

PEACE AND SECURITY

UNDER PRESSURE

An Analysis of the Russian-Speaking
Minority in Latvia

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Riga, July 2023



Russian speaking minority and
Latvian speaking majority:
Differences increase



War against Ukraine:
Narratives have not changed



Looking towards the West:
Unwavering skepticism



Looking towards Muscovy:
Growing criticism



Younger generation:
Open-minded

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INTRODUCTION

I. BACKGROUND

The share of Russian-speaking minorities among the Latvian population is substantial. According to the Central Statistical Bureau of the country, they account for 558,216 residents, which is 29.7% of the population as a whole, and include Russians (23.7%), Ukrainians and Belarusians (each 3%). Most of them settled in Latvia during the time of the Soviet Union. The following analysis will concentrate on Russian-speaking Russians, although the poll includes small numbers of the other two minorities who chose Russian as their main language.

The territories that form Latvia today became part of the Russian empire beginning in the 18th century. Latvia achieved independence in 1918 but was illegally annexed by the Soviet Union in 1940, invaded by Germany in 1941 and again occupied by Moscow in 1944. Latvia was a Soviet Republic until 1991, when the country regained its independence for the second time.

Many Russians who came during the Soviet time stayed. From the very beginning of Latvia's restored independence, the relationship between the Latvian majority and the Russian-speaking minority was not easy. Latvians looked at the Russians as former oppressors, while the minority regarded the Latvian majority as unfair and nationalistic. Over the course of the last 30 years many compromises have been found. But still, differences remain. And then came the 24th of February 2022 – the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, an emotional earthquake for Latvian society and its Russian-speaking minority.

II. IMPORTANCE OF THE TOPIC

Two months after the beginning of the war, the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) together with the Latvian survey institute SKDS conducted the first representative and in-depth survey of the Latvian population with a focus on the Russian-speaking minority. The main reason was to find out whether the war had had a major impact on the relations between the Latvian majority and the Russian-speaking minority. Could one detect major tensions from both sides? If so, that could be a security issue for an EU and NATO member, with consequences for both the political and economic union and for the defense alliance. The Russian Federation defined the sup-

posed insecurity of Russians abroad as a legitimate reason to potentially defend their rights by any means – one of its official reasons for going to war against Ukraine.

Latvia's Russian-speaking minority is often described and analyzed as a monolithic community. That was never the case and was proven wrong in the first survey in 2022 as well as in this second survey in 2023. The minority consists of groups with different status: legal residents, Russian citizens and non-citizens, who are protected by the Latvian constitution but have neither a Latvian nor a Russian passport.

Moreover, in the survey a separate category of Latvian-Russian families was introduced, in addition to the Latvian and the Russian-speaking families. Any significant differences in their responses will be pointed out in the analysis. In general, this group seems to have moved more to the Russian-speaking minority and has lost the middle stance it occupied in the first survey.

III. DIMENSIONS OF THE SURVEY

The aim is to achieve a better understanding of any different opinions between the Russian-speaking minority and Latvian majority. For this, five dimensions for the survey were chosen:

1. Foreign policy orientation and threat perception
2. Solidarity with Ukraine
3. Media and narratives
4. Identity, affiliation and feelings of Russian speakers
5. Relations between Latvians and Russian speakers

The FES hopes that the main results of this opinion poll and its analysis will be discussed in public. In general, and not only in Latvia, any issues between majorities and minorities can only be resolved through a constant conversation about how to make a country a home for everyone and how to build a stronger community and more resilient democratic society to face domestic and foreign challenges. There are clearly no easy solutions. Instead, the continuation of the long and difficult process towards a prosperous and thriving independent state, which started in 1991, requires the participation of all communities and willingness on all sides to accept some compromises.

RESEARCH DESIGN

For the survey, 2021 respondents aged 18–75 were interviewed. Half (1016 respondents) were interviewed through personal (face-to-face) interviews at their places of residence, and the other half were interviewed through a web survey. This mix of methods aims to provide a higher overall quality of the sample in terms of its representativeness (it is believed that face-to-face surveys better cover people with lower socioeconomic status, while web surveys reach persons with higher socioeconomic status). In addition, this research design allowed us to test the hypothesis that respondents in seemingly anonymous conditions (web surveys) might provide more honest answers to sensitive questions than those in the presence of an interviewer (face-to-face surveys). This proved to be only partly the case.

The structure of the resulting raw sample was adjusted using official data from the Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia (www.csb.lv) by weighting. The gender, age and region were used as weighting variables.

Technical characteristics of survey

Population: permanent residents of Latvia aged 18 to 75

Sample size: 2021 respondents

- 1016 respondents reached through personal (face-to-face) interviews at their places of residence
- 1005 respondents reached through the web survey

Sampling methods:

- For face-to-face survey: stratified nationally representative random sampling
- For the web survey: quota sampling (respondent quotas on gender, age, ethnicity and place of residence (regions of Latvia); quotas were proportional to the actual composition of the population)

The web sample was created from the population of Latvia registered in the WebPanel of the research center SKDS (~ 20,000 participants/ potential respondents)

Time of survey: From April 15–24, 2023.

The survey was conducted by the research center SKDS (www.skds.lv)

Respondent groups: For the purpose of data analysis, three groups of respondents were created: 1) those who speak only Latvian in their households, 2) those who speak only Russian, and 3) bilingual – those who use both Russian and Latvian in communication within the household.

The creation of such groups is based on the findings from

previous surveys that the language used in the household largely indicates the information space from which an individual obtains information about what is happening both in Latvia and beyond its borders. In the case of Latvia, the content of the two main information spaces (Latvian-language and Russian-language) is diverse enough to be worthy of special attention and analysis. Latvian speakers are more likely to live in the Latvian information space, i.e., they mainly consume media in Latvian, and Russian speakers in the Russian information space, mainly consuming media in Russian (including various information channels of the Russian Federation).

Accordingly, a look at the language groups in relation to the nationality of the respondents reveals the following picture:

- Among those who speak only Latvian in the family 94% are ethnic Latvians, 3% are Russians, Ukrainians or Belarusians, and 3% other nationalities.
- Among those who speak only Russian in the family 71% are ethnic Russians, 9% are ethnic Belarusians, 6% are ethnic Ukrainians, 6% are ethnic Poles, 5% are ethnic Latvians and 4% belong to other nationalities.
- Among those who speak both Latvian and Russian in the family (bilinguals), 31% are ethnic Latvians, 42% are ethnic Russians, 7% are ethnic Ukrainians, 7% are ethnic Poles, 4% are ethnic Belarusians, and 10% are ethnic Russians of other nationalities. As can be seen, bilinguals are a very heterogeneous group in ethnic terms.

Looking at conversational language groups in relation to respondents' citizenship status reveals the following picture:

- Among those who speak only Latvian in the family, 99% are citizens of the Republic of Latvia and only 0.3% are non-citizens. There were no Russian citizens in this group.
- Among those who speak only Russian in the family, 70% are citizens of the Republic of Latvia, 25% are non-citizens and 4% are citizens of the Russian Federation.
- Among those who speak both Latvian and Russian in the family (bilinguals), 85% are citizens of the Republic of Latvia, 13% are non-citizens and 1% are citizens of the Russian Federation. This indicates that in terms of citizenship, this group falls somewhere between Latvian-only and Russian-only speakers.

1

RUSSIAN-SPEAKING MINORITY AND LATVIAN MAJORITY: DIFFERENCES INCREASE

After more than 500 days of the war inflicted by the Russian Federation on Ukraine, the effects on Latvian society remain much to be seen. This is evident not only from the numerous Ukrainian flags on streets throughout the country but also in the increasingly negative official and unofficial statements concerning the Russian-speaking minority. The political party Saskana, which saw itself mainly as the party for the Russian minority and as the only social democratic force, lost badly in the elections in October 2022 and failed to make it

into parliament. This was mainly because its voters became confused and angry when the party openly criticized the Russian war.

When asked if a serious ethnic conflict between Latvians and the Russian-speaking minority might be possible, almost a third of those who speak either Russian or both Russian and Latvian in their families agree. This is a higher share than in the previous survey. Most respondents, about 50 percent,

Figure 1
In your opinion, what is the possibility that such events can happen in Latvia and in the world in the future: Serious ethnic conflicts between Latvians and Russian-speakers living in Latvia
Answers depending on the language spoken in the family: comparison of data from 2022 – 2023. All figures in %

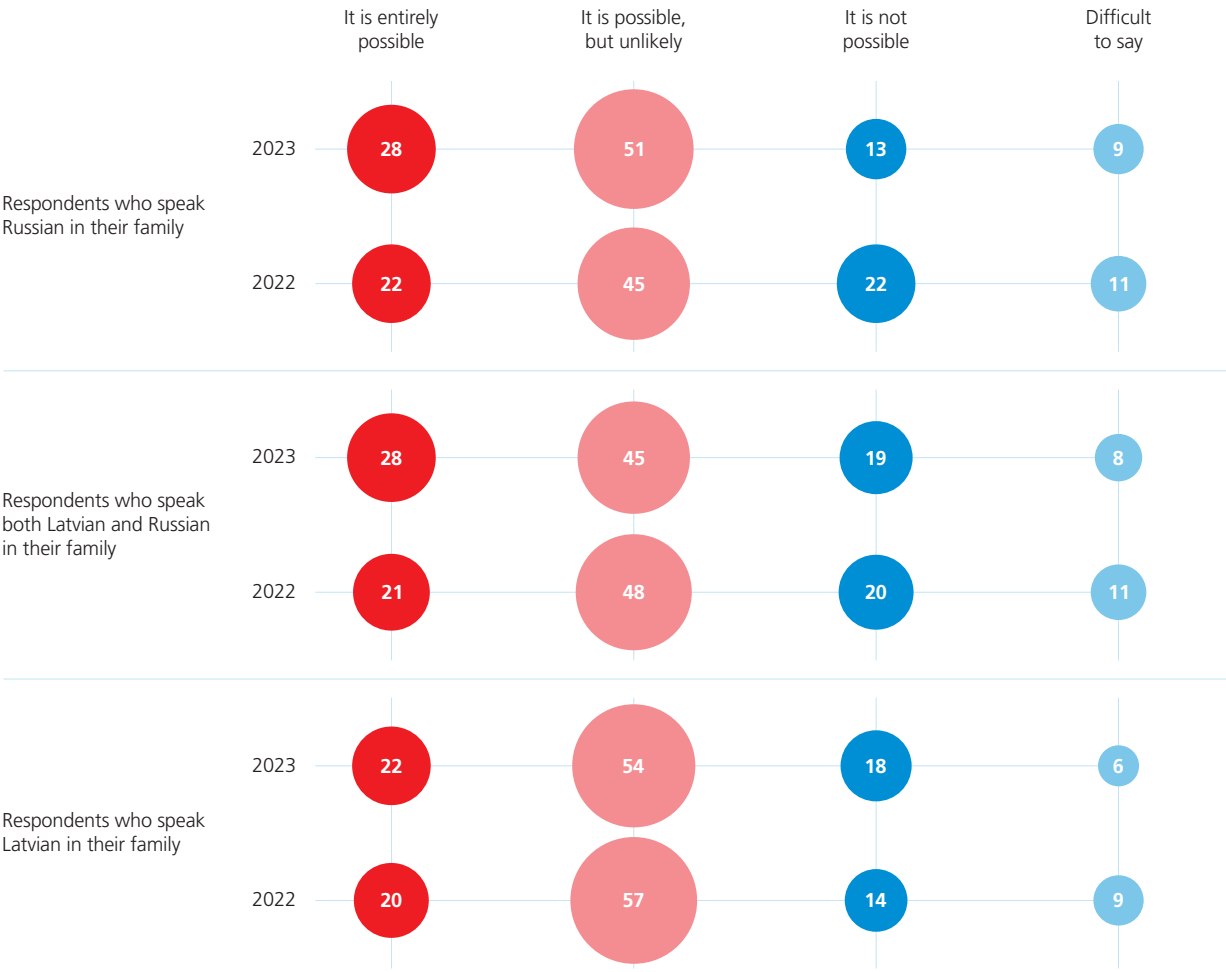
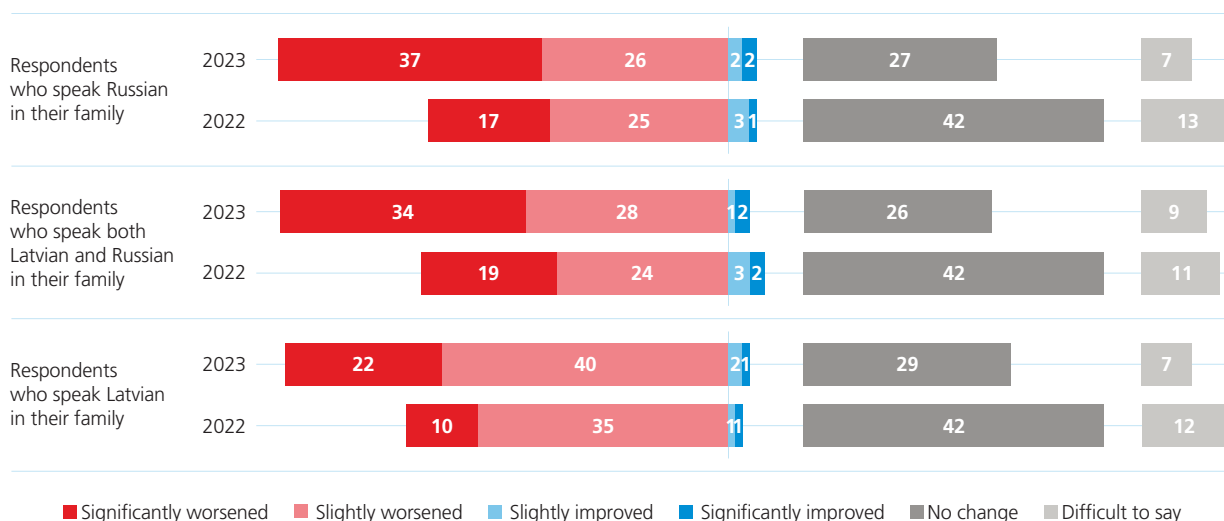


Figure 2

Taking into account your own personal experience and observations, has the attitude of Latvians towards the Russian-speaking population of Latvia changed since the Russian invasion of Ukraine? Has it...

Answers depending on the language spoken in the family: comparison of data from 2022 – 2023. All figures in %



think that such a development is “possible, but unlikely.” And only less than 20 percent believe that such a conflict is not possible (figure 1).

Even clearer is the difference in the evaluation of the relationship between Latvians and the Russian-speaking minority in comparison to last year’s poll (figure 2). No matter to which group the respondents belong, they all agree that the trend is negative because the attitude of Latvians towards the Russian-speaking population has changed for the worse.

What is alarming is the fact that a majority of Russian-speaking families believe that fascism is growing in Latvia (figure 3). That was not the case at the beginning of the war. This trend

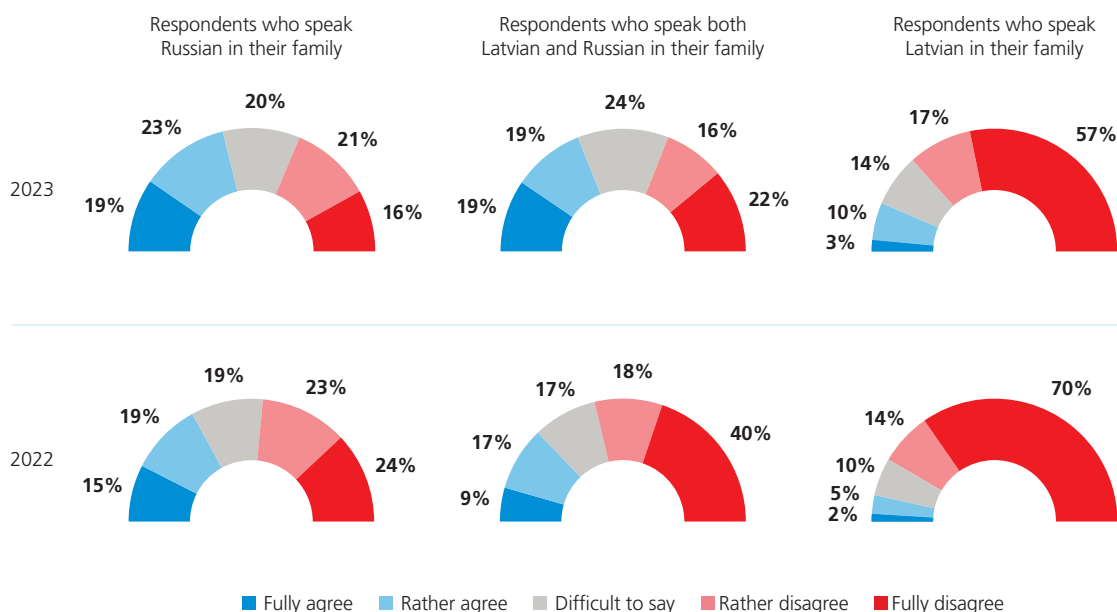
can also be seen in Latvian-Russian families. One can argue that this feeling mirrors the Russian propaganda, which justifies the invasion in Ukraine with the need to combat allegedly dangerous tendencies of fascism.

The demolishing of monuments that glorified the Soviet regime, including some dedicated to the victory over Germany and fascism, is heavily criticized by the Russian-speaking minority as well as by the Latvian-Russian speaking families (figure 4). The exact opposite opinion can be observed by the Latvian families, which support this action by the state against Soviet symbols. Very few respondents chose the option to answer “difficult to say”.

Figure 3

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements: Fascism is re-emerging in Latvia

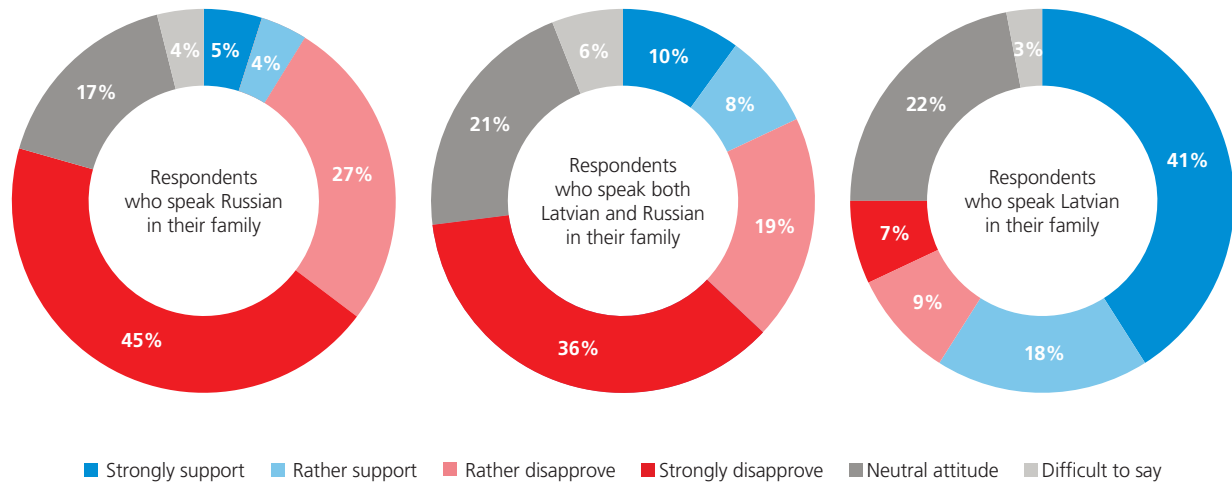
Answers depending on the language spoken in the family: comparison of data from 2022 – 2023*



*In 2022, the wording of the answers was “Fascism is being reborn in Latvia”.

Figure 4

In May 2022, the Latvian Parliament decided that all monuments glorifying the Soviet regime, including those dedicated to the USSR's victory in the Great Patriotic War, should be demolished in Latvia. What is your attitude towards this decision?
Answers depending on the language spoken in the family



One of the every-day frictions between the Latvian majority and the Russian-speaking minority is language. Latvian is the state language and Russian is not. In the course of the ongoing war in Ukraine there is a general perception among respondents that discrimination against people who do not know or have only a poor command of Latvian has grown in the last year. A majority of Russian-speaking and Latvian-Russian speaking families think this, and even a growing number of Latvians agree, though to a far lesser extent (figure 5).

And finally, the disagreement about the war in general and who is fighting whom, as well as the relationship between

Russia and Ukraine in particular, could not be wider. Whereas the Russian-speaking minority is certain that Ukraine is a puppet of the United States, that Russia and Ukraine are one nation, and that Western countries and Ukraine threaten the security of Russia, the Latvian-speaking majority is equally confident in disagreeing with all three statements.

Slightly less divisive is the answer to the question of whether Russia is fighting NATO in Ukraine. Not surprisingly, the Russian-speaking minority agrees and the Latvian majority does not. But the percentages are not as clearly as with the other questions, and the number of those who think the question is difficult to answer is also fairly high, up to 28% (figure 6).

Figure 5

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements:
There is discrimination in Latvia against people who do not know or have poor knowledge of the Latvian language
Answers depending on the language spoken in the family: comparison of data from 2022 – 2023

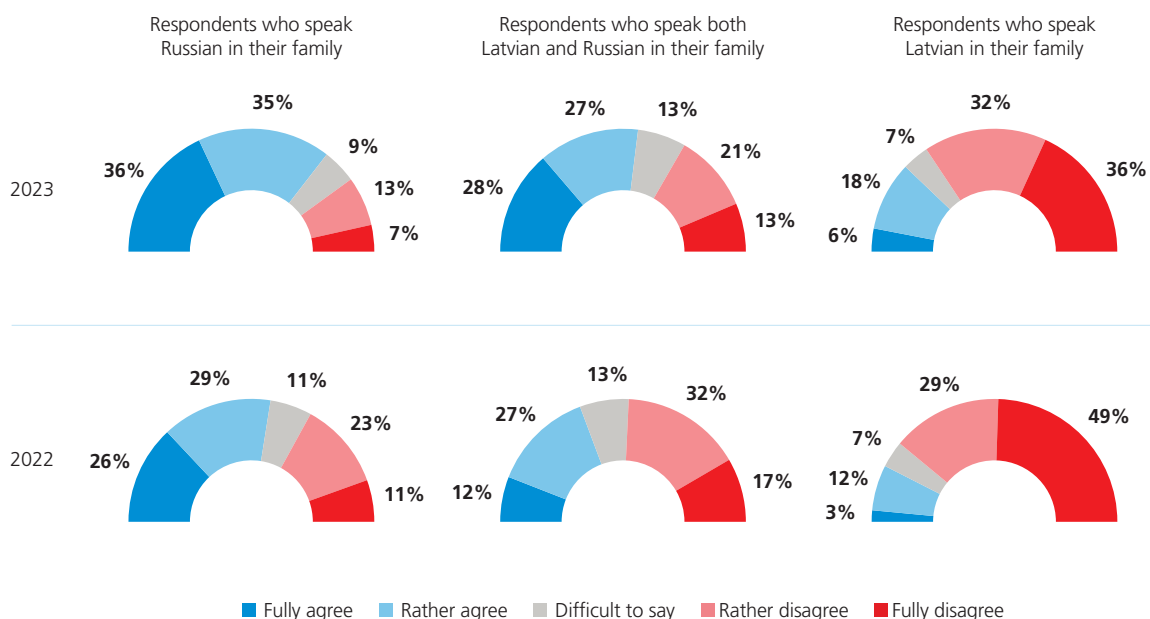
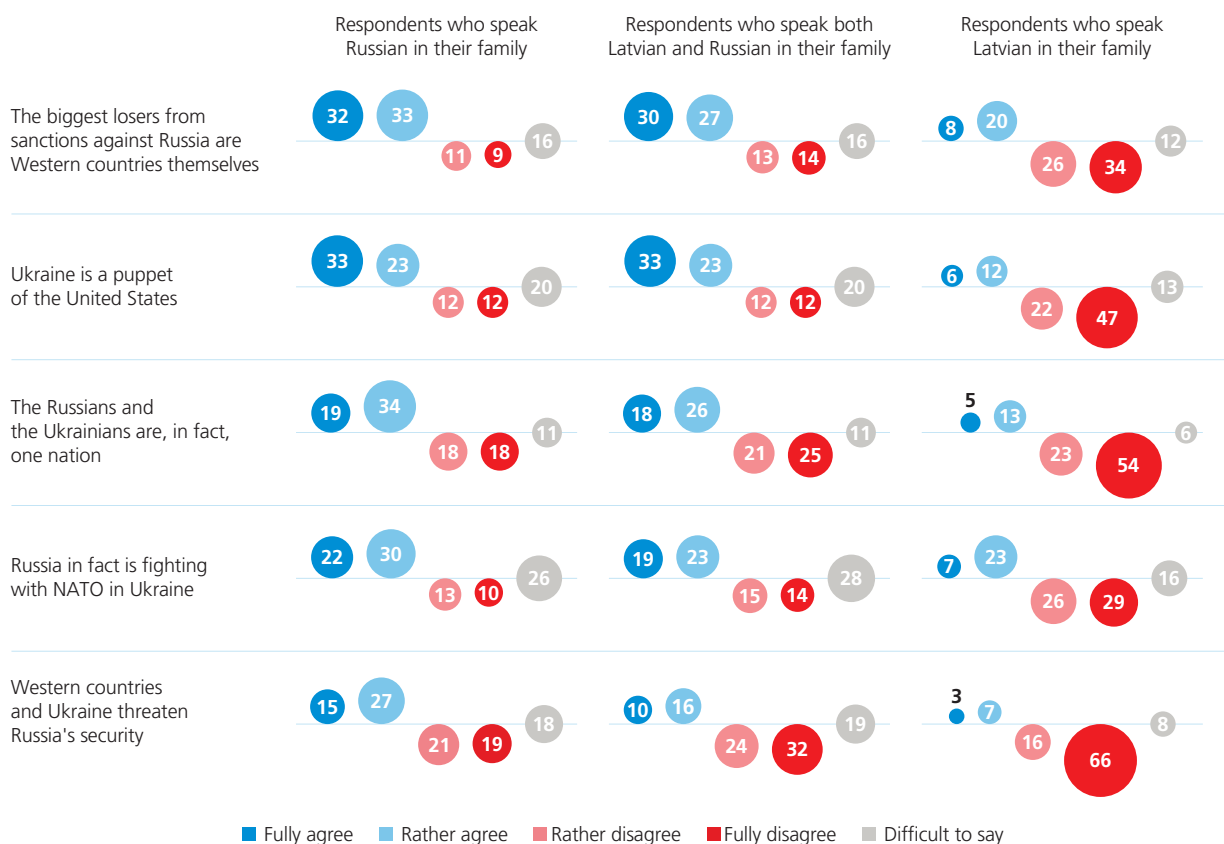


Figure 6

Various statements have been made in society regarding the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the course of these events. Please assess to what extent you agree with the following statements.

Answers depending on the language spoken in the family. All figures in %



2

WAR AGAINST UKRAINE: NARRATIVES HAVE NOT CHANGED

One of the main reasons for conducting this survey was to find out how strongly the Russian-speaking minority agrees with Russia's official justification of the war against Ukraine. They are living in Latvia, which joined the EU and NATO in 2004. All parts of society have experienced a very different transformation than that in neighboring Russia. Before the war in 2022 one could have assumed that Latvian society in general supports its own reforms for the better but that at least parts of the Russian-speaking minority would still sympathize with their former homeland. But what about after the unprovoked military aggression of Russia against Ukraine?

When compared with the survey in 2022 the major narratives have stayed the same. More than half of the Russian-speaking families still have no preference whom they support, neither Russia nor Ukraine. There is only a slight increase in the share who support Ukraine and not Russia, meaning that only 14% support Russia. It is surprising that a greater share of Latvian-Russian families support neither Russia nor Ukraine, compared to 2022. Two thirds of the Latvian families support Ukraine (figure 7).

When looking at the answers among respondents to questions that examine Russia's official arguments for having started the war, there is a clear difference between the Russian-speaking minority and the Latvian-speaking majority. This is unsurprising and, indeed expected. What is surprising is the fact that the answers of the Russian-speakers show almost no changes in either direction in the past year – neither criticizing the West more nor criticizing Russia more.

As in 2022, about 40% of the Russian speaking minority thinks that Russia's security is threatened by Western countries or Ukraine (figure 9) or that Russia is fighting Nazism in Ukraine (figure 10). Over half are convinced that Ukraine is a puppet of the United States (figure 10) and that Ukrainians and Russians are one nation (figure 11). Over 60% think that the sanctions against Russia will most likely impact Western countries themselves (figure 8). At the same time the share supporting Russia's decision to use military force against Ukraine is less than a quarter, with over half opposed. Latvian-speaking families oppose the use of force with 90% (figure 9).

Figure 7

Regarding Russia's so-called military operation against Ukraine, which of the belligerents do you sympathize with?

Answers depending on the language spoken in the family: comparison of data from 2022 – 2023

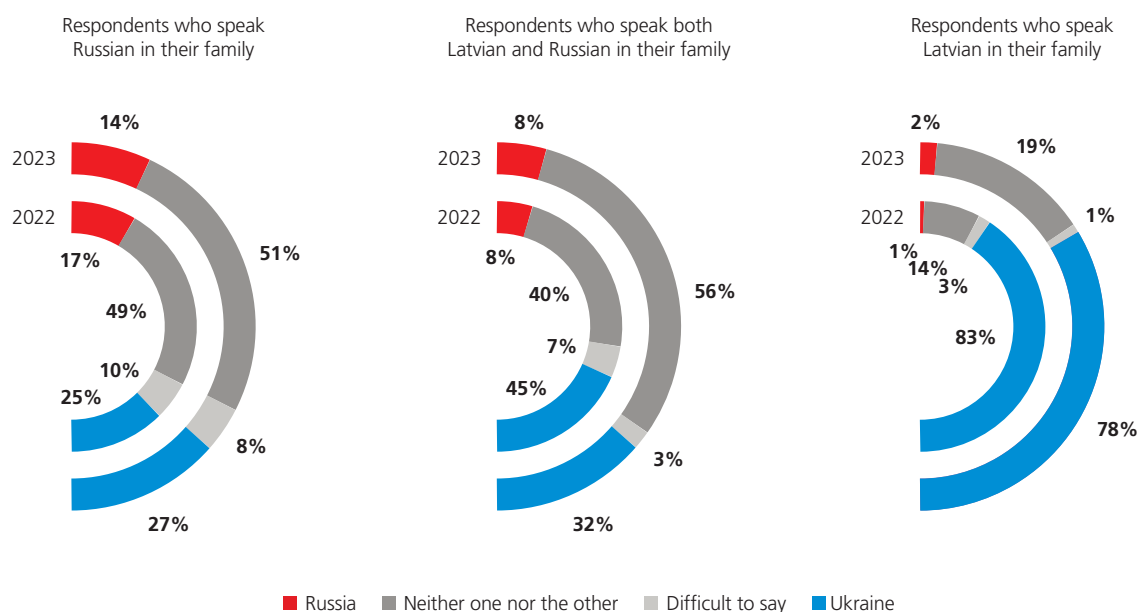


Figure 8

Please assess to what extent you agree with the following statements: The biggest losers from sanctions against Russia are Western countries themselves

Answers depending on the language spoken in the family: comparison of data from 2022 – 2023. All figures in %

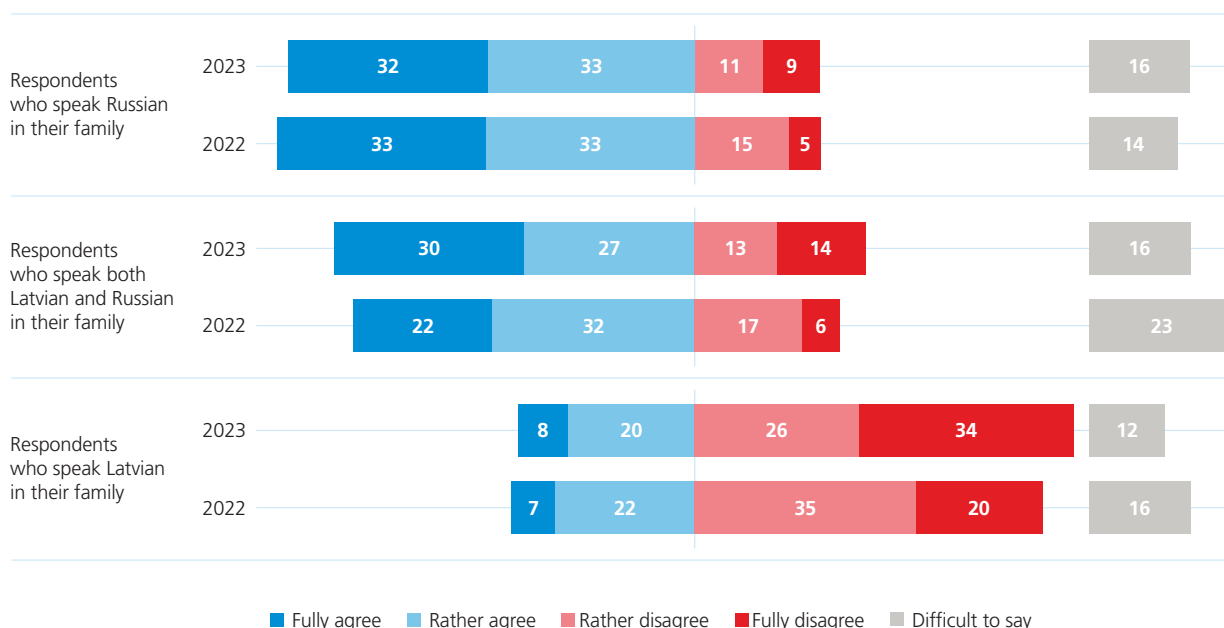


Figure 9

Please assess to what extent you agree with the following statements:

Answers depending on the language spoken in the family: comparison of data from 2022 – 2023

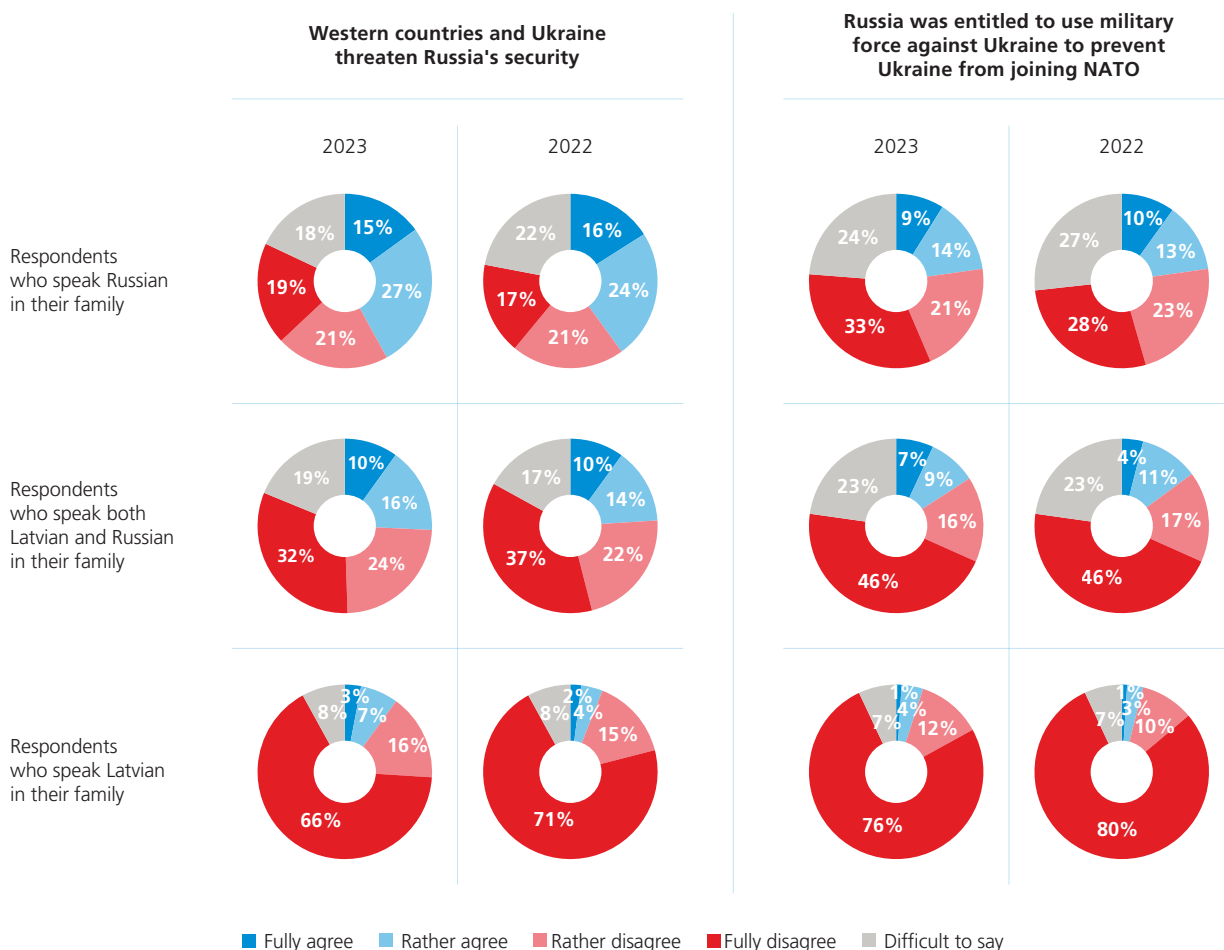


Figure 10

Please assess to what extent you agree with the following statements:

Answers depending on the language spoken in the family: comparison of data from 2022 – 2023

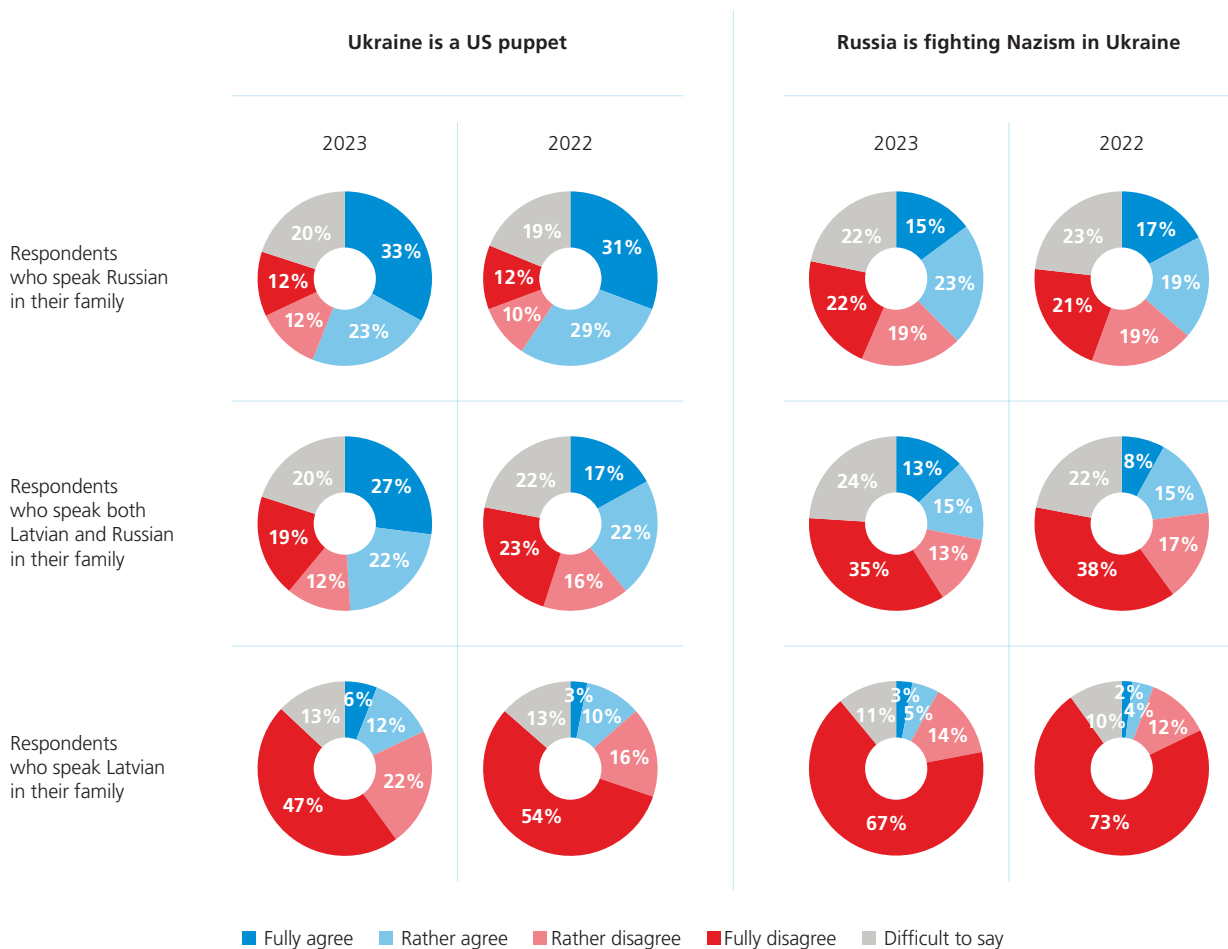
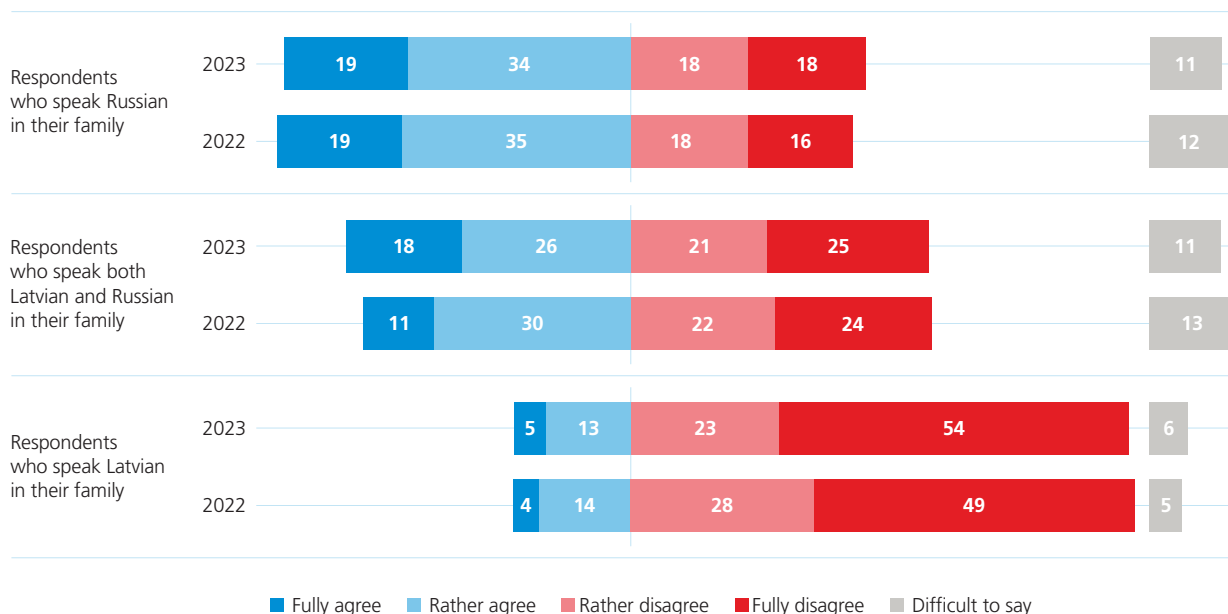


Figure 11

Various statements have been made in society regarding the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the course of these events. Please assess to what extent you agree with the following statements: The Russians and the Ukrainians are, in fact, one nation

Answers depending on the language spoken in the family: comparison of data from 2022 – 2023. All figures in %

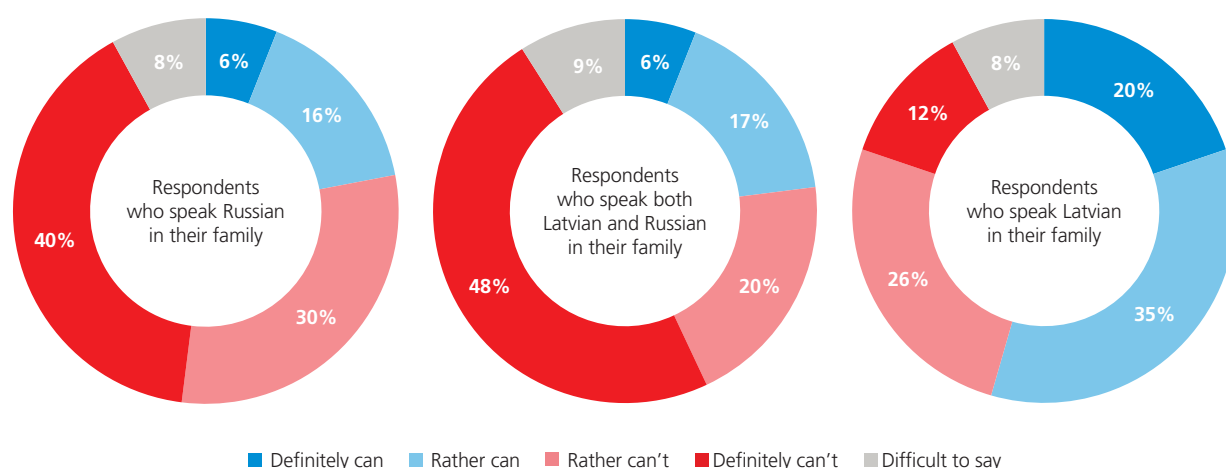


Some parts of the Russian-speaking minority discuss these highly controversial topics only among themselves. They believe that they cannot express their opinions and attitudes towards Russia freely, especially if these differ from the official Latvian position. 70% of the Russian-speaking families as well as Latvian-Russian families think this way (figure 12). This self-censorship does not hold true for topics such as compulsory vaccination, political parties or extension of the rights of sexual minorities.

The reluctance of the Russian-speaking minority to firmly condemn Russia may be seen as evidence of a lack of commitment to Latvia, as when, for example, the Russian-speaking respondents are unwilling to pick a side when asked if they sympathize either with Russia or with Ukraine. Russian speakers would argue that they see both sides as responsible for the escalation whereas the Latvian majority sees only one side as guilty: Russia. The Russian-speaking minority, so it seems, is not ready to take such a clear stance.

Figure 12

**Do you think that people in Latvia can currently freely and without fear express their opinions on such issues?
To express attitudes towards Russia and its military invasion in Ukraine, if they differ from the official position of the country**
Answers depending on the language spoken in the family



3

LOOKING TOWARDS THE WEST: UNWAVERING SKEPTICISM

The skepticism of Russia and its population towards the West, which concerns mostly NATO but also the EU and its constant criticism of Russia since 1991, is well known and researched. But it seems that the Russian-speaking minority in Latvia, even though not that skeptical, is torn between historical ties with Russia and living in Latvia. A commitment to either side would be difficult for them; instead, a compromise between both worlds would be the ideal choice.

That could be the explanation for why the support for working more closely with both Russia and the Western countries (figure 16) to serve Latvia's interest is strikingly high. In 2023 about half of both the Russian and the Russian-Latvian families would like to see exactly that, whereas the Latvian families would prefer to work more with Western countries (66%).

At the same time, the attitude among Russian speakers towards the EU is unexpectedly critical when asked if there is a possibility that Latvia might lose its sovereignty and become controlled by Brussels. Almost half of the Russian-speaking

minority believe that such a development might be entirely possible, whereas only 18% of the Latvian-speaking majority sees this as a likely scenario (figure 13).

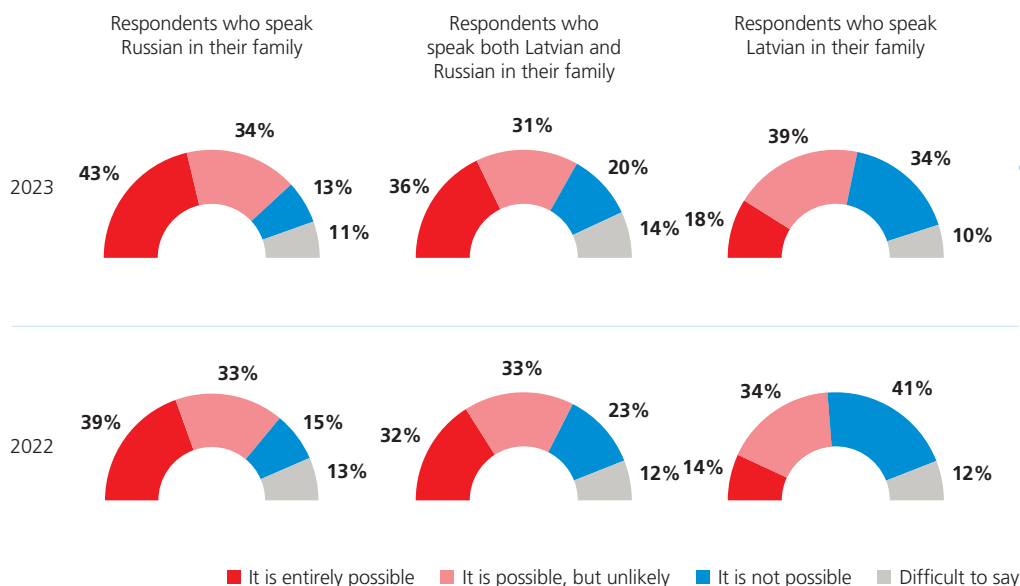
Whereas the Latvian-speaking majority appreciates the NATO presence in their country, with a high support of about 80%, only one quarter of the Russian-speaking minority shares this opinion while 44% opposes the presence of NATO troops and equipment (figure 17). The Russian speakers are also skeptical of sanctions imposed by the West against Russia. Despite a slight increase in support since the previous survey, overall most of the respondents are opposed to them (44%), whereas almost 90% of the Latvian majority supports the sanctions (figure 18).

When it comes to friendly countries, both groups see their neighbors Estonia and Lithuania as Latvia's most important allies. For the Latvian majority, these are followed by the US, Poland and Sweden; for the Russian minority they are Poland – which is surprising, considering the overall relationship – Germany and "none of the indicated countries." The least

Figure 13

**In your opinion, what is the possibility that such events can happen in Latvia and in the world in the future:
Total loss of Latvia's sovereignty and falling under the control of Brussels**

Answers depending on the language spoken in the family: comparison of data from 2022 – 2023*



*In 2022, the wording of the answers was "Total loss of Latvia's sovereignty and ending up under Brussels".

Figure 14

Overall, how has your opinion of these countries changed since the Russian invasion of Ukraine?

Answers depending on the language spoken in the family. All figures in %

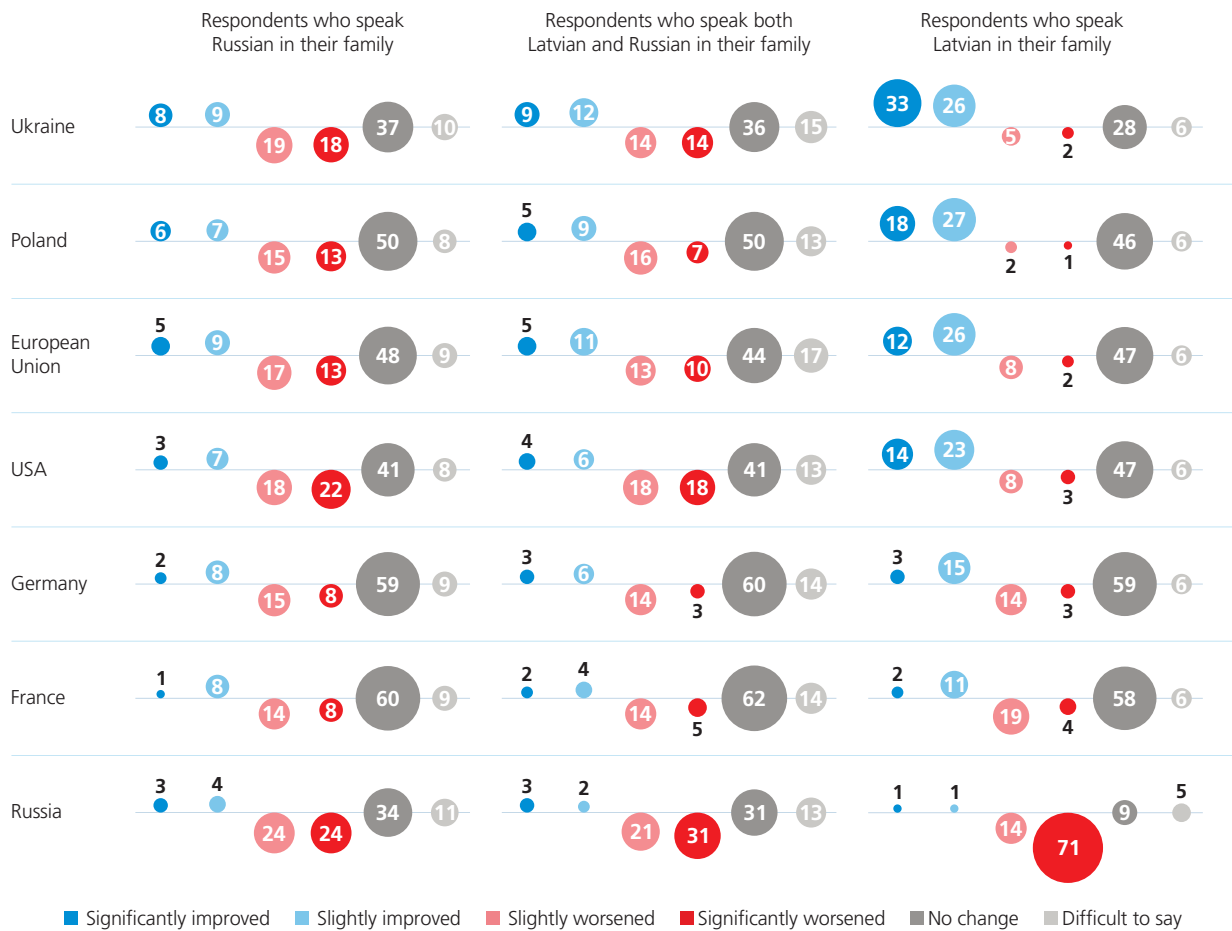


Figure 15

Which of the following countries do you consider to be Latvia's most important allies?

Answers depending on the language spoken in the family. All figures in %

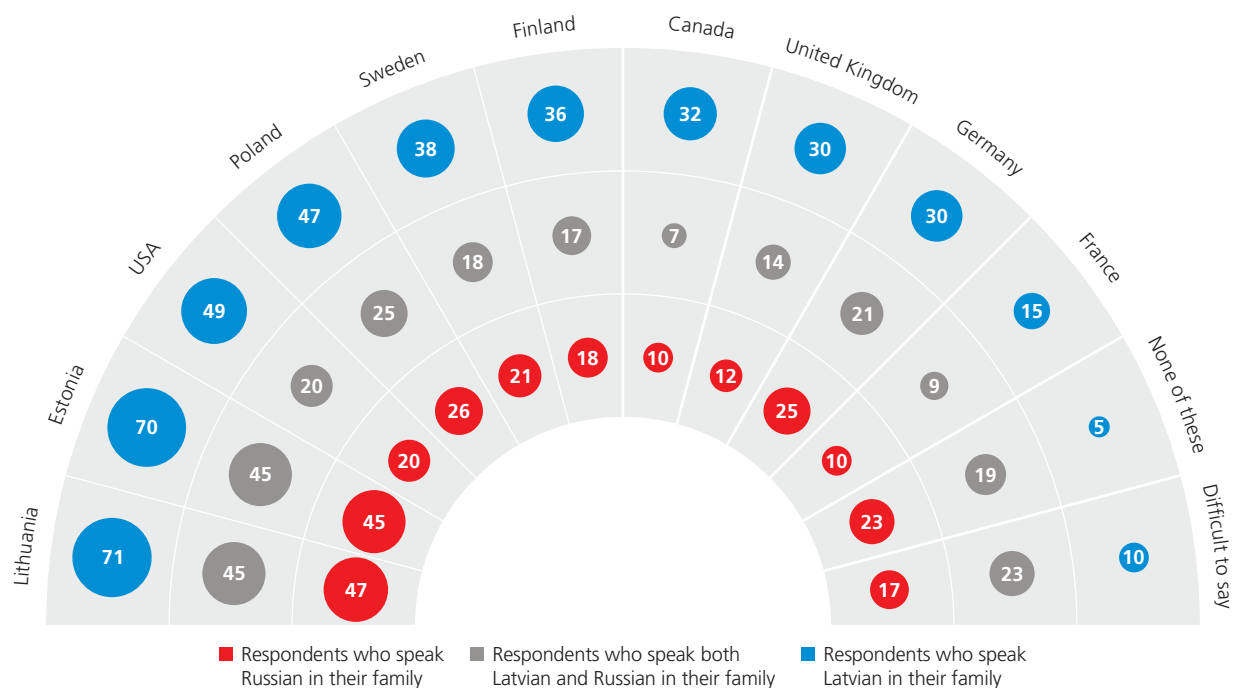


Figure 16

Do you think Latvia's interests would be better served by..

Answers depending on the language spoken in the family: comparison of data from 2022 – 2023. All figures in %

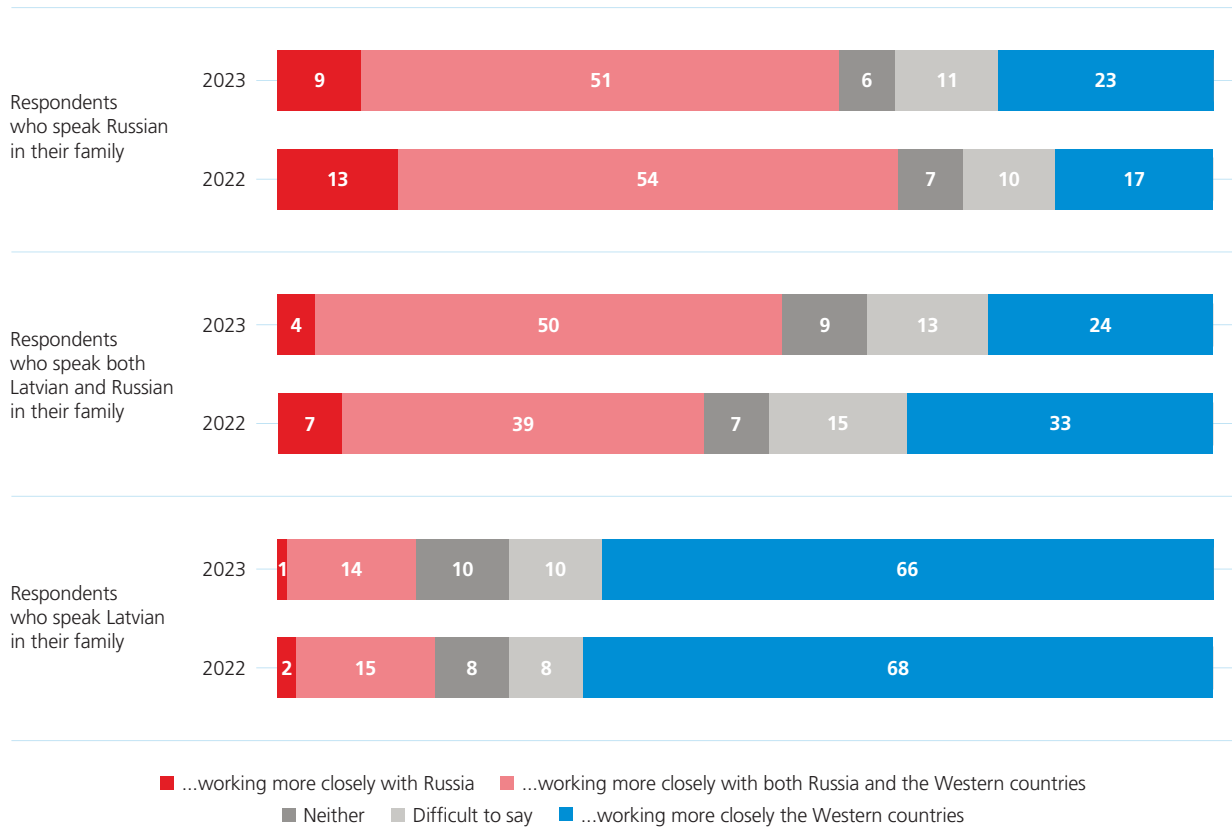
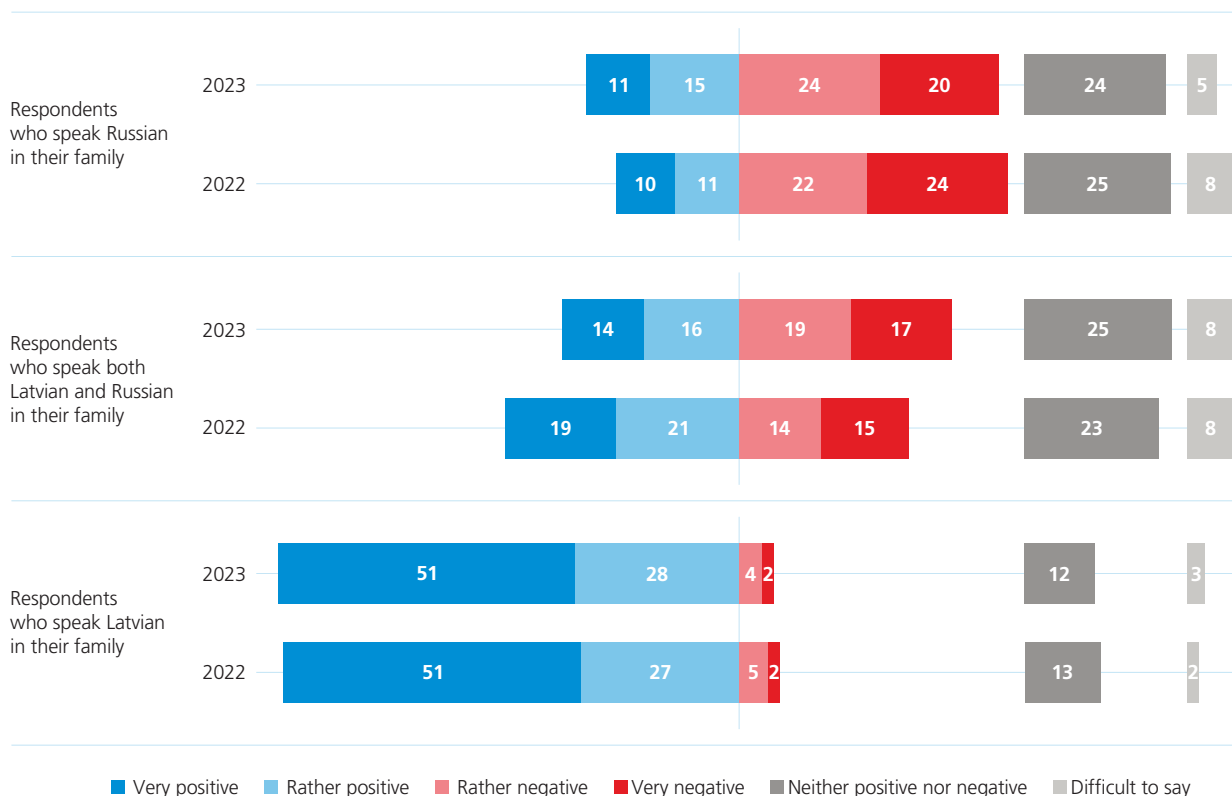


Figure 17

Generally speaking, how do you assess the presence of foreign NATO troops in Latvia?

Answers depending on the language spoken in the family: comparison of data from 2022 – 2023. All figures in %



favorite allies for the Latvian majority are France, Germany and the UK, and for the Russian minority Canada, France and the UK. Canada might have been mentioned because it is the leading nation of the Enhanced Forward Presence of NATO in Latvia (figure 15).

The Russian-speaking minority has a more negative attitude to almost all countries listed in the survey than before the war (figure 14). Surprisingly, Russia tops that list, followed by the US, Ukraine and the EU. For the Latvian majority, countries with an increased negative connotation are Russia, France and Germany (for the latter, 17% had a more negative opinion, but 18% had a more favorable opinion). In general, the Russian-speaking minority is skeptical mostly of the US but

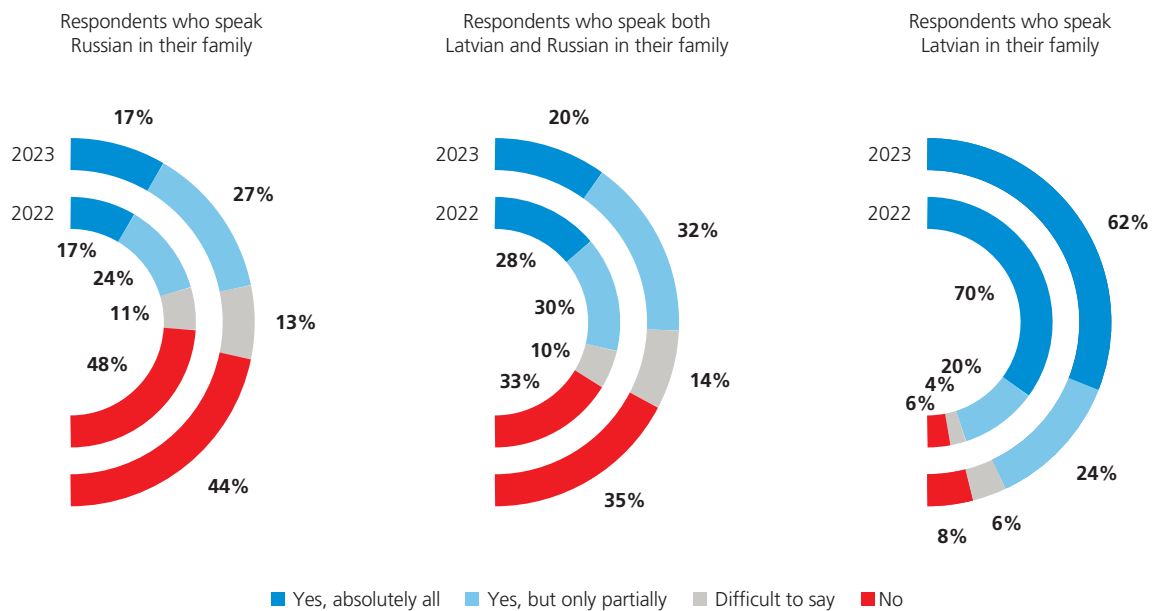
also of the EU, when it comes to possible further cooperation. Germany has lost the favorable status it had in the past among Russian speakers.

The Russian-speaking minority has to deal with the fact that their situation as Russians living in Latvia has been made extremely difficult because of Russia's military aggression. In addition, they have to come to terms with Latvia's official response to the war as a member of the EU and especially NATO. And finally, Russia for the first time since Peter I is questioning its place in Europe. The war against Ukraine has destroyed almost every contact with the West. Furthermore, official Russia has done this deliberately. So where does that leave the Russian minority in Latvia?

Figure 18

Do you personally support the various sanctions imposed by Western countries against Russia?

Answers depending on the language spoken in the family: comparison of data from 2022 – 2023



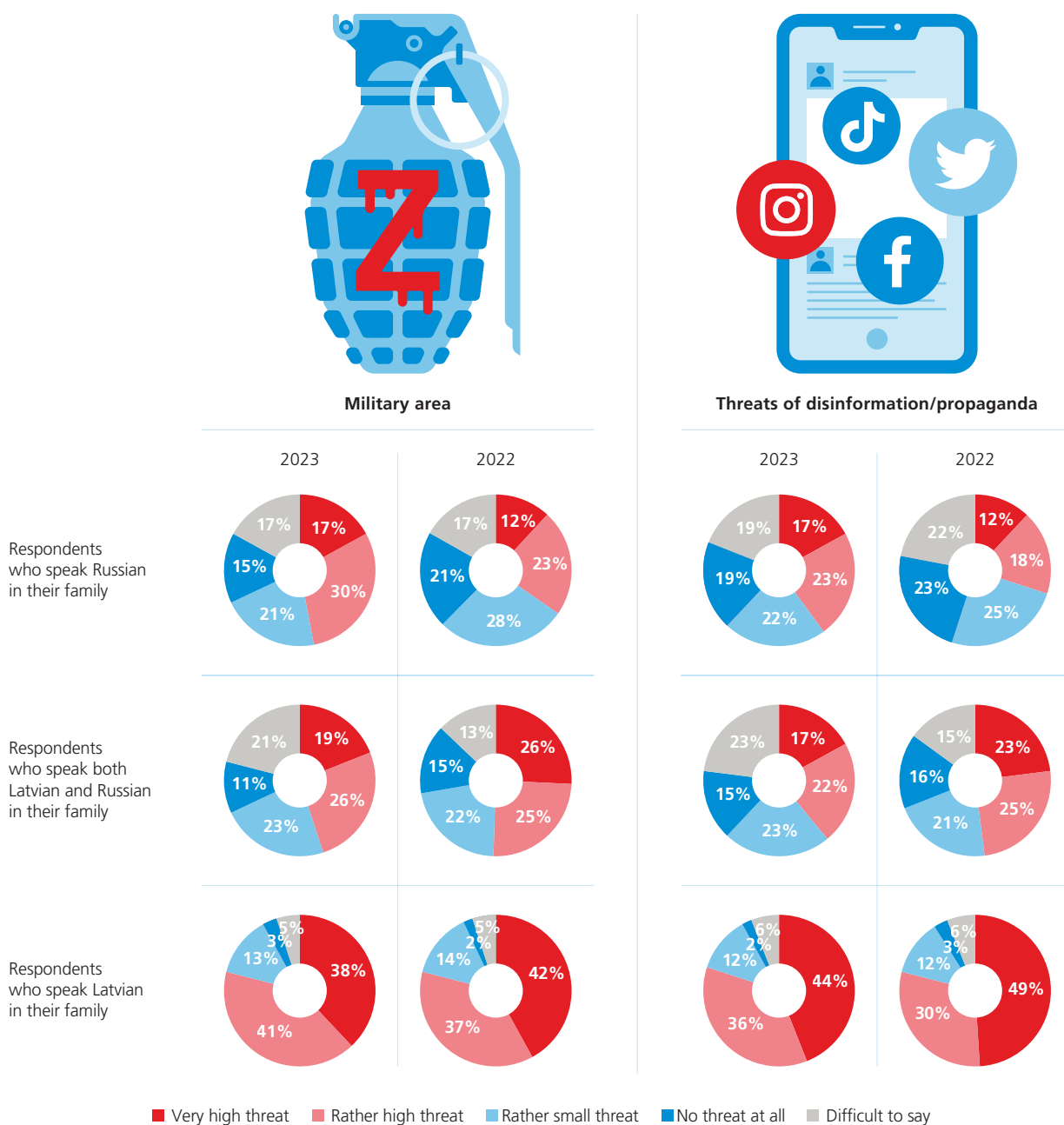
4

LOOKING TOWARDS MUSCOVY: GROWING CRITICISM

Figure 19

**How large a threat, if any, do you think Russia poses to the rest of Europe in the following areas:
Military area and threats of disinformation/ propaganda**

Answers depending on the language spoken in the family: comparison of data from 2022 – 2023*

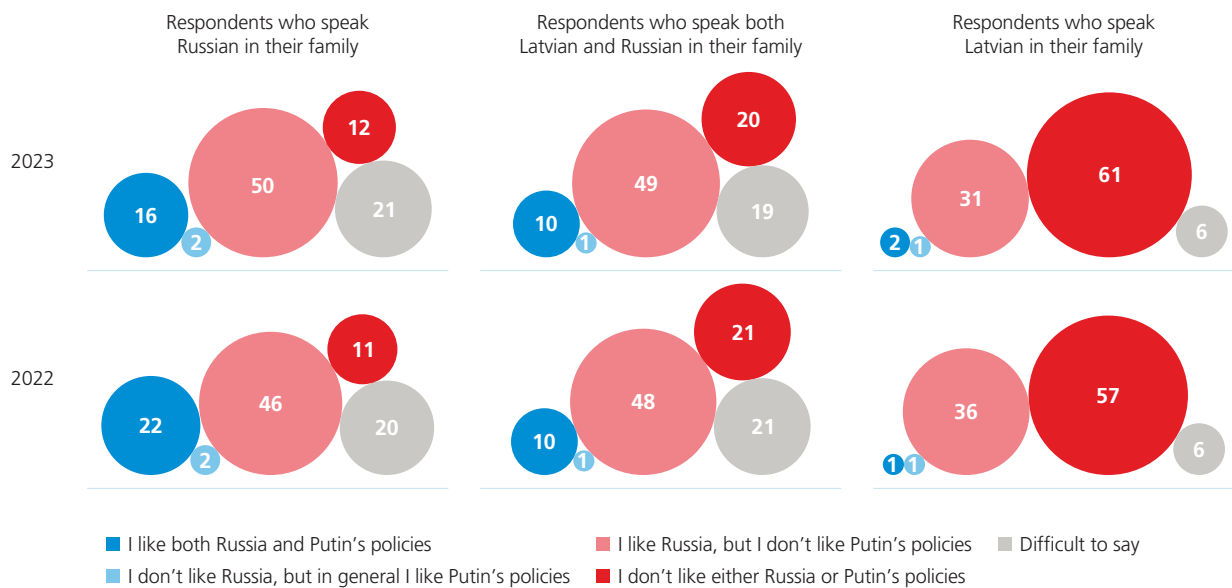


*In 2022, the wording of the answers was "Military threats".

Figure 20

Please assess which of the following statements best describes your views on Russia and the current policies of its President Vladimir Putin?

Answers depending on the language spoken in the family: comparison of data from 2022 – 2023. All figures in %



The current situation leaves the Russian-speaking minority with doubts. Even though these respondents are sticking with Russia's narrative of its reasons for the war – which are found not only in the behavior of Russia but also in Western politics, Russia's refusal to acknowledge Ukrainian independence, as well as its distrust of the West – they have grown more concerned about Russia. The longer the war drags on, the more questions are asked. And the answers are not always in favor of Moscow.

Half of the Russian-speaking minority believes that Russia poses a military threat to the rest of Europe. That is an increase of almost 15% in comparison to 2022. Still, that is not even close to the 79% of the Latvian majority that views Russia as a threat. Interestingly enough, when asked about the threat coming from Russian disinformation or propaganda, only 40% of the Russian-speaking minority feel threatened, which is still an increase of 10% when compared to the survey a year ago. The number for the Latvian majority is 80% (figure 19).

Concerning the support of the Russian-speaking minority towards the policies of Russia and its president Vladimir Putin, one can observe at least some decrease in comparison to 2022. There was a slight increase of those who like Russia but not Putin's policy (50%, up by 4%) and those who don't like either Russia or Putin's policy (12%, up 1%). Those who supported both Russia and Putin's policy decreased by 6%. Interestingly, for the Latvian-Russian families, the numbers stayed the same (figure 20).

Russia's president Putin was rated more harshly by the Russian-speaking minority in comparison to the survey from a year ago. 55% see him negatively, which is 6% more than in 2022. The share approving of his performance also decreased by 5%. But there is a clear difference with the Latvian speak-

ing majority, 94% of whom rate Putin negatively. Among the Russian-speaking minority, 22% had difficulty answering; for the Latvian side only 4% (figure 21).

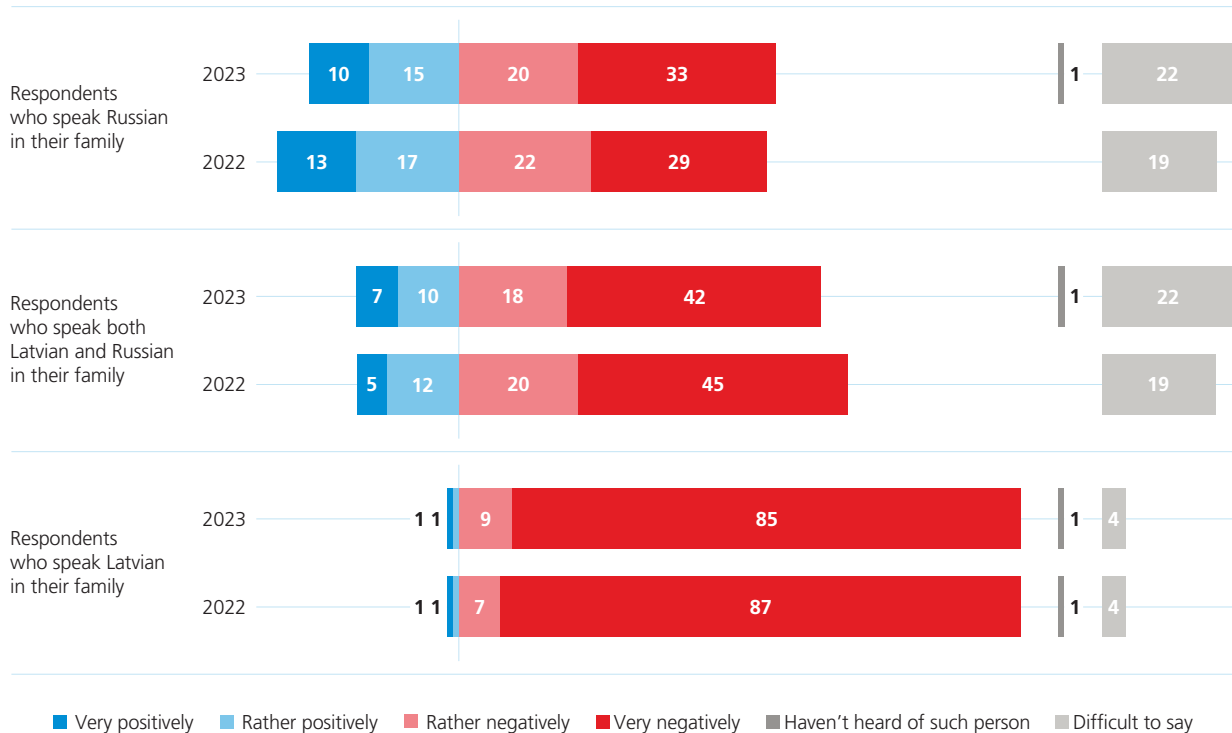
Almost half of the Russian minority have a more negative opinion of Russia since the war; only 7% now have a more positive opinion. The opinion of one third of the Russian-speaking minority has remained unchanged since the invasion of Ukraine, which leaves room for speculation. One could argue that in the



Figure 21

Do you rate this person's performance very positively, rather positively, rather negatively, or very negatively:
President of Russia Vladimir Putin

Answers depending on the language spoken in the family: comparison of data from 2022 – 2023. All figures in %



eyes of the Russian-speaking minority, Russia behaved during the last year as one would have expected – either in terms of not giving up and improving its military capabilities or in terms of a continuation of mismanagement, failure and using brutal force (figure 22).

When asked who is to blame for the war, the Russian-speaking minority agrees with the Latvian respondents that Russia is the main culprit, but with different quantities – the former with 32%, the latter with 79%. Whereas the Latvian majority almost exclusively blames Russia, the Russian-speaking minority also

name the US (28%) as well as NATO and Ukraine (each 6%). And 21% find it difficult to say (figure 23).

It would be wrong to argue that the Russian minority has changed its attitude towards Russia in a fundamental way. But it is fair to say that there is growing unease towards Russia among their responses. There is still a gap between the clear condemnation of Russia as the aggressor by the Latvian majority and the opinions of Russian-speaking minority. But the survey – on its own and in comparison with the one from 2022 – shows clearly that the Russian-speaking minority is not monolithic.

Figure 22

Overall, how has your opinion about Russia changed since the Russian invasion of Ukraine?

Answers depending on the language spoken in the family

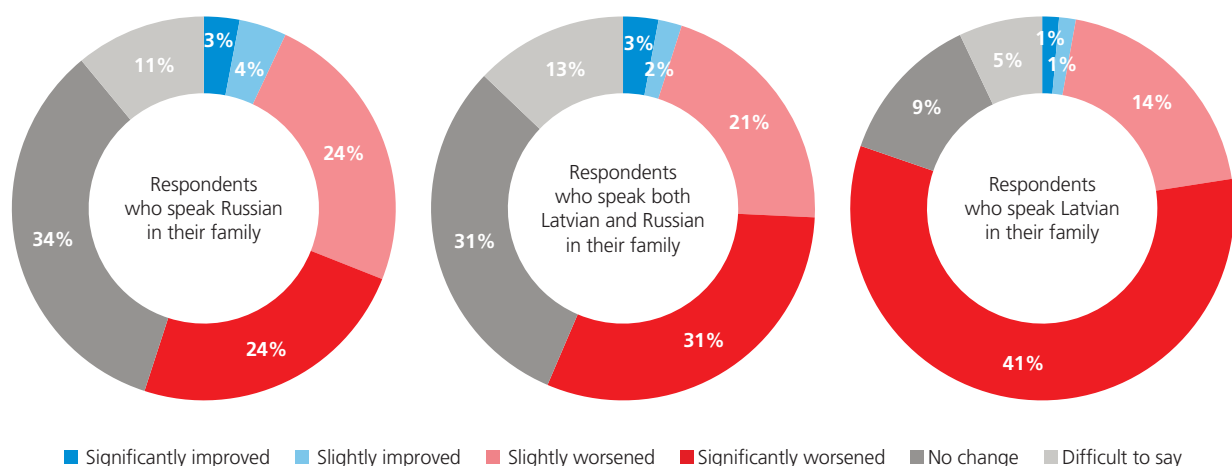


Figure 23

Who do you think is primarily responsible for the outbreak of war in Ukraine?

Answers depending on the language spoken in the family. All figures in %



5

YOUNGER GENERATION: OPEN-MINDED

Starting with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 there was hope that especially the younger generations would carry the newly or again independent states of Eastern and Central Eastern Europe away from a planned economy and dictatorship and towards a market economy and democracy. They would be the backbone against any reconsideration or even cessation of badly needed reforms. As we know today, transformations of state and society are much more complicated than simply hoping for change based on new generations.

But as the survey of 2022 has shown, the younger generations of the Russian-speaking minority in Latvia are indeed more eager to see the EU as an opportunity, do not regard NATO as a threat either to themselves or to Russia, and view the current Russian state as a destructive force that might at one point pose a threat to Latvia. They seem to understand

that having a Russian background does not mean eternal loyalty to Russia but is rather simply a cultural bond that does not prevent them from being Latvian.

Both of the younger age groups, 18–24 and 25–34, are much more open towards the EU than the Russian-speaking minority in general. This decreased slightly from 2022 but still stands at 57% and 47% respectively in comparison to 39% among Russian-speakers in general. Still, one-third chose the response “neither good nor bad” (figure 24).

When it comes to membership in NATO the approval of the younger generations is not as high as for EU membership, but is still considerable higher than the average of the Russian-speaking minority (40% and 39% in comparison to 28%) with a very slight increase among the age group 25–34

Figure 24

Generally speaking, do you think that Latvia's membership in the European Union is...?

Answers depending on the language spoken in the family: comparison of data from 2022 – 2023. All figures in %

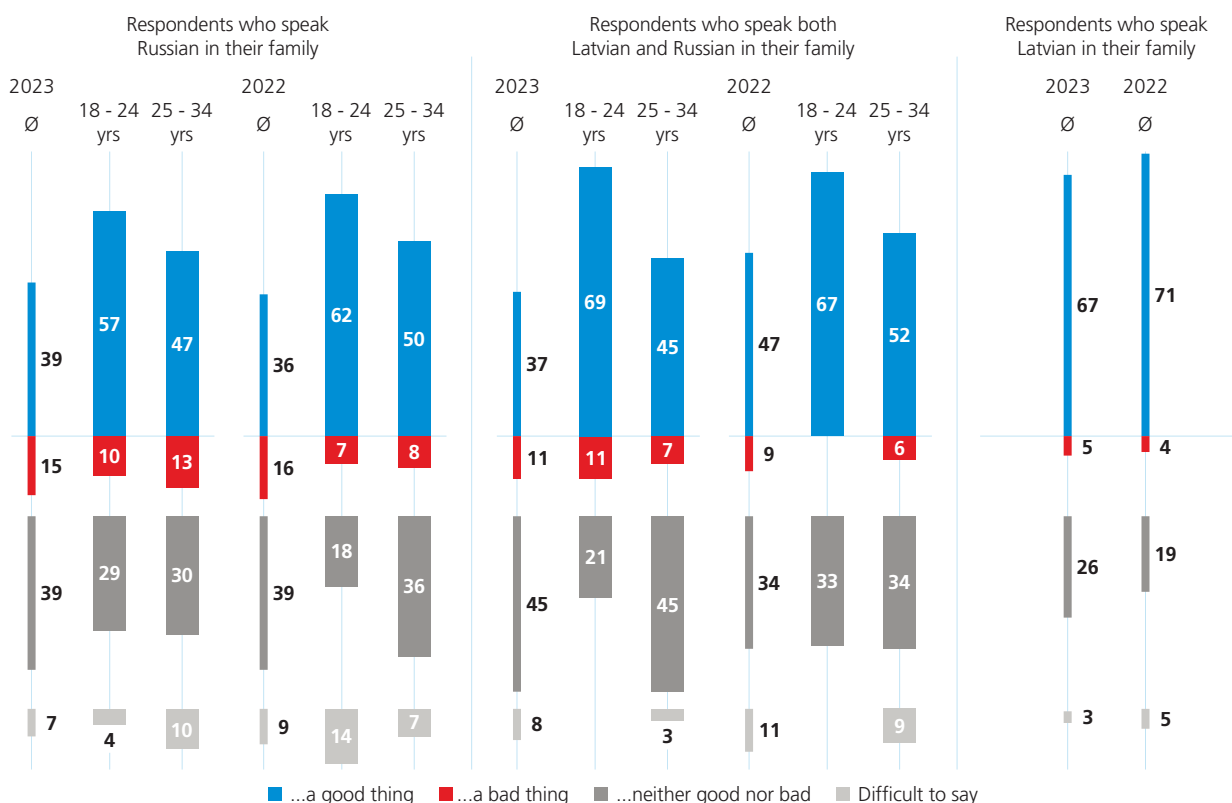


Figure 25

Generally speaking, do you think that Latvia's membership in NATO is...?

Answers depending on the language spoken in the family: comparison of data from 2022 – 2023 . All figures in %

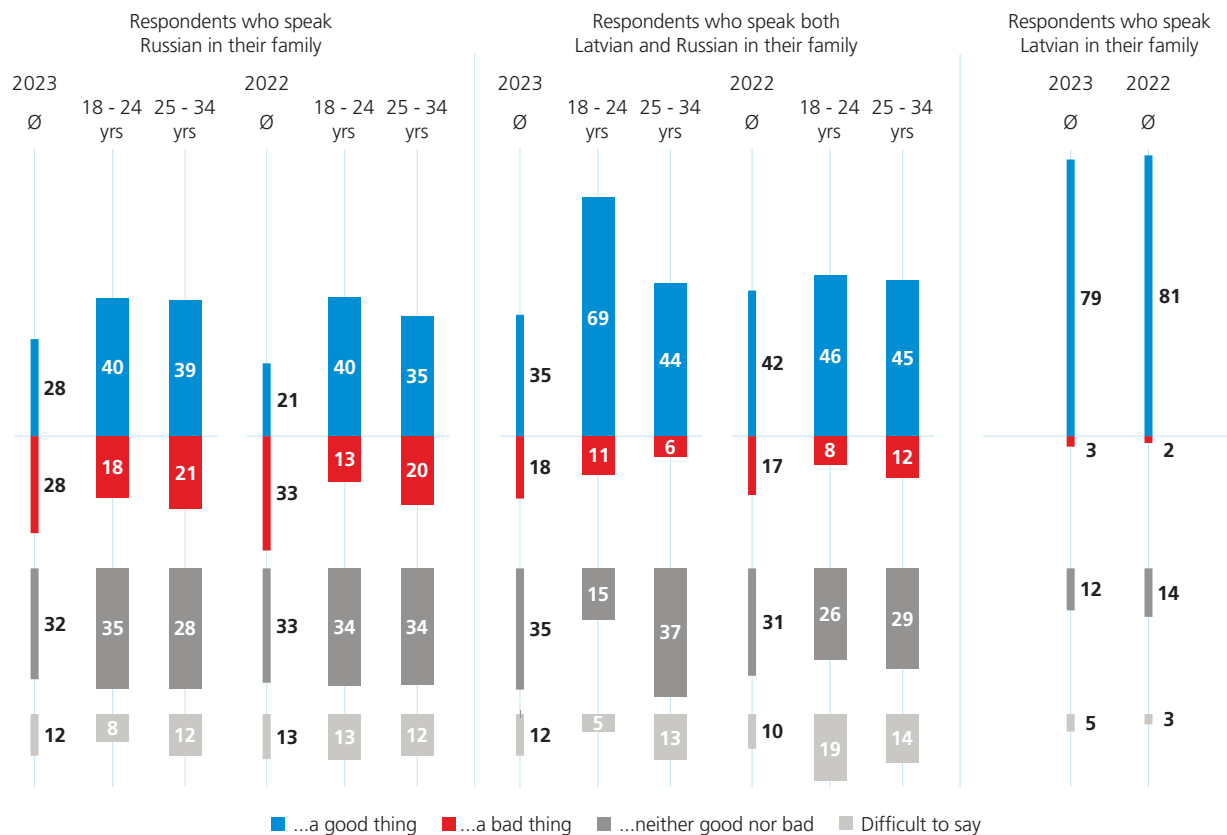
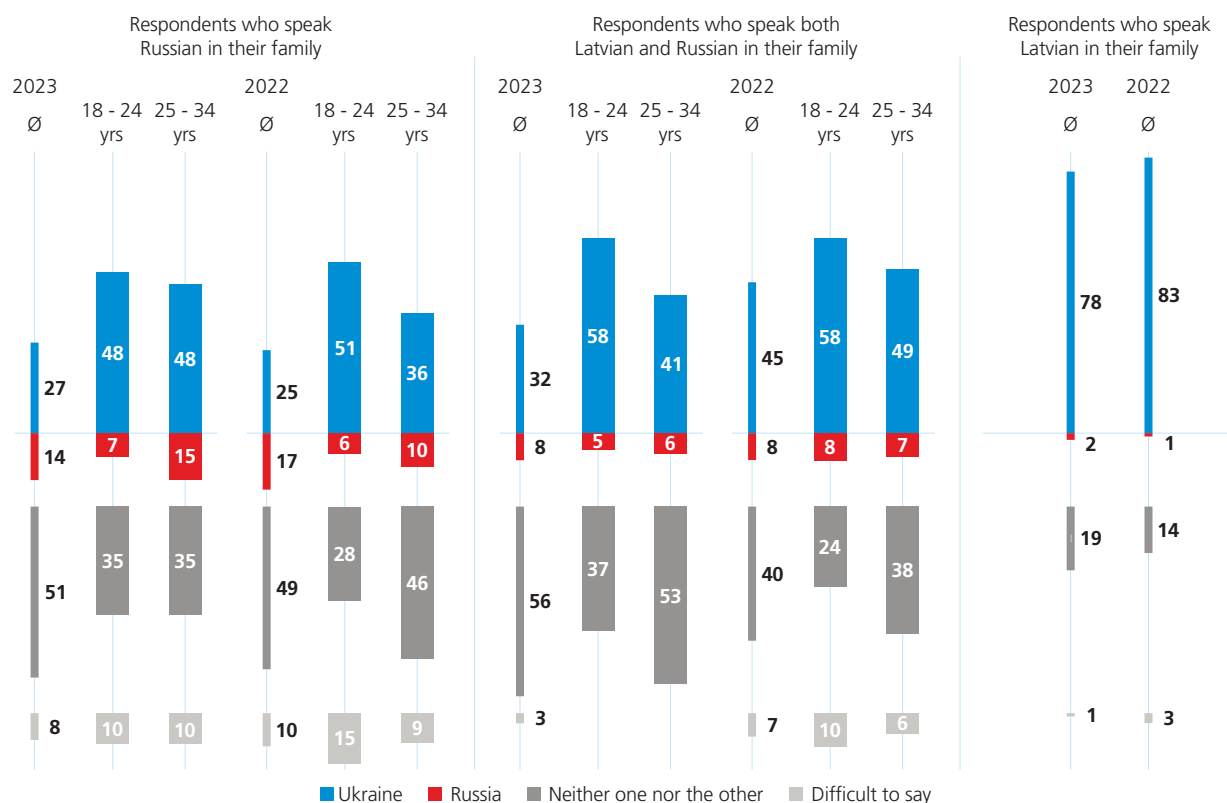


Figure 26

Regarding Russia's so-called military operation against Ukraine, which of the belligerents do you sympathize with?

Answers depending on the language spoken in the family: comparison of data from 2022 – 2023 . All figures in %



since the previous survey). This support is still only half that of the Latvian majority, which shows a much bigger gap than the numbers concerning the EU. NATO still seems to be viewed as a Cold War organization among the Russian-speaking minority in general, no matter which generation looks at it (figure 25).

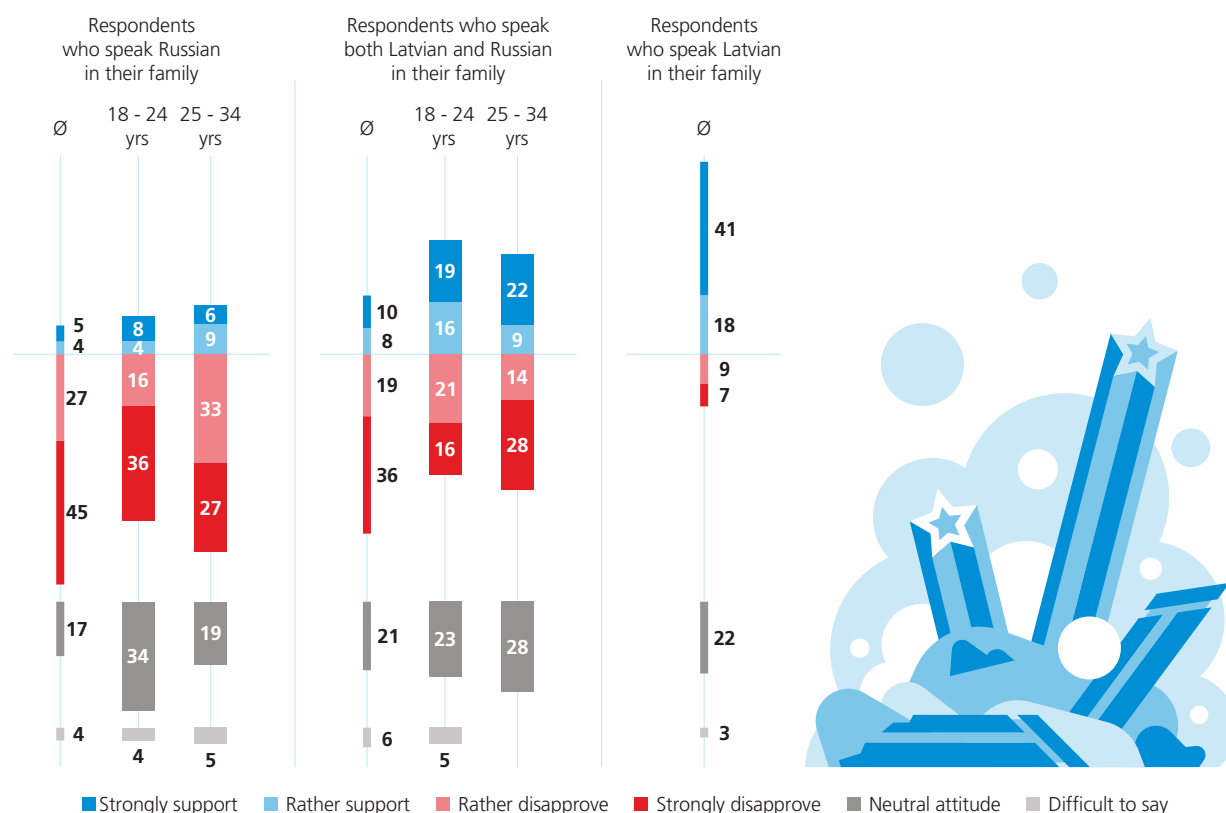
The younger generation shows very clear support for Ukraine (figure 26). Instead of choosing neither one, when asked with whom they sympathize (older generation: 35%), half of them support Ukraine. Also, the younger generations are less disapproving of the demolition of monuments dedicated to the Second World War (figure 27). What is striking is that one

third of the 18 to 24 year olds have a neutral attitude.

The younger generations of the Russian-speaking minority, up to the age of 34, have no memories of the Soviet Union. They grew up entirely in Latvia. They are at least partly much more integrated within Latvia and inside the EU than other generations. To what extent depends among other things on education, language and interest. Their Westernness is more pronounced than that of other age groups. They approach especially the EU as something positive rather than something threatening or negative. In comparison to their peers among the Latvian majority, they are less enthusiastic about NATO. But they are also critical towards today's Russia.

Figure 27

In May 2022, the Latvian Parliament decided that all monuments glorifying the Soviet regime, including those dedicated to the USSR's victory in the Great Patriotic War, should be demolished in Latvia. What is your attitude towards this decision?
Answers depending on the language spoken in the family. All figures in %



CONCLUSION

The Russian-speaking minority is not monolithic. As one Latvian politician recently said, one should speak of different Russian-speaking minorities. Not because there are Russian-speaking minorities among Ukrainians and Belarusians, but because among the Russians of the Russian-speaking minority one can find different attitudes towards the Russian war against Ukraine, towards the causes of this war and towards developments in Latvia itself.

As pointed out in this analysis, there remains a minority among the Russian speakers that is partly disturbing because of its closeness to Russian propaganda and disinformation. Ukraine is still, at least partly, not seen as a properly independent state or as merely a puppet of the US. A majority does not want to side with Ukraine in the war but still hesi-

tates to take sides. Old clichés like the US as the eternal enemy can be seen in a couple of answers.

A fair number of the Russian-speaking minority do criticize Russia, its threat to Europe, its disinformation and its current president. Members of this group see Russia as being responsible for the war in Ukraine. The younger generation, in particular, has a closer relationship towards Western organizations and a more critical view of Russia.

And then there are those who try to bridge the seemingly unbearable contradictions of being Russian in Latvia by either finding compromises, as in suggesting cooperation with both the West and Russia, or by abstaining from giving a clear answer to difficult questions. This might be connected

Figure 28

To what extent do you agree or disagree with following statements: European Union and NATO countries should further support Ukraine militarily, even if Russia threatens to use nuclear weapons as a result

Answers depending on the language spoken in the family: comparison of data from 2022 – 2023

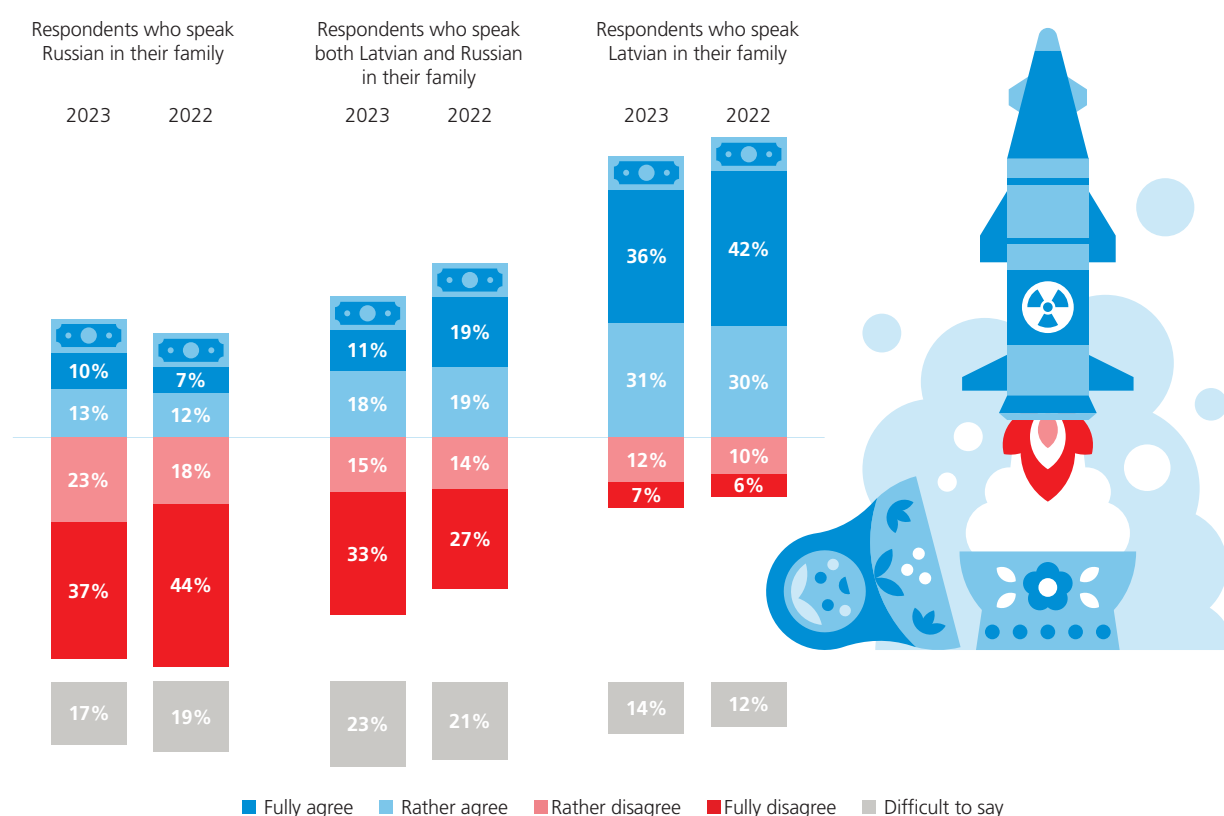
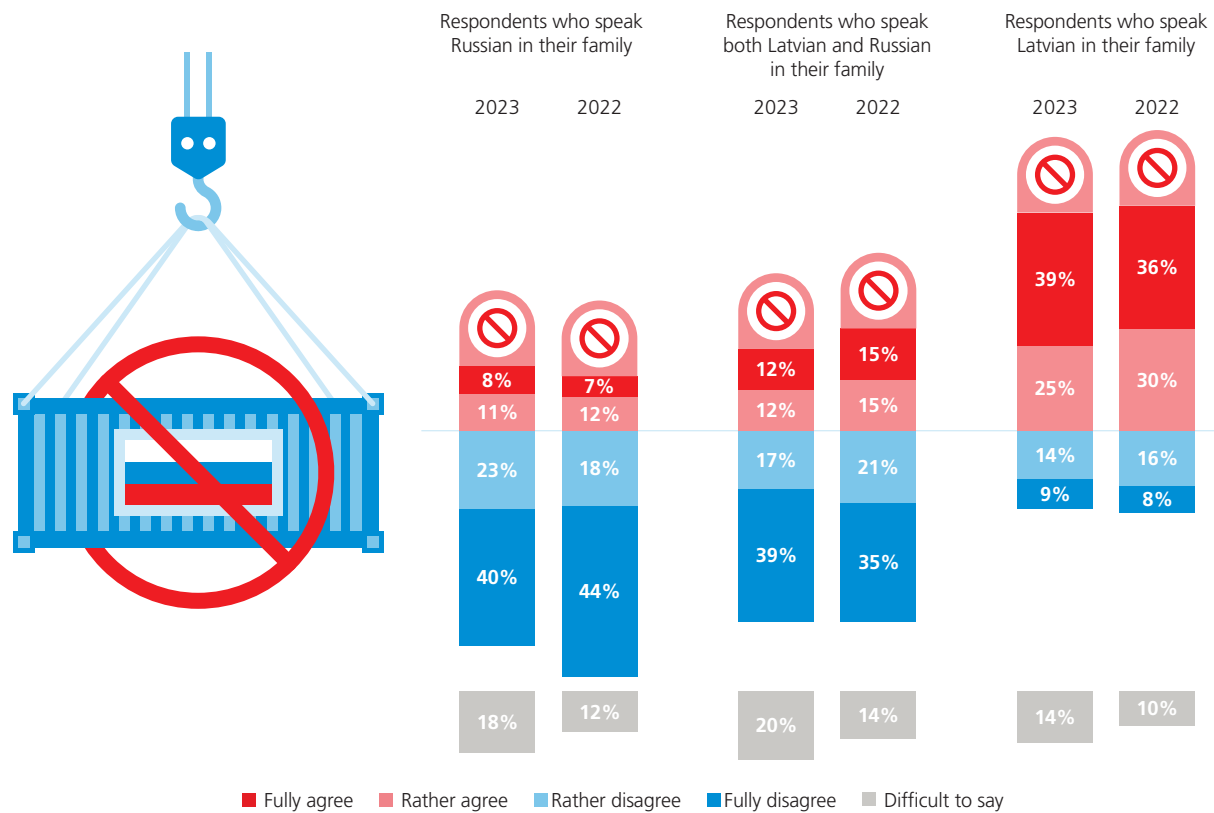


Figure 29

To what extent do you agree or disagree with following statements: More severe economic sanctions should be imposed against Russia than current ones, even if this would mean a lower standard of living in Latvia

Answers depending on the language spoken in the family: comparison of data from 2022 – 2023



with the impression that honest answers perceived to go against the mainstream might have negative repercussions. Comparing the surveys of 2022 and 2023 one can observe many similarities. But there are also noteworthy differences, as have been pointed out.

And there are still major differences between the Latvian-speaking majority and the Russian-speaking minority. More than half of the Russian minority does not want to further support Ukraine militarily, if Russia threatens to use nuclear weapons in response. On the Latvian side the opposite is the case, with over 60% endorsing military support at all costs (figure 28).

The same goes for supporting sanctions even if it means a lower standard of living. The Russian-speaking minority and the Latvian-Russian families disagree to this with a percentage of almost 60% or more, whereas the Latvian majority supports sanctions with well over 60% (figure 29). These two scenarios seem to be too difficult for the Russian-speaking minority and extremely important for the Latvian majority.

The Russian war against Ukraine is quite a challenge for the Russian-speaking minority in Latvia. Not only do they have to come to terms with their position towards the war, they also face new challenges at home in Latvia. And finally, they have to accept that the Russian Federation is moving away from Europe in particular and the West in general – for the first

time since the 18th century.

For Latvia the main question is how to improve difficult relations among its various population groups in times of war. Is it now up to the Russian-speaking minority to improve relations? Does the Latvian state have to offer bridge-building measures? Or are both parts of the society each simply waiting for the other side to move first?

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UNDER PRESSURE

An Analysis of the Russian-Speaking Minority in Latvia



The military aggression of Russia against Ukraine had an impact on Latvian society: different groups have different opinions on the reasons for the war as well as on responses such as sanctions or military support for Ukraine. Whereas the Latvian majority favors full support, the Russian-speaking minority is much more cautious or even against it.



Ethnic conflicts between Latvians and the Russian-speaking minority are not ruled out by either group. Almost half of both groups believe that conflicts are possible, but unlikely. In both groups, the share of those who believe that there is discrimination against those with poor knowledge of Latvian has grown since last year's survey.



The younger generation of the Russian-speaking minority is far more in line with the positive attitude of the Latvian majority concerning EU and NATO membership as well as other topics. The support has increased in comparison to last year's survey.

Further information on the topic can be found here:
<https://baltic.fes.de>