

Permission to Secede? The Impact of Foreign Endorsements on Attitudes Toward Separatist Movements

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Stephanie Wright¹ , Ala Alrababah² , and Rachel Myrick¹ 

Abstract

How do international endorsements of separatist movements by foreign powers impact popular views toward secession? Much literature on secessionist movements focuses on subnational bargaining between the government and separatist groups. However, these models often neglect international audiences, who offer endorsement and other forms of support for separatist groups. This paper demonstrates that when foreign powers take positions on secessionist activities, these actions can affect popular support for such movements. In a survey experiment conducted before Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, we examine Ukrainians' attitudes toward the Russian-backed separatist movement in the Donbas region. We randomize hypothetical scenarios in which foreign powers endorse secession and measure changes in public attitudes in both the parent state and the occupied territories under separatist control. Our results show that even in conflict-affected settings where attitudes have presumably hardened, international endorsements can influence popular support for secessionist movements.

¹Department of Political Science, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina, USA

²Department of Social and Political Sciences, Bocconi University, Milan, Italy

Corresponding author:

Rachel Myrick, Department of Political Science, Duke University, 204J Gross Hall, 140 Science Drive, Durham, North Carolina 27708-0187, USA.

Email: rachel.myrick@duke.edu

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Keywords

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Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the international community has witnessed many attempted secessionist movements, including some that were accompanied by considerable levels of political violence. In some cases, separatist groups successfully achieved their aims of creating new states, such as in East Timor (2002), Montenegro (2006), and South Sudan (2011). Yet territorial claims made by other separatist groups were largely unsuccessful. Independence referendums in Scotland (2014), Catalonia (2017), and Iraqi Kurdistan (2017) failed to produce new states recognized by the international community.

Building on a rich literature on the domestic determinants of separatism,¹ scholars recognize that secessionist movements have important international dimensions. International factors, including endorsement of secessionist movements by foreign powers and other forms of external support, shape the claims separatist groups make and whether they are successful in achieving their aims (Coggins 2011, 2016; Fazal and Griffiths 2014; Florea 2017; Griffiths 2016, 2021; Huddleston 2021; Saideman 1997, 2002). Studies about the international dimensions of secessionist movements often rely on case studies and large-N, cross-national analyses to explore the relationship between foreign involvement and secession. By contrast, this paper draws on public opinion data to ask: How do international endorsements of secessionist movements affect public attitudes toward these movements?

We begin by summarizing conflicting theoretical expectations about the relationship between international endorsements and public opinion that emerge from existing scholarship. On the one hand, some research anticipates that foreign endorsements will have little to no impact on public opinion, especially when secessionist movements have escalated to armed conflict. On the other hand, to the extent that international endorsements might influence public opinion, they are expected to have different effects in the separatist areas relative to the parent state. In separatist areas, international endorsements should signal material and/or symbolic support, increasing favorability toward secessionist movements. By contrast, in parent states, endorsements should increase the perceived threat of separatist movements, causing backlash and reducing public support for secession. Moreover, characteristics of both the conflict and the foreign endorser should affect the strength of these anticipated effects. International endorsements are likely to be less influential in areas where public attitudes have hardened due to armed conflict. And endorsements should be more influential when they are issued by powerful foreign actors who have high diplomatic prestige or identity-based ties to the affected population.

We examine whether these expectations are reflected in public attitudes during an ongoing secessionist conflict in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine,² where a Russian-backed separatist movement emerged in 2014. This context is a challenging case for international endorsement because persistent armed conflict can harden public

attitudes toward separatism. This paper leverages a unique opportunity to conduct a parallel survey experiment about attitudes toward secession in three regions throughout Ukraine: separatist areas/occupied territories within the Donbas region, the rest of the Donbas region outside of the occupied territories, and the remainder of Ukraine excluding Donbas. In an endorsement experiment conducted in the spring of 2017, we randomly assigned respondents to consider scenarios where either the European Union (EU) or Russia endorsed the secession of the self-proclaimed Luhansk and Donetsk People's Republics within Donbas relative to a control condition with no international endorsement. We then measure how these endorsements affect attitudes toward secession within the separatist areas and the parent state.

Our main finding is that international endorsement of secessionist movements can shape public attitudes toward these movements, even in contexts with high levels of political violence. However, these effects vary considerably across different regions of Ukraine and across foreign endorsers. Endorsements from the EU generally have a sizeable effect on support for secession while endorsements from Russia marginally impact public attitudes. Beyond our immediate findings, this study makes two additional contributions to the literature on international dimensions of secession. The first is to demonstrate the importance of studying public attitudes within separatist areas and the parent state in tandem. Existing research widely recognizes the importance of the parent state in shaping the outcomes of secessionist movements (Butt 2017; Cunningham 2011; Griffiths 2016; Walter 2009). However, the limited body of work on public opinion about the international dimensions of secession focuses on attitudes within separatist territories (Muro et al. 2020; Muro and Vlaskamp 2016; Shelef and Zeira 2017, 2023). To our knowledge, this paper provides the first experimental evidence that foreign endorsements can impact public attitudes in separatist areas and in the parent state.

The second contribution of the paper is to draw attention to counterintuitive findings about how international endorsements affect attitudes toward secession in the parent state. Classic theories of inter-group relations suggest that, if foreign endorsements of a secessionist movement make the movement appear more threatening, this would lead to backlash among individuals in the parent state, reducing support for secession. In the context of the Donbas region, however, we find the opposite. EU endorsement of secession makes respondents living in the rest of Ukraine more favorable to the idea of the self-proclaimed republics of Luhansk and Donetsk becoming independent. Interestingly, this result holds even among respondents who are otherwise not favorable to the EU. We believe that this finding is best explained by the perception that foreign endorsements could be accompanied by concrete material benefits.

Although our experiment was conducted prior to Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, its findings remain relevant to the ongoing conflict in the region and to the broader literature on secessionist movements. After 2022, Russia's war on Ukraine continued to revolve around questions of territorial control and legitimacy. Foreign powers were involved in the conflict on both sides, providing weapons, manpower, diplomatic support, and endorsements. Our study demonstrates that external endorsements can change how the public perceives contested regions, which matters for negotiating the future status of these territories. Even during ongoing fighting,

statements from major international actors can signal the (lack of) legitimacy and viability of changes to state borders, influencing public calculations both inside contested areas and in the rest of the country.

Our results offer insights that may travel to other contested statehood contexts where foreign involvement is salient and public opinion remains volatile. In places like Georgia and Abkhazia, Moldova and Transnistria, or Kurdish areas in several countries, international actors shape public perceptions of separatist claims and territorial legitimacy (Broers 2013; Lawrence 2009; Place 2024). In these cases, as in Ukraine, the backing of foreign powers may alter the strategic and symbolic meaning of secession, shifting domestic opinion in ways that complicate or facilitate settlements. We argue that international endorsements can affect the trajectories and outcomes of secessionist disputes. Importantly, foreign support for secessionist movements can carry weight even with audiences who might not otherwise favor the endorsing power.

International Influences on Secessionist Movements

Secession refers to a group's attempt to withdraw from a state, thereby creating a new state in a portion of territory that used to belong to the state from which the group seceded (Armitage 2010). The two primary actors involved in the process are the secessionist group and the parent state. The *secessionist or separatist group* refers to the group that claims independence in a portion of the territory within the *parent state*, the state from which the group wishes to secede. The secessionist group may engage in peaceful or violent strategies to achieve independence, and the parent state may accept or deny separatist claims using peaceful or violent means.

Literature on secessionist movements tends to focus on subnational bargaining between these two sets of domestic actors. Much research explores what claims are made by separatist groups and what concessions parent states offer in response (Brancati 2006; Cunningham 2011; Griffiths 2015; Lacina 2015; Lustick et al. 2004). Claims and concessions often reflect bargaining over material factors such as the distribution of territory, resources, or political power. However, other factors that affect the strategic interaction between separatist groups and the parent state may be immaterial or largely symbolic in nature, such as precedent-setting and reputational considerations (Toft 2002; Walter 2006a, 2006b, 2009).

Theories that focus solely on subnational bargaining sometimes overlook a third set of actors that shape the success or failure of secessionist movements: the international audience. The *international audience* refers to foreign countries and international institutions that may offer support to separatist movements or parent states. Hostile neighbors, states with transnational ethnic ties to separatist groups, and foreign powers with strategic interests in the parent state are among the international actors most likely to play an active role in separatist conflicts (Coggins 2011; Lee 2018; Saideman 1997, 2002). These external actors impact secessionist movements by providing (or declining to provide) material and/or symbolic support.

Much research focuses on material forms of foreign support such as arms, funds, training, or other types of assistance (Florea 2017; Jenne et al. 2007; Kenwick and

Lemke 2023; Lee 2018; Salehyan et al. 2011). However, this paper emphasizes an important symbolic form of foreign support for secessionist movements: international endorsement of separatist claims. *Endorsement* refers to public support or approval of secessionist activities and new states by international audiences, including diplomatic statements of support, invitations to international organizations, and formal recognition of independence (Coggins 2011; Huddleston 2020; Muro et al. 2020; Muro and Vlaskamp 2016; Shelef and Zeira 2017, 2023).³

Coggins (2011, 2016) explains that international endorsement is a crucial aspect of separatist movements, as it effectively creates permissible conditions for new states to secede. Coggins (2011) summarizes, “By basing their model of the state on domestic-level theories and neglecting potential insights from their own field, IR scholars have given short shrift to the key determinant of state birth. Secessionists themselves and state practice agree: without external legitimacy, an actor cannot really be considered a state” (p. 461). Scholars argue that international recognition and external legitimacy are more dependent on geopolitical rivalries and international order than on domestic legitimacy (Coggins 2011, 2016; Fabry 2010; Newman and Visoka 2023). Nonetheless, international endorsement can impact the outcomes of secessionist movements by lending legitimacy to these movements and paving the way for other forms of material support from international actors.

Public Attitudes Toward Foreign Endorsements of Secession

While much existing research on international endorsements blends qualitative case studies and large-N, cross-national analyses, this study focuses on public attitudes toward foreign involvement in secessionist movements. Why should we care about public attitudes toward secession? For one, popular support for secessionist movements is often critical to their success. The formation and persistence of secessionist movements is predicated on ideas of group identity, built around common ethnicity, culture, religion, and/or history among inhabitants of a defined territory (Saideman et al. 2005). Public engagement increases the visibility of secessionist claims through media and popular culture, protests and demonstrations, and—at the extremes—political violence or armed mobilization against the parent state. For instance, in Catalonia, the Spanish government’s attempts to crackdown on Catalan voters during their independence referendum in October 2017 resulted in large-scale strikes and protests. This drew global attention to the Catalan independence movement and increased support for the movement among Catalan residents (Balcells et al. 2021).

Public support for secession is especially important in democracies, where politicians are more likely to be responsive to the public and referendums can demonstrate popular consensus around secession. New countries like Montenegro (2006) and South Sudan (2011), for example, held popular referendums before declaring independence. Likewise, independence referendums that fail to garner public support—such as the 2014 Scottish referendum, in which 44.7 percent of voters indicated that Scotland should be independent—can stifle the momentum of secessionist movements (BBC News 2014).

Although researchers tend to focus on attitudes in the separatist areas, public attitudes in the parent state can also be highly relevant to a movement's success. Peaceful resolution between the central government and the secessionist group relies on the negotiated consent of both parties. The consent of the parent population can be necessary to demarcate new territorial boundaries. The Canadian Supreme Court, for example, ruled that Quebec could not unilaterally declare independence, but rather must negotiate with the rest of Canada as a prerequisite to secession (Leslie 1999). In secessionist conflicts, negotiated resolutions must be viewed by inhabitants of the parent state as permissible to begin demobilization.

Finally, studying public attitudes is a useful way to evaluate micro-foundations of arguments about the international dimensions of secession. For example, if international endorsement by foreign powers gives legitimacy to secessionist movements (e.g., Coggins 2011), we should see this reflected in public opinion. To that end, this section draws on existing literature to outline theoretical arguments for how foreign endorsements may affect public opinion toward secessionist movements. We derive competing hypotheses for how international endorsements could shape public attitudes in the separatist areas versus the parent state. We conclude by discussing how the characteristics of foreign endorsers make their endorsements more or less influential.

Why Foreign Endorsements Might Not Matter

One possibility is that *foreign endorsements have little or no impact on public attitudes toward secession among people living in separatist areas or in the parent state*. This is likely to be the case in contexts where attitudes have hardened over time or due to violent conflict. In these cases, variation in public opinion about secession is likely driven by individual attributes such as ethnic and religious identity, political beliefs, and perceptions of the central government (Giuliano 2015; Muñoz and Tormos 2015; Sarigil and Karakoc 2016). Other factors that shape public attitudes may be domestic factors, such as the relative distribution of power between the separatist group and the parent state, a history of autonomy or independence, and geographical concentration and/or non-contiguity (Brancati 2006; Lustick et al. 2004; Sorens 2005). In such cases, the opinions of individuals directly impacted by separatist claims are unlikely to be swayed by international audiences.

One reason why foreign endorsements may not impact attitudes toward secession is that these movements often link strong identity-based attachments to physical territory. International relations scholars document the ubiquity of territorial conflict (e.g., Diehl and Goertz 1992; Vasquez 1993), emphasizing that disputes fought over territory are particularly deadly (Hensel 1996). Territorial attachments can reflect desire for a territory's material resources, strategic value, and/or symbolic or cultural significance (Lee 2024; Toft 2003, 2014; Vasquez 1993). People living in the parent state may also have strong beliefs about secession, especially if they view secessionist movements as a threat to the integrity of the state (Coggins 2016; Sorens 2012).

Another reason why public attitudes could be hardened around secessionist claims is that these disputes can be accompanied by high levels of political violence. Researchers

show that relative to other types of civil conflict, secessionist conflicts tend to last longer and are more likely to become violent (Fearon 2004; Walter 2009). If citizens are willing to take up arms on behalf of a separatist cause, their attitudes may be unlikely to be influenced by foreign actors. Moreover, as separatist movements become more conflictual, ongoing violence can exacerbate anger and fear in local populations, entrenching beliefs about the separatist group and the parent state (Kaufmann 1996; Sambanis and Shayo 2013).

This discussion suggests that foreign endorsements of secessionist movements are unlikely to change public opinion toward these movements in either the secessionist area or the parent state when strong prior feelings exist about identity and territory. This is especially likely when separatist claims have escalated to high levels of political violence or when claims have been made over long periods of time, hardening identities and attitudes on either side of the conflict. This discussion leads to the following null hypothesis:

Null Hypothesis. Foreign endorsements have little or no impact on public attitudes toward secessionist movements among people living in the separatist areas or in the parent state.

How Foreign Endorsements Could Shape Public Attitudes in Separatist Areas

We previously outlined why public attitudes toward secessionist movements are unlikely to be easily swayed by foreign observers. Yet, other research suggests a plausible theoretical alternative, which is that *foreign endorsements increase favorability toward secession among people living in separatist areas*. Importantly, endorsement is a “bundled treatment” that could simultaneously convey information about military intervention, financial support, and international legitimacy. To the extent that endorsements are influential in separatist areas, we generally expect them to alter the expected utility of secession by lowering its anticipated costs and increasing its anticipated benefits.

International endorsements may lower anticipated costs or increase anticipated benefits of secession by increasing the power and bargaining position of separatist groups and legitimizing separatist claims (Coggins 2016; Muro and Vlaskamp 2016; Qvortrup 2014; Shelef and Zeira 2017). Endorsements of secessionist movements may contribute to the perception that foreign actors are willing to provide support, from financial assistance to military intervention (Fazal and Griffiths 2008, 2014; Griffiths 2014; Salehyan et al. 2011). Endorsements may also signal that the separatist region has a greater likelihood of being accepted by the international community as a sovereign state, which comes with a variety of benefits (Coggins 2016; Fazal and Griffiths 2008, 2014; Griffiths 2014, 2021; Qvortrup 2014). Anticipating such benefits, people living in a separatist region may react to foreign endorsements by becoming more favorable toward secessionist movements.

A handful of studies examine the effect of international endorsement or recognition on domestic dynamics of secession by focusing on public opinion. The empirical findings in these studies are mixed. Shelef and Zeira (2017) find that international

recognition of Palestine increases support for partition among Palestinians, but reduces support for compromise on the terms of partition, likely because it increases the bargaining position of the separatist group. In later work, [Shelef and Zeira \(2023\)](#) further show that international recognition reduces popular support for violence in separatist conflicts by altering the relative payoffs of violent and nonviolent strategies. We build on this work by considering how characteristics of the endorser influence not only the population in the separatist areas, but also in the parent state areas.

In a different context, [Muro and Vlaskamp \(2016\)](#) find that the prospect of EU membership for Catalonia and Scotland has limited effects on public support for secession. Great Power recognition of Catalonia and Scotland, on the other hand, increases public support for secession, moderated by nationalist sentiment and secessionist motivations ([Muro et al. 2020](#)). These mixed empirical findings are consistent with conflicting theoretical expectations about the relationship between foreign endorsements and public opinion in separatist areas. Some literature anticipates that international endorsements will have no impact on attitudes toward secession. But to the extent that it does, we would expect international endorsement to increase approval of secession in separatist areas, leading to the following hypothesis:

Cost-Benefit Hypothesis. Foreign endorsements increase approval of secessionist movements among people living in separatist areas.

How Foreign Endorsements Could Shape Public Attitudes in Parent States

Although some studies speak to how international endorsement influences public attitudes in separatist areas, research on attitudes in the parent state is even more limited. However, classic theories of inter-group relations anticipate that *foreign endorsements of secessionist movements will reduce support for secession among people living in the parent state*. When considering whether to make concessions to separatist groups, parent states weigh the threat of current and future separatist claims ([Butt 2017](#); [Cunningham 2011](#); [Griffiths 2015](#); [Toft 2002](#); [Walter 2009](#)). As a consequence, parent states are more likely to make concessions to separatist groups when they are less threatening, such as when the group is fragmented ([Cunningham 2011](#)) or their claim adheres to a unique administrative region ([Griffiths 2015, 2016](#)). By contrast, parent states react more coercively to separatist groups that heighten security risks, such groups that share identity-based ties with geopolitical rivals ([Butt 2017](#)).

In theory, international endorsements should increase the threat of the separatist group to the parent state. As discussed previously, foreign endorsements create permissible conditions for new states to secede ([Coggins 2011, 2016](#)), signaling the possibility of material and symbolic forms of external support and strengthening the bargaining power of separatist groups ([Muro and Vlaskamp 2016](#); [Shelef and Zeira 2017](#)). Endorsements from foreign actors may be especially credible if the endorsing leader incurs domestic audience costs ([Fearon 1994](#)). Once leaders publicly side with a separatist cause, backing down from those commitments could risk electoral punishment or elite backlash at home, especially in democracies. Finally, endorsements

may be indicative of endogenous legitimacy: international actors are more likely to endorse and/or recognize separatist claims when they perceive the claims as legitimate (Coggins 2011, 2016; Newman and Visoka 2023; Seymour 2018). As more endorsements are issued by foreign actors, additional endorsements may follow.

Combining these insights with influential theories about inter-group conflict informs expectations about the relationship between international endorsements and public support for secession in the parent states. These theories tell us that, as an out-group becomes more threatening, the in-group will experience more negative attitudes toward the out-group (Blalock 1967; Blumer 1958; Runciman 1966; Sidanius et al. 1992). Gurr (1970) and Claassen (2014) draw on these theories to help explain how economic, political, and social hierarchy - or threats to it - contribute to conflict between social groups.

In the context of secessionist conflicts, people living in the separatist region represent the out-group and people living in the parent state represent the in-group. Foreign endorsement of secession should increase the perceived threat of separatist groups to the parent state, as endorsements increase the economic, political, and symbolic power of separatist groups. Thus, theories of inter-group conflict predict that foreign endorsement of secession should induce backlash and reduce support for secession among citizens of the parent state.

Backlash Hypothesis. Foreign endorsements decrease approval of secessionist movements among people living in the parent state.

Variation in the Strength of Foreign Endorsements

In the preceding sections, we outlined expectations about how foreign endorsements impact public attitudes toward secessionist movements. However, these overarching effects vary based on which foreign actor is issuing the endorsement and how they are perceived by the population of interest. Political behavior literature on elite cues and endorsements, as well as literature on the international dimensions of separatist movements, anticipates the characteristics of foreign actors that make endorsements more or less influential.

Early studies of elite cues and endorsement effects tell us that citizens often rely on endorsements to make informed political decisions (Downs 1957; Lupia 1994). The persuasiveness of an endorsement depends in part on the degree to which the recipient views the actor issuing the endorsement as knowledgeable, trustworthy, or sharing common interests. In other words, people are more likely to be persuaded by endorsements from actors they view favorably. Subsequent research on endorsement effects and elite cues demonstrates that international actors—such as international organizations (e.g., Chapman 2011; Dellmuth and Tallberg 2021; Grieco et al. 2011) and leaders from abroad (e.g., Dragojlovic 2013; Hayes and Guardino 2011)—have the potential to influence public opinion on a wide range of issues.

Existing research on secessionist movements suggests that certain features of international actors make their endorsements more influential. For one, endorsements from major powers—especially those with significant military, economic, or diplomatic

leverage—are more likely to affect public opinion (Muro et al. 2020; Muro and Vlaskamp 2016; Shelef and Zeira 2017). In separatist areas, statements of support from powerful foreign actors can function as credible promises of support, protection, or deterrence against retaliation from the parent state. Endorsements from economically powerful states can raise expectations of future aid, trade, or investment for a newly independent state (Fazal and Griffiths 2008, 2014; Griffiths 2014). In the parent state, the material power of a foreign endorser shapes how threatening secessionist claims appear. Endorsements from powerful countries, especially those with a history of interventionism, may increase the perceived costs of allowing secession, hardening opposition to secessionist claims in the parent state (Florea 2017; Jenne et al. 2007; Kenwick and Lemke 2023; Lee 2018).

Beyond material power, symbolic factors such as the endorser's global standing or ideological alignment also shape the effectiveness of foreign endorsements. Endorsements from states with high diplomatic prestige, like permanent members of the UN Security Council, are perceived as more legitimate and carry more weight with international audiences (Coggins 2016; Qvortrup 2014; Shelef and Zeira 2017). Endorsements from states with shared institutions or ideological values could be especially persuasive to people living in separatist areas if the secessionist movement aspires to similar governance (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Newman and Visoka 2023; Seymour 2018).

Finally, endorsements from actors who share ethnic, religious, or historical ties with the separatist population are likely to be more influential than those from culturally dissimilar states (Buhaug and Gleditsch 2008; Cunningham and Sawyer 2017; Saideman and Ayres 2000). People living in separatist areas may interpret endorsements from neighboring states with strong ethnic or religious ties as more credible and emotionally resonant (Saideman 1997, 2002; Saideman et al. 2005). At the same time, endorsements from actors who share identity-based ties with a separatist group are especially likely to amplify perceived threat in the parent state (Butt 2017). Such endorsements could intensify anxieties about economic and military intervention or heighten the salience of identity, reinforcing inter-group dynamics (Blalock 1967; Blumer 1958; Butt 2017; Runciman 1966; Sidanius et al. 1992).

In sum, endorsements from foreign actors have the potential to influence public opinion about secessionist movements. Endorsements are more likely to be influential when they are issued by foreign actors with substantial material power, high diplomatic status, or identity-based ties with the separatist group. In these cases, we should be more likely to find support for the *Cost-Benefit Hypothesis* and the *Backlash Hypothesis*. Endorsements should be more likely to increase favorability toward secession in separatist areas by lowering anticipated costs and increasing anticipated benefits to secession. These same endorsements should also elevate the perceived threat of secessionist activities, decreasing favorability toward secession among people living in the parent state.

Research Design

Our theoretical discussion emphasized three insights drawn from existing work on the international dimensions of secession. First, there are many reasons to expect that

foreign endorsements will have little to no impact on public opinion about secessionist claims. Second, to the extent that foreign endorsements do impact public opinion, they should affect attitudes differently in separatist areas versus in the parent state. Because endorsements from international audiences can confer material and symbolic benefits to separatists, they should increase favorability toward secession within separatist areas. However, in the parent state, foreign endorsements should increase the perceived threat of a separatist group, reducing support for secession. Third, we should expect the strength of these endorsement effects to vary based on characteristics of the conflict and the endorser.

To examine the impact of foreign endorsements of separatist movements on public attitudes toward those movements, we focus on the case of Ukraine. We analyze public attitudes toward the Russian-backed separatist movement in the Donbas region in eastern Ukraine. We begin by describing the context in which this separatist movement emerged and then outline an original public opinion survey we fielded in April to June 2017, after the secessionist conflict in Donbas had been going on for a few years, but prior to Russian President Vladimir Putin's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. In the discussion of results, we further elaborate on why our findings from 2017 could still inform ongoing debates about post-2022 Ukraine.

Context

The secessionist conflict in Donbas that began in 2014 was rooted in divisions between southeastern Ukraine and the rest of the country. The region is made up of the two administrative units ("oblasts") in eastern Ukraine called Luhansk and Donetsk that border Russia. Eastern Ukraine is largely populated by ethnic Russians, who account for less than 20 percent of the population nationwide. During the presidency of Viktor Yanukovich, tensions between pro-European and pro-Russian orientations re-escalated when Yanukovich refused to sign the highly anticipated Association Agreement with the EU in 2013 and instead reopened negotiations with Russia about joining the Eurasian Customs Union. In response to Yanukovich's pro-Russian policies, protests erupted in western Ukraine, leading to the president's ouster.

In March 2014, Russian forces annexed the Crimean peninsula as part of a covert military operation and fueled counter-protests in Donbas. By late spring of 2014, Russian-backed separatists proclaimed the independence of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (DNR and LNR, respectively). The self-proclaimed republics split Donbas into an area under de facto separatist control (known to the rest of Ukraine and much of the international community as "the occupied territories" or "non-government controlled areas") and an area that remained under Ukrainian control ("government controlled areas"). A prolonged, bloody insurgency followed between separatists and Ukrainian forces. After multiple attempts to negotiate a resolution in late 2014 and early 2015, low levels of fighting—punctuated by periods of escalation—persisted in the region until the Russian government launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

The separatist movement in Donbas is an instructive case for a few reasons. For one, multiple international actors have been directly or indirectly involved in the secessionist movement, allowing us to examine how different foreign endorsements shape public attitudes. Given that powerful foreign actors are the most likely to influence public opinion, we focus on two major powers involved in the conflict in Donbas: Russia and the EU. Naturally, Russia has had the most direct involvement through its backing of the separatist insurgency. At the time our survey was fielded in 2017, the Russian government had not formally endorsed the secession of the self-proclaimed LNR/DNR but it would ultimately do so in February 2022. From the outset of the 2014 conflict, however, it was widely reported that—despite repeated denials from the Kremlin—the Russian government was providing substantial covert military and financial support to separatist groups in Donbas (Walker 2015).⁴ By contrast, the EU's involvement in the conflict in Donbas was largely indirect. In response to the annexation of Crimea and Russia's provocations in eastern Ukraine in 2014, the EU issued condemnations and imposed various waves of sanctions on Russia (Council of the European Union 2025). EU member states also provided financial assistance to Ukraine after 2014 to support its economic recovery (King 2019).

The window of time in which we fielded our survey in 2017 gave us a unique opportunity to access respondents both inside and outside of the separatist areas in Donbas. Doing so enables us to compare how endorsements differentially impact attitudes in the separatist areas vs. the parent state. After this period, it became increasingly difficult for researchers to collect public opinion data in non-government controlled areas of Donbas.

We note that this case is a relatively “hard test” of the relationship between foreign endorsement and public attitudes toward separatism. For one, for ethical reasons and to avoid deceiving respondents, the endorsements in our survey are framed as hypothetical. In addition, unlike other recent separatist movements in Europe, such as the independence movements in Scotland and Catalonia, the separatist movement in the self-proclaimed LNR/DNR is characterized by substantial armed conflict. By 2017, when our survey was fielded, considerable loss of human life, destruction of property, and credible allegations of war crimes committed by Russian-backed separatist forces⁵ hardened views toward the movement among the rest of the Ukrainian population. This means it is challenging to shape public attitudes in the context of a survey experiment. At the same time, during the time our survey was fielded, attitudes toward the secessionist movement in Donbas and the relevant international actors involved in the movement had not yet calcified to the point that they later would after the full-scale military invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. As our results demonstrate, there is still a good deal of variation in public opinion within and across different regions of Ukraine.

Sample and Survey Design

To look at the impact of foreign endorsements on attitudes toward secession, we partnered with an independent research firm, Kyiv International Institute of Sociology

(KIIS), to include a survey experiment on an omnibus public opinion survey of adults living in Ukraine, both inside and outside of the Donbas region (composed of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts) in eastern Ukraine. We stratified our sample into three regions: (1) the rest of Ukraine excluding Donbas (2) the portions of Donbas that remained under control of the Ukrainian government, and (3) the occupied territories/self-proclaimed separatist republics within Donbas. A total of 2,423 respondents completed the experiment between April and June 2017, with 914, 839, and 670 completed responses from each region, respectively. By significantly oversampling in Donbas, both inside and directly outside the separatist regions, we were able to gather data from a large percentage of respondents who were supportive of the Russian-backed separatist movement as well as respondents who lived in close proximity to the ongoing conflict.

To construct our sample, we used random digit dialing (RDD) based on area codes that correspond to different oblasts (administrative units) within Ukraine. Potential survey participants were contacted by telephone and asked a series of demographic questions. Respondents who met relevant demographic quotas⁶ and agreed to participate in our survey were given a website address to take the online survey on their mobile phone or computer. Respondents could take the survey in Ukrainian or Russian. Those who completed the survey were financially compensated for their time via SMS text message. The [online appendix](#) contains more information about the sampling strategy and the demographics of our sample.

Embedded in the survey was a simple endorsement experiment. Respondents were randomly assigned to one of three treatment conditions. The first condition was a control group, which asked respondents the main outcome question directly. We include this control group to establish baseline attitudes toward the secessionist movement across each of the regions in our sample. The second and third conditions added a hypothetical endorsement from a foreign actor, either Russia or the EU. This means that respondents read one of three questions:

- **Control Group:** How much do you approve or disapprove of the territory currently known as the Luhansk and Donetsk People's Republics seceding (becoming independent) from Ukraine?
- **Russia Endorsement:** Suppose that Russia endorses the secession of the territory currently known as the Luhansk and Donetsk People's Republics. How much would you approve or disapprove of the republics becoming independent in this case?
- **EU Endorsement:** Suppose that the European Union endorses the secession of the territory currently known as the Luhansk and Donetsk People's Republics. How much would you approve or disapprove of the republics becoming independent in this case?

Respondents then selected one of five response options: *Strongly Disapprove/Disapprove/Neutral/Approve/Strongly Approve*. Our main interest is in how international endorsements impacted attitudes toward secession in each of the regions we sampled.

Results

We start by describing the attitudes of respondents toward Russia and the EU, the two international actors included in the endorsement experiment. Before the experiment, we asked respondents: “Do you have a favorable or unfavorable view of (the European Union/ Russia)?” Respondents could choose one of the following response options for each question: *Very Unfavorable/Somewhat Unfavorable/Neutral/Somewhat Favorable/Very Favorable*. Figure 1 shows the results for the EU (left panel) and for Russia (right panel) in each of the three regions in our sample.

As expected, attitudes toward these different foreign actors vary across Ukraine. The top panel shows attitudes in what we consider “the parent state,” or Ukrainian territory outside of Donbas (“Rest of Ukraine”). In this region, views toward the EU were almost completely neutral or positive, with less than 15 percent of respondents reporting unfavorable views. Views toward Russia were much more negative, with fewer than 10 percent of the sample showing favorability toward the country. The middle panel shows attitudes in Donbas that remained under Ukrainian control outside of the separatist areas (“Govt-Controlled East”). Here, views were more mixed. While the modal respondent was neutral toward both the EU and Russia, over 30 percent reported favorable views toward the EU, and slightly more held unfavorable views toward Russia. At the same time, over 15 percent expressed favorable views toward Russia. In the separatist-controlled areas (“Occupied Donbas”), attitudes were quite different, with around 50 percent of respondents viewing Russia favorably, compared to only 15 percent viewing the EU favorably.

Figure 2 shows attitudes toward secession within each of the three regions. Since this question was asked after the endorsement experiment, we include only the views of respondents who were assigned to the control group. Unsurprisingly, Ukrainians living

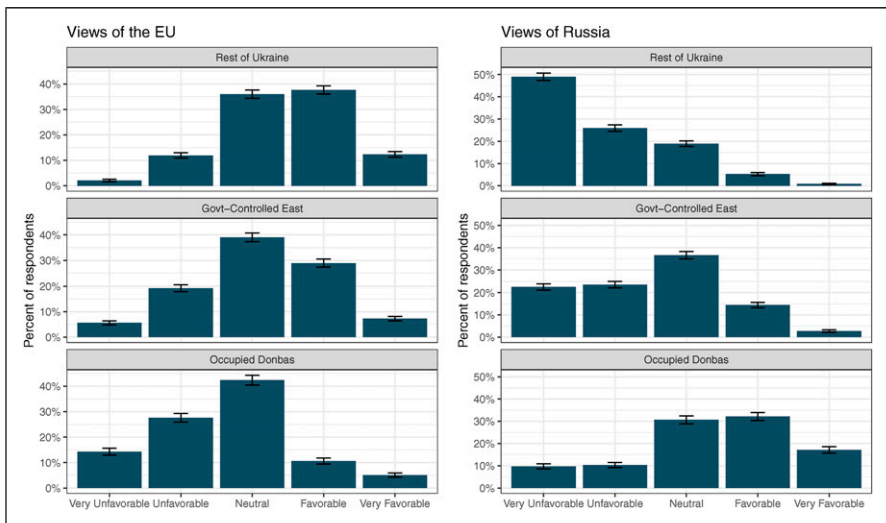


Figure 1. Respondent attitudes toward the EU and Russia.

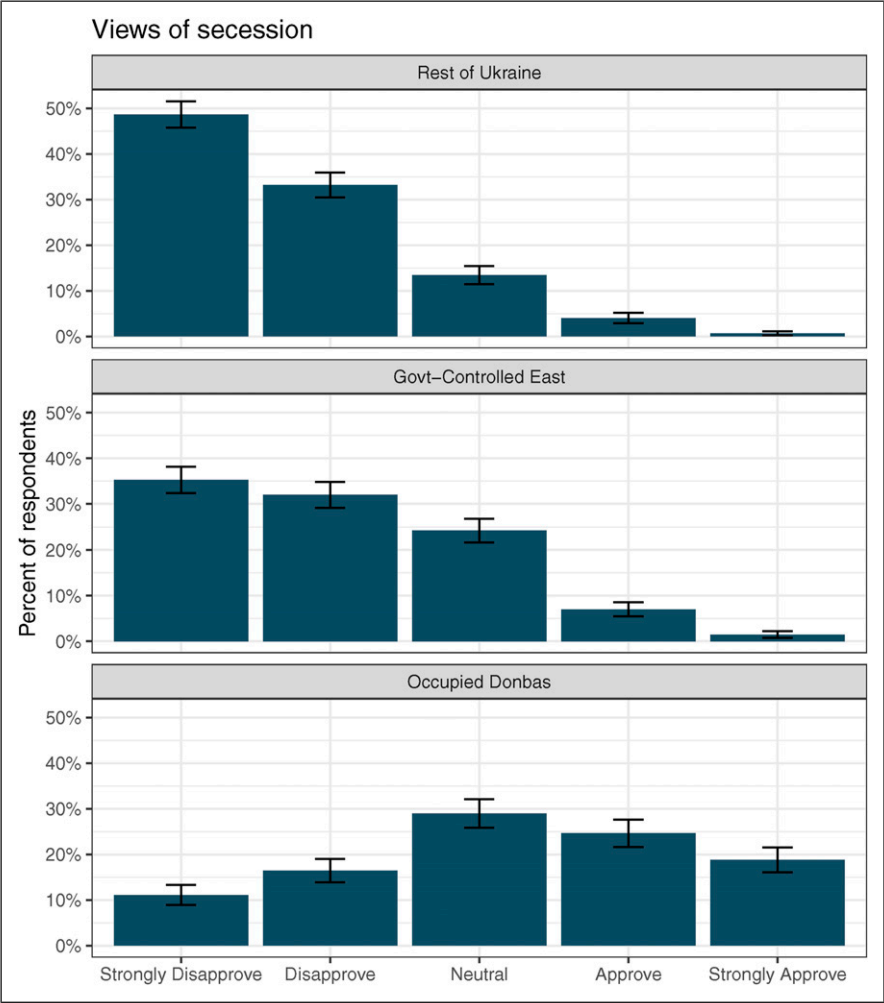


Figure 2. Attitudes toward secession by region (among the control group).

in the parent state (the top two panels) tended to largely oppose secession, with less than 10 percent of respondents approving of it. In the separatist areas, views were more mixed, with over 40 percent approving of secession. Still, a substantial minority of respondents living in the separatist region opposed secession (around 25 percent).

Main Results

To evaluate our three main hypotheses, we examine how foreign endorsements impact public attitudes toward secession. We regress the outcome on indicators for

endorsements and include relevant demographic control variables.⁷ Figure 3 describes the results.⁸ The left panel shows the results in the parent state outside of Donbas (“Rest of Ukraine”). In this area, EU endorsement increased support for secession by 0.29 points (95 percent C.I.: 0.14–0.44), representing a 39 percent increase over the control mean in the parent state, but Russian endorsement did not have a significant effect on public attitudes. The positive effect of EU endorsement contradicts the *Backlash Hypothesis*, which suggested that foreign endorsements should *decrease* support for secessionist movements within the parent state by heightening perceived threat of the separatist area. We further unpack this finding in the next section.

The middle panel shows the results within the Ukrainian-controlled areas of Donbas (“Govt-Controlled East”). Here, both Russian and EU endorsements significantly increase support for secession. Specifically, EU endorsement increased support for secession by 0.36 points (95 % C.I.: 0.18–0.53), representing a 33 percent increase over the control mean in the Government-Controlled East. Similarly, Russian endorsement increased support for secession by 0.26 points (95 % C.I.: 0.09–0.42), representing a 24 percent increase over the control mean in the same region. The right panel displays the results in the separatist areas of Donbas (“Occupied Donbas”). In this region, Russian endorsement does not significantly increase favorability toward secession, but EU endorsement marginally does. The estimated treatment effect of EU endorsement within the separatist areas is 0.22 (95 % C.I.: 0.002 - 0.44), which represents a 10 percent increase over the control mean in this region. Taken collectively, these results provide mixed support for both the *Null Hypothesis* and the *Cost-Benefit Hypothesis*. Some endorsements did not impact public attitudes toward secession. But to the extent that they do, in Donbas, they appear to *increase* support for the secessionist movement.

Figure 3, however, emphasizes that there is variation in the effects of foreign endorsement across the three regions in our sample. One interesting observation is that endorsements do not substantially influence attitudes toward secession within the separatist-controlled areas (right panel). We think there are two likely explanations for

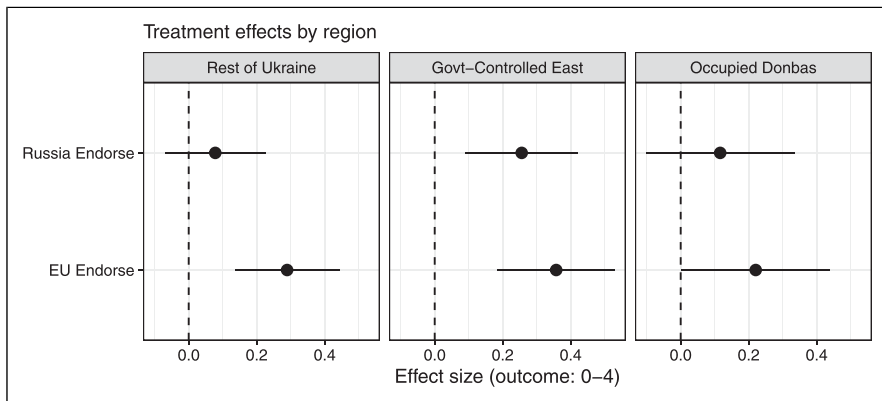


Figure 3. Main treatment effects by region.

this finding. A first explanation—consistent with discussions of our *Null Hypothesis*—is that in areas that have experienced the most direct, protracted conflict, identities and attitudes are most likely to be hardened. A second possible explanation, illustrated by [Figure 2](#), is that a relatively small percentage (around 25 percent) of respondents in the occupied territories disapprove of the secessionist movement. In practice, this means that we are more likely to observe a ceiling effect on foreign endorsements in the separatist region relative to regions controlled by the Ukrainian government, where a much higher proportion of respondents disapprove of secessionist activities.

[Figure 3](#) also shows that the effect of endorsement varies based on the foreign actor. In particular, EU endorsement increases support for secession across all three regions (although this effect is marginal in the occupied territories), whereas Russian endorsement only increases support within the portions of Donbas controlled by the Ukrainian government. We expect these null results are partly driven by the fact that Russian endorsement may be less informative to survey respondents. Although the Russian government had not yet formally endorsed secessionist activities at this stage of the conflict, it was widely known that Russia was covertly backing separatist groups ([Walker 2015](#)). The null effects of Russian endorsement in the parent state could also be attributable to the fact that views of Russia throughout the rest of Ukraine were largely unfavorable. As a consequence, respondents in parent state may be more likely to discount Russia's endorsement.

To further unpack the relationship between favorability toward a foreign actor and the effectiveness of an endorsement, we run the same regression as earlier but subset the sample by respondents who are (not) favorable toward each of the EU and Russia within each region.⁹ [Figure 4](#) shows the results. As the figure on the left shows, EU endorsement increases support for secession among those who are not favorable toward the EU in all the regions, including in the parent state. Meanwhile, Russian endorsements do not significantly increase support for secession among those living in the parent state.

These results indicate that EU endorsement can be effective even among people who do not favor the EU, particularly in the parent state. Meanwhile, Russian endorsement only influences those who already favor Russia in the Donbas region. The findings illustrate that foreign endorsements can be influential across diverse opinion groups, although they tend to be more effective when the endorsing entity already has local support.

Exploring Attitudes in the Parent State

An especially interesting finding from our survey is that the results contradict the *Backlash Hypothesis*, which anticipates that foreign endorsements decrease support for secession within the parent state. The top left panel of [Figure 4](#) shows that throughout Ukrainian territory outside of Donbas, EU endorsement *increases* support for secession. What could explain these puzzling results in the parent state? We consider three plausible explanations for why international endorsements could increase support for secession in the parent state.

The most straightforward explanation for our findings in the parent state is a simple endorsement explanation: perhaps the increase in support for secession in the parent

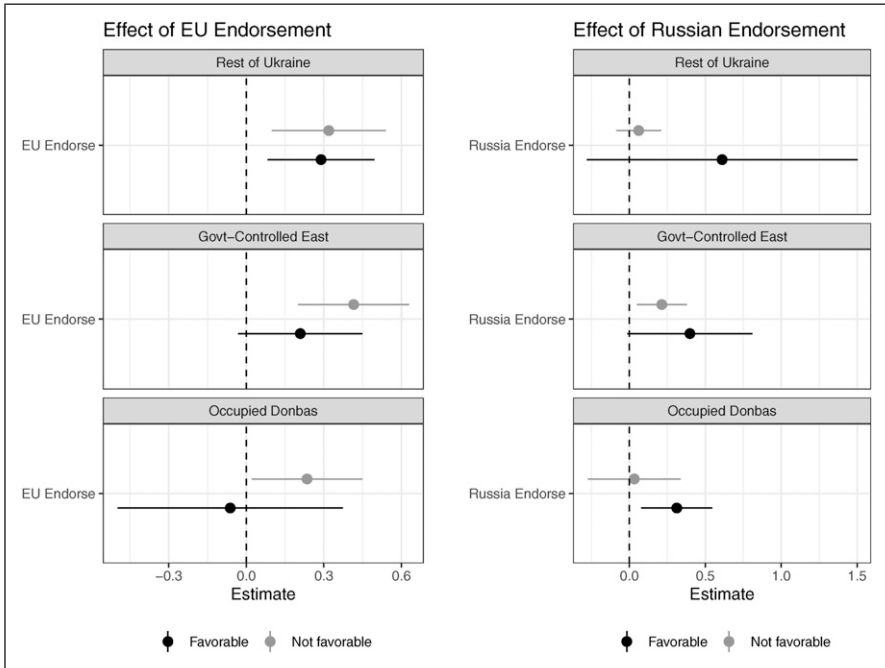


Figure 4. Treatment effects by views toward the EU and Russia.

state is driven by respondents who are favorable toward the EU and therefore are persuaded by its endorsement. If this were the case, we would expect to see heterogeneous treatment effects in response to the EU endorsement based on survey respondents' favorability to the EU. However, the top panel of Figure 4 shows that the positive effect of EU endorsement persists even among respondents living in the parent state who are *not* favorable to the EU.¹⁰

An alternative interpretation of the treatment effect is that EU endorsement of secession signals to respondents in the parent state that a quicker resolution of the conflict is possible. If this were the case, the positive treatment effect would be largely driven by respondents who want to prioritize peace in the region. In a later module of our survey, we asked respondents: "Overall, which of these objectives is more important? Bringing peace to the region or creating justice by holding those who committed war crimes accountable." We analyze whether the EU endorsement effect was heterogeneous based on whether respondents thought that bringing peace to the region was the most important objective. Figure A.2 in the appendix shows that EU endorsement in the parent state increased support for secession both among those who said they prioritize peace and those who said they prioritize justice, rather than being largely concentrated among those who prioritize peace. We are cautious in interpreting these results because this question was asked post-treatment. However, the analyses

suggest that the positive effect of EU endorsement in the parent state is not primarily driven by respondents who want to prioritize peace.

A final possibility is that respondents in the parent state anticipate that EU endorsement will come with other forms of material support, such as financial assistance to Ukraine. Of the three possible explanations, we think that this best explains why even respondents in the parent state who do not favor the EU are still more likely to approve of secession after the EU endorsement. As in other countries in Eastern Europe, many Ukrainians who dislike the EU as a political and cultural project may still be interested in receiving economic assistance from the EU. Some suggestive—although not definitive—evidence to this effect comes from an earlier question on our survey that asks respondents, “In your opinion, how acceptable is it for the European Union to provide aid to the territories currently known as the Luhansk and Donetsk People’s Republic?”¹¹ We show in an appendix (see [Appendix Figure A.3](#)) that a sizeable percentage (49–68 percent) of respondents who are unfavorable toward the EU are still either favorable or neutral toward EU aid given to Donbas. This implies that a substantial portion of respondents who do not have a positive view of the EU still see EU endorsement of secession as likely to be accompanied by other forms of material support for Ukraine. We see this as the most likely explanation for our findings in the parent state but leave definitive tests of this mechanism to future research.

Implications for Post-2022 Ukraine

Another important question raised by our findings is how they could translate to the current context in eastern Ukraine. Since our survey was conducted in 2017, the situation in Ukraine has changed considerably. In 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. That year, the territory that had been held by pro-Russian separatists since 2014 became fully occupied by the Russian military. By the fall of 2022, in a move rebuked by the international community, Putin unilaterally annexed Donbas along with other regions of eastern Ukraine ([United Nations General Assembly 2022](#)). As the conflict continues, questions about the occupied territories in eastern Ukraine are no longer about secession and independence but rather largely about Russian annexation. As a 2022 research study summarized, “Among Donbas residents, the debate is between those who want to be annexed by Russia and those who do not” ([O’Loughlin et al. 2022](#)).

Although future research is needed, there are some insights from our study that plausibly inform the present conflict. For one, our findings suggest that public attitudes may be less sticky than previously assumed, even in the midst of ongoing secessionist movements or armed conflicts. Foreign endorsements can shape public views on whether concessions made by the parent state are desirable. In the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, negotiations about the borders, the status of occupied territories, and the prospects of any future settlement will in part depend on local acceptance and support of these outcomes. If international actors signal support for (or disapproval of) changes in sovereignty and territorial control, the local public may be responsive, especially if these signals are accompanied by other forms of material support. In the months

immediately following the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, research showed that Ukrainians were largely unwilling to accept any territorial concessions in response to Russia's aggression (Dill et al. 2024). However, as the conflict has progressed, public opinion polls demonstrate that a significant minority of Ukrainians may be willing to make territorial concessions to achieve peace (Grushetskyi 2024).

Conclusion

This paper explores the impact of international endorsements of separatist movements on public attitudes toward secession, drawing on the case of the Russian-backed separatist movement that emerged in eastern Ukraine in 2014. In a survey experiment conducted in 2017 across Ukraine, we found that international endorsements could affect public opinion toward secession, even in a context where attitudes are more likely to have hardened due to ongoing political violence. Our findings also emphasized that international endorsements of secessionist movements have the potential to influence public opinion in both the separatist region and the parent state.

The study makes two contributions to the literature on the international dimensions of secession. First, it emphasizes the importance of examining public attitudes in both the separatist areas and the parent state, as attitudes within the parent state are crucial for the success of a secessionist movement. This insight is especially relevant for democratic societies, where public opinion can influence policy decisions regarding territorial disputes and separatist demands.

Second, our findings highlight important variation in how foreign endorsements influence attitudes toward secession in the parent state. In the Ukrainian context, the influence of an endorsement depended on which foreign power issued it. Across the different regions of Ukraine, endorsements of secession from the EU were most likely to impact public attitudes. One of our most interesting findings related to EU endorsement in the parent state. Contrary to classic theories of inter-group relations, the results show that within this region, EU endorsements of secession increased support for independence even among those who were not favorable toward the EU. Future research might investigate whether the effect of endorsement on public opinion in the parent state is influenced by the expectation of specific material benefits, such as economic aid.

Since our survey was conducted, the 2022 Russian invasion and annexation of Ukrainian territories has altered the nature of the conflict. However, the study's findings on how foreign endorsements can affect local perceptions remain relevant. The results suggest that foreign endorsements still may influence public calculations about the legitimacy and viability of territorial changes, an important consideration in the current conflict. Beyond the Ukrainian case, this study suggests that external support can reinforce or destabilize existing preferences in secessionist disputes. By focusing on Ukraine, a setting marked by prolonged tension and violent conflict, we highlight how foreign endorsements can be influential even where conflict has hardened views. This has implications in a broader comparative context, particularly in other contested statehood settings. Across cases such as Georgia and Abkhazia, Moldova and

Transnistria, and Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan, foreign powers routinely weight in on questions of sovereignty and territorial integrity. These endorsements may similarly influence how domestic populations assess the threat and legitimacy of secessionist claims, and the possibility and desirability of peaceful resolution.

In Georgia, for instance, public opinion toward Abkhazian independents has been shaped by Russian recognition and Western non-recognition, dynamics that echo the competing foreign signals seen in Ukraine (Broers 2013). In Moldova, the unresolved status of Transnistria persists in part because international actors offer mixed cues, potentially sustaining public ambivalence (Place 2024). Likewise, in Iraq, where Kurdish aspirations for independence remain salient, endorsements or opposition from the U.S., Turkey, and Iran have demonstrably shaped both elite and public reactions (Lawrence 2009). These parallels suggest that our findings are not unique to the Ukrainian context, but instead reflect a broader logic of how foreign involvement interacts with domestic opinion in secessionist disputes. Examining the Donbas case shows how foreign endorsements intersect with local perceptions and can help or hinder the prospects for negotiated settlements. The ability of international actors to influence local attitudes through endorsements signals the continued importance of foreign involvement in shaping the outcomes of secessionist movements.

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ORCID iDs

Stephanie Wright  <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-4554-2713>

Ala Alrababah  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5762-8892>

Rachel Myrick  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9833-6041>

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Data Availability Statement

The survey data and replication code for this project is available at on Dataverse at: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/JHHNMV> (Wright et al. 2025).

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. See, e.g., [Brancati \(2006\)](#), [Cunningham \(2011\)](#), [Griffiths \(2015, 2016\)](#), [Jenne et al. \(2007\)](#), [Johnson and Toft \(2013/2014\)](#), [Lacina \(2015\)](#), [Lustick et al. \(2004\)](#), and [Walter \(2009\)](#).
2. Often referred to as “Donbas”.
3. Recognition, a formal legal act by which a state acknowledges another entity as a sovereign state under international law, is arguably the strongest form of endorsement ([Coggins 2011](#); [Fabry 2010](#); [Huddleston 2020](#)). This paper focuses on endorsement rather than recognition because endorsement often occurs earlier in the conflict trajectory, at a stage when public opinion is still in flux and political outcomes remain negotiable.
4. Despite Russia’s ongoing support of the movement, many analysts did not anticipate that the Russian government would formally recognize the LNR/DNR. As one article described after the announcement in February 2022, “For years, and even in recent months, it was widely believed that Putin would refrain from making such a move”—referring to the recognition of the separatist entities as independent ([Guterman 2022](#)). This lends credibility to the control group in our experiment, in which respondents are not informed about Russian endorsement.
5. See, for example, the International Criminal Court’s “Report on Preliminary Examination Activities” issued in 2017 detailing alleged crimes in eastern Ukraine and Crimea ([ICC 2017](#)).
6. We used quota sampling to match target demographic quotas based on gender, age, and geographic location.
7. The controls include age (logged), income level, and indicators for completing university education, identifying as a Russian ethnic, speaking Russian at home, belonging to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, gender, and being employed. In the [appendix](#), we show our main findings are very similar without covariate adjustment.
8. Columns 2, 4, and 6 in [Appendix Table A.2](#) show the regression results for this figure while columns 1, 3, and 5 show the results without controls. [Online Appendix Table A.6](#) attempts to address potential problems with inattentive respondents, showing the results with the fastest 20 percent of respondents removed from each region. [Online Appendix Table A.9](#) shows the results after including separate models controlling for ethnicity, religion, and the language in which the survey was answered.
9. We asked the respondents two separate questions to examine their favorability toward the EU and Russia. For the analyses, we code survey respondents who are favorable toward each actor as “favorable” and those unfavorable or neutral as “not favorable”.
10. In an [online appendix](#), we further distinguish between respondents who are favorable, neutral, and unfavorable toward the different foreign endorsers (see [Online Appendix Table A.7](#) and [Table A.8](#)). In the parent state, EU endorsement continues to have a positive effect on respondents who are favorable, neutral, or unfavorable to the EU.
11. This question was part of an earlier experiment about attitudes toward foreign aid described in an [online appendix](#).

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