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(DIS)TRUSTING NATO? PERCEPTIONS OF YOUTH IN ROMANIA AND TÜRKIYE AMID THE WAR IN UKRAINE

ABSTRACT: *The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has profoundly affected global security and international relations, particularly influencing perceptions of trust in institutions such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). This study investigates the level of (dis)trust in NATO among citizens, especially youth, in Romania and Türkiye—two strategic NATO member states—within the context of the evolving geopolitical landscape. Romania, with its border shared with Ukraine, and Türkiye, with its historically complex relationship with the Alliance, provide unique case studies for understanding public sentiment towards NATO amidst Russia's aggression. The research methodology integrates a dual approach, thus the qualitative component will involve a theoretical framework and a comparative analysis, examining data from the Eurobarometer reports and other surveys to assess changes before and after the invasion of Ukraine, while the quantitative component consists of a questionnaire administered to students from Romania and Türkiye across various fields of study, including international relations, diplomacy, political science, history, economics, languages, and engineering. The findings highlight the intricate and multifaceted nature of trust in international organizations, particularly during times of conflict. They underscore how trust can be influenced by shifting geopolitical dynamics and varying national contexts.*

KEYWORDS: NATO; war in Ukraine; youth; Türkiye, Romania.

1. Introduction and Research Questions. Methodological Framework

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has had significant implications for various aspects of international relations and the security architecture, including trust in and perceptions of institutions like the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). In two strategic NATO member states, Romania and Türkiye, shifts have occurred in both political discourse and civil society regarding the Alliance's overall response and level of involvement in the ongoing conflict.

The main research question guiding this study is: *How do Romanian and Turkish citizens, particularly youth, perceive NATO and their sense of security in light of the evolving geopolitical landscape shaped by Russia's aggression in Ukraine?* Thus, this research aims to comprehensively examine levels of (dis)trust in

NATO and the sense of (in)security among citizens—especially youth—in Romania and Türkiye, within the context of the shifting geopolitical dynamics created by Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Romania and Türkiye were chosen for this research due to their unique and strategically significant positions within NATO; Romania, with its border shared with Ukraine, holds a strong stake in NATO's defensive posture, and Türkiye, with its historically complex relationship with the Alliance, as well as strategic interactions with Russia, provide unique case studies for understanding public sentiment towards NATO amidst Russia's aggression.

Russia's unprovoked war of aggression in Ukraine has greatly impacted global security and heightened regional security concerns, especially for countries with historical ties to Russia or those in close proximity to the conflict zones. In the case of Romania, which has been an Alliance member since 2004, citizens' trust has heavily relied on NATO, widely perceived as a crucial security guarantor. Türkiye's membership in the Alliance dates back to NATO's first expansion in 1952, shortly after the collective defence organization was established in 1949 amidst the geopolitical turmoil of the Cold War tensions. The role of Türkiye in NATO remained central and pivotal throughout the second half of the twentieth century, and most importantly it evolved and reoriented along with the very reshaping of the Alliance in the new paradigm of the post-Cold War period and the imperatives of the security challenges of the new millennium, from terrorism and asymmetric warfare to hybrid threats and non-conventional warfare.

Nevertheless, Türkiye's relationship with NATO remains complex, with public support and trust in the alliance fluctuating over time. Key events, such as the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Arab Spring, the failed coup attempt in 2016, the strengthening of Turkish-Russian relations, and most recently, the dynamics of Russia's aggression in Ukraine, have all highlighted and reinforced the multifaceted nature of this partnership.

The research methodology for this article employs a dual approach, combining qualitative and quantitative tools. The qualitative component will involve a theoretical framework and a comparative analysis, examining data from Eurobarometer reports and other surveys to assess changes before and after the invasion of Ukraine. The quantitative component will integrate a questionnaire administered to students from Romania and Türkiye across various fields of study, including international relations, diplomacy, political science, history, economics, languages, and engineering. Two groups of thirty students from each country participated, providing insights into the perceptions of youth within civil society.

2. Literature Review

Trust is undeniably a key concept that has been extensively examined by social and political theorists, spanning from the works of Locke and Tocqueville to those of Putnam and other civil society theorists (Newton 2001: 201).

Peter Nannestad (2008) highlighted the complexities surrounding the concept of trust, describing it as "a huge puzzle that is not even near solution" (Nannestad 2008: 432). Levi and Stoker (2000) explored the meaning of trust, defining it as relational—a "judgment that can be conceptualized dichotomously (one either trusts or distrusts) or in a more graded fashion (one trusts or distrusts to a degree)" (Levi and Stoker 2000: 476). Rathbun (2011) further conceptualized trust as "the belief that one will not be harmed when one's interests are placed in the hands of others" (Rathbun 2011: 246). Hollande and Wolton (2021) underscored the critical role of trust in political relations, stating that "trust is the very foundation of political relations. It is not possible to convince if there is no trust" (Hollande and Wolton 2021: 87).

Overwhelming research and relevant literature have examined political and social trust (*inter alia* Uslaner 2002, 2008, 2017; Newton and Zmerli 2011; Zmerli and van der Meer 2017; Vallier 2020), highlighting their distinctiveness, interconnectedness, and the complexities of their causes and consequences. Both social and political trust are fundamental to our societies. Social trust represents a *horizontal trust*, reflecting trust between citizens (*inter alia* Putnam 1993, 1995; Fukuyama 1995; Newton 2001) and it is exemplified by the "ability to trust people outside one's familiar or kinship circles" (Mattes & Moreno, 2018: 357) and is often considered a form of "bridging trust," which represents the "bond that people share across a society and across economic and ethnic groups, religions, and races" (Rothstein & Uslaner, 2005: 45). On the other hand, political trust represents a *vertical trust* and is generally understood as trust in political institutions (*inter alia* Rothstein 2000; van der Meer 2010; Newton and Zmerli 2011), more specifically referred to as trust towards "formal, legal organizations of government and state, as distinct from the current incumbents nested within those organizations" (Mattes & Moreno, 2018: 357).

Trust in international organizations, particularly in complex alliances like NATO, is a crucial factor influencing their effectiveness and legitimacy. Understanding the determinants of trust and the implications of trust dynamics on the Alliance's operations and member state relations is of utmost relevance. Crises, tensions, and security threats play significant roles in shaping political trust, often exerting a profound influence. Most studies suggest that conflict negatively impacts confidence levels and diminishes political trust (*inter alia* Hutchison and Johnson 2011; Grosjean 2014; Gates and Justesen 2020), however, a few studies indicate potential positive effects (*inter alia* Hong and Kang 2017; Child and Nikolova 2018). Despite this, the relationship between conflict and political trust, particularly trust in international organizations, remains

relatively underexplored.

In the context of the war in Ukraine, Economou and Kollias (2023) investigated how Russian aggression has affected EU27 citizens' trust in NATO, using data from two Eurobarometer surveys conducted prior to the invasion and several months afterward. Thus, the present research aims to continue this path of research and analyze citizens' trust in NATO within two member countries, Romania and Türkiye, through a comparative study using data from four Eurobarometer surveys (conducted between 2022 and 2024) along with Flash Eurobarometer 506 (2022), which assesses the EU's response to the war in Ukraine. Since Türkiye is not included in these Eurobarometer reports, data will be sourced from surveys conducted by Pew Research Center (2019 and 2024) and the German Marshall Fund of the United States (April 2022).

Additionally, this analysis will be further enriched with findings from a questionnaire conducted by the authors in May 2024 with students from two universities in Romania and Türkiye.

3. Türkiye and Romania membership in NATO. Challenges and Opportunities

This section of the article examines the historical context and current dynamics of NATO membership for both Türkiye and Romania; it analyzes each country's strategic role within NATO, focusing on the unique challenges they face as well as the opportunities that NATO membership provides in terms of security, influence, and international cooperation. By exploring these factors, this part sets the groundwork for understanding the public trust and the perception of security in each country, particularly in light of recent geopolitical tensions following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. This context serves to frame the comparative analysis that follows, investigating how citizens- especially youth—perceive NATO's role in ensuring national and regional stability.

Key Points about Türkiye's NATO Membership

Türkiye became one of the earliest members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1952, joining during the Alliance's first wave of enlargement. During the Cold War, marked by ideological tensions and the bipolar struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union, Türkiye's strategic location on NATO's southeastern flank and its substantial military contributions were invaluable to the Alliance's collective security framework. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the subsequent dissolution of the Soviet Union transformed the ideological landscape and global security dynamics. Despite these changes, Türkiye maintained its strategic significance in the new paradigm, as evidenced by its active role in the 1990s Balkans conflicts, participation in various global peace missions, and its provision of training to civilian and

military personnel from partner countries through the Partnership for Peace Training Center.

As part of the event organized by LSE European Institute's Contemporary Turkish Studies, titled "70 Years in NATO: Türkiye's Partnership with the Western Alliance since 1952," focusing on Türkiye-NATO relations, Prof. Gencer Özcan highlighted key aspects of the evolving relationship between Türkiye and NATO emphasizing that Turkish politicians and the public often conflate NATO with the United States, viewing NATO primarily as a vehicle for the modernization of Türkiye's military and society. Özcan provided critical insights into the late 1960s when political discourse and influential socio-political movements began questioning NATO membership and Türkiye's ties with the U.S., asserting that "Türkiye cannot remain independent unless it leaves NATO" (Özcan 2022). The anti-American and anti-NATO sentiments of that era were largely fueled by the crisis with Greece over Cyprus, during which NATO played a role in deescalating tensions and preventing military conflict between its members, however, despite NATO's efforts, the prevailing perception was that the Alliance hindered Türkiye's development and prosperity (Özcan 2022). Özcan concluded that "with the exception of the first decade of Türkiye's membership, public perception regarding NATO has always been negative" (Özcan 2022).

The post-Cold War decades have seen intensified tensions between Türkiye and NATO, driven by crises such as the Arab Spring, the Syrian war, the failed 2016 coup attempt, stagnant EU accession, and Türkiye's growing alignment with Russia. Prof. Oya Dursun Özkanca identified

> "three factors behind Türkiye's increased intensity of intra-alliance opposition: 1. International systemic and regional sub-systemic factors; 2. the irreconcilable differences between Türkiye and the NATO allies on the issues of Syria, Cyprus, Libya, maritime delimitation in the Eastern Mediterranean, hydrocarbon explorations in the region and the subsequent lack of trust; 3. domestic factors such as anti-Americanism and Euroscepticism" (Özkanca 2022).

Recent years have seen significant crises of confidence between Türkiye and the United States, as well as with other NATO members. Despite ongoing issues of distrust, Türkiye's commitment to the alliance has been reaffirmed, particularly in relation to the 2020 NATO report, "NATO 2030: United for a New Era," adopted in Brussels, and in response to the Russian aggression in Ukraine. The persistence of trust issues remains, but Türkiye's engagement with NATO continues to be reinforced by its significant contributions and its role in addressing key challenges.

In summary, Türkiye's role and involvement in NATO have been marked by tensions, political and strategic divergences throughout the Cold War and have continued to face new challenges in the post-1989 world order, reflecting a complex and evolving membership, which has been influenced by domestic politics,

regional dynamics, and global shifts. Despite these challenges, Türkiye's partnership with NATO has remained pivotal to the Alliance, underscoring its enduring significance despite the evolving complexities.

Romania's road to accession into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization

The end of the Cold War and the subsequent dissolution of the Soviet Union brought about profound shifts in global security dynamics. In the new paradigm of the post Cold-war era and the new geopolitical architecture, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization increased its strategic efforts for stability and security in the region, marking a cardinal reorientation from defence to security. Alongside numerous new challenges, NATO has also been confronted with the *dilemma of expansion*, as articulated by Zbigniew Brzezinski "whether, and if so, why, when, where, and how much next to expand, and eventually where to stop" (Brzezinski 1999).

For Romania, a former Warsaw Pact member whose commitment to the alliance had become increasingly tenuous by the late 1960s, forging closer ties with Western institutions and pursuing NATO membership became a central foreign policy objective after the collapse of the communist regime in December 1989. Integration into the Western sphere represented a key aspiration for the newly emerging democracy, both at societal and political levels. This desiderate was reflected in numerous initiatives and events, including the Prime Minister's invitation to NATO Secretary General Manfred Wörner to visit Romania, the authorization of the Romanian Ambassador to Belgium to establish diplomatic relations with NATO, the meeting in Brussels between the Romanian Prime Minister and NATO Secretary General, and the visit of the Romanian military Chief of Staff to NATO Headquarters in Brussels, where he met with the NATO Secretary General and the permanent military representatives of NATO member states (1990) (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2024).

In the following years, efforts to strengthen Romania's relationship and cooperation with NATO intensified. NATO Secretary General Manfred Wörner visited Romania multiple times, and a Euro-Atlantic center was inaugurated in 1992. Romania became the first post-communist country to join the Partnership for Peace (PfP) program, which was launched at the 1994 NATO Summit in Brussels. The PfP was designed to foster cooperation between Euro-Atlantic partner countries and NATO, that "established the norm that partners should be 'contributors' and marked a shift from purely multilateral dialogue to bilateral (partner and Alliance) relationships" (Simon 1999). During the Brussels Summit, Allied Heads of State and Government reaffirmed NATO's commitment to eastward enlargement as a means to ensure security and stability in the evolving geopolitical landscape. The rationale and strategy for NATO's enlargement were further examined by the Allies, culminating in the 1995 *Study on NATO Enlargement*, which emphasized that "with the end of the Cold War and the disappearance of the Warsaw Treaty Organisation, there is both a need and a unique

opportunity to build an improved security architecture in the whole of the Euro-Atlantic area, without recreating dividing lines" (NATO 1995).

NATO's commitment to enlargement was consolidated at the 1997 Madrid Summit, where the Alliance officially invited the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland to join. The Summit also affirmed that the enlargement process would continue, specifically acknowledging Romania as one of the "candidate countries which have made significant progress in fulfilling the NATO membership criteria" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2024). In 1998, amid the unfolding events in the former Yugoslavia, Romania demonstrated its geostrategic importance and commitment to NATO by agreeing to the Alliance's request to use its airspace for "possible military operations against Yugoslavia, but in urgent and exceptional situations only" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2024). The following year, Romania further supported NATO by opening its airspace to Alliance aircraft.

A significant milestone in Romania's path to NATO accession was the 9/11 terrorist attacks, which prompted NATO to activate Article 5 - declaring that *an attack on one member is an attack on all*, for the first time since its creation (NATO 2023). In the wake of 9/11, the United States' global *war on terror* sought new strategic allies, thus at the 2002 Prague Summit, President Bush advocated for a "robust" enlargement of NATO, leading to Romania's official invitation to begin accession negotiations alongside six other countries: Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia, and Slovenia. This enlargement transformed the geopolitical status of these states from a "buffer zone" to NATO's Eastern border (Kozma 2019).

Within two years, on March 29, 2004, Romania officially became a NATO member as part of the Alliance's largest expansion to date. This marked a momentous event for Romania's foreign policy as well as a pivotal moment for NATO's enlargement process.

As Romania marks the 20th anniversary of its NATO membership in 2024, one reflects on two decades of significant contributions to the Alliance and the profound impact its integration into the Euro-Atlantic community has had on its national security and international standing. Since joining NATO on March 29, 2004, Romania has played a key role in collective defense initiatives, participated in numerous NATO missions and operations, demonstrating its commitment to collective defense and international stability. The 20th anniversary underscores Romania's evolution from a post-communist state to a pivotal actor on NATO's Eastern flank, reaffirming its commitment to the Alliance's core values amidst evolving global security challenges.

Russia's Aggression in Ukraine and NATO's Response.

The Ukrainian – NATO relations date back to Ukraine's independence in 1991, initially Ukraine pursued a non-aligned foreign policy but expressed its intentions for cooperation with Western partners, NATO

included, this led to the joining of the Partnership for Peace program in 1994 to foster engagement in military cooperation, training, and reform. As NATO expanded eastward, the Ukrainian authorities expressed their interest in membership and closer cooperation, and as expected these actions have gathered a negative response from Russia since the latter opposed the eastward enlargement and already considered itself to be cornered by the US and Western allies. In 2008, at the NATO Bucharest Summit, there were discussions and promises in relation to future membership for Ukraine and Georgia, but they never materialized in a Membership Action Plan (MAP).

Until the 2014 annexation of Crimea by Russia, Ukraine remained a peripheral topic in NATO's agenda. Starting with Russia's aggressive and assertive policy towards the region and the contouring of the narrative of Russian protection against NATO's advancement and US imperialism, NATO officials have started to express their full support for Ukrainian territorial integrity and pleading for increased support through technical assistance, resources, and capacity-building efforts. The Ukrainian administration at the time stressed the growing importance of Ukraine joining NATO in order to ensure the Ukrainian state's security and territorial integrity, extending this security to the security of the entire Europe, although the declaration were more dimmed than the ones given by President Zelensky, even in the incipient stages, Ukraine was regarded as a frontier that once crossed, would put Russia face to face with the rest of Europe and lead to a direct conflict between the NATO-backed states and Russia's military capabilities. While Petro Poroshenko called for NATO to offer a MAP and increase efforts for further integration, Arseniy Yatsenyuk, Prime Minister of Ukraine at the time, supported the President's vision and called for NATO member state contributions to provide Ukraine with the military assistance needed to counter the Russian aggression.

Despite the sense of urgency that emerged in 2014, the growing importance of the Eastern European country for the alliance came into full force with the Russian invasion that took place in February 2022: prior to the harsh wake-up call for the entire neoliberal world order, NATO's most significant advancement in relation to Ukraine's situation was the assistance package offered in the aftermath of the annexation of Crimes in 2014 – the Assistance Package for Ukraine consisted in nonlethal equipment, training, cyber defense mechanisms, logistics and closer cooperation with NATO forces.

In the aftermath of the invasion, NATO organized three extraordinary meetings focusing on different levels of expertise to generate a unitary response, initially on the list was the meeting of the ministers along with representatives from Georgia, Finland, Sweden, and the European Union; second, the meeting of foreign ministers joined by the partners mentioned prior and finally, the extraordinary NATO meetings. Starting with the initial declarations of NATO representatives at the beginning of 2022, the call for unity was emphasized due to the existence of a clear threat to the current world order and by extension to Europe, in

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg's pre-ministerial press conference, he noted the following remarks: "Tomorrow NATO Defence Ministers will meet to address the most serious security crisis we have faced in Europe for decades. There are signs from Moscow that diplomacy should continue. This gives grounds for cautious optimism. But so far we have not seen any sign of de-escalation on the ground" (NATO 2022). In the declarations following invasion, the NATO leaders related that Russian war on Ukraine is the "gravest threat to EuroAtlantic security in decades" (European Parliament 2022) and demanded that the invasion shall be condemned in the strongest possible terms.

NATO deployed multinational battlegroups in the Baltic States (Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania) and Poland as part of the Enhanced Forward Presence in order to serve as a deterrent in the region, thus signaling the possibility of spill-over effects, this in turn has been interpreted by Russia as a further advancement of NATO and the US in Russia's sphere of interest and by Ukraine as further proof for membership demands. The initial for groups sent in 2014 have doubled due to the 2022 events, and discussions regarding sending missions in Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, and Bulgaria have led to further negative responses coming from Russia. With Finland and Sweden pleading their case for NATO membership, Ukraine once again found herself empowered to demand membership, considering itself as the barrier that for the time-being, keeps Russia from posing a clear and direct threat to the rest of European countries.

The 2022 June Madrid summit brought to the attention multiple concerns ranging from the narratives perpetuated by Russia, a need for unitary response among the NATO members, news related to new members and most importantly the Ukrainian Assistance Package. For the latter, demands were made in relation to equipment: anti-drone systems and counter-mine as well as medical supplies or fuel, these accounted for around $100 million. The discussions also tackled the commitment for post-war reconstruction to help Ukraine transition from Soviet-era equipment to NATO infrastructure and especially tackled the electrical infrastructure, which due to Russia persistent bombings, is prone to power shortages (Monaghan and Bolstad 2023).

The visits made by Zelensky in NATO member states along with the discussions with NATO officials have been regarded by some actors as a sign of reigniting strength and solidarity in the 75-year-old transatlantic alliance, while some have pointed out that these persistent actions would head to signs of "fatigue and division" (Brookes 2023) and as author Peter Brookes signaled, most experts consider these variables as intersecting (Brookes 2023). In their fight, the Ukrainian forces have used most the arsenal provided by the Western partners and in relation to the NATO members, only the US has the capabilities of supplying more, the rest of the members have been seated in a comfortable situation in which they have produced or acquired limited military arsenal and have placed their bets on a quicker end to the current Russian – Ukrainian war, now the need exceeds the production of the reserves and due to the pacing of the conflict, on the ground

more resources are used and their supplementation is awaited and delayed.

The 2023 Vilnius Summit had been pushed to the forefront of headlines mainly due to the possibility of opening the dialogue for Ukraine's membership. The resolutions unfortunately did not offer such a prospective but rather suggested an abstract outcome in which membership would be extended when "allies agree and conditions are met" (Monaghan et al. 2023). The advancements in regard to this issue pertained to the formation of the NATO-Ukraine Council and the withdrawal of the MAP for the accession process. Otherwise, the summit provided a framework for expression of continued support for Ukraine's forces in combating Russia's military advancements and addressing reconstruction, as well as civilian needs.

Finland was welcomed as the 31st member and in the aftermath of the resolution coming from the Turkish officials, Sweden may soon be on the way for full membership. Ukraine unfortunately remains in the gray area in which there is no further sign on the horizon for membership, but there is an increased monetary support coming from the US with the decision of the Senate vote on passing the $95bn in aid support for Ukraine, Israel, and Taiwan. Senator Chuck Schumer declaration on the US's involvement "Today the Senate sends a unified message to the entire world: America will always defend democracy in its hour of need" (Gambino 2024) has been tackled by experts, since in the case of Ukraine, this presents a delayed effort and still entails a bureaucratic and technical effort to deliver the weapons and ammunition (Florescu 2024).

Regarding NATO's efforts in relation to the conflict in Ukraine, authors Sean Monaghan and Gabriella Bolstad signal that NATO has played a dual role in providing Ukraine with capabilities to defend herself and contained the conflict by further providing support for the NATO members: "The war in Ukraine is tragic enough; a wider conflict with Russia would be truly catastrophic. NATO's two roles are also interdependent. The emerging specter of equipment or munitions shortages among allies suggests NATO may need to choose in future between strengthening Ukraine's deterrence or its own" (Monaghan and Bolstad, 2023).

Narratives about the War in These Countries. Main Threats to Security in the Region

Romania has continuously expressed support for the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine: as a follow up the Romanian officials have condemned the Russian aggression and have shown support for the EU and NATO's measures against Russia. Due to the geographical proximity, Romania has shown more signs of being concerned with the prospect of the escalation of the conflict, spillover effects and sought to cooperate with other agents – local and foreign in order to assure shelter and protection for the Ukrainians that sought asylum. The threat of possible escalation drove Romania towards the increase of its military readiness and pushed for participation in NATO exercises in order to be able to deter potential threats.

As mentioned prior, Romania has taken an active role in providing humanitarian aid to Ukraine, including the acceptance of refugees, within the public discourse there was a predominant consensus highlighting solidarity and support for those affected by the war.

For Türkiye, the war in Ukraine presented a challenging scenario in which the balancing act was put to test, as the state tried to support Ukraine and condemn the aggression while maintaining ties with Russia and refusing to impose sanctions. The conflict presented an opportunity for Türkiye to emerge as a regional powerbroker, offering its main cities as a neutral ground for negotiations and showcasing an interest in positioning oneself as a key diplomatic player. In Türkiye, the broader implications for NATO and regional security were raised up, and the need for the strengthening of its defense capabilities and the maintaining of robust military preparedness were regarded as being the best way forward, another factor that played an important role in Türkiye's positioning regarding this regional conflict was the employment of its drone industry as part of the foreign policy, with the Turkish government providing Ukraine with drones and adjacent technology.

The conflict was framed as having a strong impact on the Turkish economy, pertaining mainly to energy imports, tourism and trade relations, signaling that the precarious state of the Turkish economy would be put through the ringfire if Türkiye would step out of its commitments to the Western allies as well as Russia.

Among the main threats to regional security the most significant one was the prospect of the escalation of the conflict and the possibility of a broader regional conflict erupting, through this aspect, the need for collective defensive mechanisms was once again brought to light and reinforced NATO's role in ensuring regional security.

In summary, the Ukraine conflict has profoundly impacted the geopolitical dynamics and the foreign policies of the two states: in relation to Romania, the majoritary response to the crisis was of unequivocal support for Ukraine, enhanced military readiness and requests for energy diversification whereas in Türkiye there was a juxtaposition of the balancing act, initiatives centering Türkiye as a mediator, and economic considerations.

How/If the Ukrainian War Influenced Confidence in NATO

To assess how Russian aggression in Ukraine has impacted confidence in NATO within Romania and Türkiye, a comparative analysis will be conducted using data from multiple Eurobarometer surveys. This analysis will draw on results from Eurobarometer survey 96 (January-February 2022), conducted shortly before the invasion, Eurobarometer survey 97 (June-July 2022), conducted a few months after the aggres-

sion, Eurobarometer 98 (winter 2022-2023), Eurobarometer survey 99 (June 2023), Eurobarometer 100 (autumn 2023), and Eurobarometer survey 101 (spring 2024). Additionally, data from the Flash Eurobarometer 506, which focused on the EU's response to the war in Ukraine (April-May 2022), will be incorporated into the overall assessment and conclusions. As Türkiye is not included in the Eurobarometer reports, relevant data will be sourced from alternative surveys, such as those conducted by the Pew Research Center (2019 and 2024) and the German Marshall Fund of the United States (April 2022). This comprehensive approach will allow for a nuanced understanding of how the conflict in Ukraine has influenced perceptions of NATO and dis(trust) in both countries.

The Eurobarometer survey 96, reflecting the perceptions of EU citizens, indicates a decline in trust and confidence in NATO since 2021. Nearly half of the respondents (45%, down by 4%) expressed trust in the Alliance, while 40% (up by 5%) reported a lack of trust. The survey shows that NATO is trusted by a majority in 17 EU Member States, and trust levels vary significantly across countries, with the highest trust reported in Denmark (82%) and Estonia (79%), and the lowest in Luxembourg and Romania, where trust stands at 45% compared to 43% and 41% respectively who 'tend not to trust' the Alliance (Eurobarometer 96, 2022). The report also highlights trust levels within socio-professional groups, noting that 54% of students 'tend to trust' NATO, while 32% 'tend not to trust' it (Eurobarometer 96, 2022).

The Summer 2022 Eurobarometer 97, which evaluated perceptions of the response to the Russian aggression against Ukraine, revealed an increase in trust toward supranational bodies, most significantly for NATO. Over half of the respondents (51%, up by 6%) expressed trust in NATO, while 38% (down by 2%) did not (Eurobarometer 97, 2022). In Romania, trust in NATO before the war in Ukraine stood at 45%, with 41% of respondents indicating they 'tended not to trust' the Alliance, while in the early stages of the war, trust levels rose by 10%, with 55% of Romanian respondents expressing trust in NATO. Additionally, there was a slight increase among students, with 56% indicating they 'tend to trust' the Alliance, up by 2%.

A shift in trust was observed in Romania according to the Eurobarometer 98 survey from winter 2022-2023, where trust in NATO decreased by 9%, dropping to 46%. Despite this decline, NATO continues to enjoy the trust of a majority of respondents in 18 EU Member States. Trust levels vary significantly across countries, with Denmark (86%) and the Netherlands (76%) showing the highest levels of trust, while France remains more divided, with 41% of respondents expressing trust compared to 40% who 'tend not to trust' (Eurobarometer 98, 2023). There was no significant change among students, with 58% indicating they 'tend to trust' NATO, a slight increase of 2% (Eurobarometer 98, 2023).

The Standard Eurobarometer 99 from Spring 2023 highlights significant developments within NATO, including Finland's accession as the 31st member of the Alliance on April 4. In Romania, the downward trend in trust toward NATO continues, with a further decline of 3% compared to the previous Eurobarometer,

resulting in 43% of respondents indicating they 'tend to trust' NATO, while 45% 'tend not to trust' (Eurobarometer 99, 2023). However, among the socio-professional category of students, there was a slight increase in trust, with 60% expressing that they 'tend to trust' NATO, marking a 2% rise (Eurobarometer 99, 2023).

The Eurobarometer 100 from Autumn 2023 reveals a slight overall decrease in trust levels towards NATO across the EU, despite this, the proportion of Europeans who "tend to trust" NATO remains higher than those who distrust the Alliance, with 49% expressing trust (a 1% decrease from the previous report) compared to 40% who 'tend not to trust' (Eurobarometer 100, 2023). In Romania, trust in NATO has increased by 7% since spring 2023, reaching 50%, while 39% of respondents 'tend not to trust' the Alliance. Among students, there was no significant change, with 58% indicating they 'tend to trust' NATO, a slight decrease of 2% (Eurobarometer 100, 2023).

The most recent Standard Eurobarometer 101, from Spring 2024, shows that a majority of Europeans continue to express trust in NATO, with more than half of respondents (52%, a 3% increase) indicating their trust in the Alliance, while 35% (a 5% decrease) do not (Eurobarometer 101, 2024). In Romania, this upward trend is even more pronounced, with trust in NATO rising significantly to 61%, an 11% increase from the previous report, while those who 'tend not to trust' dropped by 9%, now standing at 30%. Among students, the percentage who 'tend to trust' NATO remains consistent with the previous report.

In addition to the Standard Eurobarometer surveys analyzed above, a Flash Eurobarometer 506, *EU's Response to the War in Ukraine*, was collected in April 2022, providing further insights into citizens' perceptions of NATO's actions. Across all EU member states, just under half of the respondents (49%) expressed satisfaction with NATO's response to the conflict, with 9% being 'very satisfied' and 40% 'rather satisfied.' In contrast, 26% were 'rather not satisfied,' and 17% were 'not at all satisfied.' Romania's response stood out, with a notably higher percentage of satisfaction compared to other EU members and its later positioning in subsequent Standard Eurobarometer surveys. Thus, in Romania, 62% of respondents were satisfied with NATO's response to the war in Ukraine, with 18% 'very satisfied' and 44% 'rather satisfied,' while 19% were 'rather not satisfied' and 11% 'not at all satisfied' (Flash Eurobarometer 506, 2022).

The Russian aggression in Ukraine triggered significant geopolitical shifts, influencing perceptions of NATO across numerous states and actors. This conflict prompted a widespread reassessment of NATO's importance, underscoring the Alliance's role in ensuring collective security and stability in the face of renewed threats and crises.

As discussed in the section on Türkiye's NATO membership, trust in the Alliance has experienced significant fluctuations over the years, a trend that has persisted even after the war in Ukraine. In a 2019 survey conducted by the Pew Research Center, only 21% of Turkish citizens expressed a favorable view of NATO, while 55% held an unfavorable opinion (Pew Research Center 2019). This represents one of the

lowest levels of support among NATO member countries, highlighting the complex and often strained relationship between Türkiye and the Alliance.

According to the April 2022 survey conducted by the German Marshall Fund of the United States, which included 14 countries (Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Lithuania, The Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Spain, Sweden, Türkiye, United Kingdom, and United States), Türkiye recorded the smallest majority viewing NATO as important to national security, with 65% of respondents indicating its importance—a 4-point decrease compared to 2021. In contrast, a strong majority of Romanians, 88%, regarded NATO as either 'somewhat important' (24%) or 'very important' (64%) to their national security.

The survey also highlighted a notable generational gap in perceptions of NATO in several countries, with younger respondents generally less convinced of the Alliance's importance. Interestingly, Türkiye deviates from this trend, as older respondents are slightly more skeptical: 29% of those aged 55 and older do not consider NATO important, compared to just 20% of respondents aged 18–24 (Transatlantic Trends 2022).

According to a recent 2024 survey by the Pew Research Center, Türkiye has seen significant changes in public opinion regarding NATO. The survey reveals that 42% of Turks now express a favorable opinion of the Alliance, a substantial increase from just 21% in 2019. However, 46% of respondents still hold an unfavorable view of NATO, positioning Türkiye among the more skeptical member states. According to the same survey a majority of Turks (61%) believe that NATO membership is either 'very' (24%) or 'somewhat important' (37%) for their country's security (Pew Research Center 2024).

In summary, the impact of Russian aggression in Ukraine on NATO confidence reveals a complex and evolving landscape across Romania and Türkiye. In Romania, citizens' trust in NATO experienced an increase shortly after the invasion but subsequently saw fluctuations, ultimately rising to 61% by spring 2024. This trend suggests a growing appreciation and confidence in NATO's role in ensuring security amidst ongoing regional tensions. In contrast, Türkiye's perceptions of NATO have remained more ambivalent. Despite a significant rise in favorable views from 21% in 2019 to 42% in 2024, the country still exhibits a relatively low level of overall trust compared to its allies, reflecting deep-seated skepticism and regional complexities. These varying responses highlight the differential impact of geopolitical events on member states' attitudes toward NATO, while at the same time emphasizing the Alliance's challenging position in regard to these diverse perceptions of (dis)trust. As geopolitical uncertainties continue to evolve, achieving unified support among member states remains a complex task for NATO.

Perceptions from the Civil Society of Romania and Türkiye

In the course of the month of May 2024, the authors conducted a questionnaire with students from

Romania and Türkiye from various fields of study ranging from international relations, diplomacy, political sciences, history, economics, languages as well as engineering. For the study two groups of 30 students from each country received the questionnaire and submitted their answers online.

The first question tackled the students rating of their country-of-origin involvement in NATO's structures: a slight majority of Turkish students (53.33%) perceive Türkiye's involvement as slightly involved, the remaining 46.66 % have rated it as suitably involved. A greater percentage of Romanian students have rated Romania's involvement in NATO structures as suitably involved, a smaller portion (26.66%) considers that Romania's involvement had been slightly involved and a minority (13.33%) believe that Romania is too involved. Overall, Turkish students are more likely to regard their country's involvement in NATO structures as slightly involved, while the Romanian students are more likely to see their country's involvement as suitably involved and that among the Romanian students there had been concerns related to over-involvement in NATO.

In the second question, the students rated their country of origin's involvement in NATO's response to the Ukraine crisis. The choices have been not at all, slightly involved, suitably involved and too involved. Half of the Turkish students have regarded Türkiye's involvement in the NATO's response to the Ukraine crisis as being appropriate, a smaller group (20%) rated it as being slightly involved, 16.66 % have regarded it as being not at all involved and the rest have regarded it as being too involved. In the Romanian group, the involvement of Romania in NATO's response in the Ukraine crisis had been rated mainly as suitably involved with a 73.33% vote, and the next two ratings came with the same vote 13.33% for both slightly involved and too involved. Therefore, the Turkish students had a more diverse outlook on the Türkiye's involvement, including a group perceiving the involvement as non-existing. Both groups have expressed their concern related to over-involvement, although this concern is more prevalent among the Romanian group.

Figure 1. Rating the country of origin's involvement in NATO's response to the crisis in Ukraine

The next topic tackled whether the crisis in Ukraine changed the students perceptions on NATO - among the Turkish students, nearly half (46.66%) have answered that the crisis had moderately changed their perspective, 33.33% were uncertain and answered maybe, 16.66 % have noted a change in their perspective, very

much so, while a single student responded negatively to the question; in the Romanian group, the responses were at odds with 36.66% answering that the Ukraine crisis changed their perceptions, 33.33% responded that there were no changes in their perceptions, 20% considered that their perceptions changed moderately and 10% responded maybe. In summary, the Ukraine crisis had a more pronounced impact on the Turkish students' perspectives compared to Romanian students, the second group being more divided, with a notable portion indicating no change in perception.

Figure 2. Changes in perception due to the Ukrainian crisis impact on NATO

In the fourth question, the students were asked to name the reasons for their changes in perception if they have occurred. Among the Turkish students the major factors that have impacted a change in perception were: the lack of a coordinated response among NATO members (33.33%) and that the Ukraine crisis portrays prior existing divisions among the member states (33.33%); the moderate concerns were: the potential for unwanted escalation in neighboring states (23.33%) and the potential for unwanted escalation of the crisis (20%) and the last impactful factors were the delayed response for ground forces (16.66%) and 20% have reported that there were no changes in perception. In the Turkish group, two students offered a more complex response on the questions, one of them pleaded for an increase in the alliance and the defense industry should attach more importance to investment and good relations. In contrast the Romanian students have rated the prior mentioned arguments in the following order: The lack of a coordinated response among the NATO members - 43.33%; The Ukraine crisis portrays prior existing divisions among NATO members - 40%; Creates the potential for unwanted escalation of aggression in neighboring states - 40%; Creates the potential for unwanted escalation of the crisis - 33.33%; The provisions for ground forces experienced a delayed response - 16.66%. In conclusion, both Turkish and Romanian students have identified the lack of a coordinated response and the portrayal of prior existing divisions among the NATO member states as being driving factors for their change in perception. Both groups have expressed their concerns related to the possibility of escalation of the crisis and the escalation in neighboring states, but the Turkish students accentuated their focus on the former, while the Romanian students accentuated the latter.

Upon being asked whether the NATO's handling of the crisis might create an avenue for opportunistic stepping in, the students had the following responses: a significant portion (43.33%) considers that NATO's

handling of the crisis might create an avenue for opportunistic actors stepping in, 36.66% remained uncertain and responded maybe, while 20% do not believe so; in the Romanian group, 66.66% responded maybe, 23.33% believe that NATO's handling may lead to other actors stepping in, while 10% do not consider it to be a possibility. Afterwards, those that responded yes were asked to name the actors they've regarded as having an interest in stepping in: in the Turkish group, China had been regarded as the main actor with eight students indicating her in their answers; The US and France had been named by two students each; Azerbaijan, Poland, Britain, Central Asian countries, Hungary, and India have been named by a student each and finally there was a response tackling the fact that NATO's enlargement led to the escalation of the crisis; in the Romanian group, China was also the main actor regarded for stepping in with six students naming her; and the following countries: Iran, Brazil, Russia have been named by a student each.

In the next segment, the students were asked whether or not they trust NATO: among the Turkish students, 46.66% expressed a moderate trust, while 46.66% responded negatively and a small percentage (6.66%) expressed absolute trust; among the Romanian students, 83.33% expressed moderate trust, 13.33% responded negatively, and 3.33% expressed absolute trust. In the next question, the students had to rate their expectations in relation to NATO and the following arguments have been provided for them: for Turkish students the top priority is represented by NATO's protection of member states (13 students), followed by the creation of the needed framework for enlargement (7 students), engagement in dialogue (7 students), maintaining stability (6 students); they have also expressed concerns related to NATO's aggravation of the Ukraine crisis (7 students) and the deepening of the prior existing cleavage between member states (8 students), while no Turkish student has expressed faith in NATO's successful solving of the current crisis; for the Romanian group, the top priority remained the same - the protection and assistance given to member states (21 students), followed by the creation of the framework needed for enlargement (12 students), engagement in dialogue (11 students), maintaining stability (10 students); they have also expressed concerns for the deepening of the pre-existing cleavage between member states (7 students) and the aggravation of the crisis (7 students) and one student expecting NATO to successfully solve the Ukraine crisis.

The tenth question tackled the future of NATO and whether its role should be symbolic, limited, restricted, only under the auspices of cooperation with other actors or enhanced. Among the Turkish students 40% have responded that NATO's role should be enhanced, 26.66% responded that the role should be carried out under the auspices of cooperation with other actors, 23.33% responded that NATO's role should be limited, 6.66% responded that it should be symbolic and 3.33% responded that the role should be restricted. Among the Romanian students, the responses were the following: 50% in favor of NATO's role being enhanced, 23.33% in favor of NATO acting only under the auspices of cooperation with other actors, 13.33% considering that the role should be limited, 10% in favor of it being symbolic and 3.33% in favor of the role

being restricted in the future. Therefore, the Romanian students are more inclined towards the enhancement of NATO's role, while the Turkish students are more divided between enhancement, cooperation and limitation.

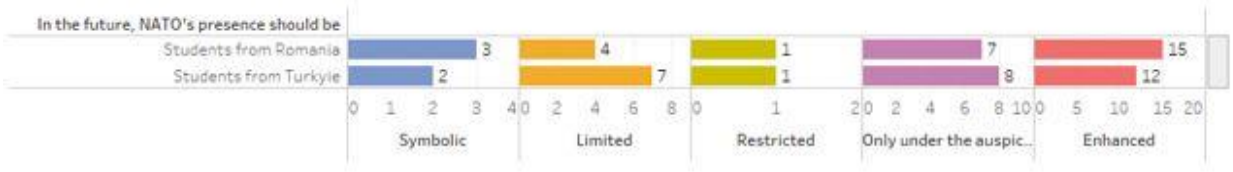

Figure 3. Considerations concerning the future of NATO's role

The final question concerned whether the students' trust in NATO has increased, decreased or remained the same concerning the before and after of NATO's response to the crisis in Ukraine. The Turkish students have reported a moderate decrease in trust (36.66%), 33.33% student's trust remained unchanged, 23.33% reported a moderate increase, 3.33% student's trust increased radically and 3.33% decreased substantially. The Romanian students had the following responses: 40% responded that their trust remained unchanged, 36.66% increased moderately and 23.33% decreased moderately.

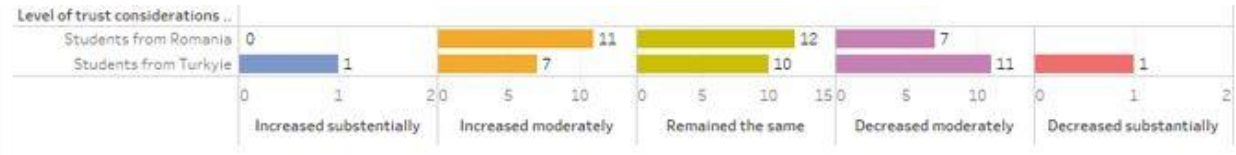

Figure 4. Level of trust considerations related to the before and after NATO's response to the crisis in Ukraine.

4. Conclusion

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has led to varied responses towards NATO in Romania and Türkiye. In Romania citizens' trust in NATO surged initially but fluctuated, peaking at 61% in 2024, indicating growing support for the Alliance's role in regional security. Conversely, Türkiye's support remained lower and more volatile, with favorable opinions rising from 21% in 2019 to 42% in 2024, yet still reflecting significant skepticism. These divergent trends highlight how geopolitical events can differently shape member states' attitudes towards NATO, revealing challenges in maintaining unified support**.**

More specifically, the Russian aggression in Ukraine has significantly impacted perceptions of NATO among the youth in Romania and Türkiye. As the results of the questionnaire conducted with the two groups of students revealed, the crisis in Ukraine had varying impacts on the trust in NATO among Turkish and Romanian students, thus the former showed a higher level of trust decrease, indicating dissatisfaction with NATO's response, while the latter reported unchanged or moderately increased trust, reflecting a more stable or positive perception on NATO's actions.

Table 1. Questionnaire questions

Perceptions and Trust in NATO from the university students of Romania and Türkiye

Disclaimer: This questionnaire is anonymous. Your responses will be treated confidentially and used exclusively for research purposes. We have no means of identifying individual respondents based on their answers. Participation is entirely voluntary. Thank you for taking part in this study.

* Indicates required question

1. Country of origin *

Mark only one oval.

- ○ Türkiye
- ○ Romania
- ○ Other:

2. Field of study *

Mark only one oval.

- ○ International Relations
- ○ Political Science
- ○ Diplomacy
- ○ Economics
- ○ Other:

3. How would you rate your country-of-origin membership in NATO structures? *

Mark only one oval.

- ○ Too involved.
- ○ Suitably involved.
- ○ Slightly involved.
- ○ Not at all
- ○ Other:

4. How would you rate your country-of-origin involvement in NATO's response in the Ukraine crisis? *

Mark only one oval.

- ○ Too involved.
- ○ Suitably involved.
- ○ Slightly involved.
- ○ Not at all involved.
- ○ Other:

5. Did the Ukrainian crisis changed your perception towards NATO? *

Mark only one oval.

- ○ Yes, radically.
- ○ Yes, very much.
- ○ Yes, moderately.
- ○ Maybe.
- ○ No, not all.

6. If your perception has changed, which were the determining factors: *

- ○ The lack of a coordinated response among the NATO members.
- ○ The Ukraine crisis portrays prior existing divisions among NATO members.
- ○ The provisions for ground forces experienced a delayed response.
- ○ Creates the potential for unwanted escalation of the crisis.
- ○ Creates the potential for unwanted escalation of aggression in neighboring states.
- ○ Other:

7. NATO's handling of the crisis might create an avenue for opportunistic actors stepping in *

Mark only one oval.

- ○ Yes
- ○ Maybe
- ○ No

8. If your answer to the previous question was yes, please provide examples of such actors

9. Do you trust NATO? *

Mark only one oval.

- ○ Yes, absolutely.
- ○ Yes, moderately.
- ○ No.
- ○ Other:

10. Do you trust the current potential of NATO to... *

Check all that apply.

- ○ Maintain stability.
- ○ Protect and assist its member states.
- ○ Provide solutions for other crises.
- ○ Create the necessary framework needed for further enlargement.
- ○ Engage in dialogue before resorting to other instruments to solve crises.
- ○ To successfully solve the Ukrainian crisis.
- ○ To aggravate the current Ukrainian crisis.
- ○ To accentuate the cleavage between the NATO member states towards the management of Ukrainian crisis.
- ○ Other:

11. In the future, NATO's presence should be... *

Mark only one oval.

- ○ Symbolic.
- ○ Limited.
- ○ Restricted.
- ○ Only under the auspices of cooperation with other actors.
- ○ Enhanced.
- ○ Other:

12. Considering (before and after) NATO's response in the Ukrainian crisis your level of trust*

Mark only one oval.

- ○ Increased substantially.
- ○ Increased moderately.
- ○ Remained the same.
- ○ Decreased moderately.
- ○ Decreased substantially.

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