

**In defense of international sanctions. How communication about sanctions can affect their
public acceptance**

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Abstract

Does communicating sanctions change how they are perceived by citizens in the target country? In this paper, we argue that framing sanctions in terms of broad international values and providing endorsement cues of actors in support of international sanction can increase perceived support for sanctions beyond their specific design. We test this argument in the case of the European Union and using conjoint experiments in Hungary and Poland. Our results show that both framing and cueing seems to matter in addition to the question of how sanctions are designed. While it is important for public support that procedural fairness is incorporated in designing the sanctions, framing sanctions in terms of protecting the rule of law and obtaining support by the domestic opposition seems to matter just as much.

A central theme in the literature on international sanctions are the possible unintended consequences of sanctions on public opinion in the affected country: the rally-around-the-flag effect (Galtung 1967: 389; Grossman et al. 2018). The European Union (EU), for example, has adopted sanctions against member state governments accused of democratic backsliding only very hesitantly, partly due to fear of public backlash. In 2015, the Vice President of the European Commission in charge of protecting the rule of law, Frans Timmermans, still referred to the precedent of EU member states' diplomatic sanctions against Austria in 2000 to argue that these measures "completely backfired at the time, and since then member states have been reluctant to take issue with other member states" (Timmermans 2015¹; cf. Closa 2021). Similarly, the domestic opposition in backsliding EU countries tries to avoid explicit support for EU sanctions against their governments for fear of being branded as "traitors" to the national interest (Jenne & Mudde 2012; Wonka et al. 2023).

If nobody dares to speak out publicly and defend international sanctions vis-à-vis the affected people, however, the rally-around-the-flag effect might become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Without strong counter-narrative, sanctioned governments can easily shift the blame for the negative effects of sanctions and denounce illegitimate outside interference by other countries or organizations. Against this background, we ask whether the way international sanctions are communicated makes a difference for public opinion. Does it matter for the acceptance of sanctions, whether and how actors other than the sanctioned government position themselves in public? To answer this question, we develop two sets of theoretical expectations regarding i) different actor cues and ii) different framings in defense of international sanctions. We test these expectations using a conjoint survey experiment conducted in Hungary and Poland in 2023. In the experiment, we examine first whether respondents' attitudes are influenced by information on the endorsement of sanctions through international organizations, other governments, domestic opposition parties, civil society actors or independent experts. Secondly, we analyze whether different framings of the sanctions regarding their substantive justification and their procedural legitimacy matter for respondents' attitudes.

The EU is often regarded a political entity *sui generis* and findings from the EU do not travel easily to other international contexts. For our interest, however, the EU offers a crucial bordering case. If there was any chance that actors' endorsements and their framings of

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https://web.archive.org/web/20171004031216/https://ec.europa.eu/commission/commissioners/2014-2019/timmermans/announcements/european-union-and-rule-law-keynote-speech-conference-rule-law-tilburg-university-31-august-2015_en

international sanctions actually reach the affected public and influence public opinion, we should observe such effects in the EU. Even though democratic backsliding in the EU has led to severe cutbacks on liberal rights in the past decade, citizens in backsliding EU member states such as Hungary and Poland still enjoy a moderate degree of media freedom and political pluralism in global comparison.² Moreover, even without a truly European public sphere, domestic public spheres have become increasingly Europeanized during the integration process, i.e. a minimum level of public awareness about political developments at the European level and in other countries has been reached. Finally, the broader literature on the effectiveness of sanctions suggests that allied democracies are more likely to be sensitive to sanctions than distant autocracies (Hufbauer et al. 2007: 163ff.). If we do not find any of the expected effects under these EU circumstances, there is probably very little that can be done in terms of public communication to affect the acceptance of sanctions and to mitigate the risk of a rally-around-the-flag effect. Our findings, however confirm that, indeed, there is some room for the EU to communicate sanctions. Not only does support levels of different sanction packages vary strongly depending on the way they are communicated, individuals in both Hungary and Poland also react strongly to both framing and cueing of sanctions.

The article is structured as follows. In the next chapter, we review the public opinion literatures on international sanctions as well as on cueing and framing to derive our three sets of theoretical expectations. Subsequently, we describe and justify our research design. In the empirical part, we present the results of our conjoint experiments in both Hungary and Poland. We further show that the results are robust in a non-target country, which might become a targeted country, namely Bulgaria. We conclude the article by discussing the implications and generalizability of our findings.

Public opinion and the endorsement and framing of sanctions

In this section, we locate our study within the literature on international sanctions and we develop two sets of expectations regarding the public acceptance of international sanctions in target countries.

Sanctions design and public opinion

The effectiveness of international sanctions is subject of a vast body of literature (Allen 2008,

² World Press Freedom Index (Hungary 72/180, Poland 57/180).

Hufbauer et al. 2007; Peksen 2019). The question of what determines the public acceptance of international action (Chapman and Chaudoin 2020: 1305) is distinct, but highly relevant also for debates on sanction effectiveness. This is because the “traditional logic of sanctions posits a domestic political mechanism: sanctions impose economic pressure, invite opposition, thereby forcing a government to change its policies or risk replacement” (Brooks 2002: 12). In this orthodox view of sanctions, the general public reacts to sanctions by lowering support for their government because of the economic harm inflicted by these sanctions for which the respective government’s actions were responsible in the first place (Hufbauer et al. 1990). In contrast, the rally-around-the-flag argument states that public backlash may be the unintended effect of international sanctions and render them even counter-productive. In particular, international sanctions may allow the targeted government to portray itself as the defender of the national interest against illegitimate outside interference and, thereby, to benefit from a rally-around-the-flag effect (Galtung 1967). Understanding which of these two logics applies and when international sanctions are perceived as (il)legitimate is crucial for their potential effectiveness, for example, if sanctions aim at undermining regime support (Alekseev and Hale 2019) or at promoting democratic values (van Soest and Wahman 2014). Empirical research to date, however, is inconclusive as to whether sanctions result in less support for the targeted government, as in line with the orthodox view on sanctions, or rather produce a rally-around-the-flag-effect. While some studies, such as Grossman et al. (2018), find strong evidence for a backlash effect of sanctions, others do not (Frye 2019).

This inconclusiveness results, among other things, from the fact that sanctions vary along various dimensions and therefore citizens might evaluate sanctions differently depending on how sanctions are designed and what their consequences are for affected citizens. For instance, sanctions can be designed as targeted (or smart) sanctions, aiming mainly at the political or economic elite, or as comprehensive sanctions, covering large parts of the populations (Drezner 2011). The argument underlying the use of more targeted sanctions, then, refers to the more confined economic costs, which should make a backlash effect less likely (Alekseev and Hale 2019). Again, research is somewhat inconclusive. For instance, Grossman et al. (2018) find strong evidence for a backlash effect of sanctions in Israel, regardless of whether they are targeted or comprehensive in character. By contrast, the study of Frye (2019) on targeted sanctions against Russia shows no rally-around-the-flag effect. Both, Seitz and Zazzaro (2020) and Alekseev and Hale (2019), go one step further and refine the argument on targeted versus comprehensive sanctions by arguing for a differential impact on public opinion depending on how much citizens

are affected by these sanctions. Both studies show that those mostly affected by targeted sanctions are most likely to rally around the flag.

Furthermore, the design of sanctions may also differ in procedural terms and, thereby, affect their perception as procedurally (il)legitimate. For example, it has been argued that sanctions are more likely to be perceived as legitimate if they are based on clear ex ante criteria, which are consistently applied to all potential targets rather than if they are adopted ad hoc and in a discriminatory way (Blauberger and van Hüllen 2021: 6). In a similar vein, international sanctions may be perceived as more legitimate when they grant certain procedural rights to the targeted government, e.g., regarding the justification of its policies or the opportunity to appeal sanctions in court.

In summary, the design of sanctions seems to affect how the general public in the target country perceives the legitimacy of sanctions. However, the literature has so far not come up with a clear 'recipe' of how to design sanctions to markedly increase their legitimacy leaving ample room for other factors to fill this void.

Communicating sanctions

In addition to the design of sanctions, we, therefore, ask whether the communication about international sanctions affects their public acceptance. Typically, international sanctions against a government trigger a blame game (Weaver 1986; Heinkelmann-Wild and Zangl 2020) about their proper interpretation: whereas the target government denounces international sanctions as illegitimate outside interference with a country's people, those in support of international sanctions attribute responsibility to the objectionable behavior of the targeted government. Citizens strongly supporting or opposing the targeted government are likely to assess international sanctions in line with their government preferences (Edwards and Swenson 1997), but what about those in-between, the "moderates" who do not hold strong ex ante preferences and, therefore, are "more malleable" in their opinions (Sejersen 2021: 7)? As long as a society is not entirely polarized between strong government support and opposition, there could be some room for communication about international sanctions to matter. Citizens may be uncertain or unaware about their governments' behavior as well as about the complexity of international sanctions and, therefore, may be undecided about their evaluation of international sanctions. For example, when governments claim to merely "reform" the judiciary in order to enhance its efficiency, while arguably eroding judicial independence and risking international sanctions, citizens may be uncertain whom to believe (Stiansen et al. 2023).

Uncertainty and the demand for guidance may be particularly high in times of democratic crisis (Bechtel et al. 2017: 884). As a consequence, when evaluating international sanctions, citizens may either rely on frames that provide them guidance in terms of how to evaluate a particular matter or they may draw on cues as shortcuts to form their political opinion (Druckman et al. 2010). In the following, we discuss how both frames and cues can affect how citizens evaluate the imposition of sanctions.

Framing

The underlying idea of framing theory is that any political issue can be viewed from a variety of perspectives and the choice of perspective matters for opinion formation (Chong and Druckman 2007: 104). People are more likely to agree with political arguments that resonate with their own frames. Aware of these “framing effects” (Druckman et al. 2010), political actors can strategically construct their arguments in one way or another in order to reorient citizens’ thinking about an issue. Framing, thus, constitutes one way to influence public opinion by means of communication.

As regards international sanctions, framing is relevant first and foremost for their *substantive justification*. Ideally, by framing sanctions in a convincing way, international actors can send a signal of support to opposition forces and help “winning hearts and minds” in the target state (Sejersen 2021: 2). In his study on US sanctions against Venezuela, Sejersen (2021: 6) found that sanctions, which were justified in order to enforce broadly accepted international norms such as fundamental human rights, were more likely to be perceived as legitimate and less likely to trigger a rally-around-the-flag effect compared to a scenario in which Venezuela was labeled a threat without any appeal to broadly shared norms. Against this background, the acceptance of international sanctions should be higher if citizens in the target state learn about them in a way that is framed in terms of broadly shared norms. For example, the European Union typically justifies its sanctions against member state democratic backsliding in terms of protecting the “rule of law”, whereas autocratic leaders seek to delegitimize them as an attempt to impose liberal Western values and to take revenge for restrictive migration or family policies (Wunsch and Chiru 2023). Framing might be particularly relevant for public opinion in such a setting, where sanctions are not triggered by a clearly identifiable event (as the annexation of Crimea by Russia, Frye 2019), but rather respond to a continuous process of democratic decline.

Endorsement cues

Generally speaking, the term cue refers to a piece of information which is used to make a decision or evaluation without further in-depth knowledge (Eagly and Chaiken 1993). Our focus here is on one of the most common type of cues, namely information about who supports or opposes international sanctions. These are typically referred to as “source cues” (Dür and Schlipphak 2021: 43) or “endorsement cues” (Druckman et al. 2010: 137), when the information includes a favorable actor position towards the political object of interest. The basic idea is that, rather than investing in gaining an in-depth understanding of a political issue themselves, citizens may use the information about which actors support or oppose the respective issue as a shortcut and align their own opinion accordingly. Depending on the reputation of the source of an endorsement, thus, citizens become more likely to evaluate a political issue positively. Conversely, if an endorsement cue stems from an actor enjoying low levels of trust and reputation, the opposite effect might occur and citizens evaluate the matter more negatively (Aaroe 2012).

A variety of actors can provide endorsement cues about international sanctions. Existing research lends some ex-ante plausibility to the expectation that these cues might matter for citizens’ evaluation of international sanctions. First, the position of *other states* has been found to matter for public opinion on the legitimacy of international action more generally (Gray and Hicks 2014; Johns and Davies 2014; Spilker et al. 2018). When adopting sanctions against the member of an international organization, the other governments may hide behind the decision of the international organization or support that decision more or less unitedly in public. No or mixed signals from other governments might undermine the perception that the adoption of sanctions was impartial and compelling and, thus, support the targeted governments’ repudiation of illegitimate outside interference. In contrast, unified backing by other governments is likely to strengthen the acceptance of sanctions, even more so if the other governments are considered traditional allies of the targeted country (#References).

Secondly, turning to the domestic level, *opposition parties* may or may not support international sanctions and attribute blame to the targeted government. If opposition parties endorse international sanctions, they undermine the targeted governments’ efforts to depict sanctions as an attack on the entire nation. Conversely, opposition parties may rather be concerned about their own reputation and refrain from endorsing international sanctions or even reject them in order not to be branded as traitors to the national interest (Wonka et al. 2023). Depending on whether opposition parties support or reject international sanctions,

citizens are likely to be cued towards increased or decreased sanction acceptance.

Thirdly, domestic *civil society organizations* may also signal their endorsement of international sanctions. Compared to government and opposition parties, civil society actors often enjoy greater levels of public trust (#Reference), which should make their endorsement of international sanctions particularly relevant for citizens without strong partisan affiliations. For example, Schlipphak et al. (2022) found civil society actors and experts to moderate the effect of governmental blame-shifting strategies in the EU.

A variety of actors could, thus, possibly influence the public acceptance of international sanctions by communicating their support (or opposition). Furthermore, if such endorsement cues matter, their effect is likely to vary between social subgroups in at least two regards. First, not all citizens are equally likely to rely on information shortcuts instead of more detailed knowledge to form their political opinion. The sensitivity to cues should be greater for individuals with lower levels of education and interest in politics (Bechtel et al. 2017: 870). Secondly, whether an endorsement cue is likely to have a positive or negative effect, depends on citizens' prior beliefs about the trustworthiness of the source.

In sum, understanding what explains the domestic acceptance (or rejection) of international sanctions is crucial for the broader debate on sanction effectiveness. Whereas most existing research in the field analyzes how the acceptance of sanctions may be influenced by their design, such as their targetedness and procedural legitimacy, our focus here is on how and by whom international sanctions are communicated. We expect systematic differences as to the acceptance of international sanctions depending on i) whether they are framed in a way that resonates with broadly shared norms, and on ii) whether they are supported by a variety of political actors, thereby providing endorsement cues for citizens.

Research design and method

We test our theoretical expectations using a conjoint experiment in two EU member countries: Hungary and Poland. We rely on a conjoint experiment because presenting the communication of sanctions in form of a sanction package (i.e., a conjoint experiment), we are able to accommodate the multitude of factors important for communicating sanctions without overburdening the cognitive abilities of respondents. Furthermore and in addition to dealing with the multi-dimensionality of sanction communication, using conjoint analysis allows us to estimate the causal effect of each of the different attributes of sanction communication, the so-called average marginal component effect (Hainmueller et al. 2014). We therefore consider the

use of conjoint experiments the ideal combination of incorporating all relevant dimensions affecting sanction communication in a way that is easy to grasp for the average citizen while allowing for causal identification.

Case selection

We decided to conduct our experiment in two EU member countries: Hungary, and Poland. The reason for including Poland and Hungary is that these countries are typically considered “as paradigmatic cases of democratic backsliding” (Bakke and Sitter 2020: 22) in the EU. Since 2010 in the case of Hungary and since 2015 in Poland, governments in both countries have been accused of systematically removing political checks and balances, restricting opposition parties, judicial independence, media freedom, civil society organizations and, thus, of violating the EU’s fundamental values. These developments have led to various EU counter-measures, which have long been criticized for their strong reliance on soft dialogue rather than enforcement (Kelemen 2022). In 2020, however, EU governments agreed – against the resistance of Hungary and Poland – to introduce a new sanctioning instrument, the conditionality regulation, according to which EU member states may lose funding in case of rule of law violations.³ On this basis, EU governments agreed to freeze €6.3bn of regional funding for Hungary in December 2022. In addition, other funds were also withheld for Poland even though on a different legal basis (Detre et al. 2023). This implies that by choosing Hungary and Poland, we cover the one existing target of the conditionality regulation (Hungary) as well as a potential case (Poland).

In each country, 2,000 respondents, age 18 to 64, took part in our online survey representative with regard to age, gender and region. The survey was conducted in March 2023 via the survey company Dynata.

Conjoint Experiment

Our conjoint experiment consisted of six attributes, each containing three attribute levels, which varied according to the different communication features of economic sanctions discussed in our theoretical framework. We opted for a fully randomized conjoint design, which means that all attributes and their levels varied throughout the experiment to avoid attribute order effects

³ From a formal-legal perspective, the conditionality regulation does not “sanction” EU member states for rule of law violations, but it “protects” the EU budget against misuse (Detre et al. 2023: 8). This legal construction was necessary to ensure broad agreement and legal compatibility with EU Treaties, but from a political perspective (and also in terms of public perception) it nevertheless qualifies as a sanctioning instrument.

(Bansak et al. 2021, Hainmueller et al. 2014). Each respondent conducted five conjoint tasks, thus evaluating ten sanction communication profiles in total.⁴

Table 1 outlines our conjoint experiment by showing all attributes and the corresponding attribute levels. To ensure that respondents could meaningfully evaluate the different sanction profiles, we not only provided our respondents with the tabular overview of our conjoint task, as shown in Table 1, but also gave them the following background information on the instructions page:

The European Union (EU) is based on shared values such as human rights, democracy and the rule of law, which all member states agreed to respect when they joined the EU. At present, however, the EU is accusing the [Your Country's] government of violating the EU's fundamental values and may soon adopt sanctions as a result.

On the next pages, we will show you pairs of scenarios under which [Your Country] might be sanctioned by the EU. These scenarios differ in various regards:

1. What is the [Your government] accused of? On what basis?
2. How big are the proposed sanctions?
3. To what extent do other EU governments support these sanctions?
4. What is the position of [National] opposition parties on these sanctions?
5. What rights does the [Your government] have in this process?

Since the current stage of implementation of the conditionality regulation was not the same in Poland and Hungary, we had to make some changes for the Hungarian case. In the case of Hungary, the Commission had already proposed financial sanctions when the experiment was fielded. This means that our experiment remained hypothetical in Poland, but partly corresponded to reality in Hungary. Thus, the Hungarian version of the experiment acknowledges this difference. First, we informed our Hungarian respondents about the actual situation and then asked them how strongly they supported or opposed the proposed sanctions (i.e., cutting €6.3 billion from the Cohesion Fund). We then moved on to the same hypothetical scenarios as for Poland, as displayed in Table 1.

⁴ The experiment was pre-registered at: <https://osf.io/3jpn6>

Table 1: Conjoint Experiment Task

	Attribute	Attribute levels	Theory
1	[Your] government is accused of	1. misusing money from the EU budget. 2. undermining the independence of the judiciary. 3. discriminating against the LGBTQI community.	Framing
2	EU member state governments	1. support the sanctions with a qualified majority (15 out of 27) 2. support the sanctions with a large majority (20 out of 27) 3. support the sanctions with a supermajority (25 out of 27)	Cueing
3	Domestic opposition parties	1. support [Your] government against EU sanctions 2. support EU sanctions against [Your] government 3. are divided on the issue	
4	EU accusations are based on	1. complaints by civil society groups [in your country] 2. an annual report on all EU member states by the EU Commission 3. a country report on [your country] by the EU Commission	
5	[Your] government	1. will have a chance to justify its position before sanctions are adopted. 2. will have a chance to appeal EU sanctions in the European Court of Justice. 3. does not have a vote in the adoption of the sanction.	Targetedness
6	EU funding shall be	1. suspended for projects, which misused EU money in the past. 2. reduced by 50% as long as violations of EU values persist. 3. suspended fully as long as violations of EU values persist.	

When designing our conjoint experiment, we intended to keep the experiment as close as possible to reality while covering all our theoretically relevant factors. This implied that we had to make some compromises in terms of combining certain theoretically relevant aspects under different attributes. More precisely, we decided to incorporate one of the cueing aspects together with some of the procedural characteristics in order to make it a realistic part of sanction communication.

The first attribute listed in Table 1 covers the framing aspect of sanction communication and varies between the misuse of EU money, undermining rule of law and discriminating the LGBTQI community. Based on our theoretical argument above, we expect respondents to be more likely to support sanctions framed according to more broadly shared norms, such as the rule of law, in contrast to sanctions framed according to more narrowly framed norms, such as discrimination of members of the LGBTQI community.

The second and third attributes as well as the first level of attribute 4 all refer to different source cues of the sanctions. While the first attribute indicates how many of the other EU member states support the sanctions, the second attribute concerns the domestic opposition. As written above, the fourth attribute combines a source cue with two procedural design aspects. We decided to formulate it this way in order to keep the sanction scenarios as realistic as possible. Therefore, this fourth attribute indicates how the sanction process came about and

the attribute level “complaints by civil society groups” covers our last endorsement cue.

The other two attribute levels, “annual report on all countries” versus “special report on the respective country,” intend to differentiate between a regular, standardized procedure versus a more ad-hoc special investigation and thus cover one of two important procedural elements. The second procedural element is included in attribute 5, in which we vary the type of response allowed by the targeted government.

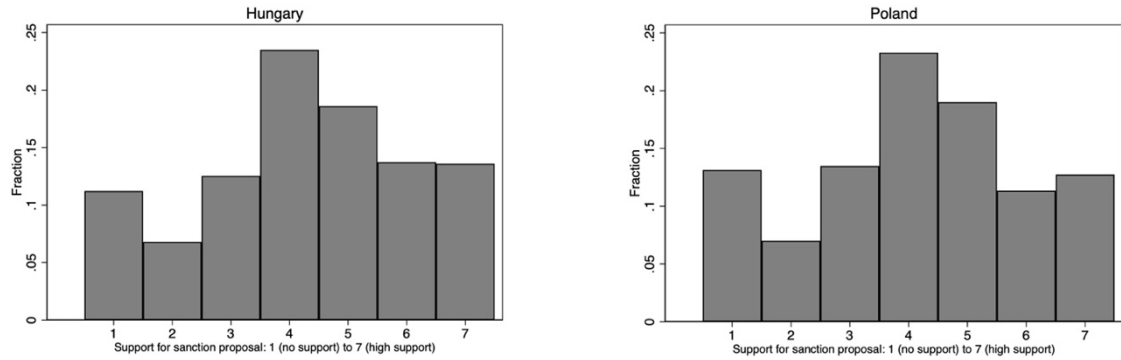
Finally, attribute 6 shows three levels of targetedness, reaching from targeted sanctions (“suspension of projects”) to a medium-level of targetedness (“50% reduction of funds”) to universal coverage (“full suspension”).

After each conjoint task, we asked respondents to a) choose between the two scenario profiles presented to them (forced choice) and b) to rate each scenario profile on a 7-point scale to indicate how strongly they would oppose or support EU financial sanctions in each scenario.

Empirical analysis

Before going into detail, concerning the effect of the different attributes of sanctions communication, Figure 1 shows the distribution of the general support for the different sanction packages in our conjoint analysis. Different to what pessimists concerning sanctions might expect, the general public in all three countries does not univocally reject sanctions. Rather the majority of citizens perceive the proposed sanction packages as neither very positive nor very negative, as the median response is the middle category 4. There is, however, also a substantive number of respondents who support the different sanction packages, i.e., who rate the proposals with a 5 or higher. This ranges from 43% in Poland to even 46% in Hungary. These descriptive findings are therefore a first indication that there seems to be some room for communicating sanctions.

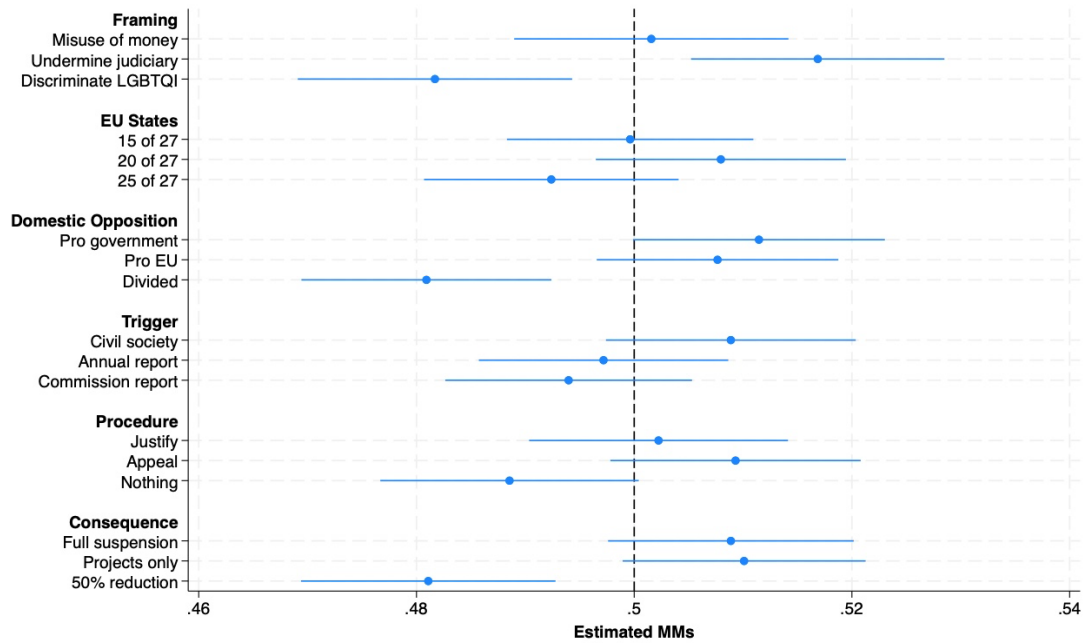
Figure 1: Support for sanction communication using rating variable



Moving on to the inferential findings from the conjoint analyses, Figures 2 and 3 display the general results for each country. The graphs show marginal means for each attribute level. Marginal means above 0.5 imply that a sanction package with this specific attribute level is more likely to be chosen and a profile with a marginal mean below 0.5 is less likely to be chosen compared to the other levels of this attribute. We show plots relying on Average Marginal Component Effects (AMCEs) in the Appendix.

The results in Figures 2 and 3 show one very consistent finding across both countries pertaining to the framing of sanctions. Respondents are significantly more likely to support sanctions if they are framed according to the rule of law (undermining the judiciary) in contrast to either misuse of EU money or discrimination of members of the LGBTQI community. This finding is line with previous literature that shows that sanctions are perceived as more legitimate if they pertain to broad instead of more narrow values (Sejersen 2021: 2).

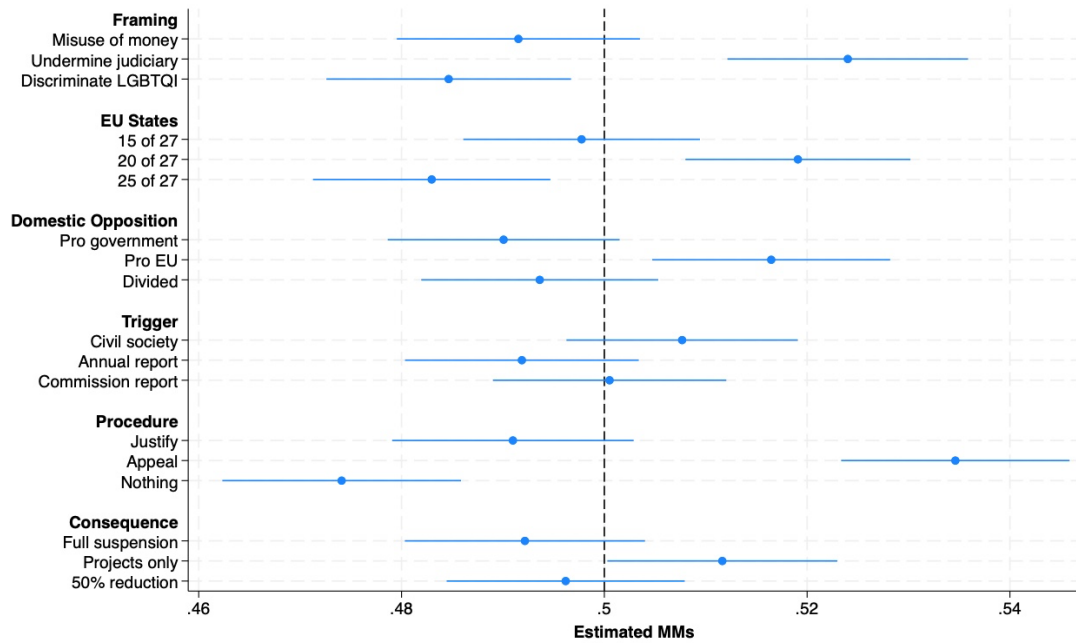
Figure 2: Results Hungary – Marginal Means



Turning to the cueing effects, we observe some similarities but also some differences between the two countries. Similar, but different to what we have argued above, respondents in both countries react most positively to the cue of 20 out of 27 EU member states. We argued above that the support of more in contrast to less EU countries should signal that the adoption process was impartial and compelling. While we do see that the difference from 15 out of 27 in contrast to 20 out of 27 indeed seems to be perceived positively, this is not the case for the category 25 out of 27, which is the least preferred option in both countries. One potential explanation for this finding could be that respondents took this cue not as a heuristic of the sanction process being impartial and compelling but rather of their country being cornered.

With regard to the cue on opposition parties, we see some differences in the two countries. While respondents in Poland react most strongly (and positively) to the cue on domestic opposition parties voicing their support for EU sanctions, it is the cue of a divided opposition that has most strength in the case of Hungary. Respondents evaluate sanction packages on which the opposition is divided as least supportive. The final endorsement cue, the cue on civil society, works similar again in both countries. Hungarian and Polish respondents are more likely to support sanction packages that have been triggered by a civil society report compared to either an annual report or a report by the EU Commission.

Figure 3: Results Poland – Marginal Means



Moving on to the procedural elements, we can observe that they do not seem to matter much in case of Hungary, yet somewhat in the case of Poland. More precisely, in both countries it does not change people’s perception of the sanctions whether they were initiated by a regular annual country level report or a special, more targeted Commission report. What does matter, at least in the case of Poland, is whether the country has the right to appeal the decision or not.

Finally, there is some, albeit weak, support for the targetedness argument. In Poland, the most preferred sanctions package is indeed the most targeted one, therefore, supporting the targetedness argument. Relative to full suspension case, targeted sanctions such as suspension of funding only to projects involved in corruption cases, generates positive but statistically insignificant effects among both Polish and Hungarian respondents. On the other hand, medium targeted sanctions (50% reduction of EU funding) is negatively perceived by both Polish and Hungarian respondents. Although, this effect is statistically significant only among Hungarian respondents.

Sub-group analysis

In the following, we turn from the general to more specific results and show sub-group differences by both partisanship and education. This is in line with our theoretical framework above in which we have argued that for both, strong supporters of the respective government

and highly educated individuals, we might not see strong variation in our experiment. However, the reasons for these expectations are different: In case of government supporters, we argued that those individuals are strongly in line with their government and thus should dislike any type of sanction packages. In case of the highly educated, we expect to find some difference with regard to the procedural elements of the sanction package, however, we should not find (or only very limited) variation in terms of cueing since these individuals should not need to rely on mental shortcuts.

Figures 4 and 5 show the respective results if we distinguish by partisanship. Several results seem noteworthy. With regard to framing, government supporters in Poland distinguish mainly between misuse of money, which they see as the best of all bad frames, while respondents aligning with the opposition react most positively to undermining the judiciary. This difference is not as pronounced in Hungary, however. Another sub-group difference exists with regard to the domestic opposition cue, which seem to mainly matter for the opposition or for the non-aligned respondents but not so much for government supporters. Overall, however, it does not seem to be the case that respondents react less distinct when they are clear partisans. Rather individuals seem to have clear and differentiated opinions with regard to the different sanction patters, suggesting again that there is indeed room for designing and especially communicating sanctions.

Figure 4: Results by Partisanship: Hungary

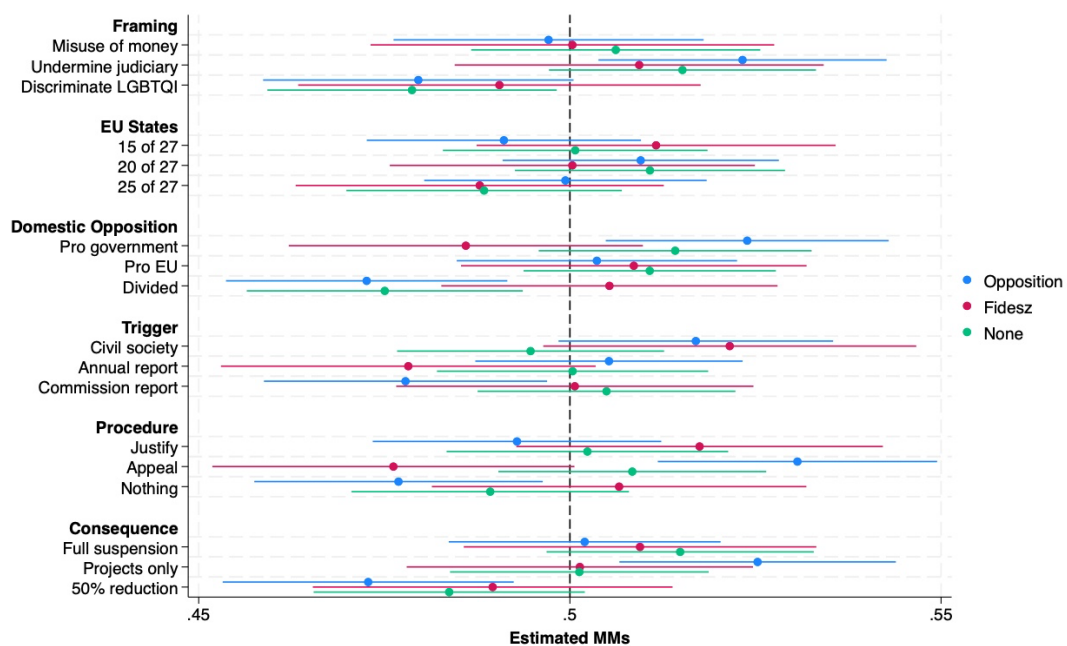
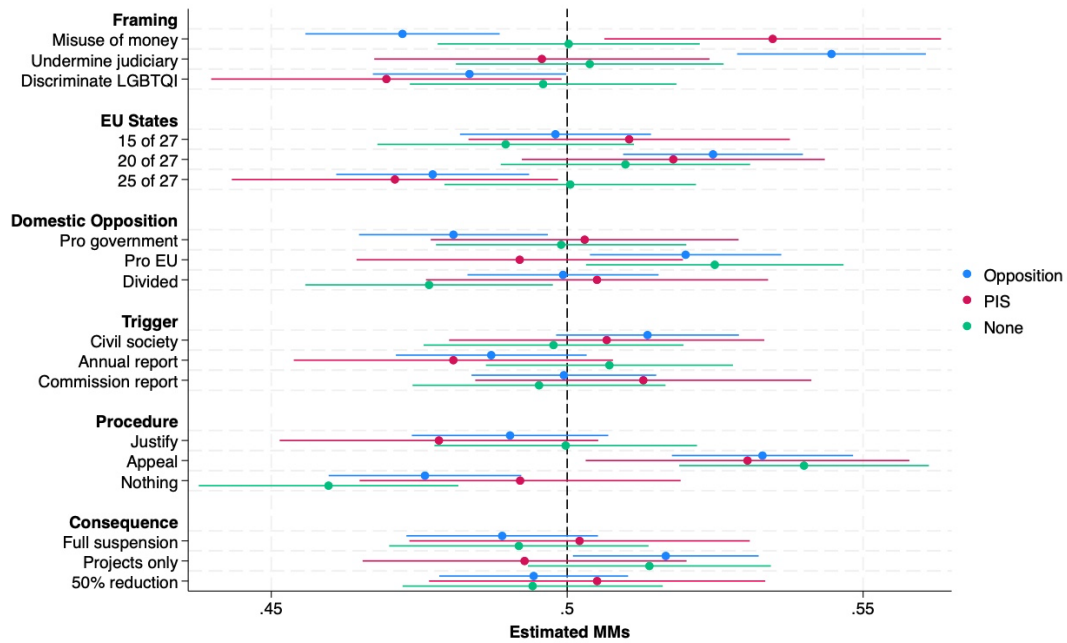


Figure 5: Results by Partisanship: Poland



Potentially even more interesting, Table 2 shows the percentage of individuals blaming the EU, the government or both for the sanctions; a question we asked directly after our conjoint experiment. We show the results by partisanship, which seems to matter strongly for respondents' perception. In particular, individuals who self-identify either with the opposition or are not aligned with either government or opposition are much more likely to put blame on their government while respondents aligned with the government put most blame on the EU. However, the latter group is much less clear in their pattern compared to the opposition group.

Table 2: Who is to blame for sanctions by partisanship

Supporter of	Who is to blame? Hungary	Who is to blame? Poland
Opposition	13% EU 62% Own Government 21% Both 4% Don't know	10% EU 71% Own Government 15% Both 4% Don't know
Government	56% EU 10% Own Government 28% Both 6% Don't know	56% EU 12% Own Government 22% Both 10% Don't know
Not aligned	8% EU 54% Own Government 27% Both 11% Don't know	11% EU 47% Own Government 23% Both 18% Don't know

Turning to education, Figures 6 and 7, we observe few differences between those with high and low levels of education. Overall, it seems that while in Hungary there is no systematic pattern of either low or high educated individuals reacting more strongly to the sanction profiles, it is mainly the more highly educated individuals in Poland that react more pronounced.

Figure 6: Results by Education: Hungary

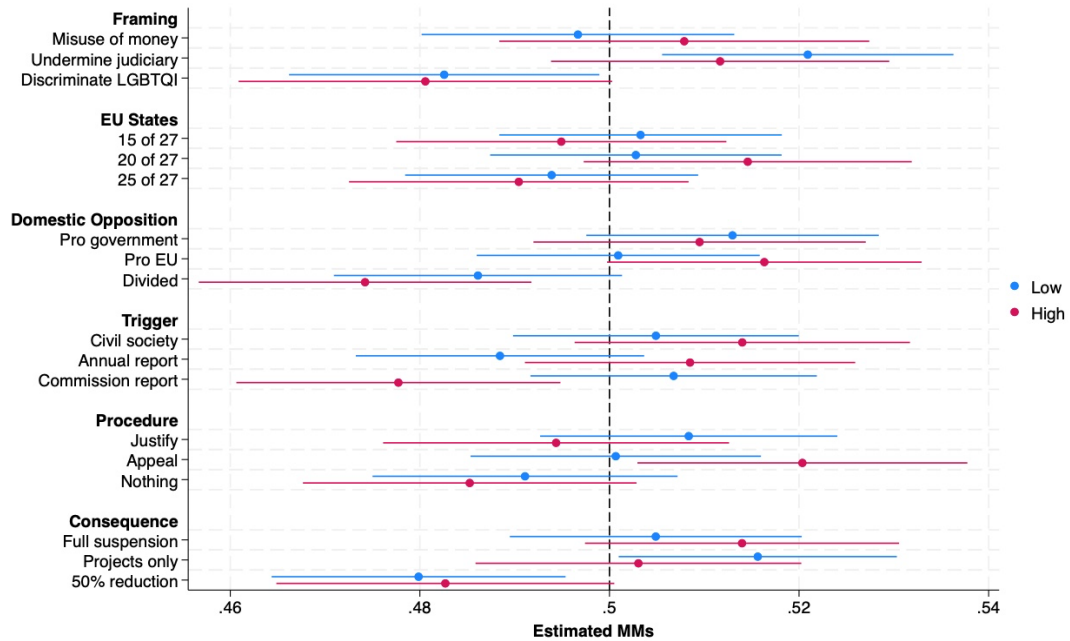
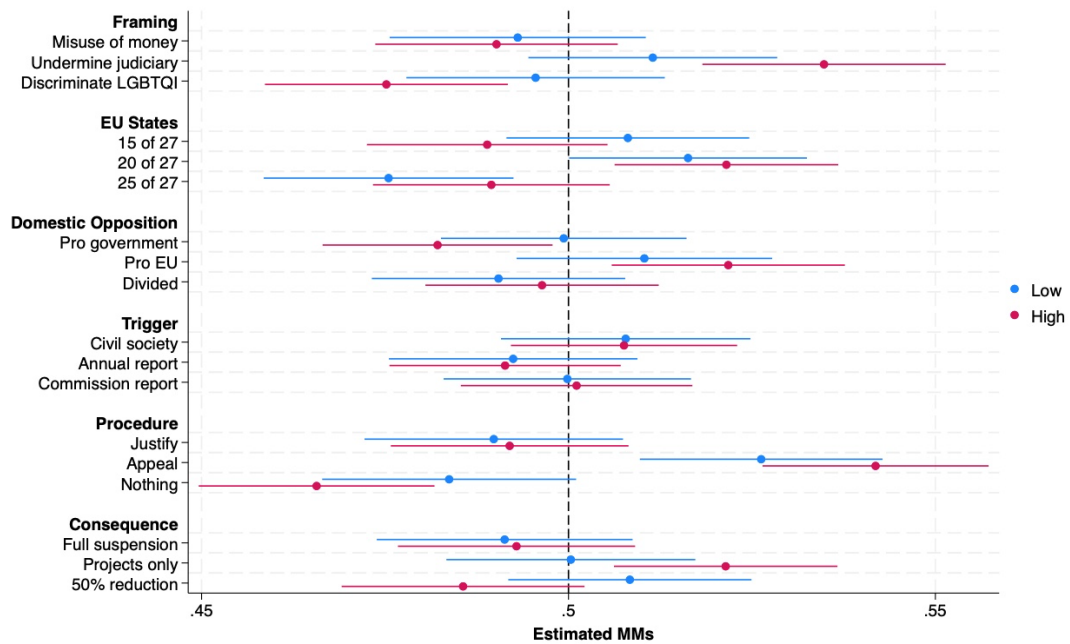


Figure 6: Results by Education: Poland



The Appendix shows several additional sub-group effects, in particular in terms of gender, age, income and urbanization. Overall, only few sub-group effects seem noteworthy. One is that in both Poland and Hungary, men and older people tend to react more strongly to both the framing of sanctions and the domestic opposition cue. Also, people living in urban areas tend to react more pronounced to various aspects of our experiment compared to respondents in more rural areas.

The case of Bulgaria

In order to investigate how much the perception of sanction communication is dependent on the actual sanction context and pre-existing knowledge, we decided to include Bulgaria as a third potential target of EU sanctions. While citizens in Hungary and Poland have been exposed to a lot of communication on EU sanctions already, this is not the case for citizens in Bulgaria. At the same time, Bulgaria is similar to Poland and Hungary in terms of rule of law and democratic deficits. With regard to the question of the state of the liberal democracy in Bulgaria, the V-dem 2022 Liberal Democracy Index (LDI) indicates that Bulgaria scores 56, the third lowest in the EU, just behind Hungary and Poland (Boese et al. 2022). In addition, the Commission's 2022 RoL report highlights growing concerns about the functioning of the Supreme Judicial Council and problems with the handling of high-level anti-corruption cases (European Commission 2022a). Meanwhile, the Commission's new media pluralism ranking places Bulgaria in the third highest risk area for media pluralism in the EU, just behind Poland and Hungary (Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom 2022). When it comes to the protection of fundamental rights, growing concerns about the rights of the LGBTIQ community found their place in the EP's 2020 report on RoL and fundamental rights in Bulgaria.

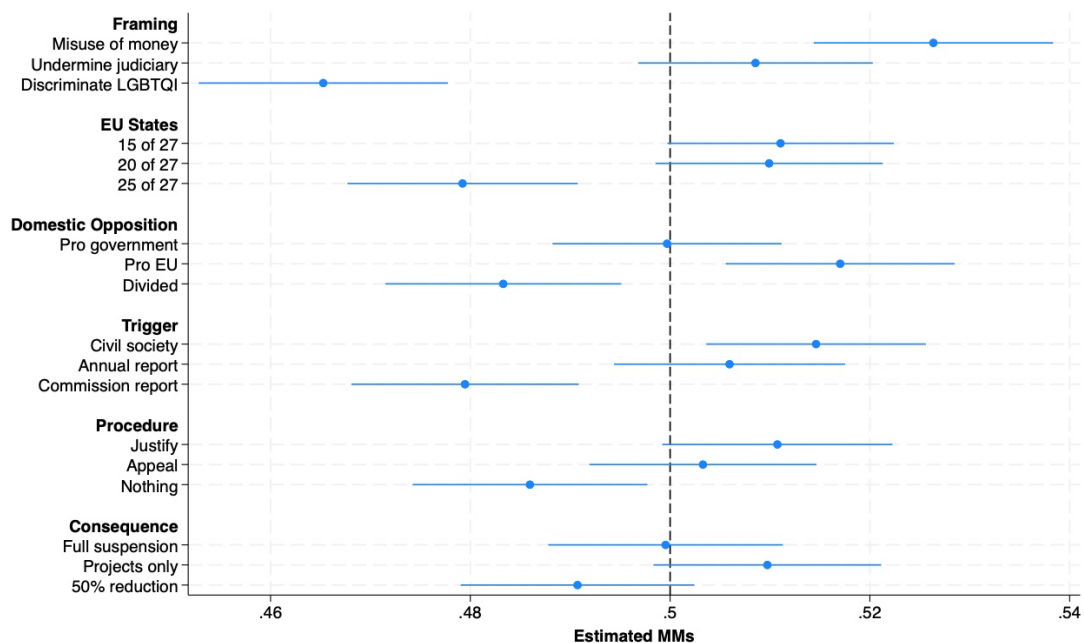
The RoL situation in Bulgaria is seen as worrying not only at EU level, but also in the eyes of the Bulgarian public. The 2019 Special RoL Eurobarometer shows that the perception of citizens in Bulgaria that the principles of RoL need improvement is the fourth highest in the EU after Cyprus, Portugal and Greece (European Commission 2019). Looking at Flash Eurobarometer 503 on the public's perception of the independence of national judicial systems in the EU, 56% of respondents in Bulgaria consider their judicial system to be 'fairly bad' or 'very bad' in terms of the independence of courts and judges (European Commission 2022b).

We, therefore, believe that Bulgaria would be well 'qualified' to become a target of the conditionality regulation by the EU. At the same time, Bulgaria differs from the other two cases in the sense that although the conditions are ripe for the adoption of the conditionality

regulation, the discussions on the use of the regulation against Bulgaria are not yet widespread at the EU level. Therefore, we do not expect Bulgarian public opinion to be politicized around the issue yet.

We run the exact same conjoint analysis as we did in Poland also in Bulgaria and at the exact same point in time. Figure 7 displays the corresponding results. Interestingly, while the results on cueing are almost identical to our findings in Hungary and Poland, the procedural design elements of sanctions do not really seem to matter and the finding on framing is very different. More precisely, it seems that respondents in Bulgaria are most positive about sanctions framed along the misuse of EU money. While similarly to Poland and Hungary, respondents in Bulgaria dislike sanctions framed along discrimination issues the least, they do not support sanctions due to rule of law issues the most. This might have to do with respondents not having been subject to such intense public discussions about the issue as compared to Hungary and Poland, for which the rule of law issue is clearly the most important one.

Figure 7: Results Bulgaria – Marginal Means



Conclusion

Although we see variations in respondents' preferences for different sanctions packages, the overall picture suggests that the specific design of sanctions, as well as the way they are communicated, influence public acceptance of sanctions. In other words, we see that public

opinion is not really polarized between outright rejection or unambiguous acceptance of sanctions, but is rather spread out on a support scale, i.e. there is some scope for public opinion to be influenced by different design and communication features of international sanctions. This suggests that sanctions do not necessarily backfire and they can lead to public acceptance when designed and communicated properly. Overall, a significant number of our respondents express support for EU sanctions.

The impact of these different features varies somewhat between our Polish and Hungarian respondents, although there are similarities between the countries. In particular, we find that framing sanctions in terms of protecting the rule of law (targeting judicial overhaul in a member state) increases public support for EU sanctions against member states. However, this effect stands out in Poland and Hungary, where public opinion is likely primed by extensive debates on the rule of law issue, but not in our test case, Bulgaria, where this issue is not yet prominent in public debates.

On the other hand, cues from both internal and external actors also seem to influence public reactions to sanctions. Externally, vocal support from other EU member states for EU sanctions has a positive effect on respondents' perception of these sanctions and their ultimate support. However, it seems that unanimity also comes with some costs, i.e. supermajority support from external actors leads to a negative assessment of sanctions among our respondents, probably because of its potential 'cornering' effect. On the other hand, the positions of domestic actors other than the national government, i.e. opposition parties, also seem to influence public perceptions of sanctions. Here, while responses do indeed appear to be clearly aligned with party affiliation, sanction characteristics seem to matter most to non-aligned respondents.

In line with existing research, we find that the process by which sanctions are imposed is also important for public perceptions of sanctions. Specifically, respondents are significantly more supportive of sanctions packages that are based on more equal than targeted treatment of a sanctioned member state, and in which the targeted member state has procedural guarantees not only to voice its concerns but also to legally challenge these sanctions if necessary. Finally, different levels of targeting of sanctions also lead to different levels of support for sanctions among our respondents. Overall, the most targeted sanctions are indeed the most preferred by our respondents. At the same time, we do not find evidence to support the argument that vulnerability to the negative effects of sanctions should lead to differential responses between social groups. In other words, targeting does not have a pronounced effect

between respondents who live in rural areas or those who are less well off, who could potentially perceive themselves as more vulnerable to sanctions.

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Appendix

Figure A.1: AMCE Hungary

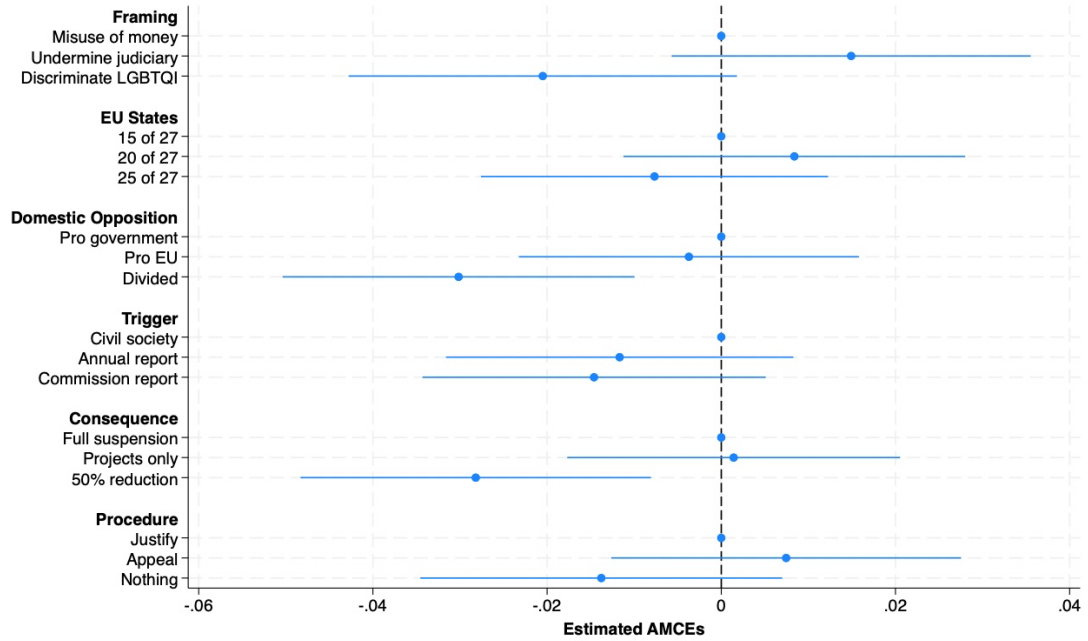


Figure A.2: AMCE Poland

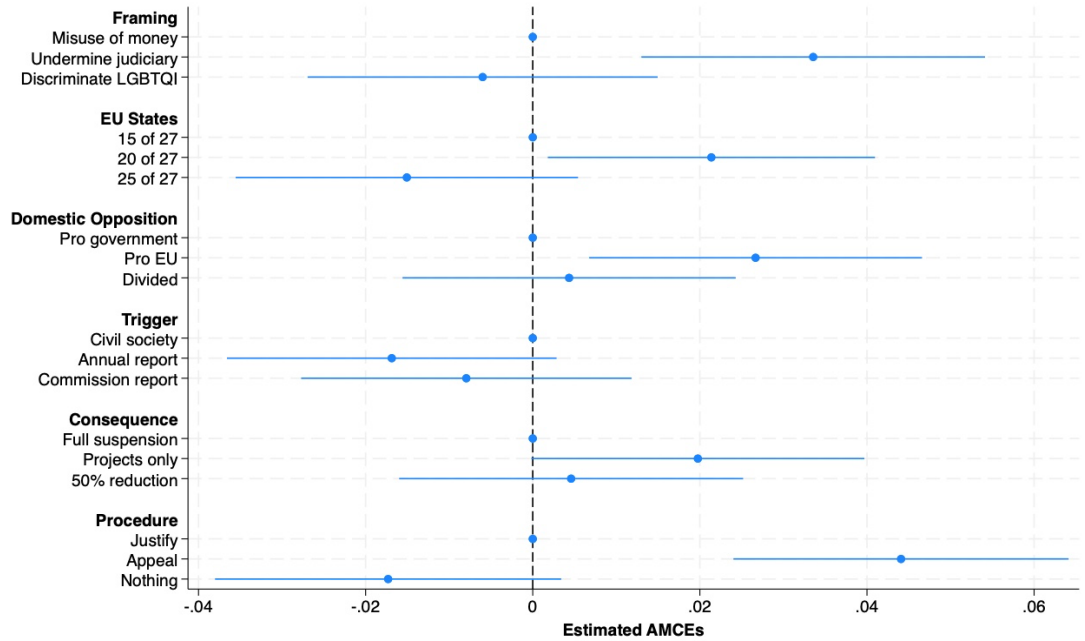


Figure A.3 Hungary Gender

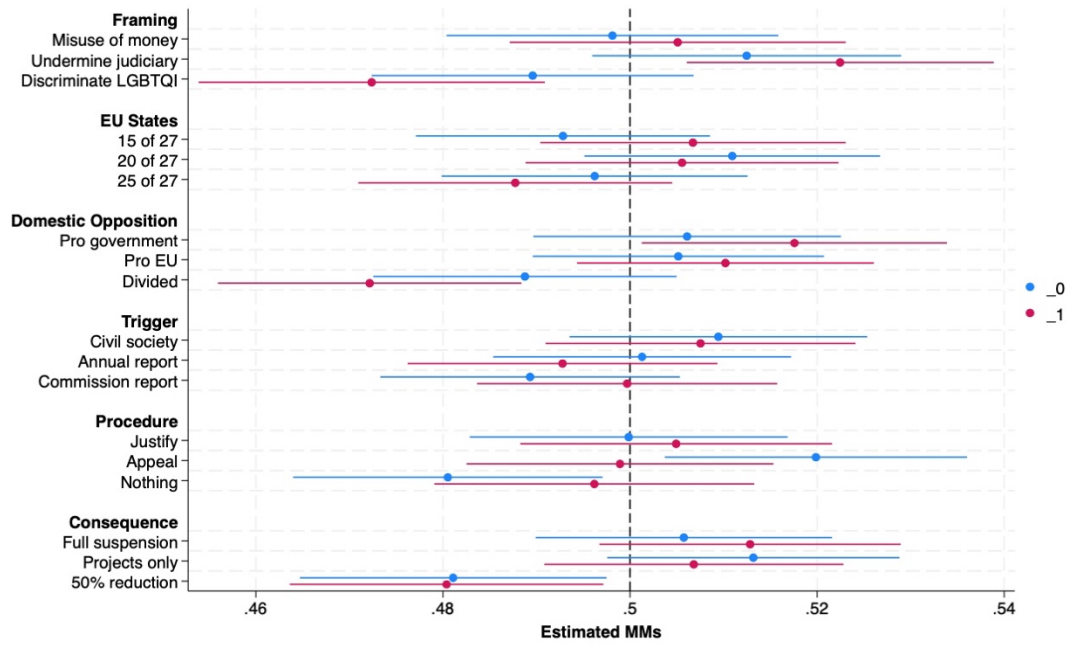


Figure A.4 Poland Gender

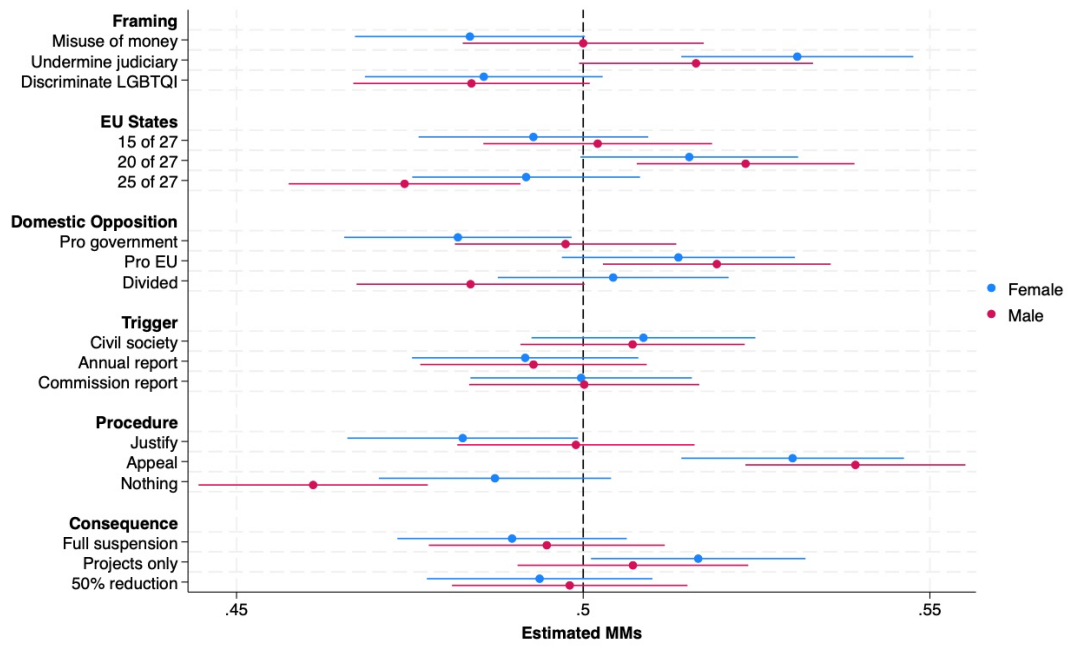


Figure A.5 Hungary Age

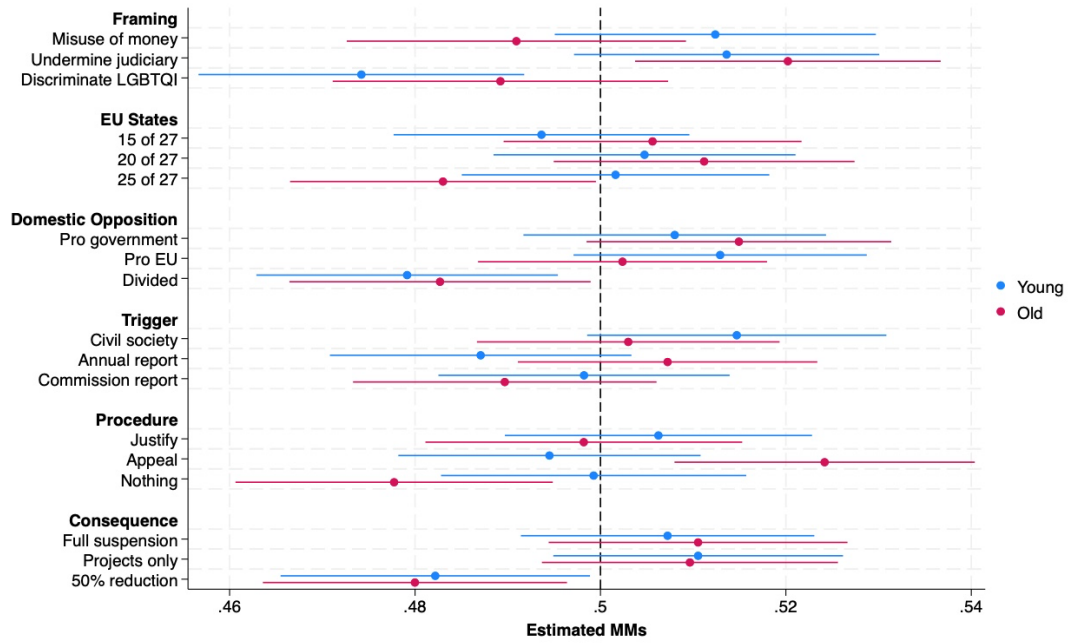


Figure A.6 Poland Age

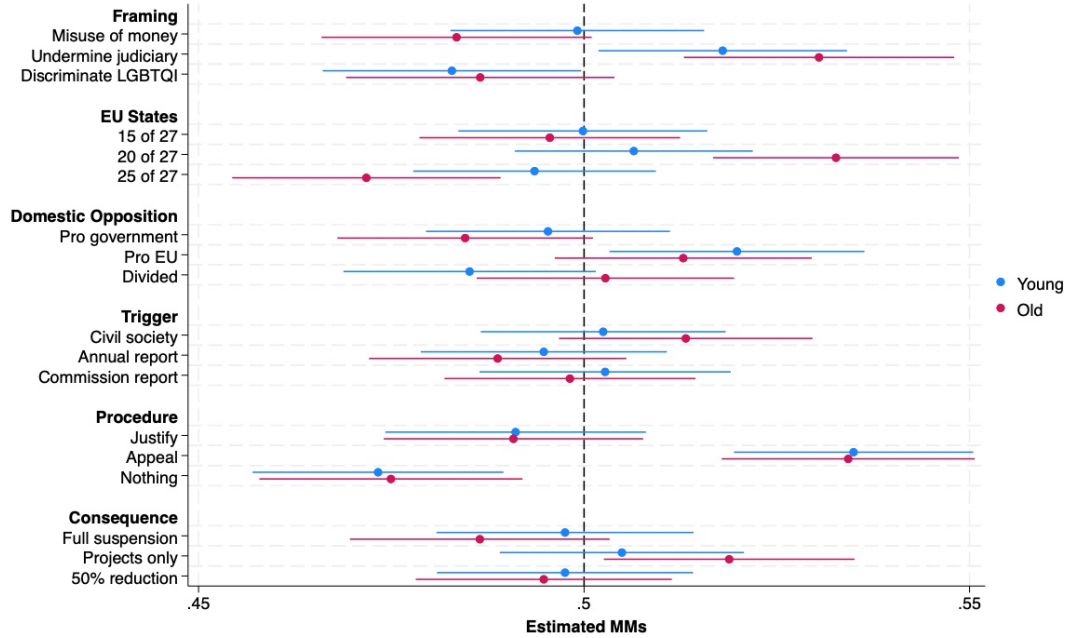


Figure A.7 Hungary Rural vs. Urban

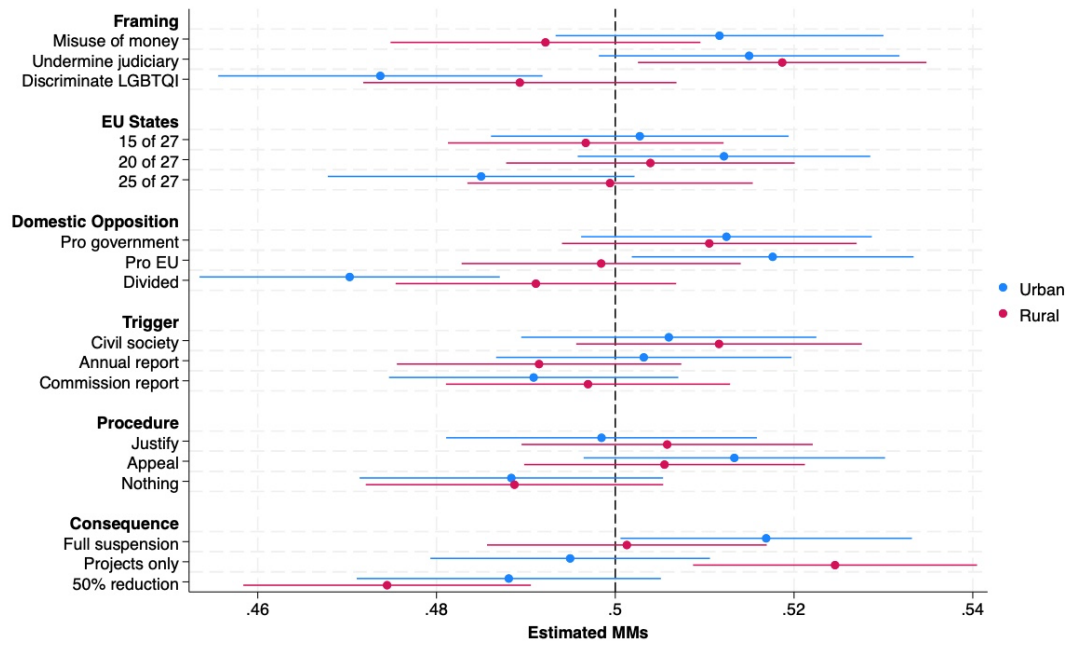


Figure A.8 Poland Rural vs. Urban

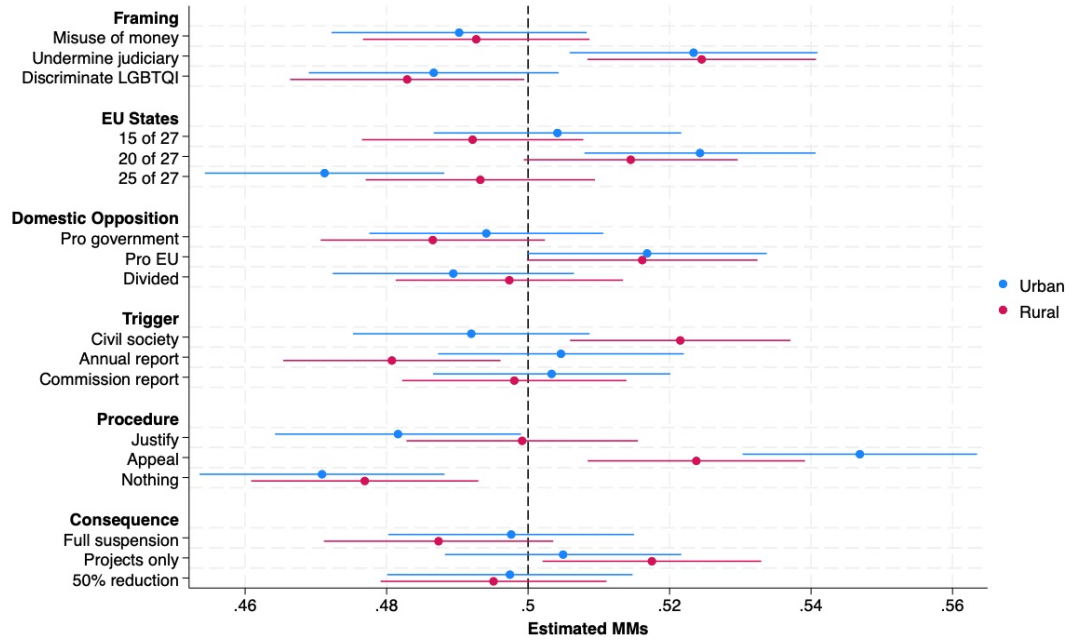


Figure A.9 Hungary Income

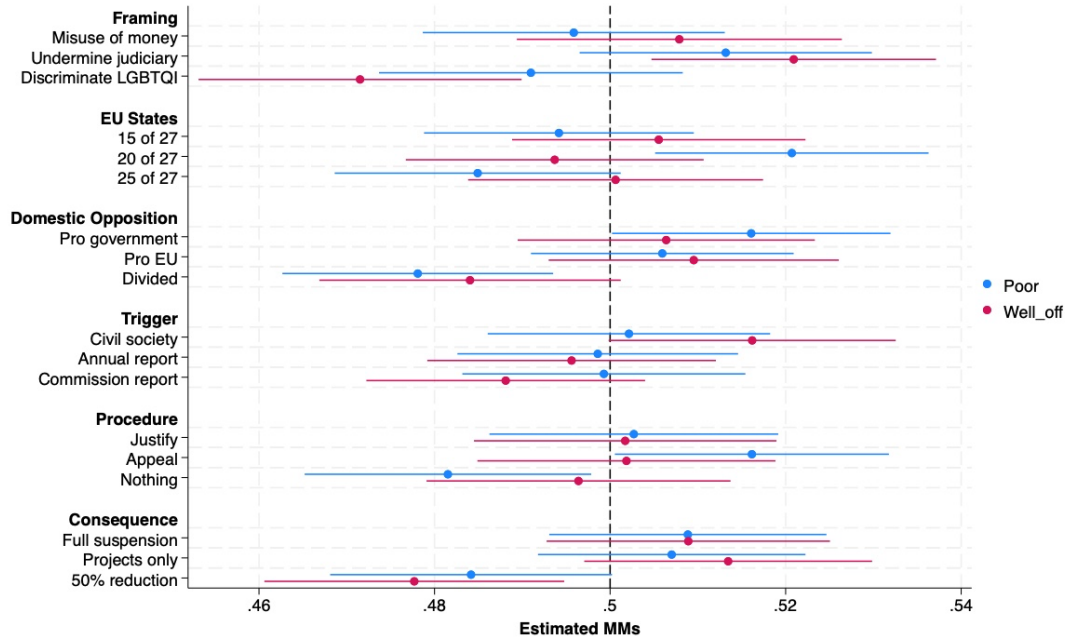


Figure A.10 Poland Income

