for both variables produces a certain limited operationalisation of the variables. After all, in this situation, the changes can only be shown through the questions on the questionnaire since they are precisely related to them. Maintaining the openness of the research design and a correct interpretation of the findings depend on an awareness of these constraints.

### **3.2. Method**

I started the modelling process by building a migration attitudes index based on three recoded survey items (1–4 scale). A pooled logistic regression used this index as the main predictor of support for EU enlargement. Cronbach's alpha (0.79) confirmed internal consistency. However, the model overlooked the hierarchical data structure and imposed equal weighting on conceptually distinct items, limiting its explanatory power. A second model applied factor analysis to address these issues and derive weighted scores for migration attitudes. These factor scores replaced the index in a revised logistic regression, improving measurement precision. The Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) dropped from 18,804 to 17,988, indicating better model fit. However, country-specific models yielded unstable estimates due to small sample sizes, limiting generalizability and ignoring cross-national structure. The third model used multilevel logistic regression to account for the nested structure and allow for cross-country variation. Instead of a composite score, it included the original three migration items as separate predictors. Although the AIC improved even more (AIC = 17,928), the model faced convergence issues and signs of overparameterization. To resolve this, the fourth model standardized continuous predictors and retained random slopes only for theoretically relevant variables. This approach ensured numerical stability and interpretability (AIC = 17,927). However, the standardized approach complicates direct interpretation of coefficients in terms of substantive survey responses. By contrast, the final model of multilevel logistic regression model employed binary-coded variables, enabling straightforward interpretation of predicted probabilities and countries differences.

A multilevel logistic regression became the most suitable model for this research (AIC = 17,877). It is structured to reflect the hierarchical character of public opinion data nested inside EU member states. Measurements of respondents' opinions on "Further enlargement of the EU to include other countries in future years" help to operationalise support for EU enlargement as a binary outcome. This specification recognises that attitudes towards European integration show both individual-level variation and systematic country-level differences. Three leading indicators of immigration attitudes comprise the independent variables: (1) attitudes towards immigration of people from other EU Member States, (2) attitudes towards immigration of people from outside the EU, and (3) opinions of whether immigrants contribute positively to the respondent's native country. Reflecting the complex character of modern migration debate within the European polity, these indicators catch several dimensions of immigration attitudes. Three nested structures guide the model specification: an initial model with just immigration attitude variables (Model 1), an expanded model with sociodemographic controls (gender, age, education) (Model 2), and a complete model including extra EU-related attitudinal measures (Model 3). With individual respondents (Level 1) nested within 28 EU member states (Level 2), the multilevel structure notes the clustered character of the data. This hierarchical specification allows the analysis of both random effects, capturing country-specific variations in baseline support for enlargement, and the relationship between immigration attitudes and enlargement support, as well as fixed effects, common across all countries.

The analytical framework uses thorough diagnostic techniques to evaluate model validity and identify possible inferential hazards. Although particular results should be carefully considered, the multilevel specification generally performs well. Model diagnostics reveal mixed evidence about distributional assumptions: the DHARMA uniformity test shows notable departure from expected uniform residual distribution (Kolmogorov-Smirnov  $D = 0.01175$ ,  $p = 0.02$ ), implying possible misspecification. Based on further look into this, it was caused by an ordinary variable that represents respondents' age. Nevertheless, the dispersion test produces non-significant results (dispersion = 1.016,  $p = 0.56$ ), indicating sufficient variance capture free from either over- or under-dispersion. With observed frequency (0.88%) almost matching theoretical expectations ( $p = 0.225$ ), the outlier analysis shows a reasonable fit. These mixed diagnostic results imply that although the model detects main data patterns, some distributional assumptions may be broken, influencing inference accuracy without invalidating main conclusions.

With all variance inflation factors kept below 1.5, multicollinearity diagnostics offer convincing proof of parameter stability. Measuring immigration attitude values shows especially low VIF values (1.12–1.34), supporting the theoretical differences between intra-EU mobility, external immigration, and immigrant contribution dimensions. Conditional  $R^2$  of 0.354 shows that the combination of fixed-random effects explains almost 35% of enlargement support variation, while the marginal  $R^2$  of 0.265 attributes 27% to fixed impacts alone. With 12% of residual variance attributable to country-level clustering, the intraclass correlation coefficient (0.122) supports the justification of the multilevel specification. These measures show that the model maintains discriminant validity across conceptually different immigration dimensions and can capture both individual and contextual factors.

The limitations of this model are manifested through random sample loss from the initial observations to the final analytical sample, which may raise concerns about systematic sampling error. The lack of data, especially on issues related to attitudes towards various EU policies, suggests that respondents who are interested in politics may be overrepresented, as they are more likely than others to respond fully to such surveys. This selection mechanism may overstate the observed relationships if political awareness correlates with cross-sectional attitude constraints. Despite these limitations, the analytical model demonstrates sufficient robustness to confirm the main findings. The stability of the main conclusions across different specifications, combined with acceptable diagnostic indicators for most criteria, suggests that the documented relationships between immigration and EU enlargement reflect genuine empirical patterns rather than statistical artefacts.

## **4. Empirical results**

This chapter examines the relationship between immigration attitudes and support for EU enlargement across the 27 member states. The analysis employs a multilevel approach to account for both individual perspectives and national contexts, allowing us to understand how different dimensions of immigration attitudes correlate with positions on enlargement. The chapter proceeds in two parts. First, descriptive statistics establish patterns in attitudes toward intra-EU mobility, external immigration, and perceptions of immigrant contributions. These statistics reveal variations across countries and demographic groups, providing context for the subsequent analysis. Second, regression models test the hypothesized relationships between immigration attitudes and enlargement support. The multilevel framework captures both EU-wide patterns and country-specific variations, reflecting how these relationships differ across national political cultures and integration experiences. By examining how immigration opinions connect to enlargement preferences, this analysis contributes empirical evidence to theoretical discussions on European public opinion formation. The findings help clarify whether negative attitudes toward immigration consistently correlate with opposition to further EU expansion, as hypothesized in the theoretical framework.

### **4.1. Descriptive Analysis of Migration Attitudes and Enlargement Support**

The empirical study of this large-scale data demonstrates trends in public opinion of Europeans regarding migration and further EU enlargement. The geographic study of EU enlargement support reveals regional differences that challenge existing knowledge on European integration dynamics. Spain comes out as the most fervent supporter of future enlargement (81%), followed closely by Lithuania (81%) and Latvia (76%), with Croatia (72%) and Poland (71%) completing the top tier shown on Figure 1 (presented below). This concentration of support among younger member states, especially those from the 2004 and later enlargement waves, suggests a favourable correlation between recent accession experiences and openness to further expansion. On the other hand, as Figure 1 displays, Germany's eastern areas (26% support), Austria (36%), and France (42%), with Luxembourg (48%) and West Germany (49%), also show below-average enthusiasm. The most notable cynicism arises here. This East-West divide inside Germany itself, with western areas displaying almost twice the support of eastern areas, helps to highlight the intricate interaction among historical events, economic conditions, and integration attitudes.

According to the statistics, early accession states and founding members usually show more enlargement fatigue, while younger members show solidarity with possible candidates.

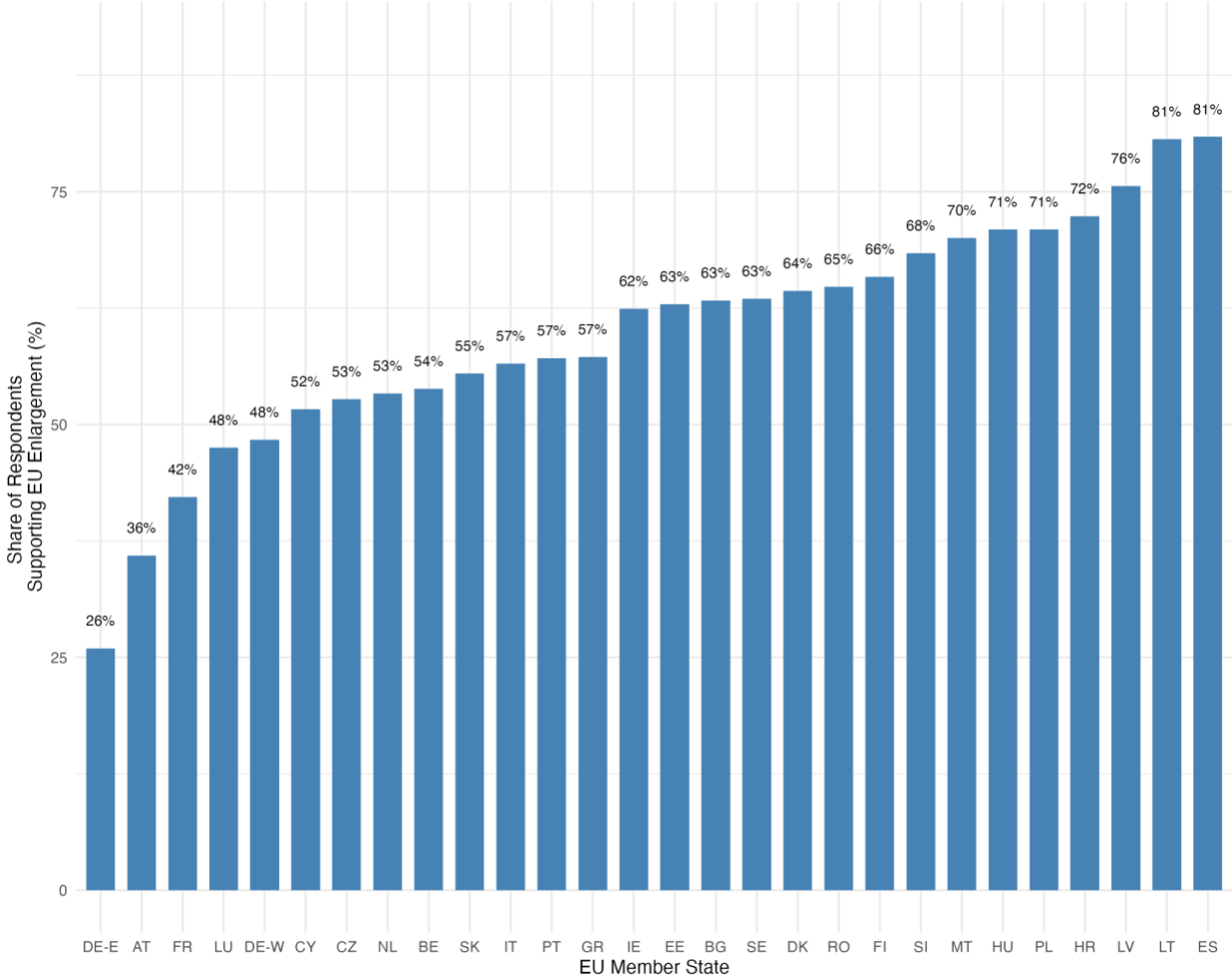


Figure 1. Support for EU enlargement by member states

Note: The figure was created by the author using data from Eurobarometer 101.3 (European Commission, 2025).

Different migration attitudes show apparent variation across origin categories, exposing a hierarchical structure of acceptance that essentially influences European political debate. Table 2 (presented below) shows that attitudes towards intra-EU migration remain generally positive (70.6%), with just 29.4% expressing negative feelings, a net positivity of 41.2 percentage points. This stands in sharp contrast to views of extra-EU immigration, where negative attitudes (57.4%) much exceed positive ones (42.6%), producing a net negative of 14.9 percentage points. Table 2 shows that the intermediate position occupied by general assessments of immigrant contributions

(54.7% positive, 45.3% negative) points to a complex public knowledge that separates between migration's economic consequences and its supposed cultural or security implications. This triple attitudinal framework shows that European people have a preference hierarchy. While third-country nationals are under more scrutiny, EU members gain from assumed cultural proximity and shared institutional frameworks. The 56.1 percentage point difference in opinions on EU against non-EU immigration emphasises the basic influence of perceived cultural distance on migration preferences.

*Table 2. Public opinion on immigration in the EU*

Immigration Attitude Variable	Positive Opinion (%)	Negative Opinion (%)	Valid Responses (N)	Net Positivity (%)*	Positive-to-Negative Ratio
Immigration from EU Member States	70.6	29.4	25,529	41.2	2.40
Immigration from Outside the EU	42.6	57.4	25,396	-14.9	0.74
Immigrants Contribute Positively to Society	54.7	45.3	25,239	9.3	1.21

\* Net Positivity is calculated as the percentage difference between positive and negative opinions (% Positive – % Negative).

Note: Author's calculations based on Eurobarometer 101.3 (European Commission, 2025).

The distribution of political orientation among European voters shows a generally centrist attitude with significant representation over the political spectrum. Figure 2 shows that while left-leaning orientations (29.2% combined) somewhat exceed right-leaning positions (29.4% combined), 41.5% of respondents place themselves at the political centre (5-6 on a 10-point scale). As Figure 2 also shows, the relative symmetry between far-left (7.8%) and far-right (7.5%) positions points to balanced polarisation at the extremes. Since extensive research (Docquier & Vasilakis, 2024; Indelicato et al., 2023; Pripp, 2024) shows strong correlations between right-wing orientations and limited migration preferences, this ideological terrain has consequences for understanding migration and enlargement attitudes. Although the combined 15.3% occupying

more extreme positions (scores 1-2 and 9-10) have a disproportionate impact in polarised debates, the significant centrist plurality indicates that moderate, pragmatic considerations most likely dominate public discussion on these issues. Thus, the distribution implies that effective policy projects have to appeal to centrists' sensibilities while negotiating ideological extremes.

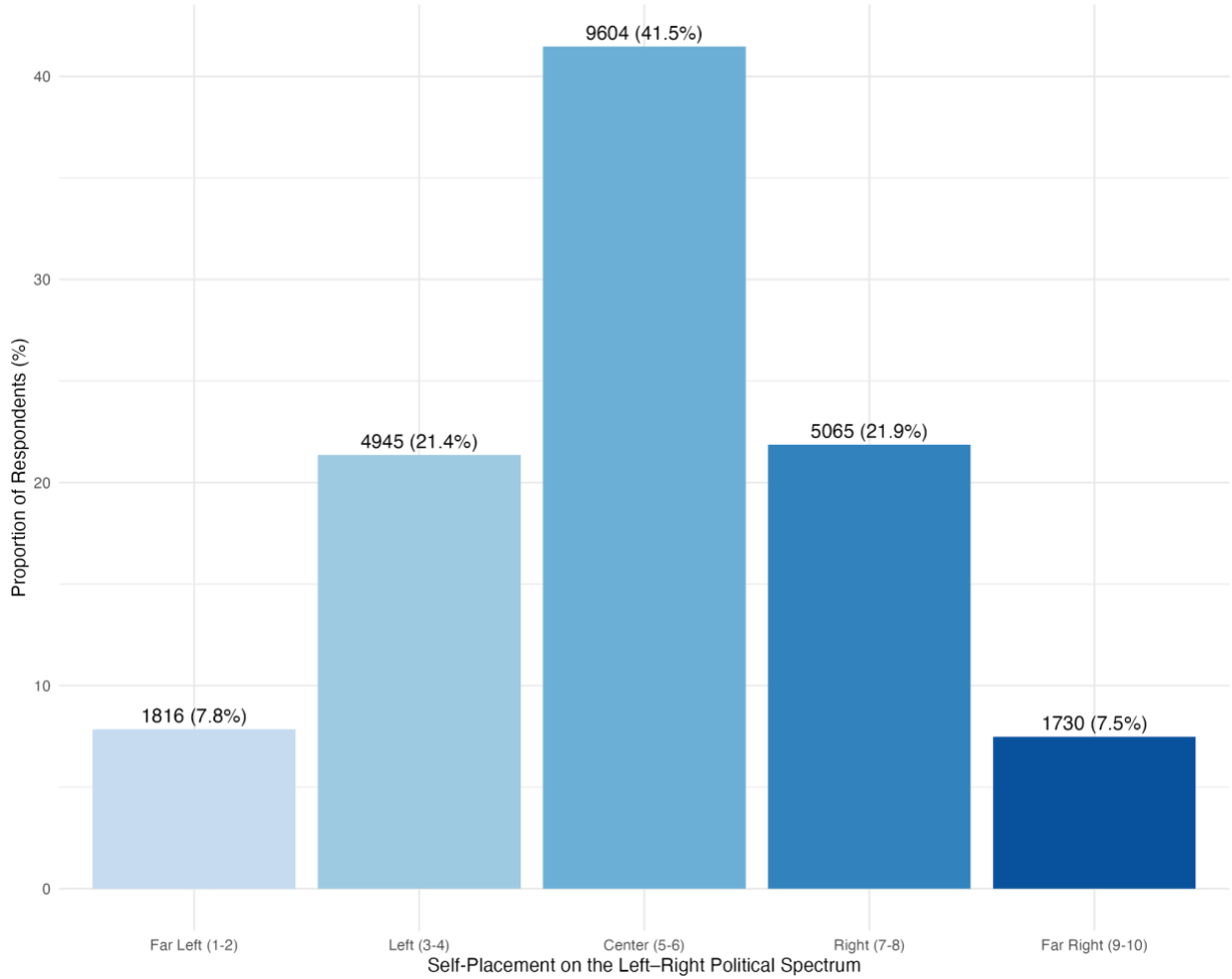


Figure 2. Distribution of political self-placement on the left-right ideological scale (EU-27)

Note: The figure was created by the author using data from Eurobarometer 101.3 (European Commission, 2025).

Democratic satisfaction measures expose interesting trends of political legitimacy across governance levels, with consequences for migration policy and prospects of enlargement. Figure 3 (presented below) shows that, despite common Eurosceptic narratives, satisfaction with EU democracy (62.8%) somewhat exceeds satisfaction with national democratic institutions (59.8%), suggesting that European citizens generally view supranational governance favourably. Though

small, the three percentage point difference questions presumptions about democratic shortcomings at the EU level and shows public acceptance of the Union's institutional legitimacy. Figure 3 shows that net satisfaction scores are 25.7 points for EU democracy against 19.6 points for national systems, further confirming this trend. These results imply that people could view EU-level decision-making as more sheltered from national political dysfunction or populist demands. Although 37.2% of respondents expressed dissatisfaction with EU democracy, which constitutes a significant minority whose issues deserve attention, the relatively high satisfaction levels across both dimensions indicate that democratic legitimacy issues, while present, do not fundamentally hinder further integration or enlargement.

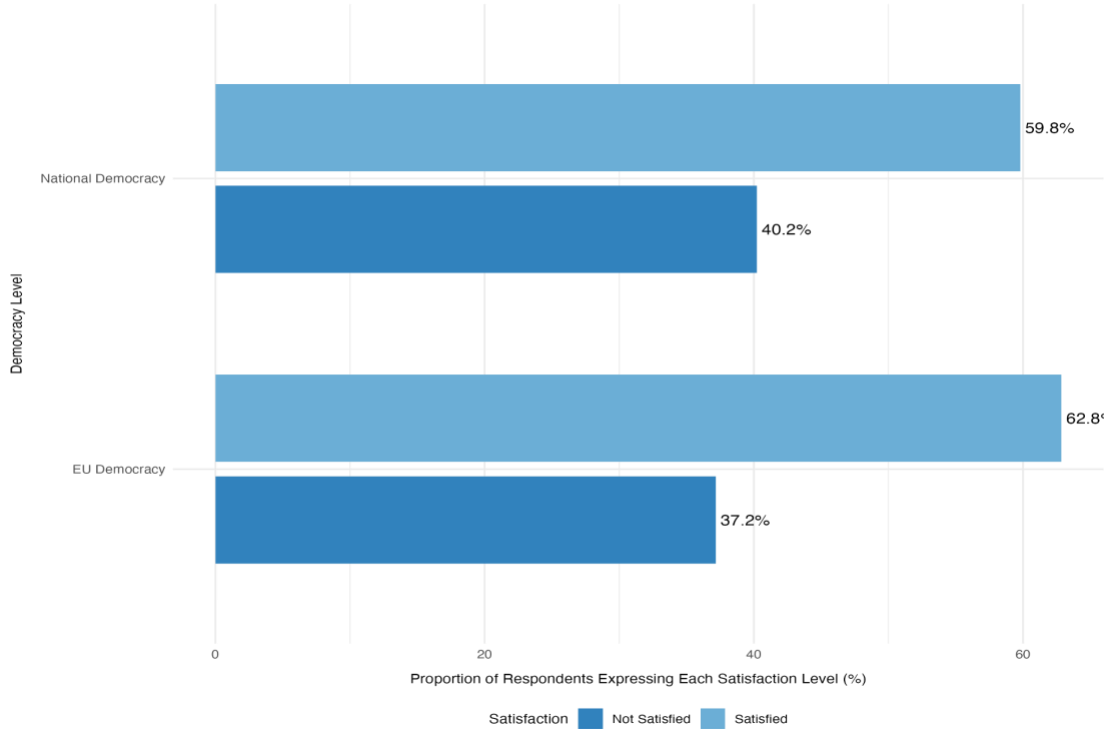


Figure 3. Satisfaction with democracy at the EU and national level

Note: The figure was created by the author using data from Eurobarometer 101.3 (European Commission, 2025). The descriptive study points to several key observations relevant to the subsequent analysis of the migration-enlargement nexus. First, as Figure 1 shows, the geographic distribution of enlargement support clearly shows a division between younger member states showing solidarity with candidates and older members displaying integration tiredness. Second, the hierarchical framework of migration attitudes shown in Table 2, with clear preferences for EU over non-EU migrants, suggests that institutional belonging and cultural proximity essentially define public

opinion. Third, the generally centrist ideological distribution, as displayed on Figure 2, together with relatively high democratic satisfaction levels, based on Figure 3, show that extreme positions, while vocal, do not predominate in the political terrain. These trends imply that the interaction between migration attitudes and enlargement support most likely works through several channels: symbolic associations between enlargement and more migration flows, cultural threat perceptions, and economic competition issues. The data reveals a European public that differs significantly between kinds of mobility, maintains moderate political orientations, and shows measured confidence in democratic institutions - factors that together shape the complex dynamics between migration scepticism and enlargement opposition that future studies must separate.

#### **4.2. Immigration Attitudes and EU Enlargement: A Multilevel Analysis**

With 16,844 observations in the whole model and distributed among 27 European Union member states, the analysis offers a significant volume of statistical power. This makes it possible to find contextual as well as personal effects. Beyond basic immigration policies, the coefficient shown in Figure 4 displays a thorough variable structure, including controls for political orientation, satisfaction with democracy at national and EU levels, and support for several EU migration policies. This framework spans the core immigration policies as well. Post-functionalist theories of European integration generate a theoretical framework that progressively reflects identity-based concerns instead of only pragmatic calculations. Views of immigrants help citizens to assess the expenses and advantages of more European integration from a different angle. This is especially true since enlargement raises issues regarding cultural limits, labour market competitiveness, and the management of mobility inside a larger Union.

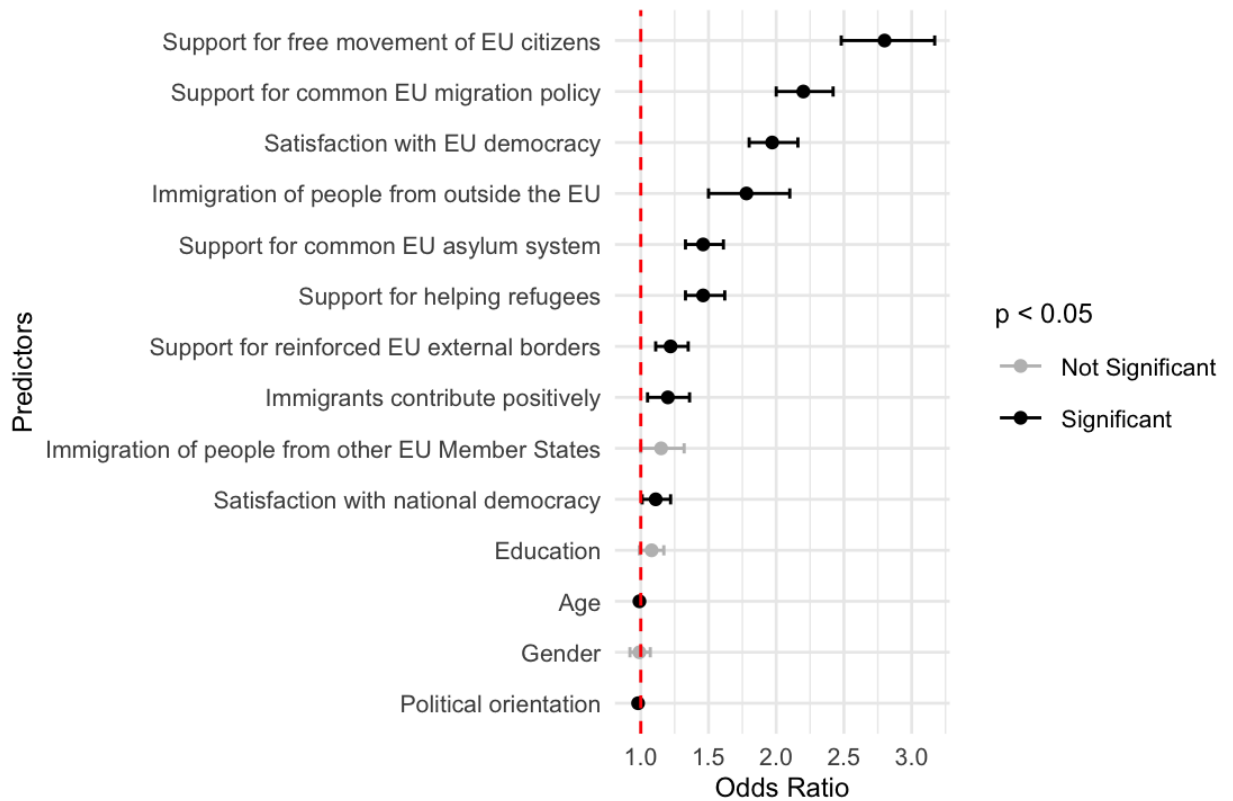


Figure 4. Logistic regression results: predictors of further EU enlargement support

Note: The figure was created by the author using data from Eurobarometer 101.3 (European Commission, 2025).

Several interesting trends in Figure 4, which shows logistic regression results through predictors, call for more attention. Most remarkably, support for free movement of EU citizens proves to be the strongest predictor of enlargement support (OR  $\approx$  2.80), implying that attitudes towards internal mobility essentially define views on EU growth. “Support for common EU migration policy” likewise shows a strong positive association (OR  $\approx$  2.20), suggesting that openness to enlargement corresponds with preferences for supranational governance in migration matters. Regarding the main predictors of interest, attitudes towards immigration from outside the EU show a more substantial impact (OR = 1.78) than attitudes towards intra-EU migration, which loses statistical significance in the whole model. This different effect implies that external immigration issues might be more important in influencing enlargement attitudes than internal EU mobility. Although the measure of perceived immigrant contributions stays statistically significant in the complete model (OR = 1.20), indicating partial mediation through other EU policy attitudes, the effect size is reduced. These first findings provide an analytical framework for investigating the operation of immigration attitudes inside a larger constellation of elements affecting support

for EU enlargement. At the same time, these results confirm the hypothesis put forward at the beginning of this study that attitudes towards immigration directly influence attitudes towards further EU enlargement.

The multilevel structure reveals significant country-level variation in both baseline support and the strength of immigration-enlargement linkages. Thus, careful attention to contextual moderators in subsequent studies is highly important. Using a nested model comparison approach, the analytical framework moves from a baseline specification with just immigration attitude variables through ever more intricate configurations. A pattern compatible with survey research approaches whereby item non-response increases with questionnaire complexity reflects the accumulation of missing data as additional variables enter the analysis: the sequential reduction in sample size from 21,848 observations in the initial model to 16,844 in the complete specification.

Table 3. Comparison of three multilevel logistic models with increasing sets of predictors

	<b>Model 1</b>	<b>Model 2</b>	<b>Model 3</b>
<i>Predictors</i>	<i>Odds Ratios</i>	<i>Odds Ratios</i>	<i>Odds Ratios</i>
(Intercept)	0.56 ***	0.72 *	0.12 ***
Immigration of people from other EU Member States	1.83 ***	1.79 ***	1.15
Immigration of people from outside the EU	1.91 ***	1.87 ***	1.78 ***
Immigrants contribute positively to respondents' country	1.74 ***	1.72 ***	1.20 **
Gender		1.00	0.99
Age		0.99 ***	0.99 ***
Education		1.19 ***	1.08
Support for helping refugees			1.46 ***
Support for common EU migration policy			2.20 ***
Support for free movement of EU citizens			2.80 ***
Support for reinforced EU external borders			1.22 ***
Support for common EU asylum system			1.46 ***
Satisfaction with EU democracy			1.97 ***
Satisfaction with national democracy			1.11 *
Political orientation (left–right)			0.98 *
<b>Random Effects</b>			
$\sigma^2$	3.29	3.29	3.29
$\tau_{00}$	0.46 isocntry	0.46 isocntry	0.52 isocntry
$\tau_{11}$	0.10 isocntry.qb8_1	0.10 isocntry.qb8_1	0.07 isocntry.qb8_1
	0.11 isocntry.qb8_2	0.10 isocntry.qb8_2	0.14 isocntry.qb8_2
	0.04 isocntry.qb9_1	0.04 isocntry.qb9_1	0.04 isocntry.qb9_1
$\rho_{01}$	0.14	0.13	0.35
	-0.80	-0.82	-0.86
	-0.48	-0.49	-0.19
ICC	0.11	0.11	0.12
N	28 isocntry	28 isocntry	28 isocntry
Observations	21848	21809	16844
Marginal R <sup>2</sup> / Conditional R <sup>2</sup>	0.120 / 0.214	0.123 / 0.217	0.265 / 0.354

\*  $p < 0.05$  \*\*  $p < 0.01$  \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

Note: Table created by the author using data from Eurobarometer 101.3 (European Commission, 2025).

In multilevel logistic regression (Table 3) settings, model fit assessment calls for careful interpretation of pseudo-R<sup>2</sup> measures, which vary greatly from their linear regression equivalents.

Across criteria, the marginal  $R^2$  values, which are presented in Table 3, show significant improvement: 0.120 for the baseline model (Model 1), 0.123 with sociodemographic controls (Model 2), and 0.265 in the complete specification (Model 3). These values reflect the proportion of variance explained by the fixed effects alone, without accounting for variation attributed to random effects. Incorporating both fixed and random effects, the corresponding conditional  $R^2$  values, 0.214, 0.217, and 0.354, respectively, showcase country-level heterogeneity accounting for roughly 9-10% of total explained variance. The development from a marginal  $R^2$  of 0.120 to 0.265 shows that EU policy attitudes significantly help to explain variation in enlargement support beyond immigration attitudes alone. This result is consistent with post-functionalist integration theory's theoretical predictions, which hold that modern EU politics spans several, linked policy spheres instead of single-issue domains. The doubling of explanatory power when including more general EU attitudes implies that immigration issues function inside a constellation of integration-related preferences.

The sequential comparison of Models 1, 2, and 3 illustrates how the inclusion of additional explanatory variables significantly alters both the magnitude and statistical significance of core predictors of support for EU enlargement. In Model 1, which contains only key migration attitude variables, all three exhibit strong and statistically significant associations with enlargement support. Specifically, positive attitudes toward non-EU immigration ( $OR \approx 1.91$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), intra-EU migration ( $OR \approx 1.83$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), and perceptions of immigrants' contributions ( $OR \approx 1.74$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) each substantially increase the odds of supporting enlargement - by 91%, 83%, and 74%, respectively. These effects suggest a direct and robust relationship between migration attitudes and enlargement preferences in the baseline specification. Model 2 introduces socio-demographic controls, which slightly reduce the odds ratios (non-EU immigration from 91% to 87%, intra-EU migration from 83% to 79%, and perceptions of immigrants' contributions from 74% to 72%), but largely preserve the same patterns of significance. However, the introduction of broader policy orientations in Model 3, such as support for refugee aid, external border enforcement, and EU common migration policy, among others, transforms the explanatory structure. Most notably, the effect of intra-EU migration attitudes diminishes and becomes statistically insignificant ( $OR \approx 1.15$ , n.s.). This reduction in effect size suggests that earlier associations were partially confounded by omitted variables related to general political or integrationist orientations.

Reflecting theoretically expected country-specific variation in both baseline enlargement support and the relationship between immigration attitudes and enlargement preferences, the specification includes both random intercepts and random slopes. The intraclass correlation coefficients (ICC) of 0.11-0.12 across models show that, on average, 11-12% of total variance in enlargement support occurs at the country level. The variance components expose subtleties of country-level heterogeneity. From 0.46 in the baseline models to 0.52 in the complete specification, the random intercept variance ( $\tau_{00}$ ) rises, implying that, indeed, controlling for EU policy attitudes increases rather than reduces country-level variation in baseline support. This counterintuitive result could be reflecting suppressor effects whereby national variations in enlargement enthusiasm are hidden under shared EU policy preferences. So, in this context, the inclusion of EU policy attitude controls seems to expose latent national heterogeneity that is hitherto hidden by apparent consensus on more general integration concepts.

Random slope variances show different country-level variation in the immigration-enlargement nexus. While attitudes towards external immigration show more cross-national variation ( $\tau_{11} = 0.10-0.14$ ), the variance for attitudes towards intra-EU immigration ( $\tau_{11} = 0.07-0.10$ ) remains relatively small. This pattern implies that, in line with the different salience of immigration issues across European political systems, the politicisation of external immigration varies more significantly across member states than issues about internal EU mobility. Complex interactions between random effects are revealed by the correlation parameters  $\rho_{01}$ . Countries with higher baseline support for enlargement tend to show weaker relationships between immigrant contribution perceptions and enlargement attitudes, according to the negative correlation between random intercepts and slopes for perceived immigrant contributions ( $\rho_{01} = -0.48$  to  $-0.19$ ). This compensatory pattern implies that immigration issues might be less decisive in terms of integration preferences in environments supporting enlargement.

### EU-Wide Main Effects Analysis

The bivariate correlations between immigration attitudes and support for EU enlargement show a complex pattern of association. With support for enlargement ranging from roughly 56% to 62% as respondents go from negative to positive assessments of immigrant contributions, the projected probability analysis for perceptions of immigrant contributions, Figure 5 shows a modest but substantively meaningful effect. Although statistically significant, this six percent-point

change has a somewhat limited effect size when taken in relation to the larger constellation of elements affecting enlargement choices. Despite the complexity of the multilevel structure, the confidence intervals surrounding these predictions remain rather small throughout the distribution, indicating substantial estimation precision. The linear development of expected probabilities indicates that the relationship between perceived immigrant contributions and enlargement support runs consistently across the attitudinal spectrum, without threshold effects or discontinuities that might indicate qualitatively different cognitive processes at work among immigration sceptics versus supporters.

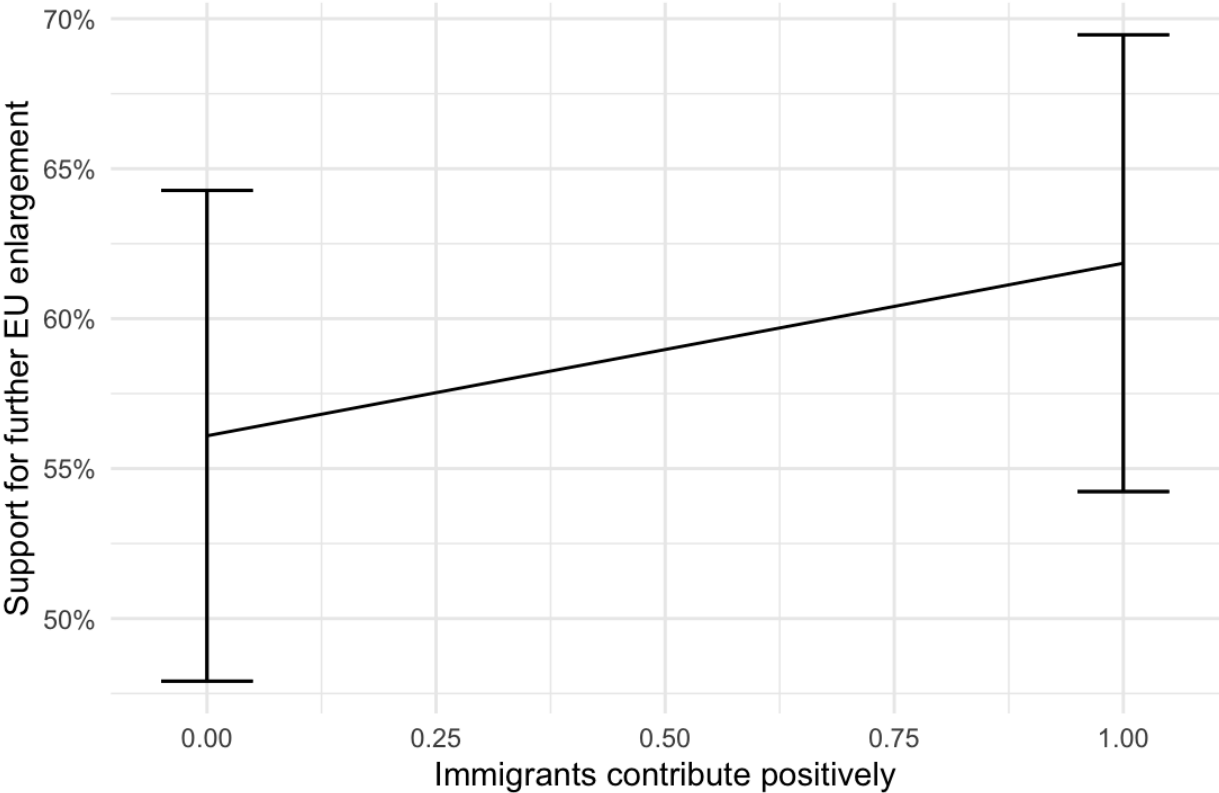


Figure 5. Bias-corrected predicted probability by immigrants contribute positively

Note: The figure was created by the author using data from Eurobarometer 101.3 (European Commission, 2025).

Conversely, attitudes toward immigration from outside the EU, displayed in Figure 6, show rather higher predictive power; support for enlargement ranges from roughly 62% to 77% over the attitudinal spectrum. More than twice the influence of immigrant contribution perceptions, this fifteen percentage-point difference highlights the particular salience of external immigration concerns in forming enlargement preferences. The steeper gradient and larger predictive range

imply that worries about immigration from non-EU sources appeal to more profound anxieties about cultural boundaries and European identity that essentially shape attitudes towards EU expansion. The different magnitudes of these effects highlight significant theoretical differences in the relationships between different dimensions of immigration attitudes and European integration preferences. Concerns about external immigration seem to elicit stronger cognitive and emotional reactions, maybe because they raise issues of civilizational limits and cultural otherness that speak to the symbolic politics of EU enlargement. The more modest impact of immigrant contribution perceptions could reflect their essentially economic framing, which has less emotional value in the post-functionalist era of European politics.

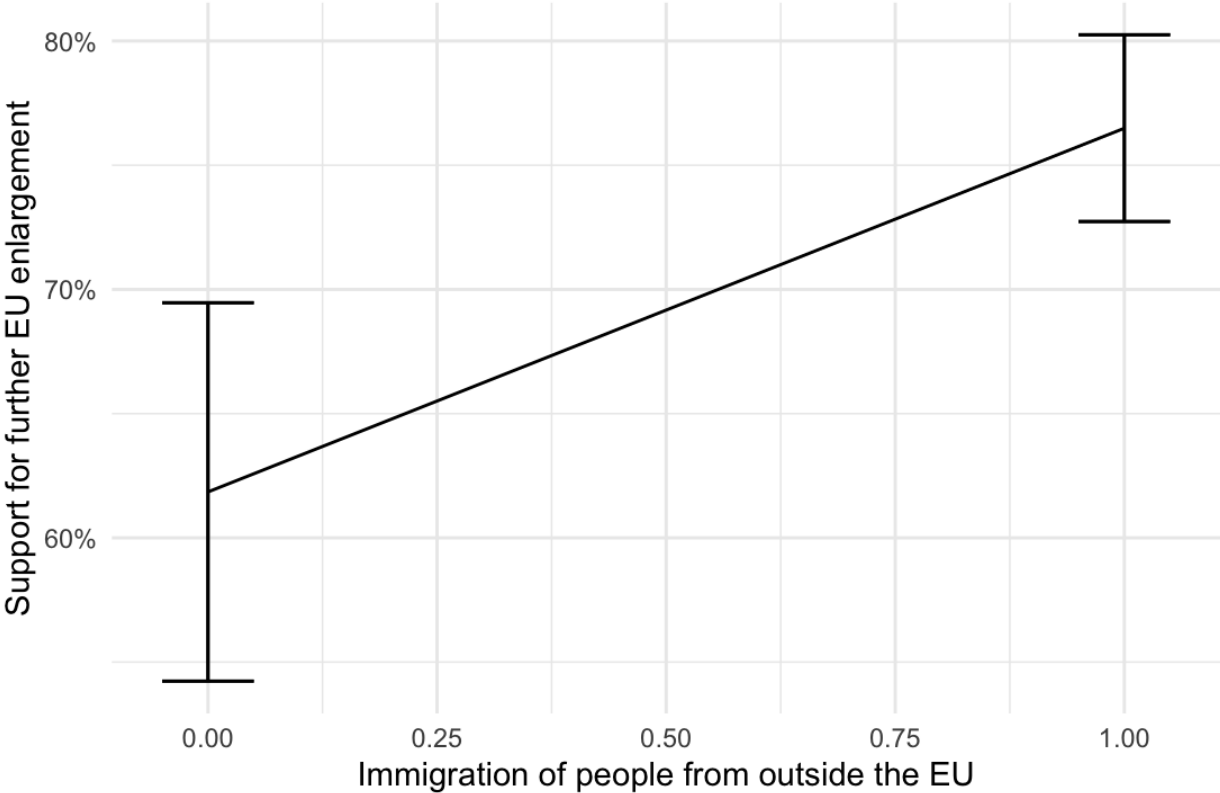


Figure 6. Bias-corrected predicted probability of immigration of people from outside the EU

Note: The figure was created by the author using data from Eurobarometer 101.3 (European Commission, 2025).

### Predictor Analysis

The full multilevel model provides a comprehensive overview of how both policy preferences and political evaluations influence public support for further EU enlargement. As

shown in Table 4, several predictors emerge as particularly strong, both in terms of effect size and statistical significance.

*Table 4. Multilevel logistic regression results: predictors of support for EU enlargement*

<i>Predictors</i>	<b>Support for further EU enlargement</b> <i>Odds Ratios</i>
(Intercept)	0.12 ***
Immigration of people from other EU Member States	1.15
Immigration of people from outside the EU	1.78 ***
Immigrants contribute positively to respondents' country	1.20 **
Support for helping refugees	1.46 ***
Support for common EU migration policy	2.20 ***
Support for free movement of EU citizens	2.80 ***
Support for reinforced EU external borders	1.22 ***
Support for common EU asylum system	1.46 ***
Satisfaction with EU democracy	1.97 ***
Satisfaction with national democracy	1.11 *
Political orientation (left–right)	0.98 *
Age	0.99 ***
Gender	0.99
Education	1.08
ICC	0.12
N <sub>isocountry</sub>	28
Observations	16844
Marginal R <sup>2</sup> / Conditional R <sup>2</sup>	0.265 / 0.354

\*  $p < 0.05$    \*\*  $p < 0.01$    \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

Note: Table created by the author using data from Eurobarometer 101.3 (European Commission, 2025).

With an odds ratio of almost 2.80 (95% CI: 2.48-3.17), support for free movement of EU citizens sits at the top of this hierarchy and is almost three times more likely than opposition. This means that if respondents favor the free movement of EU citizens, they are 180 percent more likely to support further EU enlargement. This strong influence emphasises the conceptual link between enlargement and the basic EU concept of free movement, implying that people who support internal mobility see expansion as a natural development of European integration rather than a challenge to current arrangements.

The second strongest predictor (OR  $\approx$  2.20, 95% CI: 2.00-2.42) is support for common EU migration policy, so underlining the centrality of migration governance to enlargement attitudes. Individuals who support a shared EU migration strategy are 120% more likely to support EU enlargement. Thus, those who support supranational approaches to migration management show much more support for adding new member states, probably reflecting a cosmopolitan perspective that sees EU institutions as legitimate players in handling cross-border problems. The extent of this influence implies that choices for European-level governance create a fundamental split in modern EU politics, with consequences for the larger integration effort going beyond migration.

Another strong determinant (OR  $\approx$  1.97, 95% CI: 1.80-2.16) is satisfaction with EU democracy, which strongly influences institutional trust and legitimacy perceptions, hence determining enlargement support. People who find EU democracy satisfactory are 97% more likely to be in favour of EU expansion. This result fits theoretical expectations from the literature on EU legitimacy, which holds that citizens' assessment of current institutional performance determines most of their readiness to support more integration. The significant effect size implies that enlargement uncertainty could partially reflect more general worries about democratic shortcomings and governance effectiveness inside the current EU structure.

Satisfaction with national democracy also proves to be a significant predictor of support for further EU enlargement (OR  $\approx$  1.11, 95% CI: 1.01-1.22). Individuals who are satisfied with the state of democracy in their own country are 11% more likely to favor EU expansion. This suggests that domestic political confidence spills over into attitudes toward supranational integration, aligning with theories of diffuse regime support. When citizens perceive their national democratic institutions as functional and legitimate, they may project this trust onto the EU as an extension of democratic governance. Conversely, dissatisfaction with national democracy could trigger

generalized institutional scepticism, reducing enthusiasm for transferring political authority to new member states. The effect size indicates that enlargement preferences are partially rooted in how people evaluate their domestic political systems. This reinforces the argument that both national and supranational legitimacy cues shape support for EU integration.

Support for refugee protection and a common EU asylum policy emerges as another significant determinant of enlargement preferences. Respondents who agree that EU member states should help refugees (OR  $\approx$  1.46, 95% CI: 1.33-1.62) are 46% more likely to support the admission of new member states. Similarly, support for a common EU asylum system (OR  $\approx$  1.46, 95% CI: 1.33-1.62) is associated with a 46% higher likelihood of favoring enlargement. These findings indicate that humanitarian and institutional integration attitudes reinforce each other. Citizens who back a unified approach to refugee protection are also more open to deepening the EU through enlargement, likely viewing both as expressions of solidarity and shared responsibility. This aligns with normative expectations in EU integration theory, where willingness to extend institutional capacity, such as asylum management, correlates with support for territorial expansion. The effect sizes underscore that enlargement support is not only grounded in economic or security concerns but also reflects broader ideological preferences about collective European governance.

Support for reinforced EU external borders also shows a significant positive association with enlargement preferences (OR  $\approx$  1.22, 95% CI: 1.11–1.35), indicating that individuals endorsing stronger border control are 22% more likely to support EU expansion. While this may appear counterintuitive, the result suggests that support for enlargement does not necessarily contradict a desire for stricter migration governance. Instead, it may reflect a conditional integration logic. Citizens are willing to admit new member states if they believe the EU can effectively manage its external borders. This aligns with post-functionalist interpretations of integration, where public support hinges on perceived institutional capacity to regulate flows and maintain order. The moderate effect size implies that for some respondents, enlargement is acceptable insofar as it coincides with strengthened border management, pointing to a vision of an expanded but more tightly controlled EU.

Of the immigration-specific predictors, attitudes towards external immigration retain significant predictive power in Model 3 (OR = 1.78, 95% CI: 1.50-2.10), while attitudes towards intra-EU immigration lose statistical significance, if compared to the results of models with only

independent variables or with them and sociodemographic ones. Therefore, those who support immigration from outside the EU are 78% more likely to support EU expansion. The difference between the two independent variables clarifies the different politicisation of internal versus external mobility: the latter has more symbolic weight in enlargement discussions. The continuation of external immigration effects even after adjusting for more general EU policy attitudes implies that worries about non-EU migration constitute a different dimension of enlargement opposition that cannot be reduced to general Euroscepticism. The third predictor, belief that immigrants contribute positively to the respondent's country, is also a strong predictor, even if it is weaker than out-of-EU immigration, of support for EU enlargement (OR  $\approx$  1.20, 95% CI: 1.05-1.36). Thus, individuals who hold favorable views about immigrants' impact are 20% more likely to support admitting new member states.

The demographic controls expose relatively small but theoretically interesting trends. Age shows a small adverse effect (OR  $\approx$  0.99), meaning somewhat less support among older respondents, as each additional year of age is associated with about a 1 percent decrease in the likelihood of supporting EU enlargement. This result is consistent with generational theories of European integration that suggest stronger cosmopolitan orientations among younger cohorts. Gender has no discernible influence, so it subverts essentialist narratives about varying degrees of integration between the sexes. The non-significance of having a higher education in the complete model implies that its bivariate association with enlargement support functions mainly through correlated policy attitudes rather than as an independent effect.

Political orientation shows a small but significant negative association (OR  $\approx$  0.98), with lower enlargement support shown by right-leaning respondents. With each step towards the political right, support for enlargement decreases by roughly 2 percent. However, the small scale of this effect implies that the conventional left-right dimension explains rather slight variation in enlargement attitudes once specific policy preferences are taken into account. This result is consistent with the development of new political cleavages organised around integration and identity issues that cross-cut conventional ideological divisions.

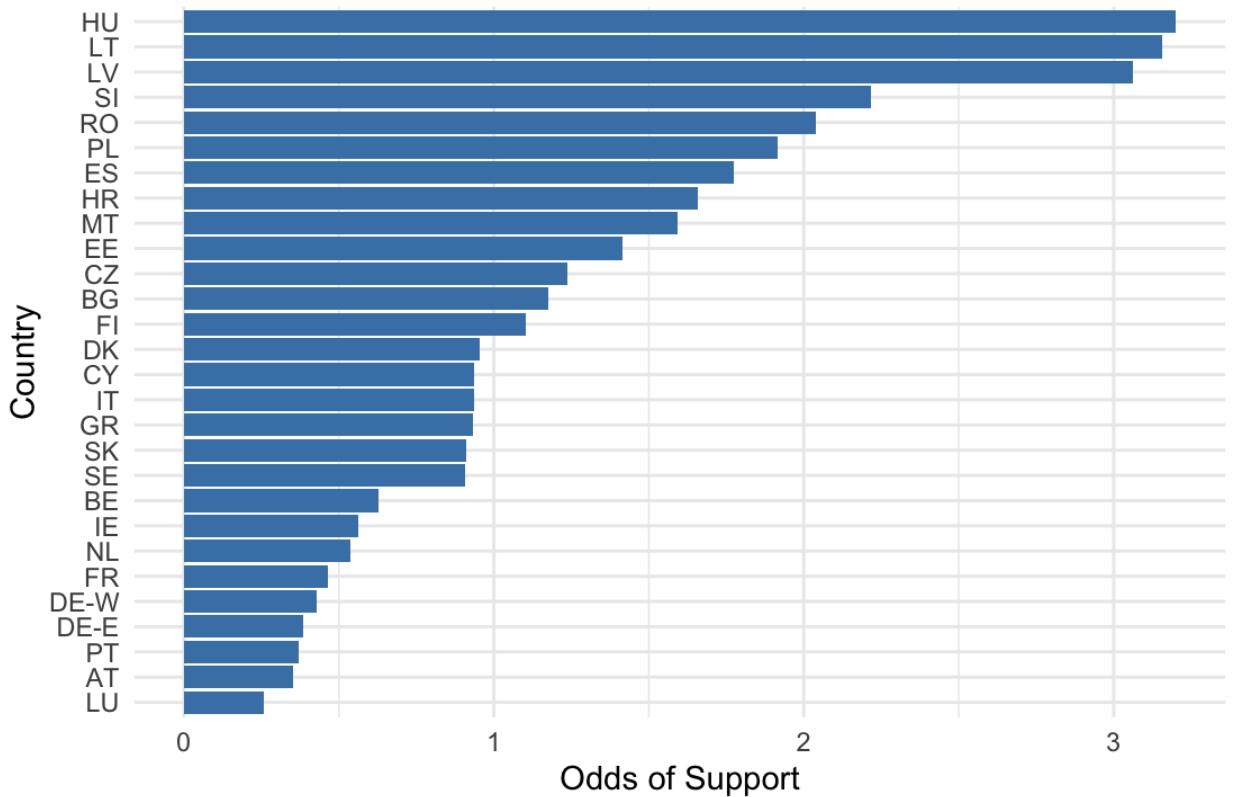
#### Effect Size Comparisons

The hierarchy of effect magnitudes reveals a clear stratification of influences on enlargement support. EU institutional satisfaction and policy attitudes dominate the explanatory landscape, with odds ratios exceeding 2.0 for the strongest predictors. Immigration attitudes occupy a middle tier, with effects ranging from 1.15 to 1.78, while demographic and ideological variables cluster at the bottom with minimal independent effects. This stratification challenges simplistic narratives that reduce enlargement opposition to immigration fears or positive-negative attitudes. Instead, the evidence suggests that enlargement attitudes are primarily structured by broader orientations toward European integration and governance, with immigration concerns representing one important but not dominant dimension of a multifaceted attitudinal syndrome. The particularly strong effects of free movement support and preferences for common migration policy indicate that citizens primarily evaluate enlargement through the lens of existing EU policies and principles rather than as an isolated decision about admitting new members.

Several findings merit particular attention for their theoretical implications. The stark contrast between internal and external immigration effects suggests that enlargement anxieties focus specifically on the prospect of increased non-EU migration rather than expanded intra-EU mobility. This can be seen as a distinction with important implications for how enlargement might be framed in public discourse. The powerful effect of EU democratic satisfaction underscores the importance of addressing legitimacy concerns as a prerequisite for building public support for further expansion. Finally, the relatively weak direct effects of demographic variables challenge deterministic accounts of integration attitudes based on social position, suggesting instead that policy preferences and institutional evaluations serve as the primary conduits through which social characteristics influence enlargement support.

These findings collectively paint a portrait of enlargement attitudes as embedded within broader orientations toward European integration, with immigration concerns representing one important but not exclusive dimension of public opinion formation. The dominance of EU policy attitudes in the explanatory hierarchy suggests that building support for enlargement requires addressing fundamental questions about the nature and future of European integration rather than merely alleviating specific concerns about immigration and everything concerning it.

## Country-Level Heterogeneity Analysis



*Figure 7. Country-level baseline odds of EU enlargement support*

Note: The figure was created by the author using data from Eurobarometer 101.3 (European Commission, 2025).

With odds ratios ranging from roughly 0.5 to 3.4 across member states, the random intercepts analysis reveals great cross-national heterogeneity in baseline support for EU enlargement, as shown in Figure 7. Controlling individual-level predictors, this six-fold variation in baseline support emphasises the basic significance of national context in organising attitudes towards further EU enlargement. The degree of these variations calls for careful attention to country-specific elements influencing public opinion development since they challenge universalist ideas of integration preferences.

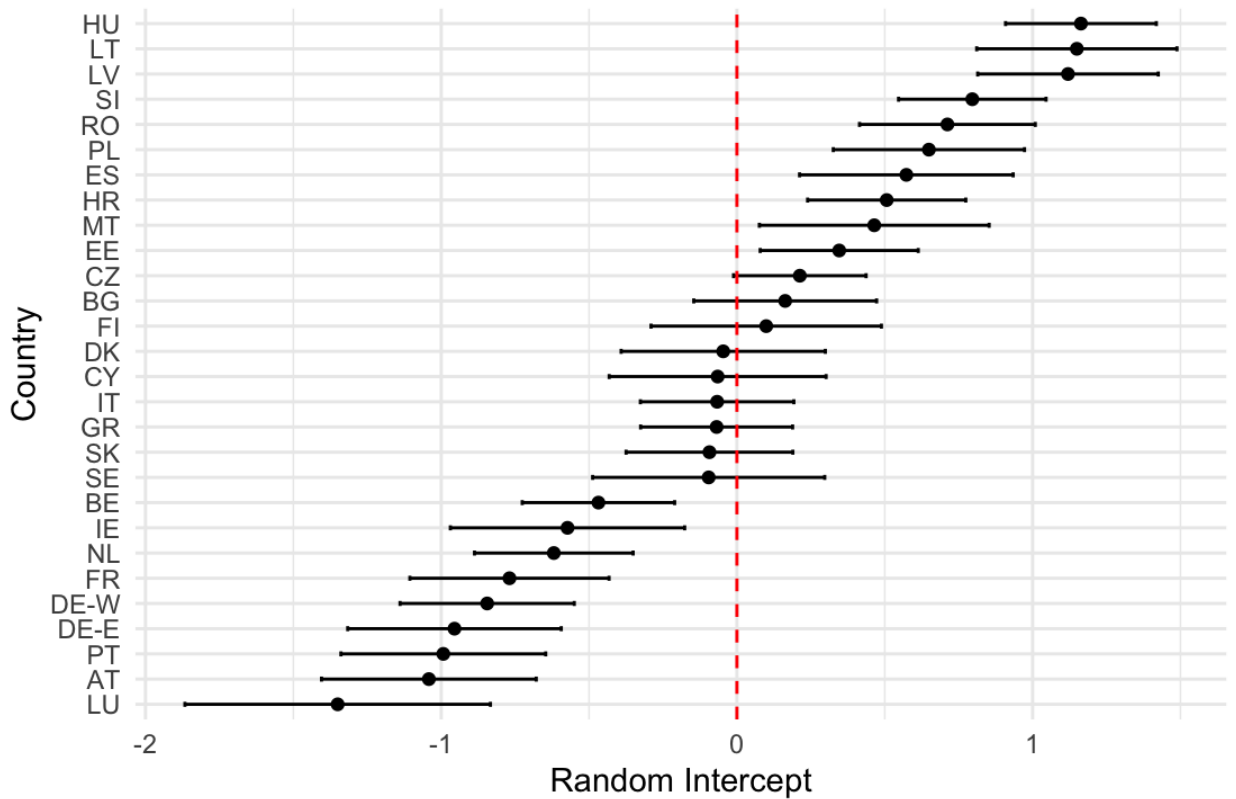


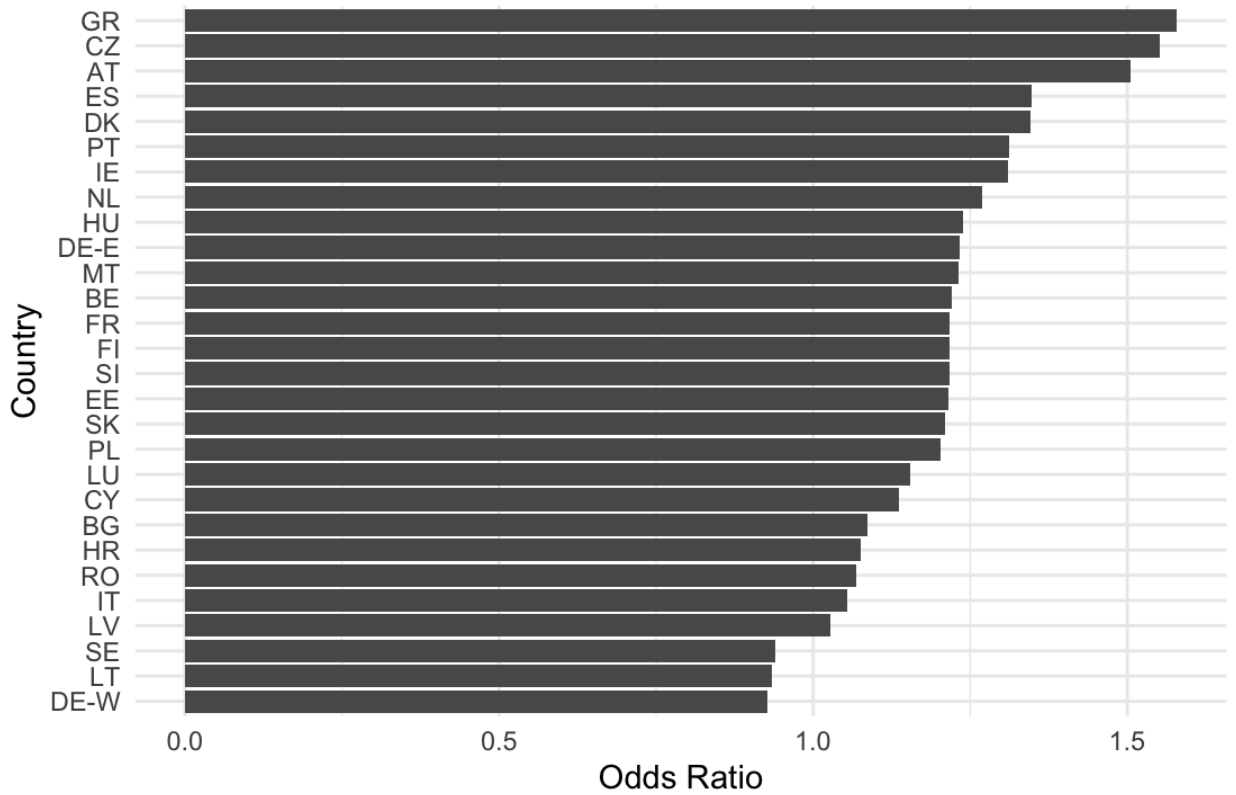
Figure 8. Country-level random intercepts (with 95% CIs)

Note: The figure was created by the author using data from Eurobarometer 101.3 (European Commission, 2025).

The way Figure 8 presents random intercepts with 95% confidence intervals offers important new perspectives on the statistical validity of noted national variations. Every horizontal line in the plot represents a particular member state, and point estimates are shown by dots. At the same time, confidence intervals span horizontally to reflect the accuracy of every country-level estimate. The relatively limited confidence intervals for most countries and the apparent separation between high and low support countries point to real cross-national variations rather than statistical artefacts. The centring of estimates around zero helps interpretation, as nations situated right from the reference line show more than average baseline support, and those positioned left show consistently less enthusiasm for enlargement. Longer distances between the extreme points of the confidence line reflect more obvious national distinctiveness in enlargement attitudes. In turn, the degree of deviation from the centre line indicates the strength of each country's departure from the EU-wide average. Hungary, Lithuania, and Latvia occupy the rightmost positions with random

intercepts exceeding 1.0, followed by Slovenia, Romania, Poland, Spain, Croatia, Malta, and Estonia with positive values ranging from approximately 0.3 to 0.9. Conversely, Luxembourg, Austria, and Portugal register the most negative intercepts (approaching -1.5), while Germany (both East and West), France, Netherlands, Ireland, Belgium, and Sweden display moderately negative values between -0.2 and -0.8.

Random intercept distribution reveals different clustering trends that fit known cleavages inside the European Union. Most remarkably, members of Central and Eastern Europe who joined during the 2004 - 2007 enlargement waves, including Hungary, Lithuania, Latvia, Slovenia, and Romania, occupy the top echelons of baseline support. This clustering implies that, compared to established Western European members, recent enlargement beneficiaries keep essentially different orientations towards additional expansion of the European Union. On the other hand, the early participants in European integration, such as Luxembourg, Germany, France, Belgium, and the Netherlands, cluster at the lower end of the support range. This geographical and chronological stratification indicates a fundamental split between "new" and "old" Europe that transcends personal level attitudes and reflects deeper structural and historical variations in interactions with the European project. A clear middle tier consists mainly of Southern European states (Spain, Greece, Italy) and Scandinavian nations (Denmark, Finland, Sweden), implying that neither geography nor welfare state typology alone explains enlargement attitudes. While Austria's position at the bottom of the distribution suggests particular national concerns, perhaps related to its geographic position as a border state, Ireland's position among the lower-support countries disturbs basic core-periphery narratives. Non-overlapping confidence intervals for many pairwise comparisons clearly show the statistical significance of these country variations, verifying that the observed clustering reflects meaningful variation rather than random fluctuation. The persistence of these variations following individual-level control for predictors points to national-level influences on enlargement attitudes independent of compositional variations in population characteristics.



*Figure 9. Country-specific odds ratios for immigrants contribute positively*

Note: The figure was created by the author using data from Eurobarometer 101.3 (European Commission, 2025).

The examination of cross-national heterogeneity in the relationship between perceived immigrant contributions and enlargement support reveals great variation that questions universalist presumptions about attitude formation in European publics. Figure 9 shows a startling range of country-specific odds ratios ranging from roughly 0.85 to 1.5, suggesting that immigrant contribution perceptions affect enlargement attitudes by almost two times the variation among member states. With odds ratios going a bit over 1.5, Greece and the Czech Republic become settings where positive views of immigrant contributions most significantly predict enlargement support. Given the rather tight immigration laws in these nations and historically dubious public opinions of migration, this result seems contradictory (Triandafyllidou, 2013, p. 34). The strength of this relationship, however, may reflect a polarised political environment in which people who have positive opinions of immigration create a unique pro-European constituency that constantly supports integrationist policies in several spheres. With an odds ratio under 0.90, the western part of Germany shows the weakest link between immigrant contribution views and enlargement support. Given Germany's central influence in EU migration policy and its sizable immigrant

population, this counterintuitive result suggests that German opinions about enlargement have become decoupled from immigration concerns. The German case, especially if talking about the western part, might show a mature immigration society in which expansion discussions centre more on institutional and financial issues than on migration consequences.

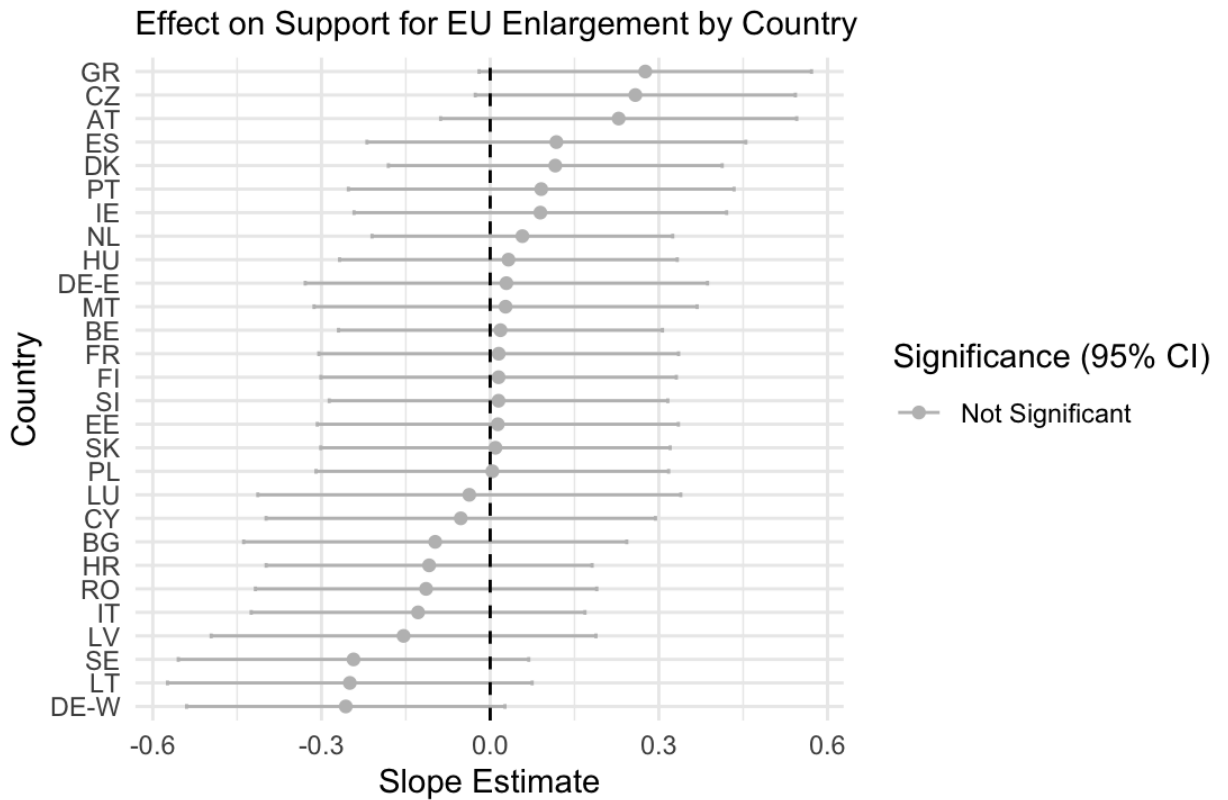


Figure 10. Random slopes for immigrants contribute positively

Note: The figure was created by the author using data from Eurobarometer 101.3 (European Commission, 2025).

The random slopes analysis of Figure 10 offers more understanding of the statistical relevance and scale of these deviations. All presented nations have broad intervals that cross zero. Their confidence intervals show that most nations cluster around the null effect, suggesting statistically insignificant relationships. This broad statistical insignificance highlights the contingent nature of the relationship between enlargement attitudes and perceptions of immigrant contribution, indicating that these attitudes function as separate aspects of the formation of political preferences in many national contexts. Although not always reaching traditional levels of statistical significance, the positive slope that Greece and the Czech Republic display and the negative slope estimates for nations such as Lithuania and Germany (West) nevertheless point to substantively

significant patterns. This heterogeneity implies that the link between immigrant contribution perceptions and enlargement support functions through intricate mediating mechanisms varies depending on national context.

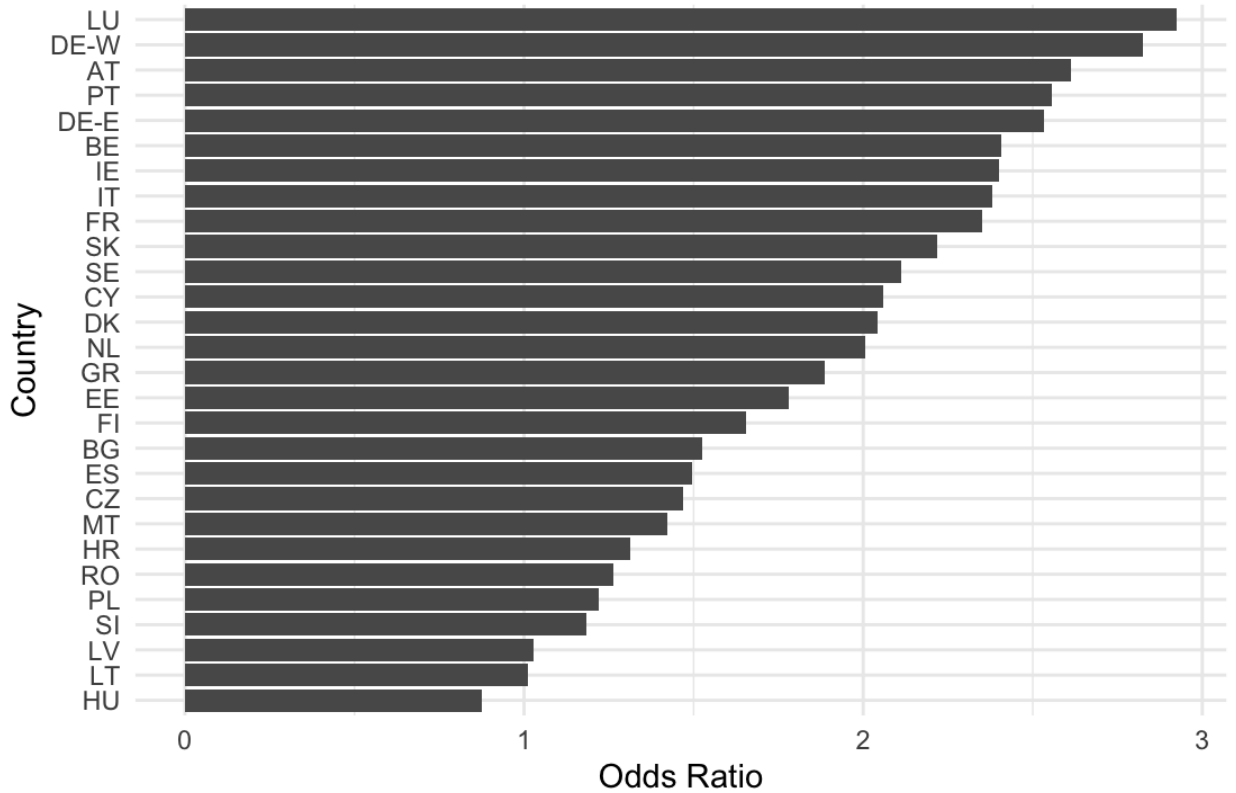


Figure 11. Country-specific odds ratios for immigration of people from outside the EU

Note: The figure was created by the author using data from Eurobarometer 101.3 (European Commission, 2025).

Views of outside-EU immigration show even more marked cross-national variation in their interaction with support for enlargement. Figure 11, which displays odds ratios of every EU member state, shows Luxembourg, Germany (West), and Austria as nations where positive attitudes towards non-EU immigration most powerfully predict enlargement support (odds ratios exceeding 2.5). By contrast, Hungary, Lithuania, and Latvia show weaker relationships (odds ratios either near or below 1.0). Figure 12’s random slopes analysis supports these trends and emphasises statistical relevance. With strong positive slopes, Luxembourg, Germany (West), Austria, and several Western European states show clear links between friendly attitudes towards extra-EU migrants and enlargement support. Eastern European nations show an interesting trend: Hungary, Lithuania, Latvia, Slovenia, Poland, and Romania show negative slopes, which have

statistical relevance. This East-West difference points to essentially different cognitive models connecting external migration with EU growth across European countries. With slope estimates ranging from almost -0.8 to +0.7, the degree of variation surpasses that shown for the "immigrants contribute positively" measure. This greater range suggests that outside-EU immigration attitudes are more potent and varied predictors of enlargement support in many national settings. The trend corresponds with theoretical expectations about cultural threat perceptions since outside-EU immigrants could be seen as more culturally remote than intra-EU immigrants.

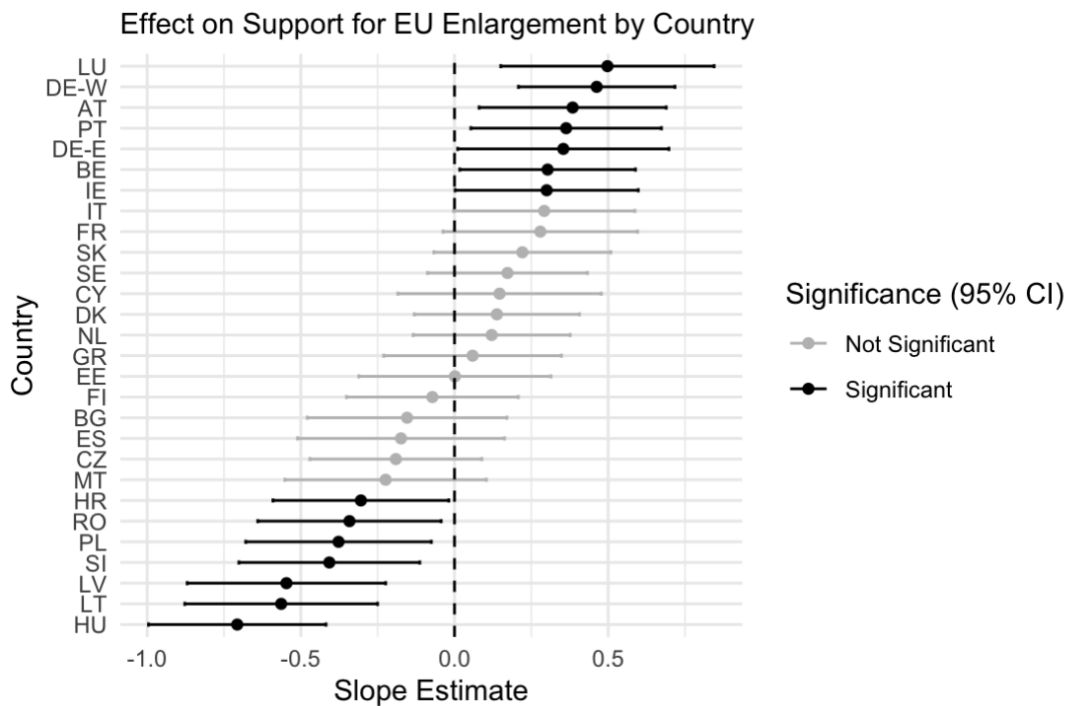


Figure 12. Random slopes for the immigration of people from outside the EU

Note: The figure was created by the author using data from Eurobarometer 101.3 (European Commission, 2025).

The relationship between attitudes towards intra-EU mobility and enlargement support shows a different pattern of cross-national variation. Odds ratios, which are displayed on Figure 13, show Bulgaria, Croatia, and Portugal as nations where positive attitudes of intra-EU migration most strongly predict enlargement support, as their odds ratios approach or exceed 1.5. Belgium, Germany (East), and Italy show the lowest correlations, implying little link between these views in these settings.

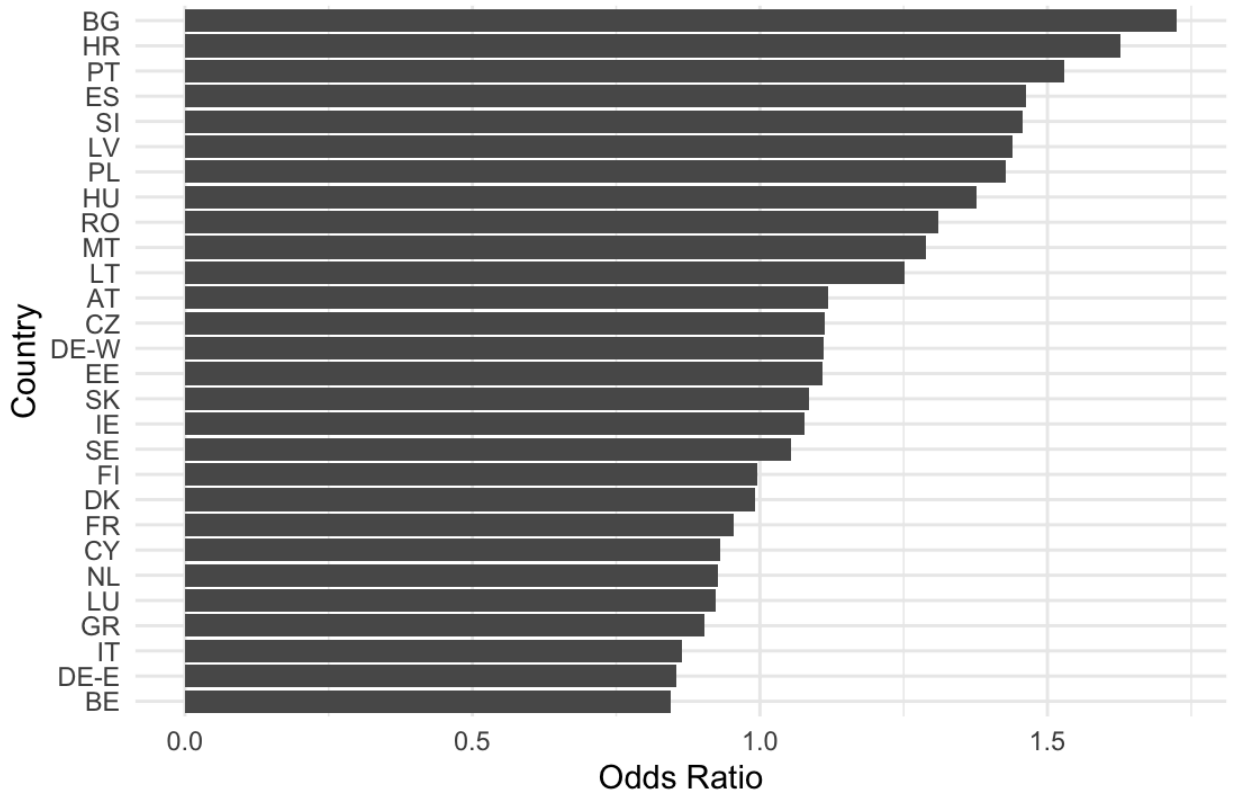


Figure 13. Country-specific odds ratios for immigration of people from other EU member states

Note: The figure was created by the author using data from Eurobarometer 101.3 (European Commission, 2025).

The random slope analysis of Figure 14 reveals a more complex picture. Only Bulgaria and Croatia show statistically significant positive slopes, while Belgium is the only country that shows a noteworthy negative relationship. Generally speaking, the confidence intervals show more uncertainty in effect estimates than the extra-EU immigration measure, implying more erratic relationships among many survey settings or population subgroups within different nations. Especially, the effects of intra-EU immigration show less marked East-West differences than those of extra-EU immigration attitudes. While some Western nations show almost zero or negative relationships, several Eastern European nations (Bulgaria, Croatia, Slovenia) show positive correlations. This trend implies that free mobility inside the EU forms a unique cognitive category that functions differently from outside migration in forming enlargement attitudes.

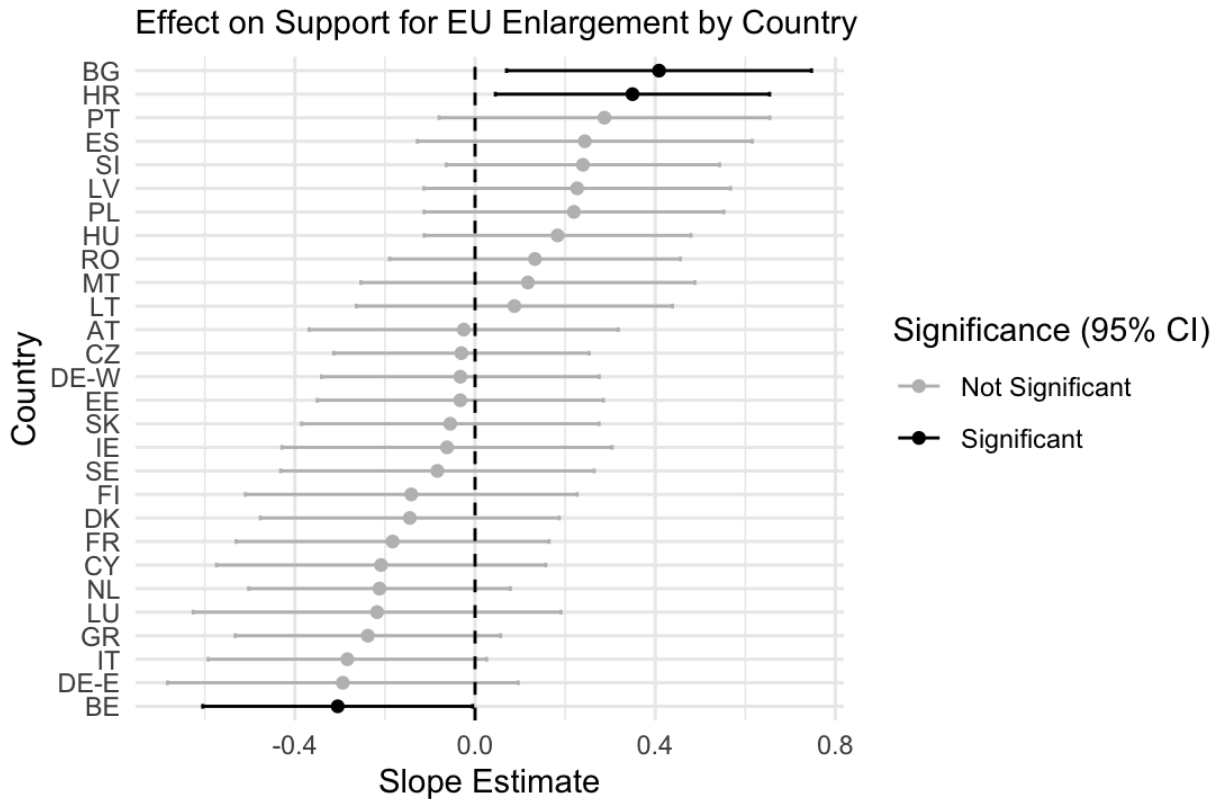


Figure 14. Random slopes for the immigration of people from other EU member states

Note: The figure was created by the author using data from Eurobarometer 101.3 (European Commission, 2025).

### Summary of Immigration Attitude Heterogeneity Cross-Countries

The random slopes obtained from a multilevel statistical model evaluating the correlation between immigration-related attitudes and support for further EU enlargement across EU member states are presented on the heat map (Figure 15). The visualisation methodically arranges nations according to the average size and direction of these slopes, showing only the countries for which at least one of the immigration-related attitude variables from the three included in the model is statistically significant. Three separate attitudes predict: opinions about immigrants' positive contributions to society, stance on immigration from other EU member states, and on immigration from outside the EU. The colour scheme conveys the direction and strength of these interactions, as darker blue tones indicate negative associations while deeper red tones indicate positive ones. Regarding immigration from outside the EU, there is a clear trend showing strong negative correlations in many Eastern European nations. Particularly strong negative slopes for Latvia, Hungary, Lithuania, Croatia, Slovenia, Poland, and Romania.

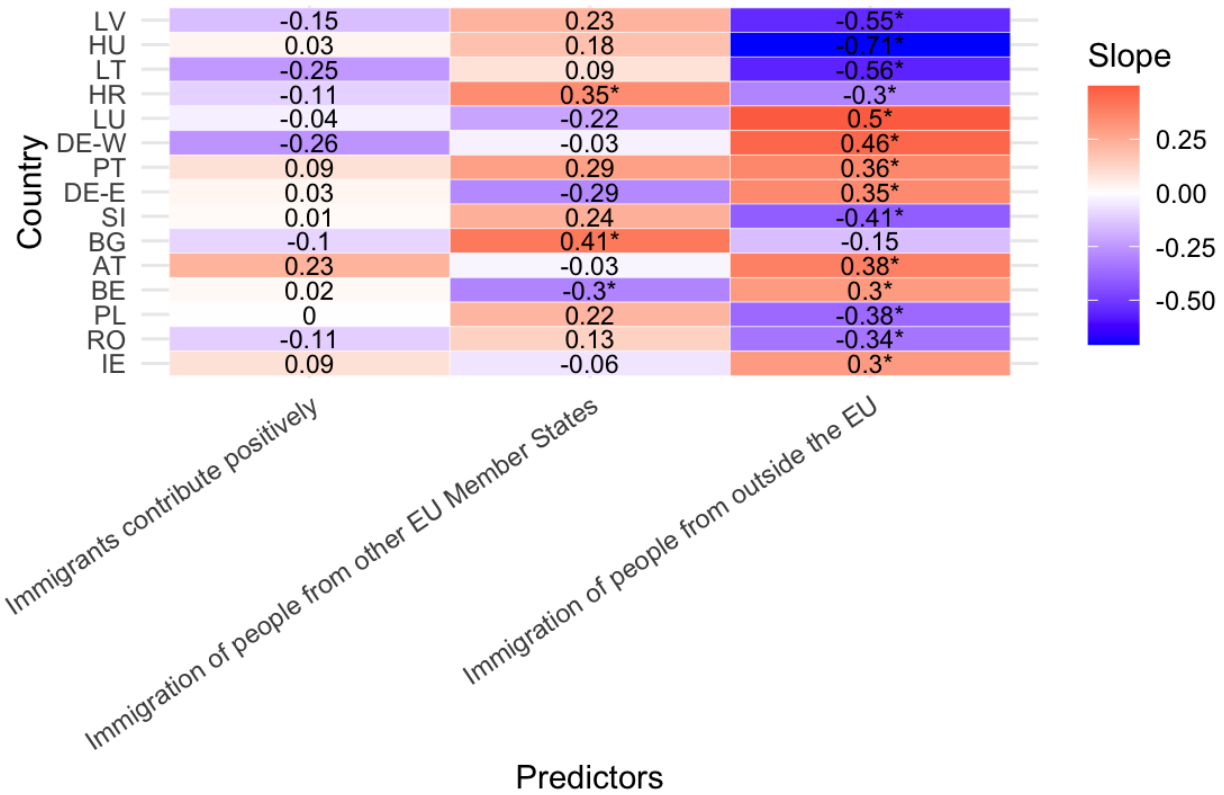


Figure 15. Heat map: immigration attitude cross-countries

Note: Countries are ordered by average effect size, and significant slopes are marked with \*. The heat map was created by the author using data from Eurobarometer 101.3 (European Commission, 2025).

On the other hand, opinions on intra-EU migration and the conviction that immigrants benefit show more varied and often positive correlations, which are exceptionally clear-cut in Bulgaria, Luxembourg, and Portugal. All things considered, the visualisation emphasises the significant variation in immigration-related attitudes inside the European Union, even among countries that display a significant effect between immigration attitudes and opinion on EU enlargement. Considering all, three separate country clusters are revealed by the heat map: (1) a Western European group marked by strong external immigration effects but weak internal mobility influences; (2) an Eastern European cluster showing the opposite pattern; and (3) a mixed group of Southern and smaller member states exhibiting modest effects across all dimensions. This tripartite framework implies that regional political cultures essentially shape how immigration issues enter calculations of enlargement.

The empirical results presented in this section complement the existing body of knowledge on the relationship between immigration and EU enlargement and continue the trend that these two factors are linked. However, the results also point to a complex picture of cross-country heterogeneity that goes beyond overly simplistic notions of resistance to EU enlargement driven by attitudes towards migration. Using complex multilevel modelling, three distinct regional patterns were identified: Western European countries, where external migration issues are a strong predictor of opposition to enlargement, Eastern European countries, where the link is weaker despite higher levels of baseline support and a mixed group of Southern countries, where the influence of migration is moderate across all measures. These patterns challenge linear theoretical models by showing that attitudes towards migration operate through significantly different cognitive mechanisms in different national contexts and that the politicisation of migration and historical experience of integration are important moderating factors. Significant differences across countries in both baseline support and the magnitude of the effect underscore the relevance of national political cultures in shaping attitudes towards integration and suggest that future enlargement strategies should take this heterogeneity into account rather than seeking homogeneous approaches across member states. The predominance of attitudes towards EU policy over immigration issues in the hierarchy of explanatory factors suggests that, to build public support for enlargement, it is necessary not only to reduce fears about migration but also to address fundamental issues of institutional effectiveness and democratic legitimacy. Ultimately, this empirical study shows that attitudes towards immigration are an important but not decisive component in the complex set of factors influencing attitudes towards enlargement, confirming the need for more sophisticated theoretical models to understand the dynamics of contemporary European integration.

## 5. Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate how public attitudes towards migration influence Europeans' views on the possible future enlargement of the European Union. The central hypothesis was that negative attitudes towards immigration correlate with lower support for the admission of new member states to the EU. This research question arose from the observation that migration has become an increasingly relevant political issue in European politics, especially after the 2015 refugee crisis and previous concerns about intra-European mobility following the 2004 enlargement. The study was particularly motivated by the revival of discussions on EU enlargement following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, which accelerated the granting of candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova. In this context, understanding the factors shaping public support for enlargement has become crucial for assessing the political feasibility of further EU integration. The study uses a multi-level analytical approach with Eurobarometer survey data from all 27 Member States, examining three different aspects of attitudes towards migration: feelings about migration from other EU countries, views on migration from outside the EU, and perceptions of immigrants' contribution to society.

These indicators served as independent variables, while support for further EU enlargement was the dependent variable. The empirical analysis pointed to a significant link between attitudes towards migration and support for EU enlargement, confirming the central hypothesis of this study. However, the results demonstrated considerable complexity and transnational heterogeneity in this link. Attitudes towards immigration from outside the EU showed a stronger association with preferences for enlargement (with a 15% difference in support across the entire spectrum of attitudes) compared to perceptions of immigrants' contributions (showing a more modest 6% difference). This suggests that concerns about external immigration may trigger more profound anxieties about cultural boundaries and European identity that influence views on EU enlargement. In particular, regional differences emerged in how attitudes towards migration shaped support for enlargement. While Western European countries such as Luxembourg, Germany, and Austria showed strong positive correlations between favourable views on external immigration and support for enlargement, Central and Eastern European countries (including Hungary, Lithuania, and Latvia) showed weaker or even negative correlations. This East-West divide reflects fundamentally different cognitive models linking attitudes towards migration and enlargement in

different parts of Europe, challenging universalist assumptions about the formation of public opinion.

The analysis also found that attitudes towards migration, while significant, were not the strongest predictor of support for enlargement when considered in the broader constellation of attitudes towards European integration. Support for the free movement of EU citizens emerged as the strongest predictor, with respondents who support this fundamental principle of the EU 180 percent more likely to support further enlargement. Similarly, support for a common EU migration policy and satisfaction with democracy in the EU showed more potent effects than attitudes towards migration alone. This hierarchy of influences suggests that preferences for enlargement are primarily structured by broader orientations towards European governance and integration, with concerns about migration representing one important but not dominant dimension. Demographic factors such as age and the presence of higher education had relatively modest effects after taking into account attitudes towards policy. In contrast, gender did not have any effect, challenging deterministic explanations of integration attitudes based on social status. These results suggest that support for enlargement is embedded in a complex attitudinal syndrome that reflects broader citizens' assessments of European integration. This study contributes to the academic literature on European integration by deepening existing understanding of how attitudes towards migration interact with preferences for enlargement within a post-functionalist theory of integration.

The findings support Hooghe and Marks' (2009) contention that European integration issues are increasingly observed through cultural and identity lenses rather than purely economic or technocratic perspectives. The pronounced effects of external migration attitudes align with McLaren's (2002) pioneering work, highlighting the significance of cultural threat perceptions in shaping EU attitudes. Similarly, De Vreese and Boomgaarden's (2005) research on immigration fears as predictors of opposition to enlargement found further validation. The results demonstrate that enlargement is not merely a political issue of practical character but also functions as a symbolic mirror of solidarity and group identity in Europe, as suggested by Risse (2010). The identification of significant cross-national heterogeneity in these relationships adds crucial nuance to existing theoretical frameworks, revealing the contextual nature of attitude formation across different national settings. The demonstrated East-West divide in how migration attitudes correlate

with enlargement support extends Taydaş and Kentmen-Çin's (2017) findings on weaker links between anti-immigration sentiment and European integration opposition in Eastern Europe, while aligning with Jeannet's emphasis on the contextual role of macroeconomic conditions.

The political implications of these findings are significant for European leaders considering future enlargement. The results suggest that if migration-related issues remain unresolved through comprehensive integration and migration policies, future enlargement attempts may face significant public opposition, especially in Western European countries, where the link between attitudes towards migration and preferences for enlargement appears to be strongest. Addressing public concerns about migration management is a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for restoring support for the enlargement process. The dominance of broader attitudes towards EU policy in the hierarchy of explanations suggests that building support for enlargement requires addressing fundamental questions about the nature and future of European integration, rather than simply alleviating specific concerns about immigration. These findings are particularly relevant in the current geopolitical context, where the EU faces simultaneous pressures to demonstrate solidarity with Ukraine and other aspiring members while addressing internal concerns about the Union's absorption capacity and institutional coherence. The regional variations documented in this study suggest that differentiated strategies may be necessary to build public support in different national contexts.

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