

Opportunity or threat? How Europeans view freedom of movement



Freedom of movement was one of the major issues during the UK's EU referendum, but how do citizens in other EU countries view the topic? Drawing on new research, [Sofia Vasilopoulou](#) and [Liisa Talving](#) explain that although freedom of movement is popular overall among EU citizens, there is substantial variation between countries, with citizens in richer member states likely to have more negative views.

As a key principle of European integration, mobility is not only important symbolically but also entails important challenges. There is a tension between the EU's objective to increase competitiveness and address unemployment on the one hand, and member states' ability to regulate their domestic labour market institutions on the other.

We know, for example, that [concerns over intra-EU migration](#) were central to the [Brexit referendum vote](#) and have been omnipresent during the Brexit negotiations. But to what extent is scepticism about the EU's freedom of movement principle UK-specific? In a [recent study](#), we find that despite overall high levels of support for EU freedom of movement, there is a great degree of cross-country variation.

What Europeans think about freedom of movement

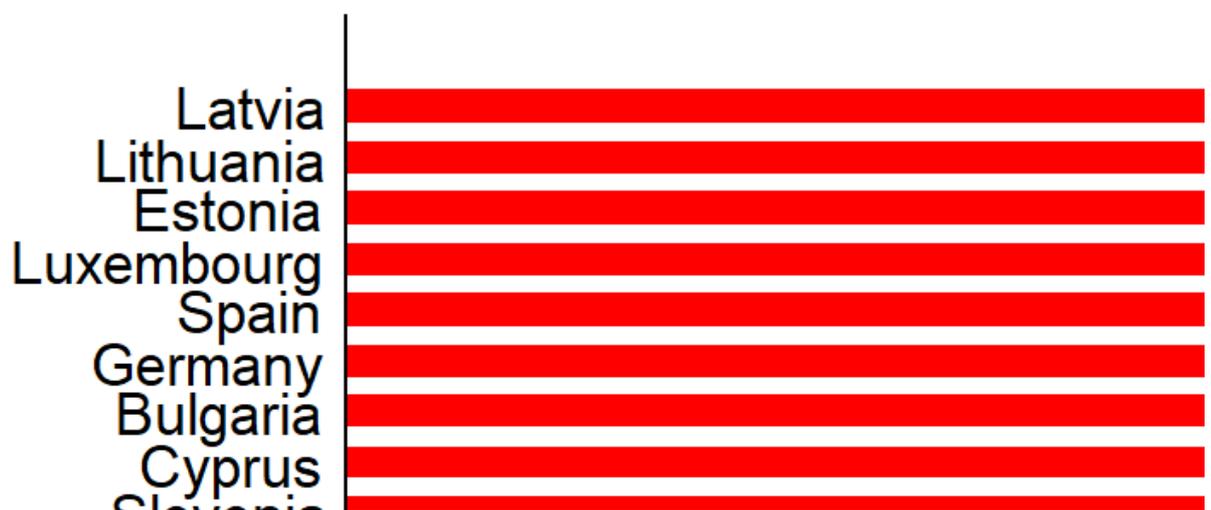
To examine European citizens' attitudes towards freedom of movement, we rely on individual-level data from four Eurobarometer survey waves conducted between 2015 and 2017 which ask:

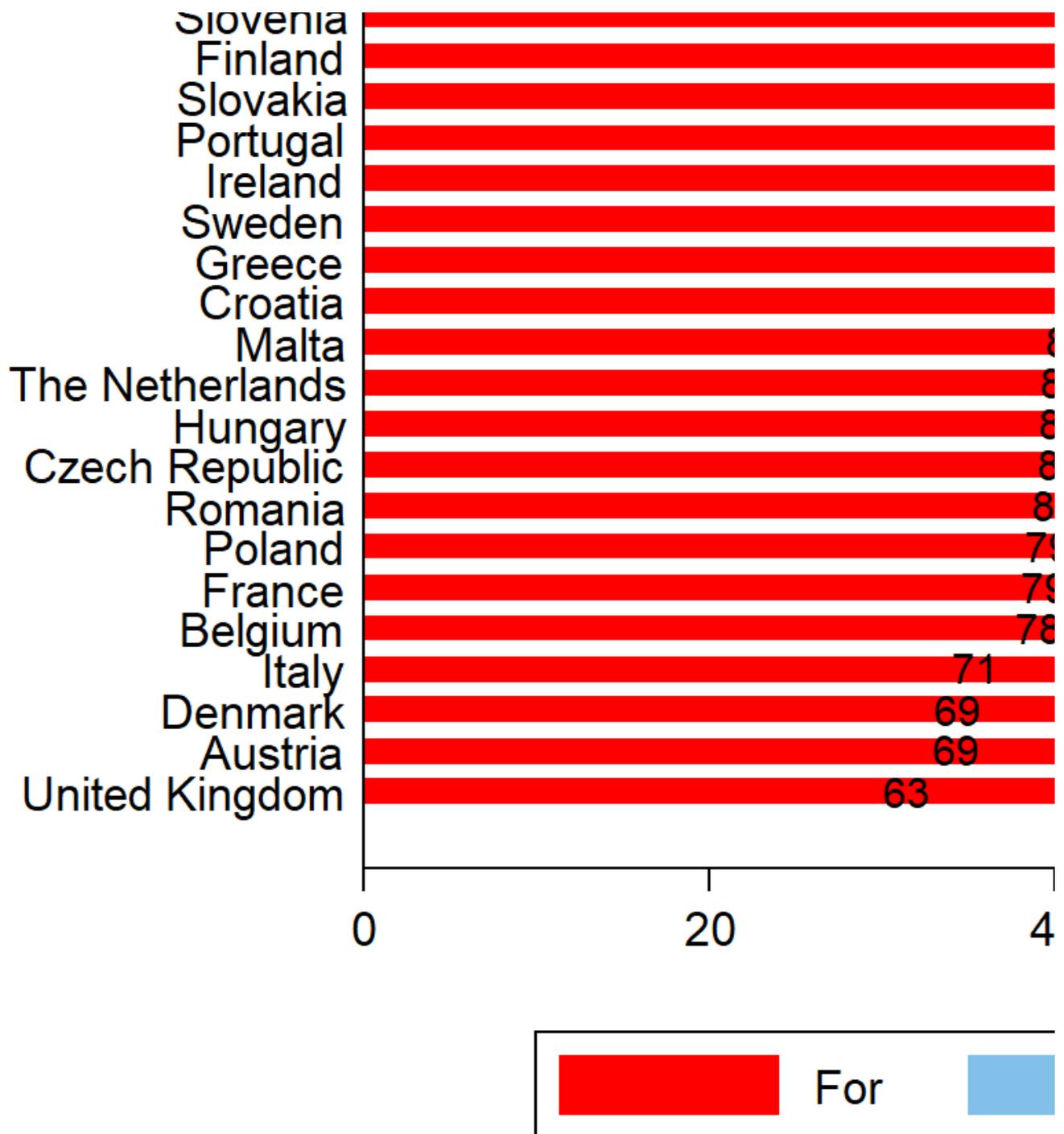
What is your opinion on each of the following statements? Please tell me for each statement, whether you are for it or against it. "The free movement of EU citizens who can live, work, study and do business anywhere in the EU".

On average, 82.4 per cent of respondents support and 13.1 per cent oppose free movement of citizens, with only 4.5 per cent not expressing a clear view. Overall support levels have largely remained the same from one survey to another, ranging between 80 and 83 per cent.

There is, however, a great degree of variation across countries. Stronger opposition to free movement of EU citizens may be found in Western Europe. Countries with the highest opposition score include the UK with 27.3 per cent of respondents being against the policy, followed by Austria at 27 per cent and Denmark at 24.6 per cent respectively (as shown in Figure 1).

Figure 1: Support for EU freedom of movement by country





Source: Eurobarometer 84.3 (November 2015), 85.2 (May 2016), 86.2 (November 2016) and 87.3 (May 2017)

These results contrast with Southern European countries such as Greece, Portugal and Spain, where the proportion of negative views is 14 per cent, 9.4 per cent and 5.8 per cent respectively. Attitudes also vary significantly among Central and Eastern European countries. Interestingly, we may observe relative opposition to EU freedom of movement in Hungary (15.2 per cent), Romania (14.7 per cent) and Poland (13.8 per cent). The Baltic states, on the other hand, show the lowest levels of negative attitudes towards the EU's freedom of movement with only 2.8 per cent in Lithuania, 3.2 per cent in Latvia and 3.4 per cent in Estonia.

What explains variation in European citizens' attitudes towards EU freedom of movement?

We know that socio-economic indicators, such as occupational skills and education, as well as group identities matter in terms of how people view the EU and its policies. Our data show that these factors are also crucial in explaining individual-level variation in support for freedom of movement.

Compared to unemployed citizens, other occupational groups, including the self-employed, managers, manual workers, house persons, the retired and students, have a higher probability of endorsing freedom of movement. Higher-educated individuals are also more likely to support intra-EU mobility compared to those with low levels of education. In addition, citizens with strong feelings of national identity are significantly less supportive of intra-EU mobility.

The role of a country's economic context

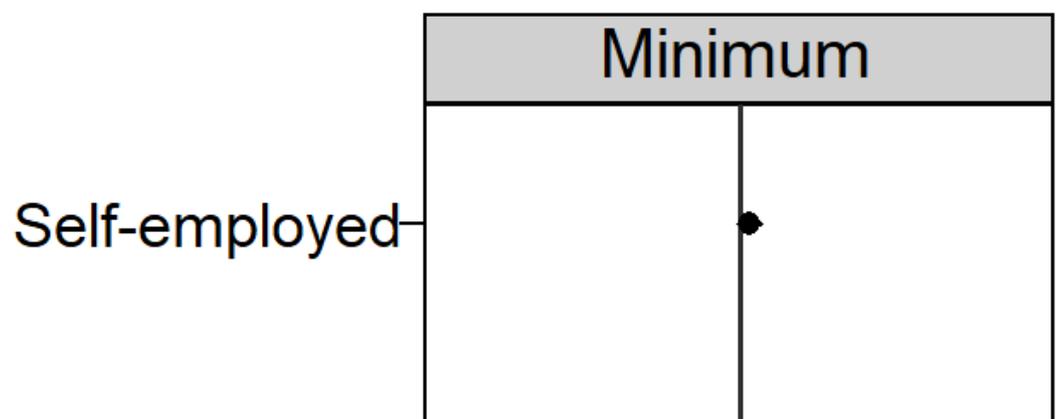
However, although statistically significant, such differences are not large in substantive terms. Our data show that the key predictor of Europeans' attitudes towards freedom of movement is country-level economic affluence measured as national GDP in euros per capita for a quarter previous to survey fieldwork.

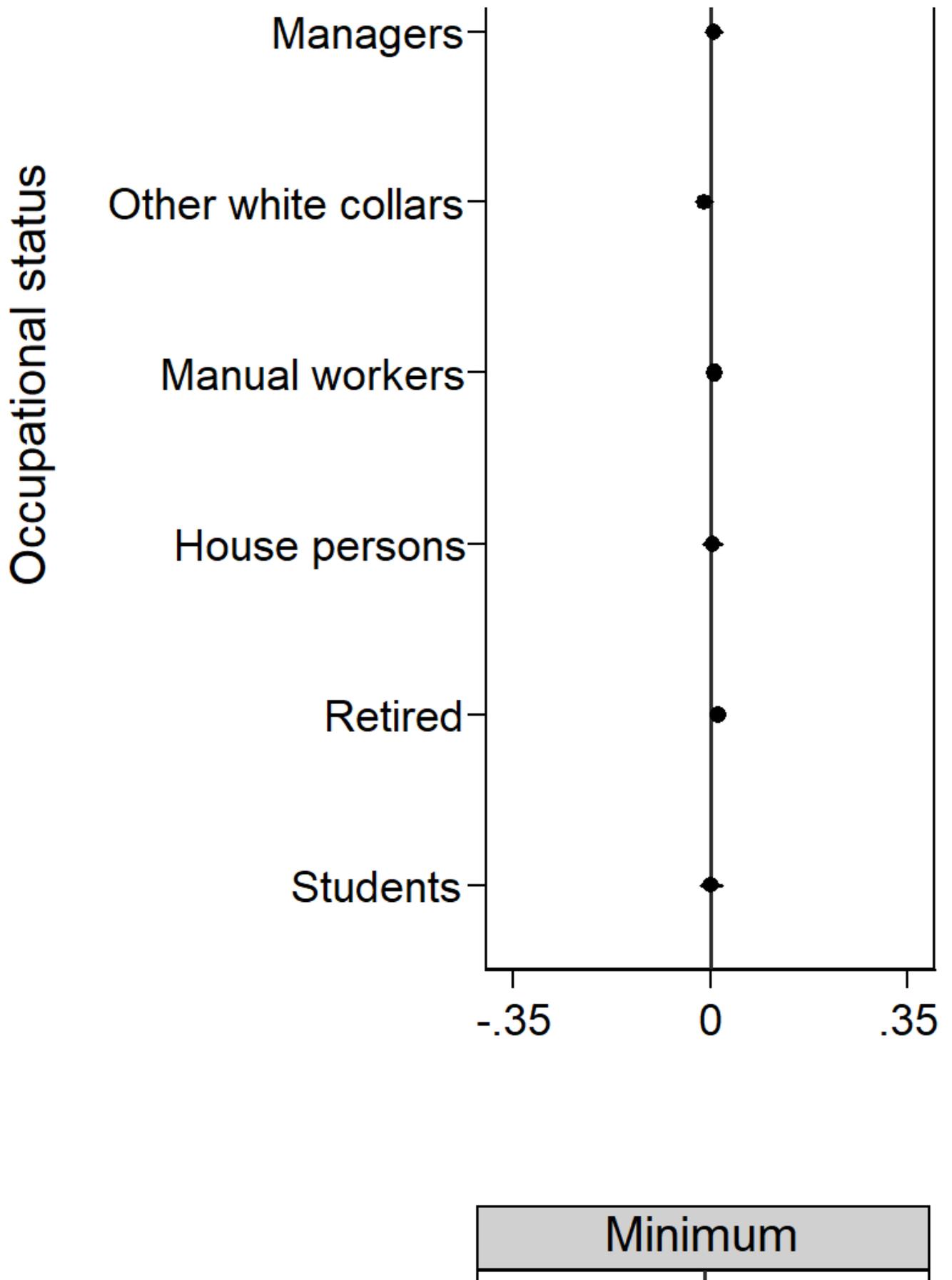
Support levels for EU freedom of movement are higher in poorer countries, but lower in richer EU member states. These differences are large in substantive terms. For example, the likelihood of approval of free movement is 96 per cent for the country with the lowest GDP per capita in the sample (Bulgaria in May 2017), 88 per cent for the median country (Spain in November 2015), and only 71 per cent for the wealthiest one (Luxembourg in May 2017).

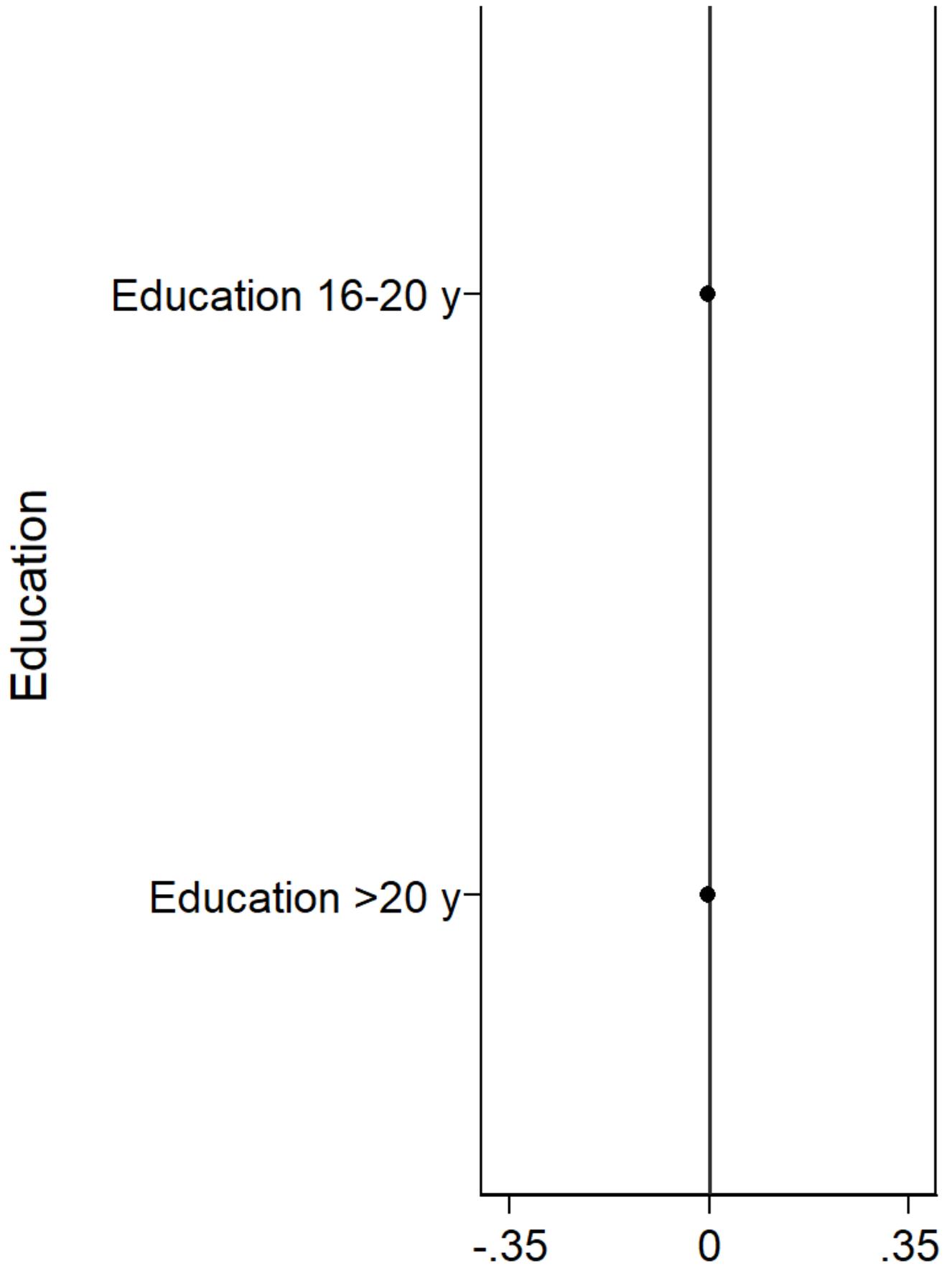
This suggests that citizens in richer countries that tend to receive more EU migrants and where the question of EU mobility is more salient seem to be more prone to perceiving EU freedom of movement as a threat. We argue that the context of macro-economic performance as a pull-factor of intra-EU migration may direct individuals in more affluent member states to pay more attention to the potential consequences of EU freedom of movement. In rich member states, increased intra-EU mobility may stimulate discussions regarding its potential effects on domestic employment and access to labour markets. It may also raise concerns over redistributive politics, the provision of public services, access to welfare, and competition for the collective goods of the state with EU citizens who are nonetheless non-nationals – despite the fact that these concerns may not necessarily be supported by objective evidence.

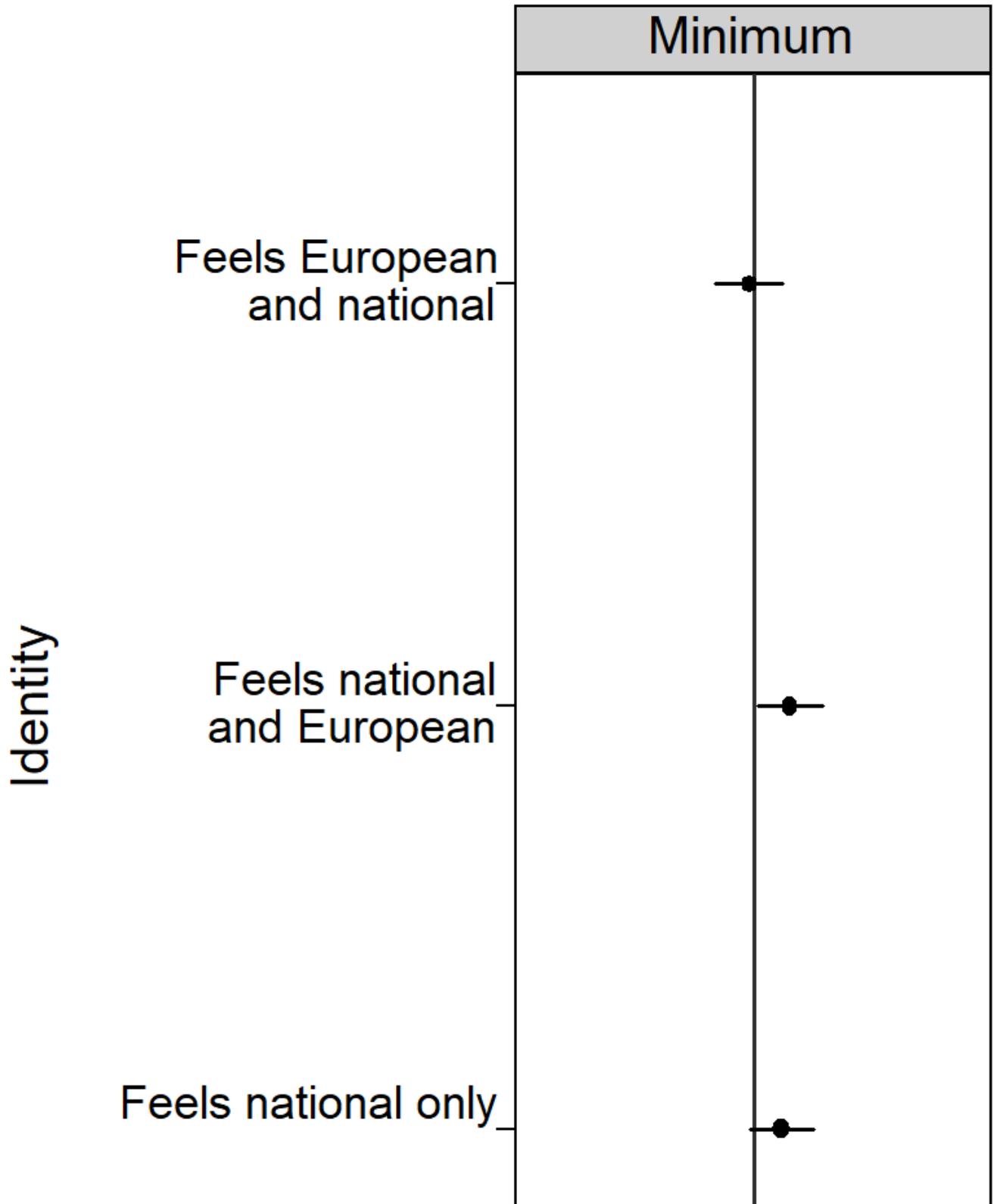
Country economic context also moderates the link between individual-level considerations and support for freedom of movement. Figure 2 clearly demonstrates that in poor countries, support for free movement is evenly high among different population groups, including those with low socioeconomic status and weak European identity. On the other hand, attitudes in richer member states depend on individuals' economic and identity considerations: support for free movement varies across different population groups, being highest among students, high-educated citizens and those with a strong European identity.

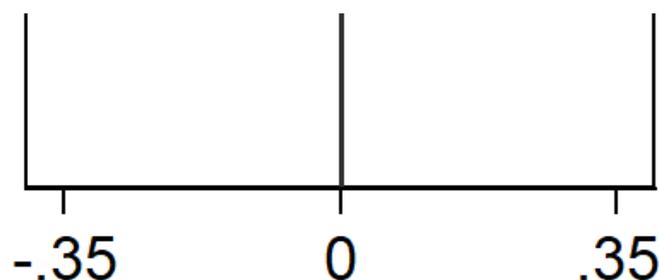
Figure 2: Individual-level effects on support for EU freedom of movement by GDP categories











Note: Average marginal effects with 95% confidence intervals. Reference categories: unemployed; education<15 y; feels European only. **Source:** Eurobarometer 84.3 (November 2015), 85.2 (May 2016), 86.2 (November 2016) and 87.3 (May 2017).

What are the implications of our findings?

Despite the fact EU freedom of movement primarily relates to policy-making and implementation – in particular access to European labour markets, employment and welfare – it can stir up conflict over constitutive issues of the EU polity, including EU membership, EU competencies, and the extent to which labour mobility should be one of the cornerstones of European integration.

It may also place a strain on European solidarity. This was particularly visible during the Brexit referendum. Although another EU membership referendum is not currently on the cards, our findings have significant implications with regard to the politicisation of EU freedom of movement in richer Western EU member states. Far right EU issue entrepreneurs in these countries have a ready reservoir of negative opinion towards freedom of movement to draw upon during electoral campaigns.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics.

About the author



Sofia Vasilopoulou – University of York

Sofia Vasilopoulou is Senior Lecturer in Politics at the University of York. Her work examines political dissatisfaction with democracy and democratic institutions across Europe. Specific themes include Euroscepticism, extremism, and loss of faith in traditional politics. She leads an Economic and Social Research Council Future Leaders Project entitled “Euroscepticism: Dimensions, Causes and Consequences in Times of Crisis.”



Liisa Talving – University of York

Liisa Talving is an Associate Lecturer of Politics at the University of York. Her research interests include determinants of citizens’ political behaviour and political attitudes, cross-country comparative research, and quantitative research methods. Her work focuses on EU attitudes and economic voting. She is currently involved in the Economic and Social Research Council Future Leaders Project “Euroscepticism: Dimensions, Causes and Consequences in Times of Crisis.”