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Responding to broken relations: Linkage and Norwegian attitudes towards Russia

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Abstract

This article examines the effects of various forms of linkage on public attitudes towards foreign relations. Focusing on Norway, it analyses attitudes towards Russia, Russians and Norway's Russia policy following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Rather than assuming a single continuum of pro- or anti-Russian sentiment, the article explores whether and how geographical, personal, informational and interest-driven linkages are associated with distinct attitudinal dimensions. Drawing on a nationally representative survey, we first use Principal Component Analysis to identify the underlying structure of Russia-related attitudes. Four dimensions emerge: geopolitical outlooks, attitudes towards ordinary Russians, support for distancing from Russia, and security threat perceptions. In a second step, the analysis shows that linkage plays a limited role in explaining geopolitical outlooks, which appear largely insulated from individual-level connections and experiences with Russia. By contrast, it is more strongly associated with attitudes towards ordinary Russians, support for distancing from Russia, perceptions of security threats, and the likelihood of expressing uncertainty. These findings highlight that different types of linkage do not have a uniform effect across different aspects of foreign policy opinion.

Keywords

Russia, Norway, public opinion

Introduction

Russia's full-scale war in Ukraine since 2022 has changed Russia's relations with other European states fundamentally. Based on survey data from 2024¹, this article examines how the Norwegian public views various Russia-related issues, such as Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine and Norway's policies toward Russia, and Russian citizens. Its main focus is whether and how different forms of 'linkage' influence these perceptions or contribute to respondents' indecision. In this study, *linkage* refers to a broad spectrum of personal and contextual ties to Russia, including family or friendship connections with Russians, travel to Russia, geographic proximity, interest in Russian affairs, and consumption of Russia-related news.

Much of the literature on public opinion on foreign relations is based on the US. This has had an impact on theories where the public is seen partly as disentangled from and disinterested in foreign relations (Kertzer 2023). Previous studies have pointed to a lack of research on foreign and security policy attitudes from a Nordic and small-state perspective (Wechman, 2023). Several of the existing studies that do focus on small states are limited to public opinion on NATO membership (Wechman, 2023; Forsberg, 2015; Kostadinova, 2000) or NATO and the EU (Tvinnereim, 2025). In the aftermath of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, some studies have been conducted on views of Russia in countries formerly constituting part of the Soviet Union (Ekman, 2024; Chapman and Zhandayeva, 2024) and public opinion on security and defence matters in the EU (Fernández et al., 2023). To our knowledge, this is the first comprehensive study to examine how a population that has never been under Russian or Soviet rule, yet is geographically close to Russia, perceives policies toward Russia, including the war in Ukraine, in the post-2022 context.

Norway is an interesting case for investigating views of Russia exactly because it is close geographically, and at the same time distant, in terms of its societal model and international alignments. Norway and Russia share a 198-kilometre border in the high north – underlining both their geographic proximity and the asymmetry of a relationship, where Russia has always been a central topic in Norwegian foreign relations (Rowe and Hønneland, 2010). Despite differences in size and military capacity, Norway's NATO membership has helped create a certain balance in its relations with Russia. Moreover, unlike Finland and Sweden, Norway has never been at war with Russia, nor has it been under Soviet occupation, as for example the Baltic states. During the Second World War, parts of Finnmark county were liberated by the Red Army, which subsequently withdrew in accordance with existing agreements (Holtsmark, 2015, pp. 253–262). The liberation left behind a historical memory of the Soviets as liberators of Norwegian territory (Myklebost and Markussen, 2021).

After WW2, Norway pursued a policy aimed at balancing deterrence and reassurance: remaining a loyal NATO member while imposing self-restrictions, such as prohibiting nuclear weapons in peacetime and refraining from military exercises near the Russian border (Friis, 2018; Heier, 2018). From the late Soviet era, pragmatic cooperation developed in fisheries and environmental management, later expanded through the Barents collaboration to cultural and civil society collaboration (Rowe, 2008; Holm-Hansen and Aasland, 2024). After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, when Russia was economically weak, Norwegian authorities started encouraging so-called people-to-people and economic cooperation. Particularly in the northern border area, there was much contact and a lot of joint projects right up until the full-scale invasion (Holm-Hansen and Aasland, 2024). A milestone in the relationship between the two countries – at least from a Norwegian perspective – was the agreement signed in 2010 delimiting

1 The descriptive results from this survey have previously been published in a Norwegian language policy-brief (See Aasland and Myhre, 2024a).

the maritime boundary in the Barents Sea (Rowe et al., 2022).

Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 led Norway to condemn the breach of international law and suspend high-level meetings (Rowe, 2018). From 2015 onwards, Norway combined continued sanctions with a gradual resumption of limited cooperation (Holm-Hansen, 2023; Stormoen and Friis, 2025). In 2019, Prime Minister Erna Solberg completed the first state visit after the annexation, and in 2021, the new Labour–Centre coalition aimed to further develop bilateral cooperation (Holm-Hansen, 2023). Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, however, marked an immediate shift, ending most collaboration (Wilhelmsen, 2025), but exceptions were still made for cooperation within nuclear preparedness and fisheries management (Regjeringen, 2022, March 4; Vyvial, 2023). Norwegian authorities have since maintained consistent support for Ukraine, including the long-term Nansen Programme, which provides annual military and humanitarian assistance over five years, and probably longer (Regjeringen, 2022, February 28; Regjeringen, 2023, February 16).

Despite the fact that both Finland and Norway border Russia, few studies have looked at public opinion towards Russia in the Nordic states (for an exception in Norway, see Narud et al., 2010). In an international study from 2014 of attitudes towards the performance of the Russian regime, Norwegians were in the lead in being sceptical: 89% of the respondents answered that they disapprove of the performance of the leadership of Russia (Gallup, 2015). In a 2022 follow-up, Norway remained among the ten most critical countries (Gallup, 2022). Despite this scepticism, many Norwegians have been open to trade and cooperation also in the period after Russia's annexation of Crimea and during their continued warfare in Donbas. In a 2020 survey, 58% preferred "a good economic relation" over "a rough attitude" towards Russia, while respondents were split on whether Norway should cooperate more or less: 35% said less, 30% more, and 35% were unsure (Svendsen and Weltzien, 2020).

Surveys in the Baltic states before and after Russia's full-scale invasion show how the threat perception of Russia increased after 2014 and again after 2022. While ethnic Latvians' threat perception increased in both surveys, the threat perception of Russia among Russian speakers in Latvia increased only after 2022 (Ekman, 2024). Awareness of Russia as a threat is very likely to have increased among the Norwegian population too. Against the backdrop of sabotage incidents across Europe, Norway is perceived as particularly vulnerable, especially due to its role as a key energy supplier (Hansen and Moe, 2025). Media reports and the Norwegian Intelligence Service's 2025 report have highlighted concerns about hybrid threats and sabotage linked to Norway's support for Ukraine (Etterretningstjenesten, 2025).

Since people in Norway originating from Russia constitute only around 22,000 people, it is not feasible to single out 'Russian speakers' in a survey as in the Latvian case. However, Norway's history of relations with Russia and the emphasis on cooperation, particularly in Northern Norway, gives reason to believe that people in Norway have different degrees of attachment to Russia. Due to Russia's importance for Norway as a big neighbour, Norwegians are likely to follow Russia closely because of a rather wide media coverage of this country. However, no studies have previously measured Norwegians' degree of attachment to Russia, how interested they are in Russian affairs and how informed, through the media, they perceive themselves to be about Russia.

In this article we ask:

How are different types of linkage to Russia associated with variation in Norwegians' attitudes towards Russia, Russians and Norway's Russia policy, and how are different types of linkage associated with being indecisive when responding to politically sensitive Russia-related questions?

Instead of a narrow focus, we study four broader thematic areas of Russia-related attitudes: 1) Norwegian Russia policy and Norway's relations with Russia; 2) views on ordinary Russians versus the

Russian regime; 3) the war in Ukraine; and 4) alignment with official Russian narratives. Drawing on a nationally representative survey, we first use Principal Component Analysis to identify the underlying structure of attitudes relating to these themes. Four attitudinal dimensions emerge that partly reflect, but also cross-cut these themes. In a second step, we examine whether and how various forms of linkage are associated with individual respondents' positions on these dimensions. We also examine how linkage relates to the likelihood of being undecided or declining to express an opinion on our politically sensitive survey questions. Kleinberg and Fornberg (2017) have found that researchers pay little attention to "don't know" and "no opinion" responses in surveys on foreign policy, which can lead to misleading conclusions about the level of support for particular foreign policies and the public's level of engagement. To our knowledge our study is the first attempt to systematically analyse the impact of various forms of linkage on answering "do not know" in a survey on foreign relations issues.

Engaging with these topics, the study aims to tease out nuances in Norwegians' views on Russia and to identify which forms of linkage are associated with variation in these views. We argue that it is particularly relevant to examine linkage when conducting attitudinal surveys about neighbouring states. Which types of linkage matter is likely to vary depending on historical and contemporary relations between countries. We argue that the Norwegian-Russian case is both special and analytically relevant since Norway and Russia are neighbouring countries characterised by asymmetric power relations, opposing security alliances, and limited – though temporally and spatially variable – social contact across the border.

Theory: Linkage and public opinion on foreign relations

Scholars disagree about the extent to which public attitudes actually influence policy decisions (Onderco and Stoeckel, 2023). According to the Almond-Lippmann consensus, public opinion is ignorant, volatile and disconnected from foreign policy (Forsberg, 2024). Following that view, citizens lack information, react either too slowly or too strongly to foreign threats, and foreign policy should therefore be guided by objective national interests rather than public preferences (Holsti, 1992; Thomson et al., 2023). That strain of research, though, has been countered by scholars who find public opinion to be quite stable in general and that when it changes, it is due to external events, such as changes in the security situation, thus logical reactions (Page and Shapiro, 1992; Ziegler, 1998; Eichenberg, 2007). However, if recognising that studying public opinion on foreign relations matters, the question arises about what influences people's views on foreign relations.

One paradigm in the literature ascribes people's opinions to elite cues and mass media (Kertzer, 2023). In these top-down models, decision-makers are thought to have an impact on public opinion by controlling and framing the information available. Public attitudes are seen as mirroring elite views and shifting when these change (Forsberg, 2024). In times of increased threat and international crises, several studies have found a rally around the flag effect, whereby support for state leaders increases and public opinion on foreign relations becomes more uniform (see Kertzer, 2023, p. 460 for examples from the literature). While some explain this with changes in the information environment, such as ideas conveyed through the media becoming less diverse (Kertzer, 2023), others have argued that the public responds independently to major events rather than just being a victim of elite (and media) manipulation (Eichenberg, 2016). However, if rational and worth taking into account – what factors may help explain differing views, if elite cues are not the only thing that matters?

Several factors are commonly assumed to influence attitudes towards foreign policy, including ideology, party affiliation, views on military power and gender (Eichenberg, 2016). Previous studies have, for example, found that women are less supportive of using military force and generally more sceptical

of war as a policy instrument (Eichenberg, 2016). Some of this literature has looked into people's preferences with regard to the use of force contra cooperative internationalism, or to what extent they are in favour of solving problems multilaterally within the framework of, for instance, the UN or solving problems by the use of military force (Kertzer, 2023). Kertzer (2023) has noted that a challenge within some of this research is that it is able to tell us that some people's views are more (or less) hawkish than others, but not why.

Recent studies have investigated how different types of linkage may impact public opinion on a foreign country or narratives promoted by a foreign state. Even though these studies do not explicitly relate to the aforementioned theories of public opinion on foreign relations, they examine factors that have been largely overlooked in this literature and thereby contribute to it. This concerns work that opens up for different types of linkage affecting individuals' views on foreign policies, and their views on foreign countries in particular.

In our study, we build on Szostek (2017, p. 328) who argues for "a more holistic appreciation of how views of international politics shape and are shaped by the social and communicative practices of individuals". She points to the extensive literature on 'soft power' that, to a large extent, investigates what states do in order to have an impact on people in other states, but focuses less on the recipient side and the effects of those policies. Szostek borrows the concept of linkage from Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way (2005) who used it in the 1990s to show that democratisation is more likely in countries with stronger linkage to the West. Lucas and Way defined linkage as ties, both economic, political, diplomatic, social and organisational as well as cross-border flows of capital, goods, services, people and information between states (Lucas and Way, in Szostek 2017, 380).

While Levitsky and Way focused on linkage on a state level, Szostek (2017) focuses on linkage on the level of individuals, looking at how it affected Ukrainians' receptivity towards Russian and Ukrainian strategic narratives respectively. In the case of Ukraine, Szostek (2017) tested types of linkage such as media use and personal ties to Russia and Russian culture (regularly attending an Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, regularly travelling to Russia or speaking to friends and relatives there). The effect of personal ties finds support in social psychology, where greater personal interaction has been found to reduce prejudice and hostility towards an outgroup (Szostek, 2017, p. 381). Szostek points out, however, that it is less clear if such affinity to foreign individuals translates into affinity towards the foreign state and its policies.

Chapman and Zhandayeva (2024) found that media use, ethnic identity, and economic ties to Russia interact in shaping opinions about Russia in Central Asia. While ethnic Russians in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan were generally more sympathetic to Russian narratives, broader Russian-speaking groups were less uniformly supportive, and economic dependence did not always predict more positive views. Also, Ekman's aforementioned study on the threat perception of Russia in Latvia may be seen as an example of how linkage matters – as variations in views were detected between 'Russian speakers' and other Latvians (Ekman, 2024).

Building on Szostek's (2017) work on linkage, we capture both concrete forms of cross-border contact and broader patterns of engagement defining linkage as various forms of attachment to Russia in a broad respect. These include family or friendships with Russians, travels to Russia, geographic proximity to Russia, interest in Russia and consumption of news about Russia. The latter aspect of news consumption may also be seen as a way of measuring how exposed people are to elite cues about Russia. What types of linkage are relevant to include, we argue, is context dependent – and while some of the ones used in this article will also be relevant for views on Russia in other countries – others will have to be refined or adjusted according to the local context. In Norway, for instance, it is less relevant

to ask about consumption of Russia-run news outlets, as consumption of these is thought to be very low. Neither, as already noted, is it feasible to single out ‘Russian speakers’, as they are relatively few. Below, we operationalise the four types of linkage that are analysed in this paper: Personal linkage, Geographical linkage, Informational linkage, and Interest-driven linkage.

Data, methods and descriptive overview of survey items

Data were collected through a nationally representative survey conducted by the Norwegian opinion polling agency Respons Analyse on behalf of the Norwegian Institute for Urban and Regional Research at Oslo Metropolitan University in August 2024. Respons Analyse used its established web panel to randomly select respondents. In total, 1,344 individuals completed the questionnaire. To correct for sampling biases related to gender, age and an overrepresentation of respondents from Northern Norway², post-stratification weights were applied. The questionnaire included 28 attitudinal statements covering different aspects of Norway’s relationship with Russia for which respondents indicated their level of agreement on a four-point scale ranging from “completely disagree” to “completely agree”, with an additional “do not know” option (see below/next section for details).

To identify broader attitudinal structures underlying these responses, we conducted a Principal Component Analysis (PCA) using oblimin rotation, which allows for correlations between components. Rather than analysing attitudes towards individual survey items, the PCA groups related items into broader attitudinal dimensions based on how respondents combine their views across questions. Components with eigenvalues above 1.0 were retained.

This approach makes it possible to examine whether attitudes towards different aspects of Russia are organised along one or several underlying dimensions, and to analyse how such dimensions – rather than single opinions – are associated with linkage and socio-demographic characteristics. To examine how different forms of linkage relate to variation across these attitudinal dimensions, we estimated a series of linear regression models with the factor scores as dependent variables. The primary independent variables capture four forms of linkage to Russia (to be described in the following section). In addition, we include a limited set of socio-demographic and political variables – such as gender, age, education, urban-rural settlement and political orientation – as control variables.

In a supplementary regression analysis, we also examined the likelihood of respondents selecting the “do not know” option on attitudinal items. This model treats uncertainty as an outcome in its own right, allowing us to assess whether patterns of indecision are systematically related to various forms of linkage as well as to certain background characteristics.

The questionnaire was structured to capture different aspects of opinion, including questions on Norway’s relations with Russia and Norwegian Russia policy, attitudes toward ordinary Russians and the Russian regime, assessments of the war in Ukraine and its consequences, and the extent to which respondents support or reject narratives promoted by Russian authorities. A full table with the full question wordings and response distributions is provided in Table A1 in the Appendix.

At a descriptive level, the responses point to a combination of broad consensus and issue-specific differentiation. Responses on several core questions related to the war in Ukraine and Norway’s geopolitical alignment are characterised by either high or low mean values (depending on the content of the statement) and limited dispersion, indicating widely shared views. Most Norwegians

2 The overrepresentation of respondents from Northern Norway was deliberate, in order to secure sufficient statistical power for analyses involving regional variation.

support sending weapons to Ukraine, blame Russia (and only Russia) for the war, and endorse NATO enlargement to Finland and Sweden.

At the same time, attitudes are more varied on questions concerning relations with ordinary Russians, the degree of desired distancing from Russia, and the longer-term implications of the war in Ukraine for Norway–Russia relations. These issues tend to display mean values closer to the midpoint of the scale and greater dispersion, suggesting that respondents hold more differentiated and sometimes ambivalent positions when questions move beyond immediate geopolitical alignment.

A further noteworthy pattern concerns the prevalence of “do not know” responses, which varies substantially across issue areas (Appendix Table A1). Uncertainty is relatively low on questions directly linked to the war in Ukraine and Norway’s security orientation, but considerably higher on issues involving people-to-people cooperation, views on ordinary Russians, and broader assessments of Russia’s motivations and security interests. It is worth noting that items characterised by greater dispersion in responses also tend to correspond with higher levels of uncertainty. This indicates that while some aspects of debates involving Russia appear relatively uniform in public opinion, others are more contested, and the latter also tend to be subject to greater uncertainty.

Linkage: Operationalisation and results

Building on the theoretical conceptualisation of linkage presented above, this section describes how we operationalise the four types of linkage identified in the theory section: personal/experiential, geographical, informational and interest-driven. These types of linkage are translated into measurable indicators that reflect how individuals in Norway are connected to Russia.

Personal linkage is measured through two variables: (1) whether respondents have visited Russia at any point in their lives (once or several times), and (2) whether they have Russian family or friends. These indicators reflect the interpersonal and experiential aspects of linkage: past travel provides first-hand knowledge and familiarity, while personal networks may foster sympathy with Russians and thereby different evaluations of Russian society and politics towards Russia and Russians.

Geographical linkage is captured through a regional variable distinguishing respondents in Northern Norway from those in the southern parts of the country. Given historical ties and Northern Norway’s closer cross-border ties and practical cooperation with Russia, people in the region are expected to experience different attitudinal patterns than those in the south. Geographical proximity is likely to be reflected in the everyday visibility of Russia and in the ways in which people in the north understand and evaluate Russia as a neighbour (Aasland and Myhre 2024b).

Informational linkage is measured through respondents’ self-reported consumption of news about Russia. While we do not measure exposure to Russian media directly, frequent engagement with news *about* Russia provides a continuous flow of narratives through which citizens interpret Russia’s actions. We expect that individuals who regularly follow news about Russia will have different attitudes from those who do not, and also that they are less likely to choose “don’t know” responses. A high percentage of people following news about Russia closely could also indicate that Russian affairs are widely covered in Norwegian media.

Interest-driven linkage, finally, is operationalised through respondents’ declared interest in Russian society. Interest is likely to function as a motivational orientation toward another country. We treat interest as a form of linkage that is likely to influence how individuals perceive a neighbouring country, its regime and its people. This represents a conceptual extension of the linkage framework applied

by Szostek (2017), implying that expressed interest may facilitate greater attention to, and familiarity with, aspects of the neighbouring society.

Together, these four operationalisations capture the primary channels through which Norwegians may be connected to Russia. They allow us to examine how different forms of linkage are associated with variation in attitudes towards Russia, Russians and Norway’s Russia policy, as well as with differences in the likelihood of uncertainty when responding to politically sensitive questions.

Descriptive distributions of all linkage variables are shown in Table 1. A minority of respondents report personal or experiential linkages to Russia: almost one in five have visited the country (including 6% who have done so several times). Only 2% have Russian family, but around 15% have Russian friends. Almost one in ten of the weighted sample resides in Northern Norway, reflecting the population distribution. Informational and interest-driven linkages are widespread: the mean level of news consumption about Russia is 2.9 on a scale from 1 “no consumption” to 4 “large consumption”, and for interest in Russian society it is 2.6 on a scale where 1 is “not at all interested” and 4 “very interested”. Both variables are characterised by substantial variation (SDs of 0.8). These patterns suggest that while personal and geographical forms of linkage are concentrated among smaller segments of the population, informational and interest-driven linkages are more broadly distributed.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for linkage variables. Unweighted totals, weighted percentages, means and standard deviations.

		N (unweighted)	% (weighted)	Mean	SD
Geographic	Northern Norway	325	9.0		
	Southern Norway	1019	81.0		
Personal / experiential	Has Russian family and friends	13	0.8		
	Has Russian family	21	1.6		
	Has Russian friends	204	13.9		
	Has neither family nor friends	1106	83.8		
	Never been to Russia	1036	80.6		
	Been to Russia once	203	13.5		
	Been several times	105	5.8		
Informational	Degree follow news on Russia (scale 1-4)	1334		2.9	0.8
Interest-driven	How interested in Russia (scale 1-4)	1239		2.6	0.8

We also examined the correlation structure of the five linkage variables (Appendix Table A2). As expected, interest in Russian society and news consumption about Russia correlate moderately (Spearman’s $\rho = .65$), reflecting that motivational and informational forms of linkage are related but not identical. Correlations between all other linkage indicators are much lower, suggesting that personal, geographical, informational and interest-driven linkage capture empirically distinct dimensions of connectedness.

Identifying Attitudinal Dimensions: PCA Analysis

Before examining how different forms of linkage relate to attitudes toward Russia, Russians and Norway's Russia policy, we used Principal Component Analysis (PCA) to explore whether multiple, distinct attitudinal dimensions underlie the 28 survey items. It is relevant to establish such a structure, since various forms of linkage to Russia may influence different aspects of opinion in different ways. Using an oblique rotation to allow for correlations between components, four dimensions emerged (Appendix Table A3).

Because the survey was organised around several thematic domains, some correspondence between item themes and component loadings was expected. The PCA therefore reflects both the initial conceptual grouping of items in the survey and the empirical patterns in how respondents combined their attitudes. The analysis revealed cross-cutting variation that does not fully mirror the thematic structure of the questionnaire shown in Table A1 in the Appendix, indicating that the four components capture broader attitudinal dimensions rather than simple thematic clusters. These components form the dependent variables in the subsequent regression analyses. We label these four dimensions as follows:

1. Geopolitical outlooks (27% of variance)

The first and largest dimension captures respondents' geopolitical orientation. Items loading strongly reflect alignment with or rejection of core Russian geopolitical claims, including views on Ukraine's territorial integrity, NATO enlargement, responsibility for the war, and Russia's security interests. High scores indicate greater acceptance of narratives sympathetic to Russia's position; low scores indicate strong endorsement of the official Norwegian position. Given the large number of items with high factor loadings, this dimension appears to reflect a broad and coherent constellation of foreign policy views.

2. Attitudes toward ordinary Russians (10% of variance)

The second dimension clusters items concerning whether respondents distinguish between the Russian regime and Russian citizens, support people-to-people cooperation, trust or distrust Russians in Norway, and whether asylum should be granted to Russians fleeing mobilisation. High scores reflect scepticism and reluctance to engage with ordinary Russians, whereas low scores reflect openness towards Russians and differentiation between ordinary Russians and the regime.

3. Support for distancing from Russia (5% of variance)

The third dimension reflects support for symbolic, cultural and diplomatic distancing from Russia. High loadings include breaking diplomatic ties, limiting Russian cultural expressions (exemplified by staging Russian plays) and negative prospects of reestablishing more friendly relations with Russia in the future. This represents a more moral stance on bilateral relations – it is not about geopolitical alignment, but about the depth and form of engagement Norway should maintain with Russia during wartime and beyond.

4. Security threat perception (5% of variance)

The fourth dimension consists of a single but strongly loading item: fear of Russian sabotage in Norway. Although only one item loads ≥ 0.5 , its moderate cross-loadings with broader items on global threats indicate a distinct concern with Russia as an immediate security risk. This reflects the salience of hybrid threats in Norwegian post-2022 public discourse and is in line with research showing that threat perceptions can form separate attitudinal structures that influence foreign policy attitudes (Huddy et al., 2007).

The four components are only moderately correlated (Appendix Table A3), suggesting that while they are part of the same thematic landscape, they capture analytically distinct domains. This structure provides a coherent basis for examining how various forms of linkage to Russia are associated with different types of attitudes, rather than along a single continuum of pro- or anti-Russian sentiment.

Linkage and attitudinal dimensions: Regression results

To examine how different forms of linkage are associated with the attitudinal dimensions identified in the PCA, we estimated a series of linear regression models with the factor scores as dependent variables. Table 1 presents the results for the four dimensions, ordered according to their relative importance in terms of explained variance.

Across all models, the primary focus is on the linkage variables capturing geographical, personal/experiential, informational and interest-driven connections to Russia. Socio-demographic and political variables are included as controls to account for basic background characteristics, but the analysis is explicitly oriented toward assessing whether and how different forms of linkage are associated with distinct aspects of public opinion.

Table 1. Multiple linear regression. Dependent variables: Linkage dimension factor scores. Standard coefficients and significance (N=1313).

		Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
		Geopolitical outlooks	Ordinary Russians	Distancing from Russia	Security threats
Linkage variables					
Geographical	Northern Norway (vs Southern)	0.00	0.01	0.04	-0.02
Personal/experiential	Several times (vs never)	0.06*	-0.02	-0.08**	-0.04
	Once (vs never)	-0.02	0.07**	-0.02	-0.03
	Has Russian family/friends (vs none)	0.03	-0.09**	-0.01	-0.09**
Informational	Follow news on Russia (scale 1-4)	-0.05	0.16**	0.06	0.21**
Interest-driven	Interest in Russia (scale 1-4)	-0.01	-0.06	-0.14**	0.00
Control variables					
Gender	Women (vs men)	-0.01	-0.13**	0.18**	-0.01
Age	Years	-0.06	0.11**	-0.04	0.12**
Education	Scale 1-5	-0.09**	-0.07**	-0.12**	-0.02
Settlement	Urban (vs rural)	-0.03	0.04	-0.01	0.00
Financial situation	Scale 1-5	-0.05	0.00	0.00	0.03
Party voting	Socialist (vs government)	0.04	-0.08*	0.05	-0.06
	Centre-right opposition (vs gov.)	-0.04	0.10**	0.03	0.05
	Progress party (vs gov.)	0.07	0.17**	0.03	0.04
	DNK/other (vs gov.)	0.04	0.05	0.03	-0.02
Adjusted R²		0.03	0.14	0.07	0.09

Note: User-defined missing values (DNK/unsure/NA) were replaced with the mean for each item, since listwise deletion would have resulted in substantial case loss.

We begin with the largest attitudinal dimension, geopolitical outlooks. Despite accounting for the greatest share of variance in attitudes toward Russia, this dimension shows only limited associations

with the linkage variables. With the exception of having made more than one visit to Russia (associated with a very minor higher inclination towards Russian positions), most forms of linkage display weak and non-significant relationships with geopolitical outlooks, suggesting that this aspect of opinion is relatively insulated from patterns of linkage. This finding provides an important baseline for the subsequent analyses, indicating that not all aspects of public opinion are equally associated with different types of linkage.

Linkage relates more strongly and systematically to the second dimension, attitudes toward ordinary Russians. As shown in the table, several types of linkage are significantly associated with how respondents differentiate between the Russian regime and Russian citizens. Informational linkage, measured as following news about Russia, is positively associated with more sceptical views of ordinary Russians, while personal and experiential forms of linkage display the opposite pattern: Respondents who have visited Russia or who have family members or close friends in Russia are significantly more likely to express more inclusionary attitudes toward Russians.

The third attitudinal dimension captures support for symbolic, cultural and diplomatic distancing from Russia. As shown in the table, two linkage variables are significantly associated with this dimension. Respondents who report higher levels of interest in Russia and Russian society are less supportive of distancing measures, indicating a negative association between interest-driven linkage and preferences for disengagement. Likewise, respondents who have visited Russia several times express significantly lower support for distancing from Russia compared to those who have never visited the country. Having visited Russia only once, however, is not significantly associated with attitudes toward distancing.

The fourth attitudinal dimension concerns perceptions of Russia as a direct security threat to Norway, operationalised primarily through fear of Russian sabotage. This dimension displays another distinct pattern of associations compared to the previous dimensions. Informational linkage shows the clearest association with security threat perceptions. Respondents who report higher levels of news consumption about Russia are significantly more likely to express concern about Russian security threats. This association is substantively stronger than those observed for other linkage variables in this model. Still, we also find that respondents with Russian family members or friends are significantly less likely to express concern about Russian threats.

It is worth noting that geographical linkage, operationalised as residence in Northern Norway, shows no statistically significant association with any of the four attitudinal dimensions. In addition to the linkage variables, the models include a limited set of socio-demographic and political controls. These variables display some statistically significant associations with specific attitudinal dimensions. As with the linkage variables, the associations of the control variables are not uniform across dimensions and vary between models. Given the focus of the analysis, we do not pursue a detailed examination of these effects here. Instead, the control variables serve primarily to ensure that the observed associations between linkage and attitudes are not driven by basic background characteristics.

Linkage and uncertainty

As shown in the descriptive overview, the prevalence of “do not know” responses varies substantially across survey items. Analysis of uncertainty further shows that it also varies systematically across the four identified attitudinal dimensions.³ Expressed uncertainty was highest for items grouped under geopolitical outlooks, followed by attitudes toward ordinary

³ We measured this by calculating the mean percentage of “do not know” for items within each dimension with a factor loading of 0.5 or higher.

Russians and support for distancing from Russia, and was lowest for security threat perceptions.⁴ At the same time, we observe considerable variation within each dimension. This is particularly evident for geopolitical outlooks and views on ordinary Russians, which include items characterised by both the highest and the lowest shares of “do not know” responses. In sum, variation both between items and across attitudinal dimensions indicates that some aspects of the debate on Russia are more settled in public opinion than others.

In addition to the variation between issues, there is also substantial and systematic variation between respondents in their overall propensity to answer “do not know”. Only 28 per cent of respondents provided substantive answers to all attitudinal items, while the median number of “do not know” responses was two. At the other extreme, a small minority consistently refrained from expressing an opinion across most questions.

To analyse the profile of respondents most prone to indecision, we estimated a linear regression model with the total number of “do not know” responses per respondent as the dependent variable. The independent variables mirror those used in the subsequent analyses of attitudinal dimensions and include both linkage variables and basic socio-demographic controls (Table 2).

Table 2. Multiple linear regression. Dependent variable: Number of “do not know” responses. Standard coefficients and significance (N=1313).

		Standard coefficient
Linkage variables		
Geographic	Northern Norway (vs Southern)	0.02
Personal/experiential	Several times (vs never)	-0.01
	Once (vs never)	-0.04
	Has Russian family/friends (vs none)	-0.06*
Informational	Follow news on Russia (scale 1-4)	-0.18**
Interest-based	Interest in Russia (scale 1-4)	-0.08*
Background variables		
Gender	Women (vs men)	0.26**
Age	Years	-0.14**
Education	Scale 1-5	-0.03
Settlement	Urban (vs rural)	-0.02
Financial situation	Scale 1-5	-0.05*
Party voting	Socialist (vs government)	-0.03
	Centre-right opposition (vs gov.)	-0.01
	Progress party (vs gov.)	-0.05
	DNK/other (vs gov.)	0.11**
Adjusted R squared		0.25

The model explains a substantial share of the variation in indecision (adjusted $R^2 = 0.25$), considerably more than the corresponding models predicting attitudinal factor scores. Several linkage-related variables display statistically significant associations with uncertainty. As we anticipated, respondents who report low levels of news consumption about Russia are markedly more likely to select “do

4 Mean shares of “do not know” were respectively 19%, 14%, 12% and 8%.

not know”, and a higher interest in Russian society is also associated with fewer missing responses. Furthermore, having family members or close friends in Russia is linked to lower levels of indecision. In sum, these findings point to a close relationship between uncertainty and limited informational, interest-driven and interpersonal linkage to the issue area.

Among the control variables, women and younger respondents are significantly more likely to express uncertainty across items, while respondents who report uncertainty or disengagement from party politics are likewise more prone to indecision. With the exception of education, which shows no statistically significant association with uncertainty, these background effects are broadly consistent with previous research on political confidence and issue salience. They are not examined further here.

Concluding discussion: Linkage and attitudinal dimensions

This study demonstrates that Norwegian attitudes towards Russia are not best represented as a single continuum ranging from pro- to anti-Russian sentiment. Rather, the analysis reveals a multidimensional structure consisting of four distinct attitudinal dimensions that are only moderately correlated. One dimension – geopolitical outlooks – stands out as the clearly most important. This dimension includes positions on NATO enlargement, responsibility for the war in Ukraine, sanctions, territorial integrity and Russia’s security claims, and thus combines items that we initially organised under different themes in the survey design. In addition to the dominant geopolitical dimension, the analysis identified three further attitudinal dimensions that capture more relational, normative and experiential aspects of Norwegian views of Russia. These are attitudes towards ordinary Russians, support for distancing from Russia, and security threat perceptions.

The central finding of this article is that all types of linkage included in this study play a limited role in influencing Norwegian geopolitical orientations towards Russia, but a substantially more pronounced role for the latter three dimensions of public opinion identified. Across the analyses, most forms of linkage – geographical, personal, informational and interest-based – show weak and largely insignificant associations with the dominant geopolitical dimension. This suggests that broader geopolitical outlooks are relatively independent of individual-level experiences and connections to Russia. This pattern is consistent with research emphasising the role of elite cues and opinion consolidation in situations of increased external threat and conflict. When relations with a neighbouring great power deteriorate, it is not surprising that public opinion in small states aligns closely with official policy positions and dominant security frames. Thus, geopolitical outlooks appear to be formed less by different types of linkage and more by shared national narratives and political consensus.

By contrast, the three remaining attitudinal dimensions; attitudes towards ordinary Russians, support for cultural and diplomatic distancing, and perceptions of security threats are systematically associated with the types of linkage that we have tested. However, the relationships with the different types of linkage are quite differentiated. Personal and experiential connections to Russia via Russian friends and travels are associated with more inclusionary views of Russians and lower support for distancing measures, confirming previous research that finds that greater personal interaction reduces prejudice and hostility towards an outgroup (Szostek 2017). That said, our study confirms that such personal and experiential connections do not seem to affect people’s geopolitical orientations. In this way our study answers ‘not necessarily’ to Szostek’s question of whether affinity to foreign individuals translates into affinity towards the foreign state and its policies. Russia was perceived as slightly less of a threat among those with personal and experiential linkage, but we did not find that such linkage has an effect on their general geopolitical orientation.

Informational and interest-driven linkage (news consumption and expressed interest in the country) show different and sometimes opposing effects. Particularly noteworthy is the role of informational linkage. Following news about Russia is associated with heightened perceptions of security threats, suggesting that greater informational exposure does not necessarily moderate attitudes, but may instead increase threat perceptions. This finding is plausibly linked to the nature of Russian coverage in Norwegian media, which largely reflects official security assessments and elite framing of Russia as indeed a strategic and hybrid threat. However, despite its association with threat perceptions, informational linkage does not appear to have an effect on respondents' broader geopolitical orientations. One possible explanation is that elite cues about Russia are widely available through multiple channels, reaching also those who do not actively follow news about the country.

Informational, interest-based and personal linkage have their strongest and most consistent association with uncertainty. Respondents with lower levels of informational and interest-driven linkage and fewer personal connections to Russia are significantly more likely to refrain from expressing an opinion. This finding illustrates that linkage not only affects what attitudes people hold, but also whether they feel able or willing to take a stance. Different types of linkage can thereby be interpreted as a facilitator for opinion formation on complex and contested foreign policy issues. The indecisive have commonly been omitted from studies on public opinion on foreign relations, but here we show that different types of linkage do matter for people's willingness to take a stand.

Historically, residents of Northern Norway have maintained closer cross-border ties with Russia, particularly during periods of active Barents cooperation. It would therefore be reasonable to expect that geographic linkage, as defined in our study, could have an impact on attitudinal patterns. Our findings, however, suggest that regional differences in Norwegian attitudes towards Russia are modest. This does not necessarily imply that people in the North and South share the same views on Russia across all issues. On individual survey items attitudes can be quite different based on geography. The net effect, however, is a regional pattern that resembles the national average.

A broader implication of this study is that linkage must be understood as a context-dependent phenomenon. As a border country to Russia, Norway represents a special case: a small NATO member with a clear geopolitical alignment, limited societal integration with Russia, and a relationship characterised by cooperation in some areas and during limited periods, but with sharp asymmetry in power and security. Such contextual factors help explain why the different types of linkage in the Norwegian case play a limited role for geopolitical orientations, but are much more relevant for the other dimensions identified. In small states facing a neighbouring great power, core foreign policy orientations may be structured primarily by elite cues and national security narratives. At the same time, what we have called personal and experiential linkage matters for how people relate to the neighbouring society and its people, how they evaluate the importance of ties between the countries, and how secure or threatened they feel.

The study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the analysis is based on cross-sectional survey data collected at a single point in time, during a period of heightened international tension following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Attitudes towards Russia, and the role of different types of linkage in forming them, may look different in periods characterised by lower levels of geopolitical conflict and more stable bilateral relations. Longitudinal studies, ideally based on panel data tracking the same respondents over time, would be valuable for examining how attitudinal structures and the effects of different types of linkage develop as international contexts change.

Second, the attitudinal dimensions identified through the factor analysis are necessarily sensitive to the content of the survey items. While the questionnaire was deliberately designed to capture a broad

range of issues that have featured prominently in Norwegian public debate, alternative item selections might have produced somewhat different dimensional structures. At the same time, the emergence of coherent and interpretable dimensions that cut across the initial thematic groupings suggests that the analysis captures meaningful underlying patterns.

Third, several of the linkage measures employed in the study are relatively coarse. In particular, informational linkage is measured through self-reported news consumption about Russia, without distinguishing between different media platforms, sources or types of coverage. More fine-grained measures of media exposure could provide additional insights into how different information sources affect attitudes towards Russia and perceptions of threat.

Finally, the findings are specific to the Norwegian context. One should therefore be cautious about generalising the results to other national contexts, particularly those with different historical relations, demographic compositions or media environments. Many states bordering Russia have histories of shared statehood and large Russian-speaking minorities. National contexts may profoundly affect how attitudes towards Russia and Russians are formed, and they are decisive for what types of linkage it would be relevant to include in a study.

This study shows that the effects of different linkage types on public opinion on foreign policy should not be overstated, but it should also not be dismissed. In contexts marked by geopolitical conflict and clear alliance alignment, core foreign policy orientations may be largely insulated from individual-level connections and experiences. At the same time, linkage remains significant for how citizens during heightened bilateral tension relate to a neighbouring great power and its people, assess continued engagement with this country and perceive security risks. It also turns out to be significant for whether they are able or willing to express an opinion at all. Understanding when different forms of linkage matter – and when they do not – is therefore essential for both the study of foreign policy opinion and the broader analysis of public attitudes about international relations.

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Appendix

Table A1. Descriptive statistics of attitudinal items sorted by themes (N=1344).

	Mean	SD	% DNK
Views on Norwegian Russia policy and Norway's relations with Russia			
Norway should have good relations with Russia	3.07	0.76	7.4
Lift all sanctions against Russia	1.40	0.74	9.9
Continue people-to-people ties with Russia	2.77	0.87	32.4
Break diplomatic ties with Russia	2.17	0.96	15.4
Russia's invasion has ruined ties with Norway for generations	3.09	0.79	9.1
Should forbid Russian ships access to Norwegian harbours	3.17	0.86	12.7
Attitudes towards Russians and the Russian regime			
Russians in Norway must distance themselves from Putin	3.23	0.86	10.6
Russians are collectively responsible for the war	2.41	1.04	6.3
Distinguish between regime and ordinary Russians	3.38	0.76	3.3
No reason for suspicion towards all Russians in Norway	2.66	1.01	4.9
End friendship agreements with Russian municipalities	2.65	1.00	20.3
Grant asylum to Russians fleeing mobilization	2.78	0.93	16.8
Russian plays should not be staged in Norway at present	2.10	1.08	14.2
Fear of Russian sabotage in Norway	3.17	0.80	8.2
Russia is a great threat to world peace	3.51	0.69	4.6
The war in Ukraine and its consequences			
Norway must stop sending weapons to Ukraine	1.51	0.82	11.5
Confiscate Russian assets to rebuild Ukraine	3.16	0.94	24.5
The West should send more weapons to Ukraine	3.29	0.88	17.4
Ukraine should give up land to end the war	1.61	0.85	19.2
Sweden and Finland joining NATO is positive	3.77	0.57	6.9
Ukraine should not join NATO	1.78	0.97	22.6
Alignment with the views of official Russia			
The West is largely to blame for the invasion	1.46	0.79	18.8
Russia has legitimate security interests deserving more attention	2.09	1.03	32.5
The USA violates international law more than Russia	2.04	0.92	28.4
Crimea rightfully belongs to Russia	1.38	0.71	31.3
Russia had legitimate reasons to go to war with Ukraine	1.12	0.46	6.5
People in west could learn from Russian family values	1.28	0.61	17.9

Notes: Means and standard deviations are calculated excluding "do not know" responses.

DNK indicates the percentage of respondents selecting the "do not know" option.

For the full wording of the question items, see (Aasland and Myhre, 2024a) (2024)

Table A2. Spearman correlations between linkage variables (N = 1244)

	1. Northern Norway	2. Interest in Russia	3. News about Russia	4. Been to Russia	5. Family/friends in Russia
1. Northern Norway	1.00	0.04	0.02	0.02	0.01
2. Interest in Russia	0.04	1.00	0.65	0.23	0.15
3. News about Russia	0.02	0.65	1.00	0.21	0.07
4. Been to Russia	0.02	0.23	0.21	1.00	0.09
5. Family/friends in Russia	0.01	0.15	0.07	0.09	1.00

Note: Spearman’s rho. All correlations $\geq |0.07|$ are statistically significant at $p < .05$.

Table A3. Factor analysis, pattern matrix. Factor loadings for the four components (dimensions).

	1	2	3	4
	Geopolitical outlooks	Ordinary Russians	Distancing from Russia	Security threat
Norway must stop sending weapons to Ukraine	0.72			
The West should send more weapons to Ukraine	-0.69			
Ukraine should give up land to end the war	0.69			
Crimea rightfully belongs to Russia	0.68			
The West is largely to blame for the invasion	0.67			
Ukraine should not join NATO	0.63			
Russia had legitimate reasons to go to war with Ukraine	0.62			
Lift all sanctions against Russia	0.62			
Sweden and Finland joining NATO is positive	-0.60			
Russia has legitimate security interests deserving more attention	0.53			
The USA violates international law more than Russia	0.50	-0.32		
People in west could learn from Russian family values	0.37			
Confiscate Russian assets to rebuild Ukraine	-0.36			0.32
Distinguish between regime and ordinary Russians		-0.75		
Grant asylum to Russians fleeing mobilization		-0.69		
Continue people-to-people ties with Russia		-0.63		
No reason for suspicion towards all Russians in Norway		-0.52		
Russians are collectively responsible for the war		0.37		
Break diplomatic ties with Russia			0.79	
Russia's invasion has ruined ties with Norway for generations			0.52	
Russian plays should not be staged in Norway at present			0.51	
End friendship agreements with Russian municipalities		0.38	0.46	
Should forbid Russian ships access to Norwegian harbours			0.39	
Fear of Russian sabotage in Norway				0.62
Norway should have good relations with Russia			-0.46	0.47
Russians in Norway must distance themselves from Putin			0.38	0.39
Russia is a great threat to world peace	-0.36		0.33	0.37