

# Strategic Humanitarian Aid, Trust in Europe and Support for Authoritarianism

Semuhi Sinanoglu



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1 How international solidarity backfires. OSF. <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/Z837M>

## Abstract

How does international assistance impact public attitudes towards donors in the recipient country when tied to strategic interests? European leaders increasingly highlight the strategic and transactional nature of international assistance. Yet, we still do not know much about how such shifts in the framing of international assistance are perceived by the recipient public, especially in contexts with prevalent anti-Western attitudes and propaganda that dismisses aid as hypocritical and disingenuous. I conducted an online survey experiment in Turkey to assess the attitudinal and quasi-behavioural effects of different types of international assistance post-disaster – conditional, unconditional, and strategic – and whether they help sway public attitudes in the face of authoritarian propaganda. Strategically distributed humanitarian aid decreased trust in the government as a defender of national interest among conservative, nationalist and Eurosceptic regime supporters, and also increased trust in European organisations. It did so partly by mitigating conspiracism and evoking positive emotions among pro-government voters whose views are hard to change. However, this comes at a cost: increased trade scepticism and decreased engagement with foreign media outlets among regime opponents. The findings have significant implications for international assistance strategies for increasing European soft power.

**Keywords:** propaganda, polarisation, foreign aid, public support, post-disaster relief, conspiracism, experimental research, Turkey

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## Abbreviations

BMZ	Bundesministerium für wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung (Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development)
CEB	Council of Europe Development Bank
EBRD	European Bank for Reconstruction and Development
EIB	European Investment Bank
ERMA	Emergency Refugee and Migration Assistance Fund
EU	European Union
GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (German Agency for International Cooperation)
GNI	gross national income
MRAA	Migration and Refugee Assistance Act
ODA	Official Development Assistance
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
US	United States

# 1 Introduction

How does international assistance impact public attitudes towards donors in the recipient countries when tied to strategic interests? With record-high public debt in donor countries, there is growing pressure to cut back on aid spending and redirect it to geo-strategically important countries. That is why European leaders are increasingly framing international assistance as a strategic and transactional tool to promote commercial interests, secure borders, deter migration and prevent instability in Europe's periphery.

The trend of linking assistance to strategic interests is already visible in ODA flows. The highest amounts do not consistently flow to countries with the lowest development (CONCORD, 2024). Humanitarian aid, too, is affected by these changing dynamics. It has already been serving donor interests (Fink & Redaelli, 2011; Narang, 2016). Under budgetary pressures, donors may place even greater weight on national interests than on humanitarian need or human rights. These shifts in focus from solidarity to interests may have consequences in terms of public perception in the recipient countries.

First, strategic framing of international assistance may reinforce autocratic governments' talking points. International assistance has traditionally bolstered donor legitimacy in recipient countries through its perceived altruism (Goldsmith et al., 2014). Yet autocratic governments increasingly challenge that credibility on the basis that Western aid is not driven by solidarity, but by self-interest. Authoritarian governments may politicise international assistance and deploy propaganda to dismiss it as hypocritical and disingenuous. Autocrats aim to consolidate their voter base and drive normative support for their regime by discrediting international organisations and fuelling conspiratorial thinking and nationalist sentiments. Strategically distributed aid may confirm conservative/nationalist opinions.

Second, increased entanglements with autocratic regimes may have reputational costs for the donor government. Donors may not just turn a blind eye to human rights abuses by strategically valuable allies (Terman & Byun, 2022), refraining from suspending aid even in the face of serious violations (Nielsen, 2013; Sandlin, 2016), but also further their collaborations with unsavoury autocratic regimes. These strategic collaborations may tarnish a donor's reputation, especially in the eyes of pro-EU, pro-democracy regime opponents in the recipient countries.

Despite a well-established scholarship on public support for foreign aid in donor countries (see among others Heinrich & Kobayashi, 2020; Hurst et al., 2017; Prather, 2020; Wood et al., 2021), we still do not know much about public attitudes in the recipient countries. We especially need more research on how public perceptions of donors are shaped in contexts with high scepticism of Western institutions and intense authoritarian propaganda. To that aim, I conducted a pre-registered online survey experiment with a sample of the general Turkish population ( $N \approx 1,400$ ).

Turkey presents a good candidate on which to conduct a study of the implications of international assistance on public opinion in the recipient country. As a middle-income ODA-eligible electoral autocracy, Turkey has deeply entrenched anti-Western attitudes, a high level of partisan polarisation, and an extensive propaganda apparatus. The country also underwent a series of natural disasters in the last couple of years, including two deadly earthquakes in 2023 that devastated multiple cities, stretched government resources too thinly, and triggered a large-scale international humanitarian response.

I probe the effects of different types of post-disaster relief on attitudinal and quasi-behavioural outcomes: *unconditional* assistance as an altruistic and pure form of international solidarity that comes with no strings attached, both with monetary and human resource contributions; *conditional* aid that comes with strings attached (such as concessional payments directly tied to specific projects) to reduce clientelism and corruption; and *strategic* aid disbursed with geopolitical/security concerns (preventing refugee influx) and communicated as such. I examine

the extent to which these different types of recovery aids help sway public attitudes in the face of government counterpropaganda that dismisses them as sinister and duplicitous.

Contrary to my expectations, the findings indicate that humanitarian assistance, distributed with strategic intent, and admittedly so, decreased trust in the government as the defender of national interests among regime supporters, despite government counterpropaganda. Furthermore, it also enhanced trust in European organisations and reduced trade scepticism among pro-government voters, who are conservative, nationalist and Eurosceptic. By confirming their prior opinions, and revealing and acknowledging *realpolitik* behind international assistance, the transparent communication of strategic intent behind humanitarian aid mitigated conspiracism and also evoked positive feelings among regime supporters.

As for regime opponents, as expected, unconditional assistance fosters their willingness to support international trade. On the other hand, strategically distributed humanitarian aid backfires with this group. On average, it exacerbates their trade scepticism, and reduces their willingness to engage with foreign media outlets. In other words, transparent public communication of strategic intent has unintended consequences for this partisan group.

The contributions of this study are threefold. First, it adds to the literature on public attitudes toward foreign aid. Against the backdrop of increased aid securitisation and tariff wars, we need more research on public perceptions of Western/European donors, and their support for democracy and international trade, especially in contexts with high scepticism of Western organisations. While the scholarly evidence is based largely on studies of low-income countries with weak state capacity (e.g. see Baldwin & Winters, 2020; Blair et al., 2022; Findley, Harris, et al., 2017; Winters et al., 2017), where the baseline support for international engagement is relatively high, this experimental study fills this gap by probing the consequences of strategically distributed aid on public opinion in a middle-income country with high state capacity, high polarisation and prevalent anti-Western attitudes (see Alrababa'h et al., 2020; Singh & Williamson, 2022).

The second contribution is to the literature on the electoral effects of international interventions. International assistance may have unintended consequences. International interventions, regardless of their shape and form, do not take place in a vacuum. Political polarisation along pro/anti-regime cleavage is a crucial contextual factor that mediates their effect. An extensive literature studies the effects of such side-taking on different issue domains (see Benstead et al., 2022; Bush & Jamal, 2015; Corstange & Marinov, 2012). My findings show that strategic aid may have unintended effects for regime opponents, who are often more likely to engage with the international community, and exacerbate their trade scepticism (see Bush & Prather, 2020).

The third and final contribution is to the authoritarian propaganda scholarship. Despite a growing literature, how autocrats portray the international community and their interactions with it to their own citizens remains largely unexamined (Carter & Baggott Carter, 2023, p. 229; see also Gruffydd-Jones, 2025; Rozenas & Stukal, 2019). I showcase how they deploy propaganda to politicise humanitarian aid and discredit international acts of solidarity as disingenuous and hypocritical, and analyse the effectiveness of such government propaganda. International assistance, when framed transparently in terms of the strategic intent behind it, may sway attitudes among the regime's core support group, whose attitudes are entrenched and very hard to shift. It renders government propaganda ineffective or counterproductive through informational and affective causal pathways.

This paper is organised as follows. First, I offer a theoretical framework that describes trends of aid disbursements with strategic considerations, its ramifications on public opinion, and how it plays out in the face of autocratic counterpropaganda. Then, I offer contextual information on Turkey, followed by a description of the empirical setting. Finally, I discuss the main findings, their scope conditions and implications for policy.

## 2 Strategically distributed international assistance

There is an increasing global trend of linking foreign aid and development assistance to strategic interests. For instance, in a recent speech, EU Commissioner Jozef Sikela said: “We should not become the donor of last resort. We cannot afford it. [...] We need a focus on our real strategic interests. [...] [I]n our engagement with our partners, we need to match our interests with theirs” (European Commission, 2025). In Germany, the Merz government considered making aid allocations conditional on recipient countries’ cooperation in repatriating their citizens, thereby curbing irregular migration (Averre & Stone, 2025). In the US, State Secretary Marco Rubio announced USAID funding cuts on the basis that aid programmes no longer serve American interests.

The alignment of aid disbursements with interests means donors prioritising the strategic intent behind aid provision and its transactional nature over international solidarity (Brown & Grävingholt, 2016, p. 3; Olivie & Perez, 2021, p. 9). Amid budgetary pressures, donors have started to cite the protection of geostrategic/national interests to justify aid and its distribution to specific countries and sectors, such as with reference to countering terrorism and radicalisation, strategically supporting on-the-ground military operations (Kisangani & Pickering, 2015), promoting commercial ties and investment (S. H. Allen & Flynn, 2018), stopping irregular immigration flows (Bermeo & Leblang, 2015) or preventing state fragility in their neighbourhood (Uzonyi & Rider, 2017).

There has been an ongoing trend of securitisation in aid allocations. For instance, the US has been deploying aid as an instrument for a long time, including during the Cold War, to induce voting compliance in the UN assembly (Dreher et al., 2008; Woo & Chung, 2018) or to fight terrorism that targets American interests (Boutton & Carter, 2014). As for the EU, the securitisation process has evolved gradually since the early 2000s, with large temporal and cross-national variation (see Brown & Grävingholt, 2016; Lazell & Petrikova, 2020; Olivie & Pérez, 2019). That said, overall, the EU’s Sahel Strategy, the Comprehensive Approach and the New Pact of Migration and Asylum are all indicative of securitisation trends in public discourse and policy. For instance, the available ODA data suggest that in 2022, €3.4 billion, roughly 11 per cent of bilateral ODA, is being used for “European self-interests”, which includes ODA that is tied/partially tied, for increasing border security and fighting irregular migration (CONCORD, 2024, p. 34).

Beyond these historical trends of securitisation with increased focus on migration prevention and border protections, the withdrawal of the US from the international development funding landscape has started a renewed phase of strategic prioritisation. There is more and more emphasis on protecting and promoting strategic interests, including developing commercial ties and investments, during the process of aid allocation.

This shift is partly the result of mounting government debt in donor countries. By 2025, the OECD ratio of public debt to GDP is set to hit 85 per cent (\$59 trillion), nearly twice the level of 2007 (OECD, 2025). Amid budgetary pressures, different European governments have already announced plans to reduce international assistance; the UK plans to cut aid to 0.3% of GNI by 2027 – the lowest share since 1999 – to redirect funds toward increased defence spending (Brien & Loft, 2025).

The changing international security environment also shifts policy priorities for international assistance, including unravelling free trade institutions, tariff wars and increased competition with China. In other words, the “return of geopolitics” may further swing the pendulum towards instrumentality. In particular, EU development cooperation may increasingly find it difficult to strike a balance between international solidarity and instrumentality (Furness et al., 2020, p. 93) as a result of the shifting international environment (see Demirel-Pegg & Moskowitz, 2009; Zhang, 2024).

Even humanitarian assistance, which is supposed to be a pure form of international solidarity in the face of disasters, has been distributed with an eye to strategic value, including emergency and health aid (Fink & Redaelli, 2011; Hwang & Hwang, 2023). For instance, Narang (2016) shows that post-civil-war humanitarian aid is more likely to be directed toward countries where donor governments have strategic or political stakes. Under growing budgetary pressures, donors may increasingly prioritise their interests over humanitarian needs. Humanitarian aid, as an act of generosity, goodwill and solidarity, has long helped win hearts and minds for aid providers (Andrabi & Das, 2017; Goldsmith et al., 2014). But would it have the same effect if it were instrumentalised to achieve strategic purposes, and explicitly tied to donor interests?

In addition, this renewed focus on strategic interests may have other implications, such as increased cooperation with authoritarian regimes. There is credible evidence that geostrategic interests may trump human rights considerations. Donor countries may look the other way (Terman & Byun, 2022) and not withhold aid from strategically important allies when they commit human rights violations (Nielsen, 2013; Sandlin, 2016). For Europe, in particular, such strategic entanglements may have reputational costs in terms of protecting democratic norms and international human rights. A case in point: the European Commission was widely criticised for bankrolling dictators after a series of deals with the governments of Tunisia and Egypt in 2024 that included stricter controls over immigration from these countries to Europe (Smith & O'Carroll, 2024). These entanglements with dictators have tarnished Europe's reputation in the eyes of pro-democracy, pro-EU recipients.

Overall, international humanitarian assistance tied to strategic interests may have ramifications for public attitudes toward donors.

### **3 Micro-level foundations**

The growing securitisation of foreign aid may have micro-foundational roots in public opinion. A large body of scholarship explores what drives public support for foreign aid in both traditional and emerging donor countries (see Milner & Tingley, 2013). Two key insights emerge. First, rising nativist or anti-elitist attitudes, fuelled by low-trust environments, may erode support for international solidarity and undercut cosmopolitan worldviews predicated on a principled approach to foreign aid (see Bayram, 2017; Heinrich et al., 2021; Prather, 2020). Second, amid economic hardship, marked by record-high government debt and growing fiscal deficit in donor countries, citizens may be self-serving (Heinrich et al., 2018, p. 195).

Foreign aid may be increasingly viewed as high-cost and an unfair burden on already stretched national resources (see Hurst et al., 2017; Kobayashi et al., 2021; Liu & Shao, 2022; Wang & Cooper, 2023), even though it often constitutes a tiny fraction of the overall government budget in donor countries (Ritchie, 2025). Instead of altruistic motivations, anticipated economic benefits and geo-strategic national interests may boost people's support for foreign aid (Chung et al., 2023; Wood & Hoy, 2022; Wood et al., 2021), so much so they may even tolerate engagement with autocratic regimes in return for important policy benefits (Heinrich & Kobayashi, 2020; Kohno et al., 2021).

Despite a substantial scholarship on donor citizens' preferences, research on public attitudes in recipient countries remains limited. Overall, existing research suggests that Western aid may help improve public perception of the donor countries and promote liberal values, especially when framed as acts of generosity or goodwill (Blair et al., 2022, p. 1359; Goldsmith et al., 2014). For example, following the major earthquake that hit Pakistan in 2005, trust in Europeans and Americans was markedly higher among those exposed to the earthquake and the subsequent relief aid, even after four years (Andrabi & Das, 2017).

One major limitation of this literature is that the evidence is drawn largely from low-income settings with weak state capacity (for an exception, see Gafuri, 2024). That is why the receipt of foreign aid does not really diminish state legitimacy (Baldwin & Winters, 2020; Blair & Roessler, 2021).<sup>2</sup> In addition, the baseline support for international donors is relatively high to begin with, as foreign programmes are considered to be less susceptible to corruption (see Findley, Harris, et al., 2017; Milner et al., 2016; Winters et al., 2017).

How does the recipient public perceive aid given not with altruistic intent but strategic considerations? The scholarly findings are scant on this issue. Alrababa'h, Myrick, and Webb (2020) show that in Ukraine, aid provided for geopolitical reasons is viewed positively among respondents who are already favourable toward the EU. These respondents express support for European aid when told that donors offer aid to expand their political influence. The finding sounds intuitive in the Ukrainian context, especially following the Russian invasion of Crimea. However, the findings may be idiosyncratic to the Ukrainian context, as it is in the pro-EU Ukrainians' strategic interest to make the EU more invested in Ukrainian security. That is why the scope conditions may be limited.

By contrast, the public perception of strategically distributed foreign aid may be different in countries where Western donors are often perceived with suspicion. Based on the analysis of Arab Barometer data, Sing and Williamson (2022, p. 7) point out widespread cynicism about Western aid benefits, and how the majority of respondents think Western countries strategically aim to gain influence through aid. Egyptian respondents thus approve less of foreign-funded programmes, due to scepticism of their motives.

There may be *informational*, *resource/distributional*, and *affective/emotional* effects of foreign aid on public perception of donors, conditional on the partisan identity. First, voters in electoral autocracies process informational cues with motivated reasoning. As democracy/authoritarianism or pro/anti-regime cleavage is a constituent feature of politics (Ong, 2022; Selçuk & Hekimci, 2020), regime opponents seek, and are more likely to believe, critical messages, while regime supporters tend to embrace pro-regime information (Robertson, 2017, p. 590). Therefore, from the opposition's perspective, Western donors providing aid to the government may appear to be taking sides with the regime.

There is a large body of scholarly work that analyses the unintended effects of international interventions due to polarisation and "taking sides" in different issue domains, such as electoral observation and intervention (Benstead et al., 2022; Bush & Prather, 2017; Corstange & Marinov, 2012; Levin, 2019), reform endorsements, democracy promotion, and human rights protection (Bracic & Murdie, 2020; Bush & Jamal, 2015; Marinov, 2013; Tokdemir, 2022) and foreign pressure and sanction threats (Hellmeier, 2021). One key observation is that people tend to favour economic ties to actors aligned with their own political camp rather than to that of others (Bush & Prather, 2020, p. 589).<sup>3</sup> As a result, overall, aid to autocrats may decrease regime opponents' support for trade with Western donor countries and erode trust in multilateral donor institutions.

Foreign aid may also have *resource/distributional* outcomes. Some autocratic regimes may stockpile aid to remain in power for the long run (Kono & Montinola, 2009; Wright, 2009), which may stoke grievances among the regime's opponents. Incumbent governments may also take advantage of their discretion over aid allocation processes to distribute resources with electoral considerations (Jablonski, 2014). Tokdemir (2017) claims that US foreign aid creates its winners

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2 Kiratli and Aytac (2024) show that in a high state capacity context, refusing aid may not cost much for the government in terms of electoral support.

3 Bush and Prather (2020, p. 606) show that even among those expected to benefit from international economic engagement, regardless of its source, people tend to favour economic ties with countries taking sides with their partisan groups.

and losers in the recipient country and alienates political opposition that would blame the US government for the regime's survival. That is why, under intense political competition, elites from different ideological camps may tap into anti-American/foreign/Western sentiments and boost inflammatory rhetoric for political gains (Blaydes & Linzer, 2012, p. 226).

Foreign aid may also evoke certain *emotional* reactions, especially post-disaster humanitarian assistance. For instance, disaster relief aid by Western donors with no strings attached may invoke sentiments of solidarity, bolstering cosmopolitan worldviews. Depending on the severity of the disaster, people may feel hopeful about the future with the receipt of aid. On the other hand, relief aid conditionally or strategically distributed may anger or frustrate them, confirming cynical opinions about the intent behind foreign aid. The effects of foreign aid on public perception would be mediated by the extent of government counterpropaganda, especially from the perspective of regime supporters.

## 4 Authoritarian counterpropaganda

Autocratic regimes with strong propaganda apparatus harness legitimacy and consolidate their support base in a polarised environment by depicting foreign engagements as threats to national sovereignty (see Chow & Levin, 2025). They cite previous victimisation at the hands of foreign powers to drive public support and spur national pride (Weiss & Dafoe, 2019, p. 969). By adopting an inward-looking, conspiracist and national security-focused discourse, they tap into pre-existing sentiments among their supporters (Matovski, 2021, p. 25; Williamson & Malik, 2021). The objective is to erode confidence in donor countries and organisations and win ideological victory for their regime (see Carter & Baggott Carter, 2023; Gruffydd-Jones, 2025). They do so to prevent the receipt of foreign aid from undermining state legitimacy and present government as capable of coping with crises on their own (Bellini & Sauter, 2025).<sup>4</sup>

One such counter-narrative is to highlight that foreign aid is distributed with *strategic considerations*, not with humanitarian/altruistic intent. Autocrats often portray Western countries/organisations with cynical motivations, claiming that they are selfish, hypocritical and biased against them. The regimes crack down on NGOs that receive foreign funding, presenting them as interlocutors of foreign powers. Such suspicion exists even against humanitarian assistance. In 2008, President Mugabe of Zimbabwe suspended aid agencies' operations, accusing them of working for the opposition (Black & McGreal, 2008). In 2017, the Turkish government purged several INGOs, such as Mercy Corps, which provided aid to Syrians in southeastern Turkey, out of national security concerns (Weise, 2017). In 2019, President Maduro of Venezuela blocked the entry of humanitarian aid, asserting that was a "Trojan horse", used by Western infiltrators to undermine his government (Munroe, 2019).

Autocrats also propagate the view that foreign aid is not *genuine*, but *just for show*, with hollow initiatives and broken commitments, especially after humanitarian crises and disasters. For instance, Western organisations brand their aid to take credit for projects and relief aid, and deploy boots on the ground to help with post-disaster recovery. The available evidence indicates that such clear branding and presence of personnel improves general perceptions of the donor country (M. A. Allen et al., 2020; Dietrich et al., 2018; Flynn et al., 2019). In response, government agencies conspicuously put out their logos, mobilise their teams, and claim what foreign donors do is very little compared to what the government has spent (Bellini & Sauter, 2025). They also often accuse Western donors of failing to come through with their promises,

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4 For a discussion, see Blair et al. (2022), Briggs (2019), Dolan (2020), and Kiratli and Aytaç (2024). A large scholarship analyses how the way in which governments address disasters and crises affects their popularity and re-election, see Baccini and Leemann (2021).

exemplified by the criticism of the EU in 2016 by President Erdogan of Turkey that €3 billion pledged for a deal on migration was never sent (Goulard, 2016).

To what extent would such autocratic counter-propaganda be effective? Pan et al. (2022) show that autocratic regimes can use propaganda tools effectively to shift people's views to adopt divergent foreign policy positions in line with the government's framing. Beyond framing effects, propaganda also often serves as an affective, identity-consistent affirmation for the regime's core support groups (Shirikov, 2024). In Georgia, for instance, Georgian Dream officials assert that there is a "Global War Party" – a shadow force manipulating Western governments and undermining Georgian interests. Viewers of pro-government channels are more likely to believe such conspiracy theories and, in turn, support anti-Western narratives (Civil Georgia, 2025). In such contexts, strategic aid may confirm nativist sceptical opinions (Singh & Williamson, 2022) and prop up propaganda by reinforcing the perception that the government serves as the defender of national interests.

To summarise, foreign aid in the form of humanitarian assistance may have different ramifications for public opinion in recipient countries with a certain degree of state capacity, partisan cleavage along pro/anti-regime lines and a strong propaganda apparatus.

First, I hypothesise that *unconditional* and strong disaster relief directly disbursed to affected areas may positively sway the opinion of regime opponents towards Western donors by invoking feelings of solidarity. On the other hand, *strategic engagement* with the regime may appear, to this group, as though the donor countries are taking the government's side, and may therefore undermine regime opponents' willingness to support economic engagement with donor countries. Government propaganda in the recipient country would be largely ineffective for this group.

Second, in this type of recipient contexts, baseline support for Western donors is often relatively low, and there is cynicism and scepticism of their motivations, especially among regime supporters. In addition, governments often circulate messages to their core base discrediting international assistance, driving normative support for their regime and prompting conspiratorial thinking. Therefore, I hypothesise that *strategic* humanitarian assistance may be counter-productive and confirm cynical prior beliefs about the motivation behind aid. It may reinforce the government's talking points and add to the regime's scoreboard.

In the next section, I trace these factors in the Turkish context by elucidating Western foreign aid and humanitarian assistance in Turkey, and government counterpropaganda.

## 5 The Turkish context

Turkey is listed as an upper-middle income country on the ODA-eligible list (OECD, n.d.), and received \$1.46 billion net in foreign aid in 2023 (Our World in Data, n.d.). As a non-DAC country, Turkey also offers development assistance, especially to sub-Saharan Africa, which is a strategic target for German and European development cooperation. Turkey has the largest NATO army in Europe, an expanding influence in conflict-prone regions such as Syria, an increased geostrategic role in the defence of Ukraine, and European military capabilities. In fact, Europe's security architecture is likely to rely more and more on Turkey. Therefore, understanding Turkish public opinion would be key to strengthening these cooperations. Turkey also presents a good candidate through which to examine the effectiveness of international assistance in shifting attitudes, because of the country's extensive government propaganda apparatus, deeply entrenched partisan and ethnic cleavages, and prevalent anti-Western public sentiments.

The AKP regime under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has forcefully taken over the mainstream media over the years (Arat & Pamuk, 2019, p. 129). Pro-government outlets largely dominate the media landscape, including digital platforms, populated by a sizable number of pro-regime trolls and bots. A growing scholarship explores the effectiveness of this propaganda apparatus (Aytaç, 2021; Öztürk, 2023) – the government has deployed it to consolidate its voter base and improve normative support for the regime that remains inelastic to economic downturns and political crises (Neundorff et al., 2024). They did so by deepening polarisation and fuelling religious and nationalist sentiments (Somer, 2022), so much so that Turkey has one of the highest political polarisation levels globally, according to the V-DEM data (see Figure C1).

One major target of regime propaganda was Western/European organisations and countries. The regime frames any type of international intervention and engagement as foreign meddling, weaponising them to fuel nationalist sentiments, erode trust in Western institutions, and feed conspiratorial narratives among its voter base. For instance, in 2021, when ambassadors from ten countries, most of them European, publicly condemned the unlawful imprisonment of Osman Kavala – a prominent businessperson and human rights defender – and called for compliance with the European Court of Human Rights’ ruling to release him, the regime launched a full-scale propaganda campaign, portraying the criticism as Western interference in the Turkish legal system (Deutsche Welle, 2021). The ambassadors’ public statement played into the regime’s hands, eventually forcing them to backtrack.

The waning European soft power in Turkey is evident in polling data. Despite a recent uptick in trends, more Turks have unfavourable than favourable views of the EU (Clancy et al., 2024). Turkish citizens have grown disillusioned with the EU, partly due to viewing its approach to Turkey’s accession process as inconsistent and discriminatory. The regime, in turn, has exploited European double standards – particularly on the selective enforcement of international norms – to undermine the EU’s credibility. For example, Aydın-Duzgit and Turhan (2025) show that Germany has taken a cautious, often reluctant, stance on the rule of law issues in Turkey, acting only when Ankara’s moves threatened core German or EU interests. Very recently, one of Erdoğan’s top advisers criticised the European Parliament’s Turkey Rapporteur on the grounds that EU should not view Turkey solely in terms of Europe’s security needs and that EU is “arrogant”, “colonialist” and “ill-intended” (Haberler, 2025).

The government has also exploited the Syrian refugee crisis as a bargaining chip against the EU and to showcase European double standards on human rights. On the one hand, the Turkish government has instrumentalised the refugee crisis and vowed to “flood Europe with refugees” to extract concessions from European leaders (Euractiv, 2016). In March 2016, the European Council and Turkey signed an agreement to prevent the flow of irregular migration via Turkey to Europe. Accusing European leaders of being two-faced and hypocritical, Erdoğan said he agreed to sign such a deal only to “save Syrian refugees from derogatory treatment at European borders” (Chadwick, 2016). Yet, the government has repeatedly threatened the EU to revoke this deal as leverage in diplomatic negotiations. In 2020, there was even a show-down at the Greek border, following Turkey’s statement that it would open the path to Europe, as thousands of refugees rushed toward the border (Ergin, 2020).

Such politicisation of humanitarian needs and international assistance can be observed following natural disasters as well. One such incident was the wildfires in 2021 in southern coastal cities that left hundreds of square miles of forest burnt and dozens hospitalised. The government was harshly criticised for failing to combat the wildfire. The government, in turn, blamed anti-government celebrities who joined the “#HelpTurkey” hashtag on Twitter to plead for help from the international community for portraying the Turkish state as weak and incapacitated (Sinanoglu & Donnelly, 2024).

In 2023, southern Turkey and northwestern Syria were struck by deadly twin earthquakes that killed thousands of people and displaced millions. The government was overwhelmed and

unable to respond and, given the sheer scale of it, framed the earthquakes as “the catastrophe of the century” to justify such incapacitation. That is why, due to the severity of the crisis, they did not refuse international aid, and instead welcomed and encouraged it, though they tried to take ownership of foreign aid with government branding (Bellini & Sauter, 2025).

Different types of post-disaster relief aid were offered by European governments and the EU: unconditional, conditional and strategic. First, right after the earthquakes, European governments *unconditionally* provided emergency aid. In addition to bilateral aid, the EU mobilised its largest ever search and rescue operations through the EU Civil Protection Mechanism, with over 1,500 rescue workers. Also, a total of €400 million was disbursed to Turkey through the European Union Solidarity Fund – the largest amount ever awarded to a candidate country (ECHO, 2023).

Second: *conditional aid*. After the International Donors’ Conference, EBRD, CEB and EIB pledged post-disaster relief aid worth €2.5 billion in the form of loans to help with reconstruction that comes with strings attached (EEAS [European External Action], 2023). These concessional loans were tied to reconstruction efforts in quake-hit areas, requiring compliance with lending standards and public procurement rules.

Finally, the EU earmarked €78.2 million of its humanitarian funding to Turkey for Syrian refugees impacted by the earthquake, which was delivered through the EU’s humanitarian partner organisations. This *strategic* funding aimed to increase the funding for cash cards distributed to some of the more than 4 million registered refugees in Turkey to prevent further irregular border-crossing to the EU, though it is unclear whether aid reached these targeted groups (Euronews, 2024). This major disaster coincided with a time of heated debates within the EU on how to fight irregular migration (Mathieson, 2023).

I conducted an experimental survey to probe the effects of these different types of international humanitarian assistance on support for authoritarian government, trust in European organisations, and support for international trade.

## 6 Empirical setting

I hired a reputable Turkey-based survey research company to conduct an online survey (N≈1,400) from 19 December 2024 to 20 January 2025. The firm used quota samples from 26 NUTS-2 regions, with respondents balanced on gender, age and education. The respondents are all adult Turkish citizens. Participants were compensated for their participation through the company that provided access to the panel.

I designed a between-subject, vignette-based experiment. I used block randomisation, where participants were stratified based on their party identification – whether they are supporters of the incumbent electoral alliance or of the opposition.<sup>5</sup> Then I randomly assigned them to treatment conditions. The reason behind this choice of randomisation is that democracy–authoritarianism cleavage is the new defining feature of party politics in Turkey following the 2017 constitutional referendum (Selçuk & Hekimci, 2020) – that is why the effect of propaganda would be conditional on the respondent’s support for the incumbent.

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5 I identified respondents’ party positions using two questions. First, I asked which party they would vote for if an election were held this Sunday. For those who left this question unanswered, I followed up by asking which party they feel closest to, regardless of voting intentions. I then classified the sample based on whether the identified party is part of the incumbent electoral coalition.

During the online field conducted on Qualtrics, I implemented several data quality controls to identify potential bot responses and fraudulent completions with different protocols, including but not limited to: removing repeated responses from the same IP address, responses with failed geo-location controls, failed pre-treatment attention checks, suspicious use of AI, and inconsistent and non-serious response patterns.

The design includes five arms (see Appendix). The treatments are designed based on a compilation of real news articles and data. There was a timer that did not allow respondents to skip the question for a fixed time. The pure control group did not receive any information. All other groups received the propaganda vignette, which serves as a baseline priming condition emphasising anti-Western narratives. In addition to the propaganda vignette, some respondents were also treated with unconditional, conditional and strategic-aid vignettes. I used such a nested design to probe the effects of different assistance in the face of government propaganda. On the one hand, government propaganda apparatus is quite strong and extensive in Turkey, exerting almost complete control over the public and private traditional media landscape. That is why it is very difficult to be immune to or avoid government framing. That said, I included both a pure control, and a baseline control with a government propaganda vignette.

The treatment arms were as follows:

- **Propaganda treatment:** The propaganda treatment, a curated news article vignette, consists of pieces of information from the regime's different propaganda materials that highlight the West's "hypocrisy", how they instrumentalise foreign aid for strategic/intelligence purposes, how duplicitous Western organisations are in their treatment of human rights, and how little they do in terms of financial support. This is a strongly reinforced treatment that primes the regime's main talking points, discrediting the Western countries/organisations overall.
- **Propaganda + Unconditional solidarity treatment:** In addition to the propaganda treatment, a set of respondents received a post-disaster recovery aid treatment highlighting millions of euros donated by multiple European countries, and tens of technical aid crews arriving in Turkey with tons of equipment to help in impacted areas. Showcasing the personnel on the ground from Germany, France and Greece, this is a strongly reinforced solidarity treatment. The order of propaganda and aid vignettes was randomised.<sup>6</sup>
- **Propaganda + Conditional solidarity treatment:** In addition to the propaganda treatment, a set of respondents received a post-disaster recovery solidarity treatment highlighting its conditionality, and the fact that it was credit rather than grants. The order of propaganda and aid vignettes was randomised. See also Findley, Harris et al. (2017).
- **Propaganda + Strategic solidarity treatment:** In addition to the propaganda treatment, a set of respondents received a different aid treatment that highlights Western financial support for refugees impacted by the earthquake in Turkey. This treatment underscores aid to refugees because it has been presented as a strategic priority by both American and European counterparts. The order of propaganda and aid vignettes was randomised.

The survey starts with a demographics module that comprises questions on age, gender, city of residence, level of education, religiosity, income and political ideology. I measure party identification with two questions: if there was an election this Sunday, which party would they vote for, and which party they feel closest to, regardless of whether they vote or not.

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6 The design does not differentiate bilateral and multilateral aid in order to prime international solidarity overall.

Pre-treatment, I asked whether they or their close kin had ever experienced a natural disaster. I included a battery of questions that measure their perception of government responsiveness, trust in public institutions, and satisfaction with social delivery services. I also measured their risk assessment regarding other countries, including France, Germany, Greece and the USA. I added a module to measure their contact with Syrian refugees in their daily life. I also asked a thermometer question about how a respondent feels toward different political parties' supporters on a scale of 0 to 100 to measure pre-treatment polarisation. Lastly, I asked a question on concerns over globalisation and dependence on foreign markets. Following the treatment, there was a short question module to distract respondents and a manipulation check.

As for the dependent variables, I asked the following sets of questions. In the modules, I included both positive and negative items to mitigate agreement bias. I measured respondents' attitudes towards each question item separately, but also created a unidimensional graded response model to construct a latent index for each module: support for authoritarian government, trust in Europe, and trade scepticism.

- **Government evaluation:** A battery of questions that measures their perception of the government and incumbent electoral alliance as the defender of national interests: the government defends Turkey's national interests against foreign interference; the government's foreign policy choices enhance national pride and dignity; the government is not transparent about its dealings with foreign countries and international organisations; the government does not manage international affairs in ways that prioritise the needs of Turkish citizens; the government ensures that Turkey's partnerships with foreign countries are fair and mutually beneficial.
- **Trust in European organisations and countries:** A battery of questions that measures their trust in Western/European organisations, and whether they would support these organisations to operate in Turkey: Western organisations like the EU are biased against Turkey in their policies and actions; Turkey should rely on the EU to deal with the repercussions of the major earthquake; European organisations should monitor and report on human rights conditions in Turkey; European organisations are not transparent about their goals and actions in Turkey; European organisations should be allowed to operate freely in Turkey to support development and humanitarian efforts; European countries apply double standards to Turkey, criticising it unfairly while ignoring their own mistakes.
- **Support for trade protectionism and self-sufficiency:** A battery of questions on attitudes towards trade and national self-sufficiency: Turkey should strengthen its open trade relations with the EU countries; Turkey should strive to be as self-sufficient as possible, even if it means higher costs or fewer choices for consumers; depending on trade with other countries weakens Turkey's economy and sovereignty; Turkey does not need help from other countries, it should rely on itself to solve its problems.

There were also two *quasi-behavioural* outcomes. First, showing a preview of a call for volunteers from different donor organisations, USAID, the Turkish Red Crescent and the German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ) for online support in disaster-afflicted areas, I asked whether they would repost this call on their social media accounts or not. Second, showing four alternative sources of information, the government-controlled Anadolu Agency, the official presidential office website, an official EU website and Deutsche Welle, which is currently banned in Turkey, I asked which source they would suggest a friend reads for further information on post-disaster relief aid.

I probed two *causal pathways* by which the international solidarity treatments may impact respondents' attitudes. Following Chaudoin et al. (2021), I randomised the order of modules of mediator and outcome variables. First, especially among the core support groups of the regime, strategic or conditional solidarity may prompt emotions and considerations that this aid is

disingenuous and *humiliating*, and make them feel *angry*, while among opposition voters, unconditional aid would be perceived as *solidarity*.

Second, foreign aid may confirm their prior beliefs, prop up government propaganda, and further conspiratorial thinking among core support groups that is perceived as an attack on Turkey's national sovereignty. I included a battery of questions to measure conspiracism: *There is a coordinated effort among powerful countries to keep Turkey from becoming a strong and independent nation; Turkey is alone in the world; it cannot rely on any other country for genuine support.*

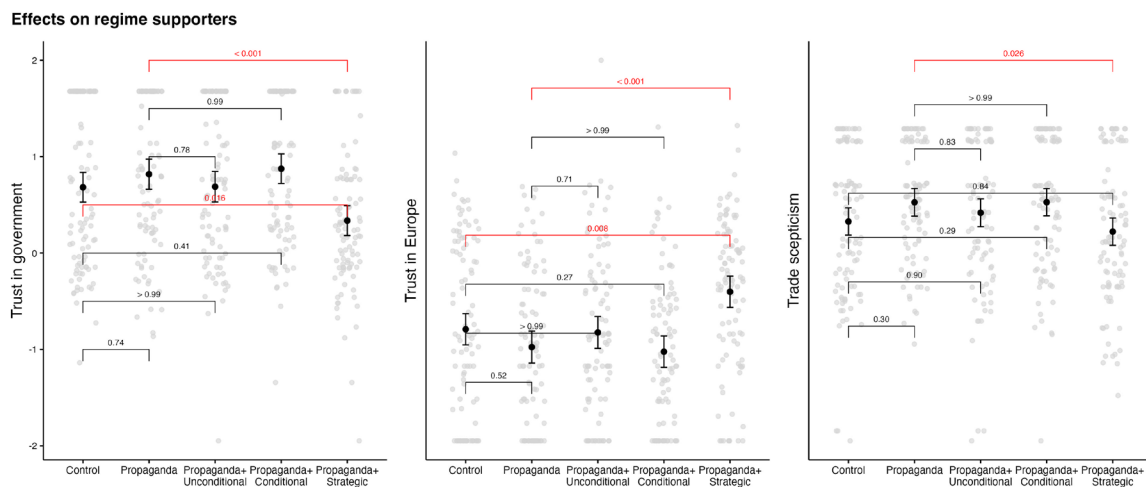
## 7 Main findings

Following my pre-registration, I ran pairwise contrasts with Tukey-adjusted p-values for bias correction. Figure 1 visualises pairwise contrasts for treatments for latent index scores of each dependent variable for the subset of regime supporters (for disaggregated individual items, see Figures A1, A2 and A3). Overall, the results demonstrate that, contrary to my expectations, strategic solidarity treatment helped decrease trust in the government among regime supporters, but also increased their trust in European organisations and support for international trade.

An analysis of individual items reveals that strategic aid, communicated as such, has significant effects on four out of five attitudinal measures. First, it decreased trust in government as the defender of national interests, and the difference in marginal means is considerable ( $\approx 0.5$ , half standard deviation). To put things in perspective, the average support for government as defender of national interest is quite high, 4.37 out of 5, among those exposed to the baseline propaganda treatment, while it drops to 3.85 among those treated with the strategic-aid vignette. Pro-government voters were also less likely to think that the government prioritises Turkish citizens in international affairs and improves national pride with foreign policy once they had been exposed to the strategic-aid treatment. The effect size is substantive, 0.65, compared to the propaganda baseline.

Interestingly, on average, the strategic-aid treatment increased the perception that the government is not transparent in its foreign policy, while it had the exact opposite effect for European organisations. Strategic solidarity treatment has statistically significant and positive effects among regime supporters on all individual attitudinal measures for trust in Europe/European organisations. Exposed to strategic aid, they, on average, become more likely to support allowing EU organisations to monitor human rights in Turkey, and operate freely. The effect sizes are substantive for a partisan group whose attitudes are hard to shift: compared to baseline propaganda treatment, the differences in marginal means correspond to approximately 1.02 and 1.32, respectively. Considering the very low baseline trust in European organisations among this particular group (ranging from 0.9 to 1.8 based on different attitudinal measures), the positive effect sizes are pronounced. Unconditional solidarity also has significant and positive effects for three out of five measures of trust in European organisations.

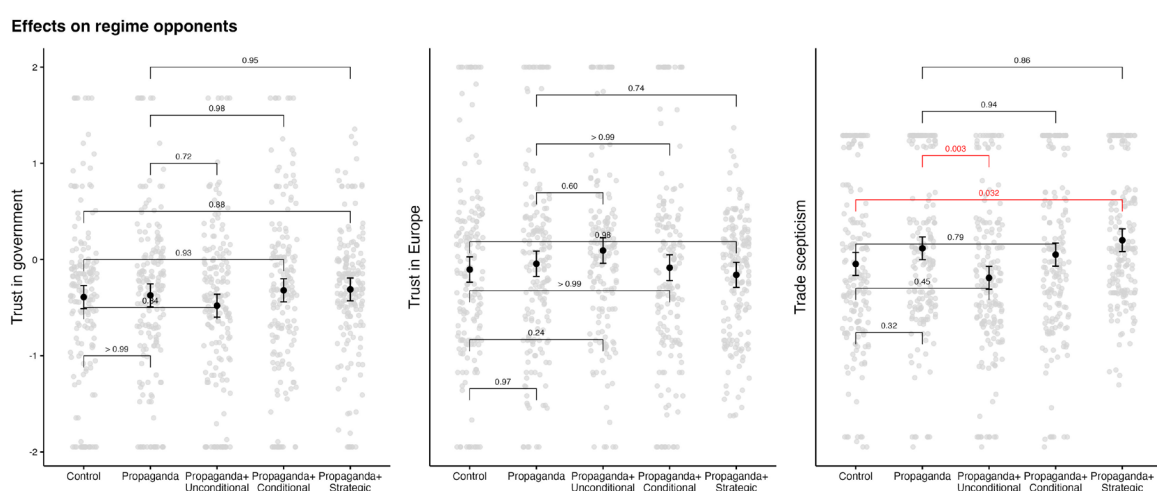
**Figure 1: Effects on regime supporters regarding trust in government, trust in Europe and trade scepticism. Pairwise contrasts with bias adjustment**



Source: Author

On the other hand, as for regime opponents, the treatments were largely insignificant, with two notable exceptions. Figure 2 visualises pairwise contrasts for treatments for the subset of regime opponents (for disaggregated individual items, see Figures A4, A5 and A6). In line with hypotheses, on average, unconditional solidarity boosted their support for international trade, while strategic aid exacerbated their trade scepticism. Unconditional international solidarity made regime opponents less likely to think that Turkey should try to be self-sufficient and does not need help from others. On the other hand, strategic aid, transparent about self-interest motivations behind it, shifted regime opponents' attitudes toward self-sufficiency. This is in line with what I expected to find, as the effects of side-taking on economic engagement (Bush & Prather, 2020).

**Figure 2: Effects on regime opponents regarding trust in government, trust in Europe and trade scepticism. Pairwise contrasts with bias adjustment**



Source: Author

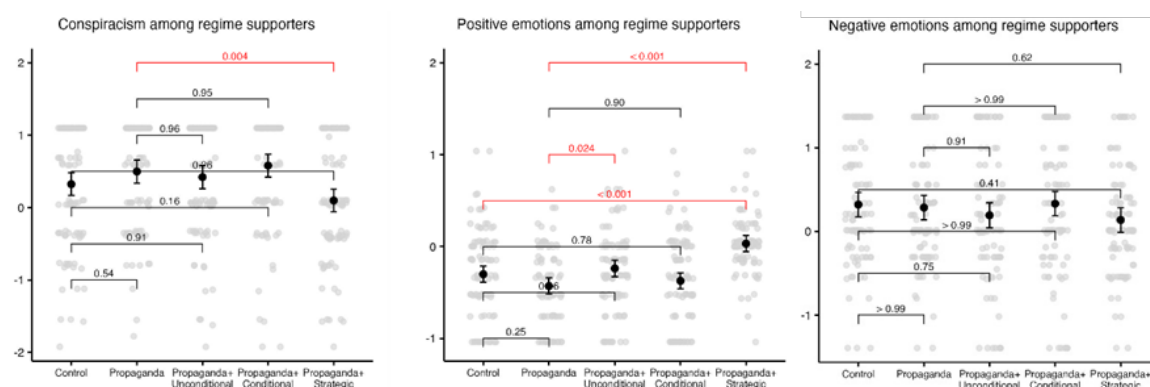
There are three potential explanations for unexpected findings for effects on regime supporters. First, it may be associated with audience costs in foreign policy. Respondents may think that the government succumbs to international pressure by accepting strategic aid, and consider

government propaganda as cheap talk (Li & Chen, 2020). That may be the reason why they, on average, tend to think that the government does not prioritise Turkish citizens in its foreign affairs and protect national reputation.

Second, voters may prefer transparency in public communication about both the provision and receipt of international assistance (Gafuri, 2024). Making the strategic intent behind aid allocation explicit confirmed their priors. That is why strategic aid communicated as such reduces conspiracism and cynicism about European aid, while it renders the government propaganda ineffective, as it creates the impression that it is not the Europeans but the government itself not being transparent in its dealings. Figure 3 illustrates pairwise contrasts for conspiracism and confirmed it as a potential causal pathway.

The third and final mechanism could be affective. International solidarity, in the aftermath of a devastating earthquake, may evoke positive sentiments towards the European organisations among the regime's core support groups, even though some was strategically distributed. The results suggest that unconditional aid reduced the effectiveness of government propaganda, and strategic-aid treatment also induced positive emotions among this group (Figure 3), though the treatments are insignificant for measures of negative emotions (Figure 3). Figure A7 illustrates results for each individual affective measure. The strategic-aid treatment, on average, significantly decreases their hopefulness about the future, which might explain their evaluation of the government. On the other hand, both unconditional and strategic aid make them significantly more likely to feel touched by the international solidarity.

**Figure 3: Causal pathways: Conspiracism, positive and negative emotions among regime supporters**



Source: Author

How about quasi-behavioural outcomes? To put things in perspective, roughly 17 per cent of the overall sample were willing to share foreign outlets, whether it's German or European, and repost calls from foreign donors, including French, German and American development agencies. There was considerable variation based on partisan identity: Only 3 per cent of regime supporters picked a foreign news outlet, only 7 per cent chose a call from a foreign agency to be reposted, while among regime opponents, the share is much higher, corresponding to 24 per cent and 22 per cent, respectively. The results display no significant effects on quasi-behavioural outcomes in terms of either reducing reposting/engaging with government propaganda, or increasing engagement with foreign outlets and agencies, with one important exception: regime opponents on average become significantly less likely to share foreign media outlets following the strategic-aid treatment (Figure A8).

## 8 External validity

What are the scope conditions of these findings? The results may apply to other countries across different regions that experience disasters and receive humanitarian assistance, and that BMZ identifies as candidate countries for bilateral development cooperation. They may also apply more generally to other middle-income ODA-eligible electoral autocracies with widespread anti-Western attitudes and partisan polarisation.

One illustrative example is Indonesia, an electoral autocracy with a relatively high degree of polarisation and government censorship. The Indonesian government has been coping with the Rohingya refugee crisis, and has pleaded with the international community to intervene more responsibly to resolve the crisis (Tarigan & Saifullah, 2023). Indonesia also has a history of politicised humanitarian assistance – after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, Indonesia accepted substantial Western aid but was also wary of foreign presence, especially in Aceh, where there was an ongoing separatist conflict at the time (Deutsche Presse, 2005).

Pakistan was also critical of the underwhelming international solidarity following devastating floods in 2022. The humanitarian aid agencies were partly demobilised, as new laws have made registration and funding access difficult, with several domestic NGOs deregistered in 2019. To put things in perspective, only \$267 million in official humanitarian aid had been allocated in 2022: roughly ten times less than the \$3.2 billion provided after the 2010 floods (Harvey et al., 2022). The government was also unable to quickly access concessionary climate funds, because nearly 90% of the aid pledged to Pakistan at the Geneva conference consisted of project loans spread over three years, and disbursement depended on how fast projects were designed (Nabi, 2023). This underwhelming international response generated grievances around climate justice, and was also leveraged by government officials to shift blame.

In Venezuela, another electoral autocracy with a high level of polarisation and strong propaganda messaging, the government aims to discredit the international humanitarian space. In 2019, Maduro denied entry to humanitarian agencies and said: “With humanitarian aid, they want to treat us like beggars.” (Lapatilla, 2019) The government passed ‘anti-NGO law’ that subscribes to the government’s interpretation of international cooperation with a clear intention to control and punish organisations collaborating with international development cooperation actors (Amnesty International, 2022). Given such politicisation of the humanitarian landscape with anti-Western government propaganda, transparent communication of strategic aid may have similar implications.

In Kazakhstan, an electoral autocracy with a strong regime apparatus, even though Europe is recognised as a potential economic partner it is also perceived as a potential threat against political stability and cultural norms (Arynov, 2022). And it has been dealing with floods and droughts recently, necessitating an international humanitarian response. In 2024, severe floods hit Kazakhstan, displacing thousands of people, and causing millions of dollars in damage. While the government’s disaster recovery was skewed and inadequate, the EU provided €200,000 in humanitarian funding to assist the most affected families (Delegation of the European Union to the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2024). However, the EU’s contributions could not keep up with the Chinese “generosity” (Times of Central Asia, 2024). Though there is no scholarly evidence that measures the effect of this post-disaster relief aid in the context of such geopolitical competition, interestingly, European High Representative Mogherini asserts that “We as Europeans are not here for geopolitical interests or games. You know that well. This is not what drives our foreign policy. [...] This is the core of our new Strategy on Central Asia.” (EEAS, 2019) Instead, in such a context, where Europe is recognised as a potential strategic partner with reservations, transparent communication of strategic intent may be the key to strengthening cooperation in the face of geopolitical rivalry.

## 9 Discussion

How does international assistance tied to strategic interests impact the recipient public's sentiments towards donors against the backdrop of heavy authoritarian counterpropaganda? There are good reasons to be worried about its potential negative repercussions on public perception of the donors. First, donors' focus on strategic interests may play into autocratic propaganda. Under tightening fiscal constraints, donors may increasingly prioritise their geostrategic interests over humanitarian needs. As instrumentality takes over international solidarity, autocratic governments may exploit these trends to undermine trust in donors, fuel scepticism of the international community, and harness ideological legitimacy for their own regime. Second, strategic priorities may result in increased Western cooperation with authoritarian regimes, deepen partisan cleavages, and tarnish the donor's reputation in the recipient country, especially among pro-EU, pro-democracy partisan groups.

I conducted an online survey experiment in Turkey, a middle-income electoral autocracy with high polarisation and widespread anti-Western attitudes, to probe the effects of different types of international assistance post-disaster – unconditional, conditional and strategic – in the face of government propaganda that aims to dismiss it as disingenuous, hypocritical and sinister.

Contrary to my expectations, making the strategic and transactional intent behind foreign assistance explicit increased trust in European organisations and support for international trade among regime supporters, who are overall conservative, nationalist and Eurosceptic, and whose attitudes are often very difficult to sway. To give a clearer picture about the government's support base, their average religiosity is 4.67, and baseline trust in EU is 2.03 out of 5.00. Eighty-four per cent of pro-government respondents identify themselves as conservative, Islamist or Turkish nationalist. They constitute the backbone of the regime's main support group, vital for its resilience. That is why these substantive shifts in their attitudes are critical to efforts for democratisation and for regaining trust in liberal order.

There may be several reasons for these unexpected findings. First, it may be a type of audience cost effect. Pro-government voters may perceive the receipt of strategic aid as a sign of government weakness under international pressure, and consider government propaganda as cheap talk. Second, strategic aid, communicated transparently as such, renders the "rules of the game" clear for the regime supporters, mitigating their conspiratorial thinking, while reducing trust in the government as the defender of national interests, as they perceive it as less transparent in its foreign affairs. In other words, transparency pays off and government propaganda backfires (see Gafuri, 2024). Third, there may be an affective mechanism at play: international solidarity, especially after the devastating earthquake, may have evoked positive emotions even among core regime supporters.

However, positive shifts in pro-government voters' attitudes come at a cost. While unconditional aid improves anti-government voters' support for international trade, strategic aid that is transparent about the instrumental motivations behind it shifts regime opponents' attitudes toward trade protectionism. It may also have potential behavioural outcomes – they may be less trusting of, and less likely to engage with, foreign media outlets.

Why does this matter in the general scheme of things? First, the available statistical evidence suggests that these natural disasters may exacerbate polarisation (Sinanoglu & Donnelly, 2024). With the increased frequency of climate-related disasters globally, even a least-likely case such as international solidarity in the form of post-disaster recovery aid may further politicise a society, discredit international organisations, and be exploited by autocrats for political gains. In other words, there may be unintended consequences of strategically distributed aid in terms of public support for international engagement in the recipient countries. That is why there are policy and programming implications of these findings in terms of

projecting European soft power, countering autocratic propaganda, and boosting public support for international trade.

One point of clarification is in order here. Well-documented evidence shows there are good reasons to be worried about securitisation. When short-term security interests are prioritised in international assistance, it crowds out long-term positive developmental outcomes (Brown & Grävingholt, 2016; Petrikova & Lazell, 2022). It does not even necessarily bring about better security outcomes either (Boutton, 2019). That is why I am making a case for understanding how not to securitise humanitarian aid and to foresee where the risks are.

If the new rule of the game is that strategic interests trump humanitarian needs, then there may be a silver lining to being transparent about it. On the one hand, for the recipient audience, by rendering the strategic intent behind aid transparent, explicit strategic framing helps reduce conspiracism and increase trust in European organisations. On the other hand, strategic framing also helps to boost the donor public's support for international assistance (Chung et al., 2023; Wood et al., 2021). The recent polling data show that around nine in ten Europeans already believe that it is important that the EU funds humanitarian aid activities (Eurobarometer, 2024). That is why, despite budgetary pressures, European leaders may find it easier to convince their voters that this is money well spent.

What are the policy implications of these findings? How European donors talk about aid is just as important as how they deliver it. These findings suggest that being open about the *realpolitik* behind aid can help counter authoritarian propaganda, particularly among conservative, nationalist and Eurosceptic groups in recipient countries, whose views are typically resistant to change. When donors are upfront about their strategic motives, propaganda narratives may lose traction. Transparent messaging may reduce conspiratorial thinking among these groups and boost their trust in Europe and support for international trade. These constituencies would be key to any serious effort at democratisation if they were to withdraw their normative support from the regime.

That said, donors must walk a fine line. Strategic framing may resonate with Eurosceptics, but it risks alienating cosmopolitan, pro-EU citizens who care deeply about principled, value-driven solidarity. If aid starts to look too self-serving or transactional, this audience may become disenchanted with European countries and organisations, and reduce their support for economic engagements with Europe, though it does not necessarily reduce their overall trust. The challenge is to communicate strategic interests clearly while staying rooted in humanitarian commitments.

Future research is required to probe the effects of different types of strategic framing (whether it is tied to migration, security or commercial interests). Future experimental studies should also examine how to calibrate and couple strategic framing with unconditional international solidarity to prevent negative spillovers. Finally, the question of how strategic framing impacts public attitudes in the recipient country in the face of geostrategic rivalry with China remains relatively unexplored, and more scholarly work is needed.

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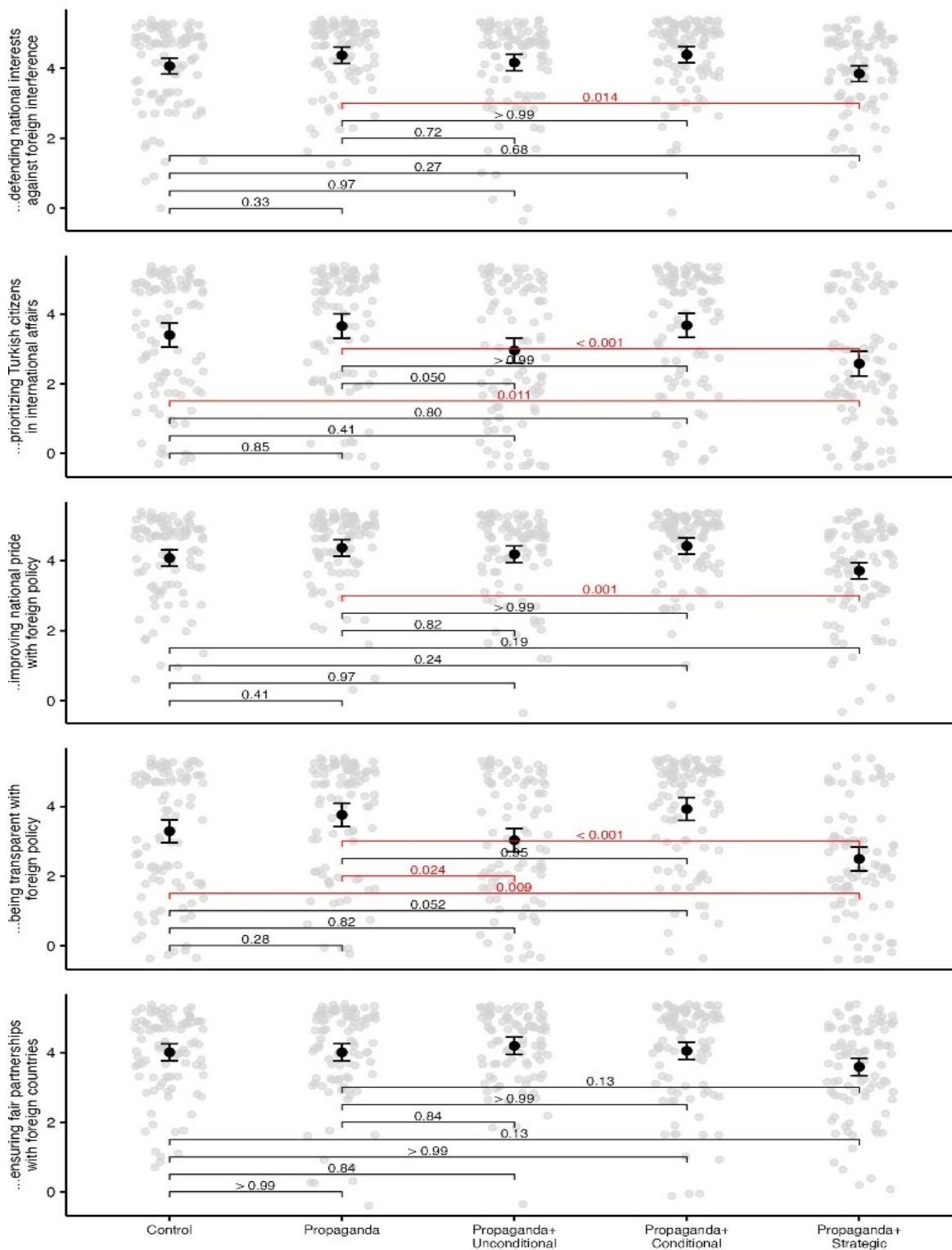
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## Appendix A: Other results

Figure A1: Trust in government among regime supporters

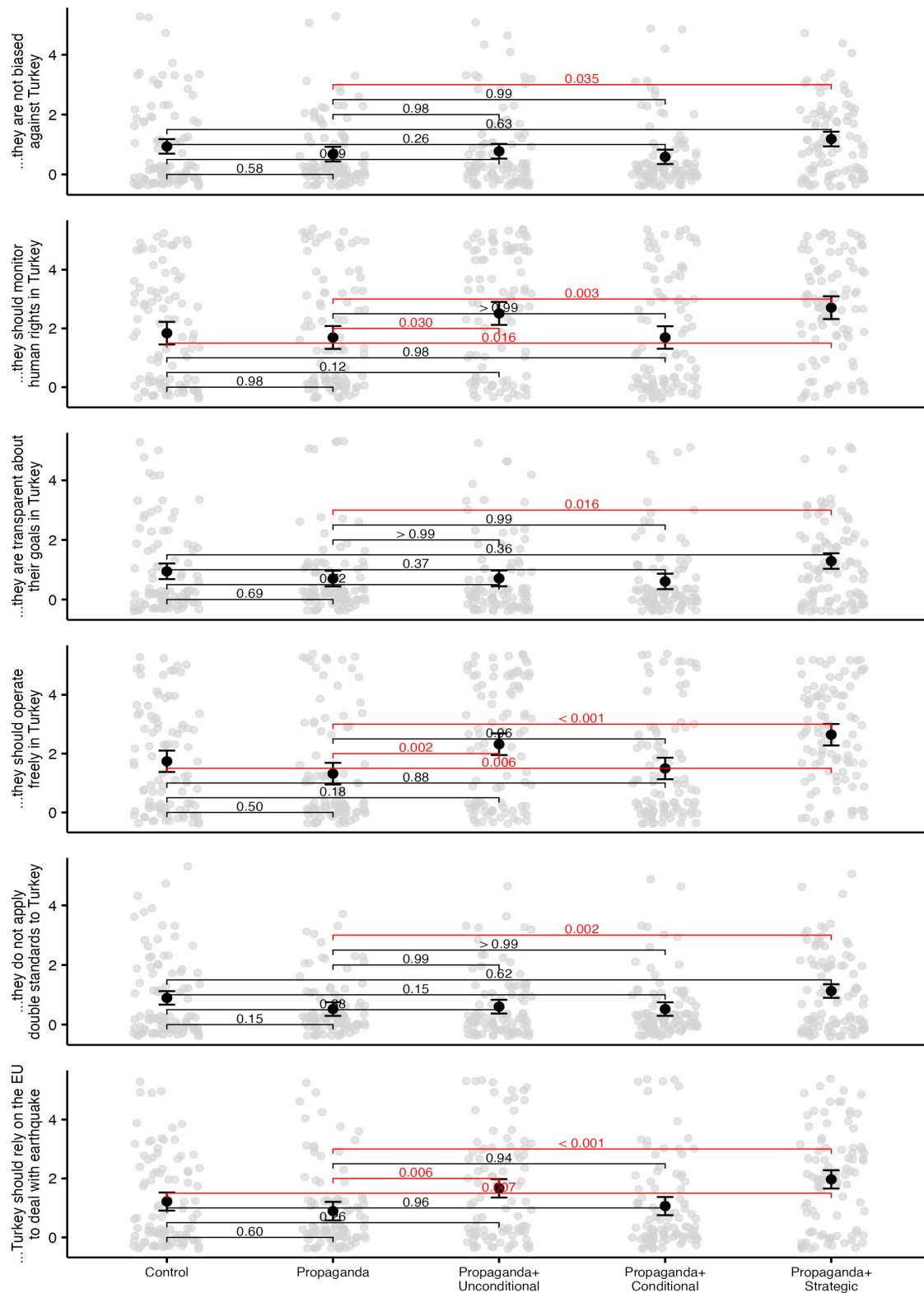
Trust in government among regime supporters for...



Source: Author

**Figure A2: Trust in Europe among regime supporters**

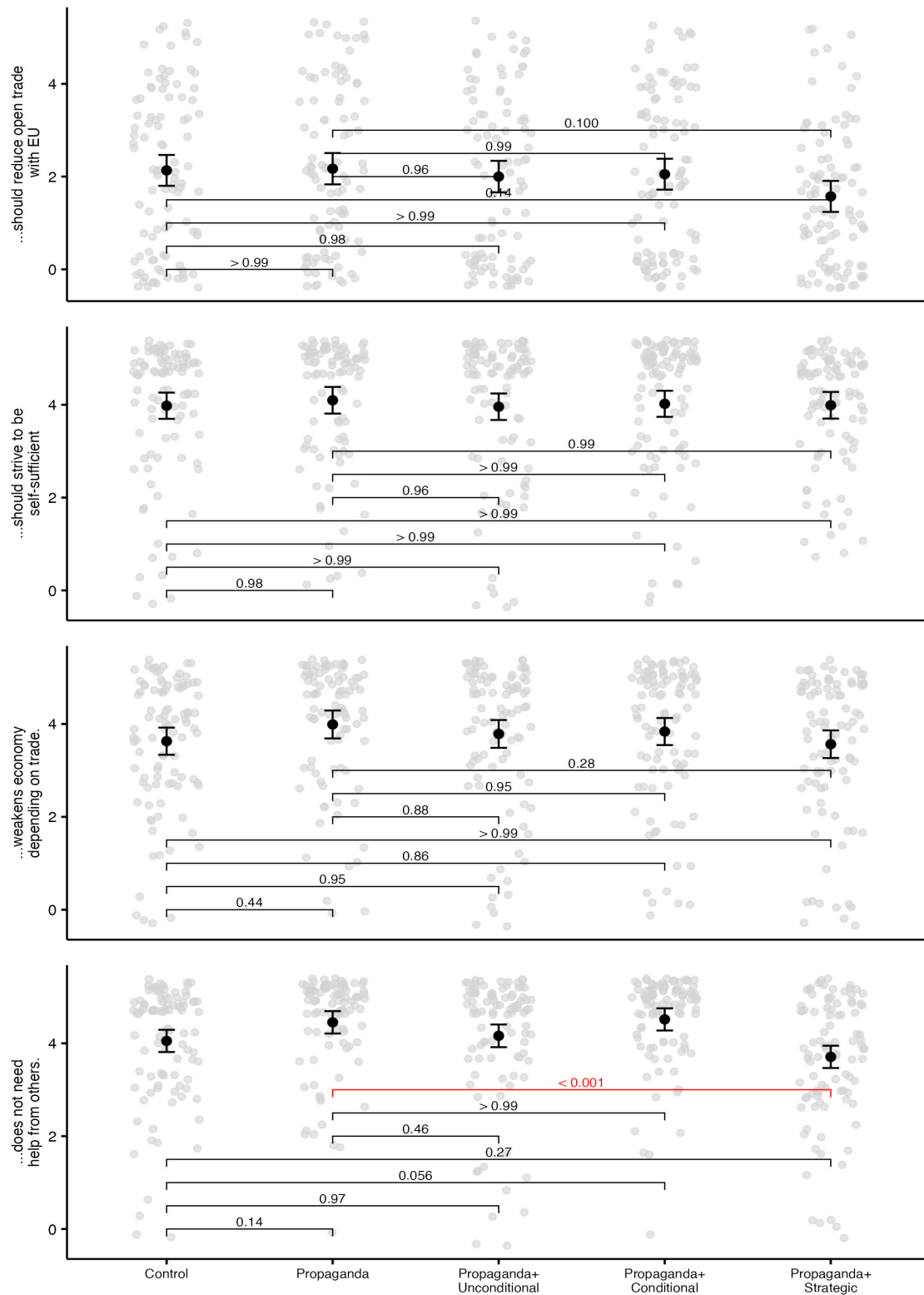
Trust in European organisations among regime supporters that...



Source: Author

**Figure A3: Trade scepticism among regime supporters**

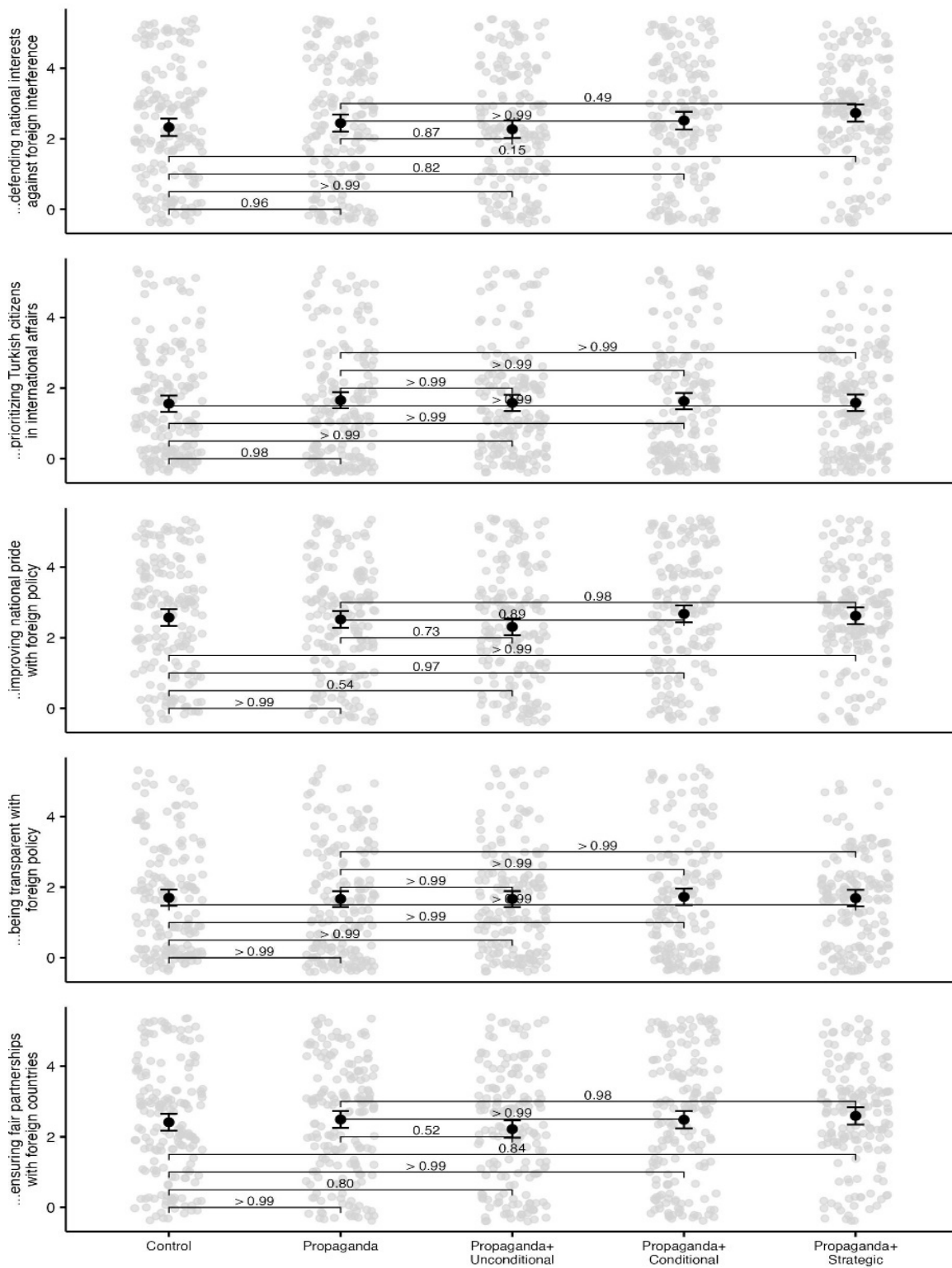
Trade scepticism among regime supporters that Turkey...



Source: Author

**Figure A4: Trust in government among regime opponents**

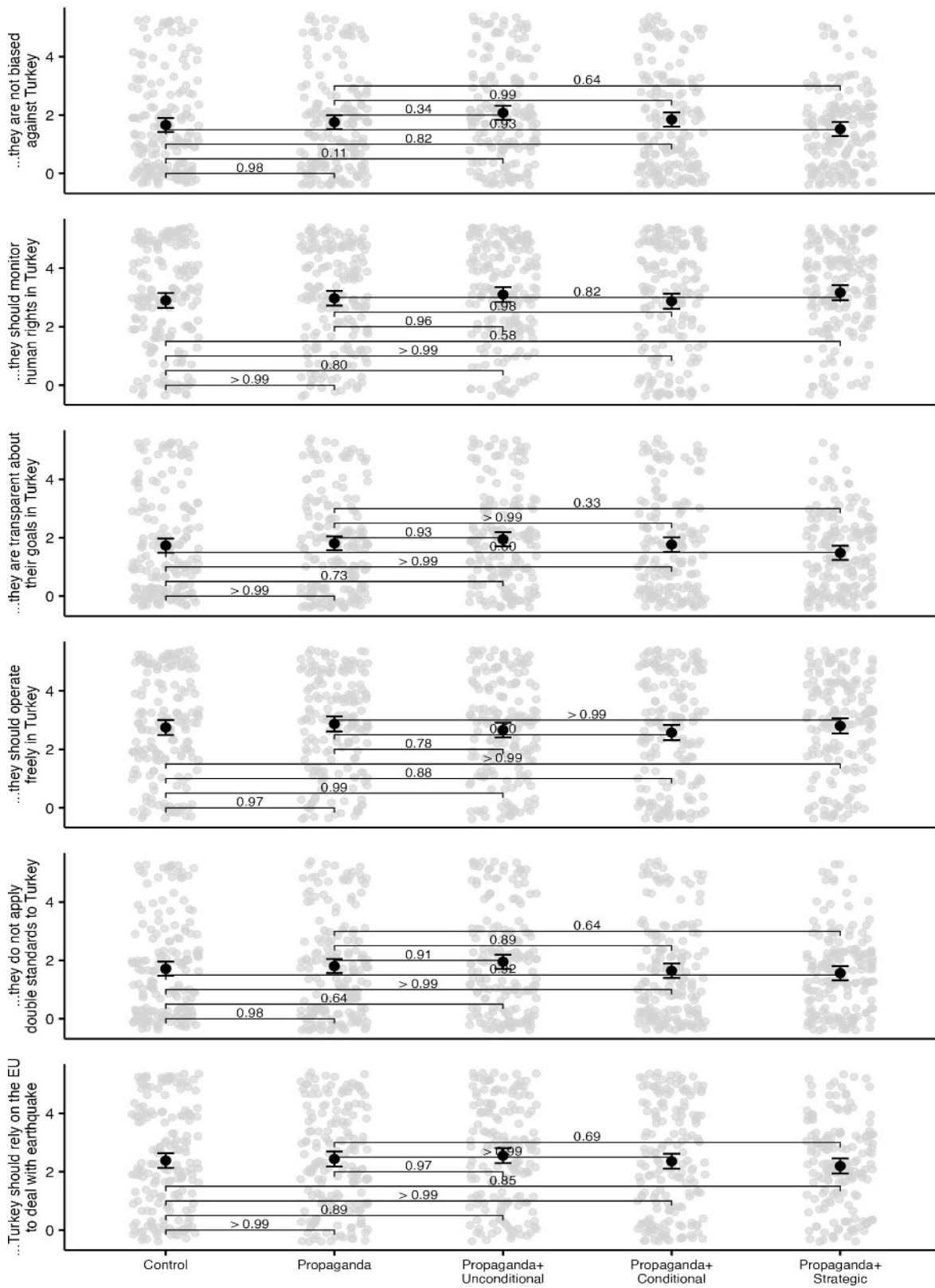
Trust in government among regime opponents for...



Source: Author

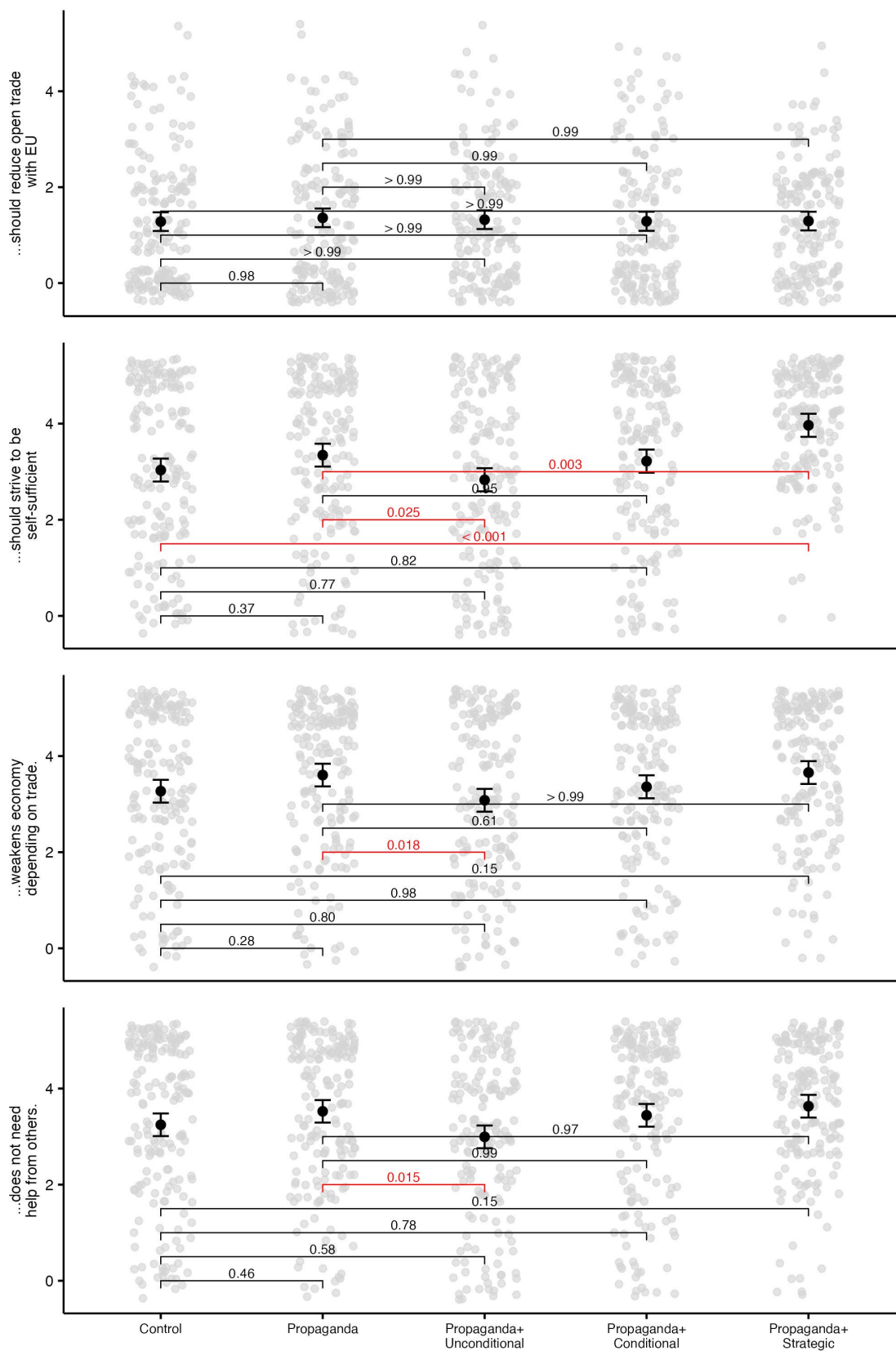
**Figure A5: Trust in Europe among regime opponents**

Trust in Europe among regime opponents that...



**Figure A6: Trade scepticism among regime opponents**

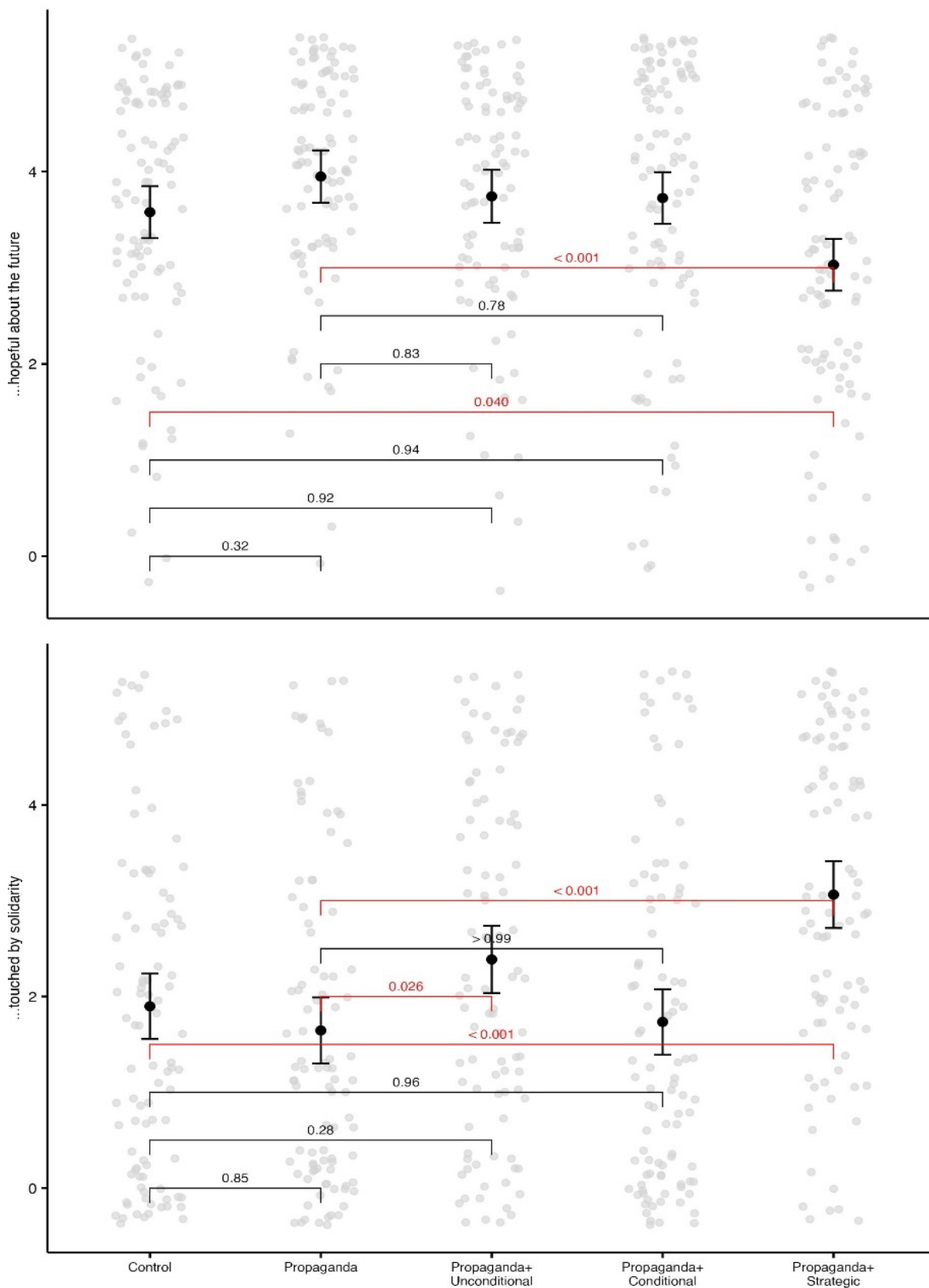
Trade scepticism among regime opponents that Turkey...



Source: Author

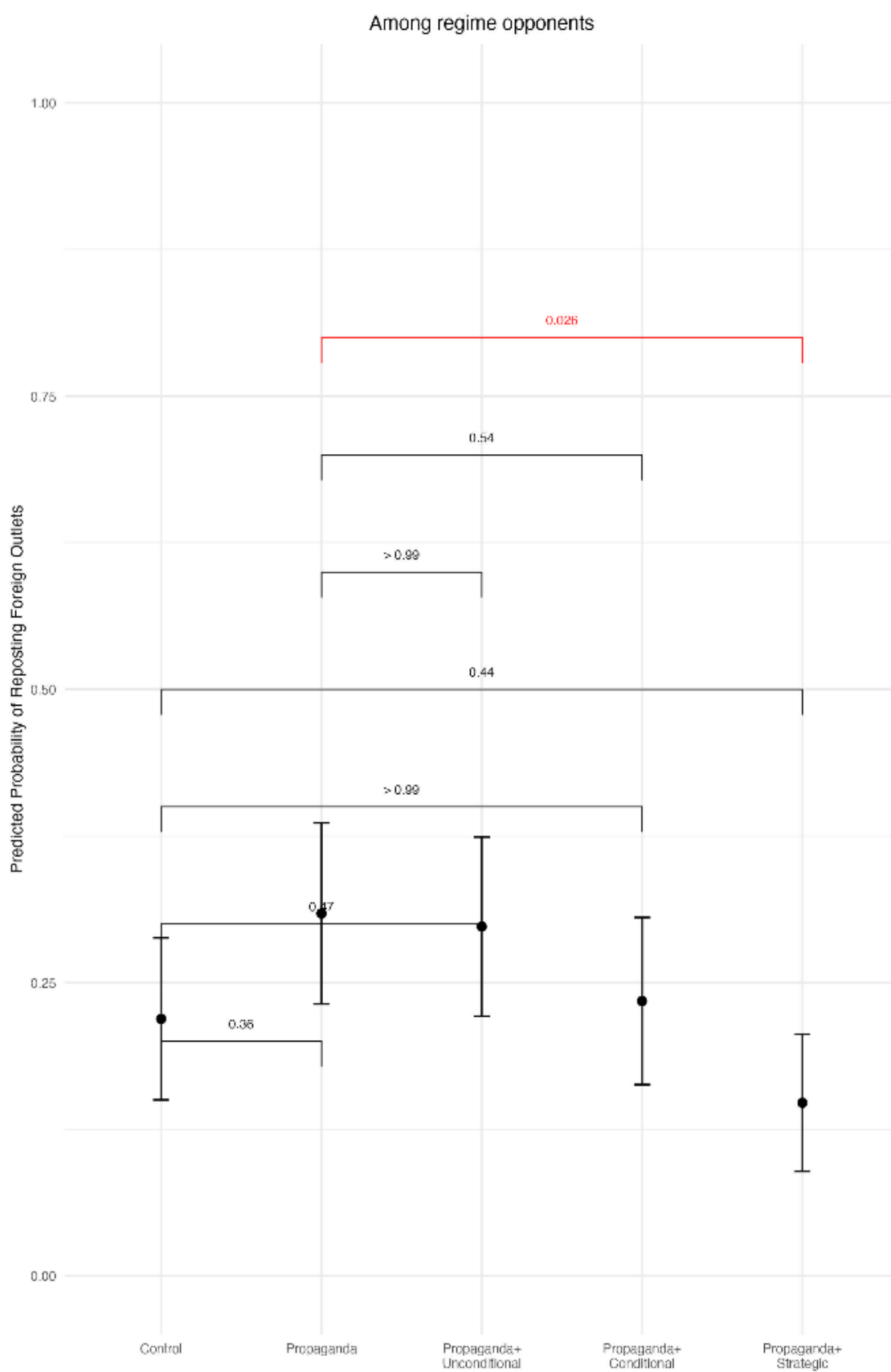
**Figure A7: Positive emotions among regime supporters**

**Regime supporters feel...**



Source: Author

**Figure A8: Predicted probability of reposting foreign media outlets among regime opponents**



Source: Author

## Appendix B: Treatments

You may find AI-translations of treatments that were presented originally in Turkish:

### Propaganda treatment

Please read the following article carefully:

#### **The West instrumentalises humanitarian aid**

It was emphasised that Western countries have succeeded in concealing their real policies under the guise of humanitarian aid, and that “humanitarian aid” also means intelligence and diplomacy. “Western countries give much less to the rest of the world than they take from them. While countries’ resources are exploited, the support provided to them on various occasions is used as a tool of a massive propaganda machine.”

#### **They don’t see it through a humanitarian lens**

President Erdoğan stressed that Western countries do not view these crises from a humanitarian perspective, stating that the West relegates them to the status of “stale news” until their next moral crisis. “The West is concerned with how to stop refugees so they don’t end up at their doorstep. Wasn’t the UN supposed to stand with the oppressed and against the oppressor? Didn’t we witness the same thing in Bosnia and Herzegovina? In Palestine, Kashmir, Crimea and Myanmar?”

#### **No support**

“When we say, ‘You provide support, look – the plan is ready, the projects are ready, let’s do this immediately,’ the world’s giants, those with the most money, just smile at us. When it comes to actual support, unfortunately, there is none.” Erdoğan, who said, “We did not see the support or attitude we expected from the European Union,” noted that the EU released only €2.5 billion of the €6 billion it had pledged.

### Unconditional solidarity treatment

Please read the following information carefully.

#### **Dozens of European volunteers and search-and-rescue teams are in Turkey with equipment and field hospitals**

Structural engineers, soldiers, medical experts, search-and-rescue dogs... These are part of the aid sent from all across Europe. Immediately after the earthquake, the EU Commission activated the European Civil Protection Mechanism. It was announced that dozens of search-and-rescue teams from 21 EU member states had gone to Turkey.

The German government announced that a search-and-rescue team consisting of 50 rescuers and equipment was dispatched to Adana. Germany is also sending emergency generators, tents, blankets and water purification equipment.

France was among the first countries to provide assistance, sending 139 rescue personnel to Turkey and setting up a large field hospital in Adıyaman.

Greece was one of the first countries to dispatch a rescue team to Turkey. A military transport aircraft carried a 21-member rescue team, two search-and-rescue dogs, a rescue vehicle, one structural engineer, five doctors and a seismic planning expert.

## **Conditional solidarity treatment**

Please read the following information carefully.

### **Support for Turkey at the International Donors' Conference**

At the International Donors' Conference organised by the European Union for those affected by the earthquake in Turkey, a total of €6.05 billion (approximately 123 billion Turkish lira) was pledged for Turkey. Of this amount, €4.3 billion will be provided as concessional loans by international financial institutions and investment banks, while €1.75 billion will be granted as direct aid.

### **Aid is conditional on project requirements**

Çavuşoğlu stated that the project-based loans will be disbursed as the projects are implemented and that the funds will be channelled through the new disaster relief fund passed in Parliament last week upon the government's proposal. He emphasised that these funds will be subject to audit, managed transparently and used exclusively for earthquake-related expenditures. Diplomatic sources in Brussels noted that they are reviewing the new law passed by Parliament, but secondary legislation and regulations might be required to align with EU standards. Officials said that discussions with the Turkish government on this matter would continue.

### **Loans could strain Turkey's economy**

According to experts, while the aid package – being largely composed of loans – may help alleviate economic problems related to the earthquake in the short term, debt repayments in the long run could further strain Turkey's economy.

## **Strategic solidarity treatment**

Please read the following information carefully.

### **Biden: Urgent refugee needs must be met after the earthquake**

Through a presidential memorandum, Biden authorised Secretary of State Antony Blinken to provide \$50 million in aid to address the urgent needs of refugees affected by the earthquakes in Turkey. Biden emphasised the importance of allocating up to \$50 million from the US Emergency Refugee and Migration Assistance Fund (ERMA) under the Migration and Refugee Assistance Act (MRAA).

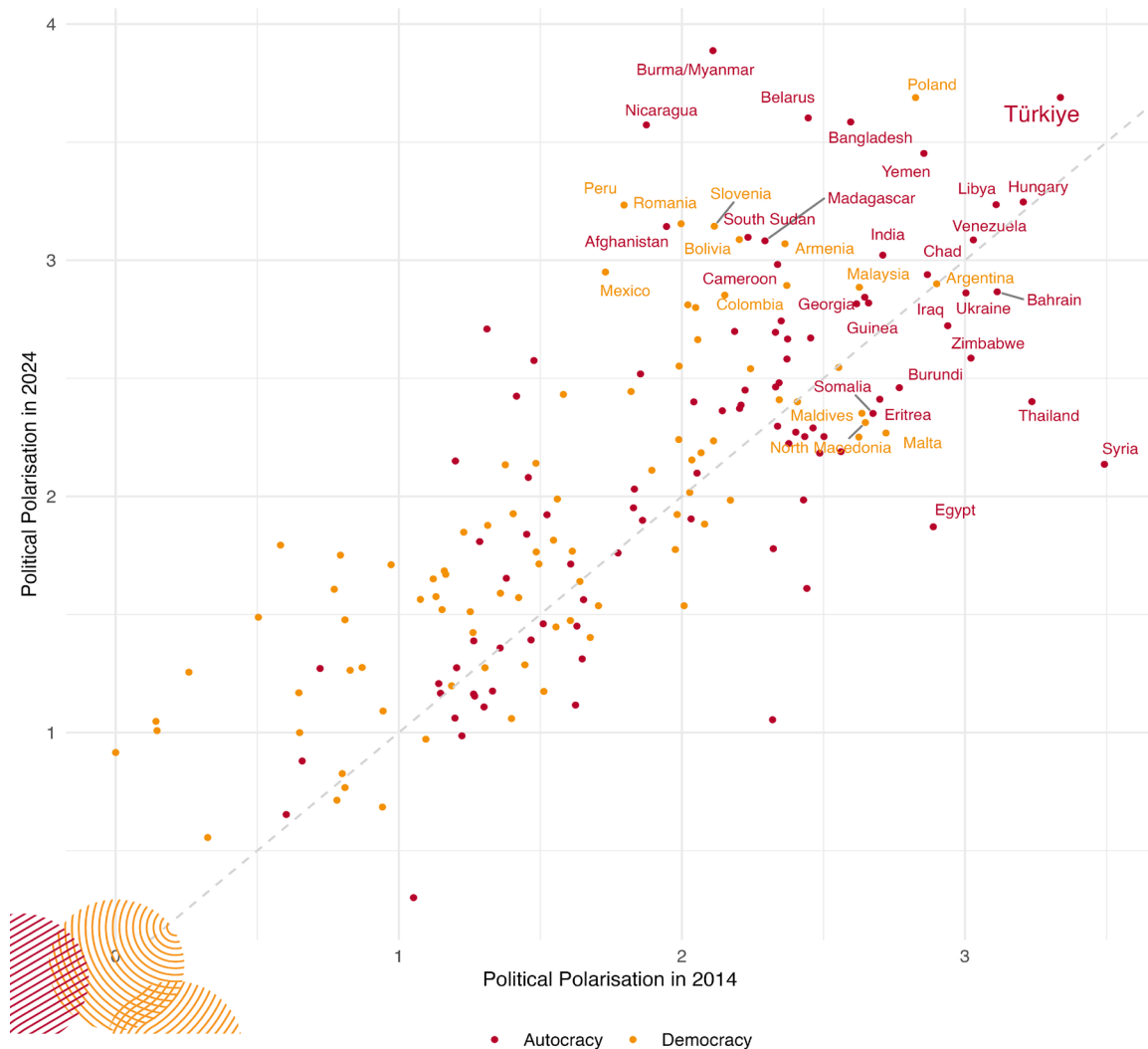
US Ambassador to the UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield, in her statement of support following the earthquake, highlighted that Turkey is already generously hosting more than 3.5 million Syrians.

### **EU to provide €26 million for refugees in earthquake-hit areas in Turkey**

The European Union will provide €26 million to support refugees in Turkey affected by the 6 February earthquakes. The EU stated that this new funding source aims to help meet the most urgent humanitarian needs arising from the earthquakes and the broader regional refugee crisis. In his announcement of the aid, EU Commissioner for Crisis Management Janez Lenarčič said the EU “continues to show solidarity with the refugees in Turkey”.

## Appendix C: Descriptive statistics

**Figure C1: Political polarisation in 2014 and 2024 with regime type. The figure labels the countries with the highest level of polarisation according to V-DEM data**



Source: Author

## Covariate balance

I used block randomisation based on partisan identity (whether the respondents are supportive of the incumbent government coalition parties or not). That is why covariate balances are reported below conditional on party identification.

**Table C1: Covariate balance for pro-government respondents**

	Control	Propaganda	Unconditional	Conditional	Strategic
Characteristic	N = 98 <sup>1</sup>	N = 97	N = 94	N = 98	N = 99
Age	40	40	38	41	39
Female	0.48	0.47	0.51	0.48	0.49
Education	4.79	4.74	4.21	4.52	4.10
Religiosity	4.60	4.64	4.70	4.71	4.70
Income	5.34	5.93	5.79	5.71	5.07

<sup>1</sup> Mean

**Table C2: Covariate balance for anti-government respondents**

	Control	Propaganda	Unconditional	Conditional	Strategic
Characteristic	N = 178 <sup>1</sup>	N = 178	N = 178	N = 175	N = 183
Age	39	39	38	39	37
Female	0.46	0.47	0.45	0.44	0.48
Education	4.57	4.09	4.38	4.29	4.24
Religiosity	4.06	4.10	3.90	4.01	4.18
Income	5.36	5.12	5.46	5.08	5.05

<sup>1</sup> Mean

**Table C3: Descriptive statistics**

<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>N = 1,378</b>
Treatments Control	276 (20%)
Propaganda	275 (20%)
Unconditional	272 (20%)
Conditional	273 (20%)
Strategic	282 (20%)
Age	39 (12) [18, 69]
Female	732 (53%)
Male	
Female	646 (47%)
Education	4.37 (2.07) [2.00, 9.00]
Religiosity	4.27 (0.84) [1.00, 5.00]
Income	5.34 (1.60) [1.00, 9.00]
Pre-treatment Responsiveness	2.33 (1.08) [1.00, 4.00]
Earthquake	916 (66%)
Refugee Encounters	2.12 (0.91) [1.00, 4.00]
Polarisation index	-27 (39) [-100, 87]
Globalisation attitude	3.02 (0.95) [1.00, 4.00]
Pre-treatment Trust	0.00 (0.92) [-2.00, 1.55]

<sup>1</sup> n (%); Mean (SD) [Min, Max]