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# Zeiten- wende

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Russia's  
war as a  
turning  
point in  
German  
public  
opinion

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## ***About the authors***

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## ***Zeitenwende – Russia’s war as a turning point in German public opinion***

- Germany is in the middle of a heated political debate about its foreign policy. The comparison of the polling data from autumn 2021 and June 2022 shows that there has been a shift towards a more robust defence policy, including an increase in the military budget; a stronger endorsement of Ukraine’s membership in the EU; and a stronger support of a visionary idea of a European Army.
- The public clearly endorses the government’s »*Zeitenwende*« policy, in terms of an increase in military spending, ongoing assistance to Ukraine and sacrifices in living standards to reduce dependencies from Russia.
- The »*Zeitenwende*« has not changed Germany into a completely different state. There is continuity in public opinion when it comes to pragmatism and pacifism. The scepticism towards military means has even strengthened since the beginning of the war. Value-based foreign policy is supported by Green voters, but in the general public the interest-based and pragmatic approach of cooperating even with countries that are not like-minded prevails. Peace remains a strong priority for an overwhelming majority of polled Germans.
- Differences between citizens in East and West Germany, as well as between supporters of different political parties are glaringly obvious. The divisions in the government between the position of Green voters and those of the SPD and the FDP could make the formulation of common positions more difficult.



## **Introduction**

The Russian war against Ukraine has shifted German foreign policy considerably in recent months.

The basic tenets of German foreign policy have been transformed in a matter of weeks. The country has lifted its ban on arms deliveries to conflict zones. The defence budget is set to receive a crisis injection of 100 billion euros (€) and will, according to the government, be raised to an annual 2% of GDP. The reliance on Russian fossil fuel supplies is set to be phased out, the clearest signal for which was the immediate cancellation of the contested pipeline Nord Stream 2. More fundamentally, it seems that Berlin has abandoned the long-held principle of »change through trade« and the belief that security in Europe is possible only with Russia on board. The political framework for these changes has been termed a »Zeitenwende« (watershed moment) by German Chancellor Olaf Scholz in his seminal speech to the Bundestag three days after Russia started its invasion of Ukraine.

The date of 24 February 2022 is thus a formative event for German foreign policy and has started an intense debate, initially at the elite level, about past mistakes and the future direction of the country. The public has been similarly affected by Russia’s unprovoked war. Rising energy prices and inflation have put pressure on living costs, while nearly a million Ukrainian refugees have sought shelter from the war in Germany, revitalising the spirit of »Willkommenskultur« once again.

Despite these rapid and rather fundamental changes, however, there is still no common understanding in the German public of what »Zeitenwende« means and what consequences it should have for Berlin’s political decision-making. Three trends can be observed in recent polls, but they are inconsistent and do not yet indicate the formation of a new consensus in the country:

- the public clearly endorses the government’s »Zeitenwende« policy, in terms of an increase in military spending and ongoing assistance to Ukraine;
- on the other hand, there is **continuity** when it comes to **pragmatism and pacifism**; and finally,
- as might be expected, there are considerable **differences between voters of different parties**, and the differences between the former **East and West Germany** are even more significant.

In order to analyse the shift in German public opinion, we draw on two representative public opinion polls carried out by the FES (for methodological details on the surveys, see annex):

- »**Security Radar 2022**«, a 14-country survey conducted before the war in **October 2021**; and
- »**Security Radar Germany**«, 16 questions from the original Security Radar survey conducted in Germany in **June 2022**.

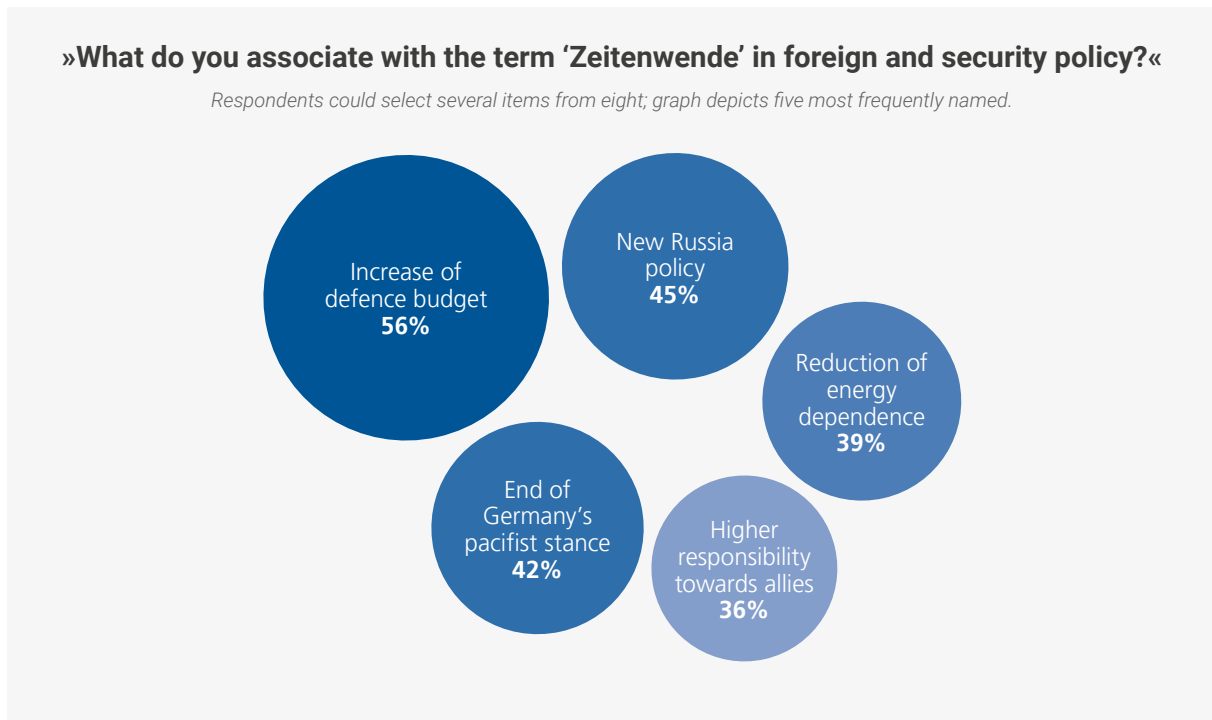
The comparative data are complemented by other recent polls conducted after the start of the war.

The term »Zeitenwende« describing the tectonic shift of German foreign policy in the wake of the Russian war has been used in a rather inflationary manner in the public debate in the past four months. It is thus interesting to observe that for the public, the term is associated with three fairly concrete policies and two issues that may have longer-term consequences.

The increase of the defence budget by €100 billion is the policy most clearly associated with the »Zeitenwende«. The other two are a »new Russia policy« and a »reduction of energy dependence«. The two longer-term aspects that are mainly associated with the »Zeitenwende« are the »end of Germany’s pacifist stance« and a »higher responsibility towards allies«.



Figure 1: »Zeitenwende« in the eyes of Germans<sup>1</sup>



## Zeitenwende – the changes

Perhaps the biggest shift in German public opinion since the start of the war concerns the **perception of Russia as a threat**. Before the start of the war only about half of the German public viewed Russia as a threat to peace and security in Europe – now it is three-quarters. This indicates a potential convergence with allies in Central and Eastern Europe, because the perception of Russia in Germany is now very close to the perception in Poland before the war, indicating a narrowing gap in threat perceptions in Europe.

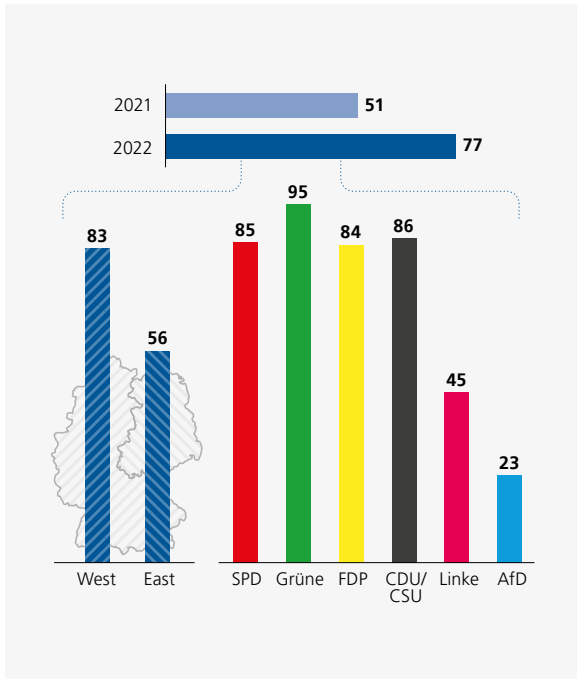
Stark inner-German differences are apparent, however: in the East, only just above half of people polled view Russia as a threat, in sharp contrast to over 80% in the West. Green voters are most wary of Russia, with whopping 95% regarding it as a threat, while on the other side only 45% of voters of the Left Party (Die Linke) and 23% of AfD voters share this view. Voters of the two centre parties, social democrats and conservatives, view Russia as a threat with overwhelming majorities of about 85%.

Another major shift in German public opinion concerns attitudes to **military spending**. Traditionally, the German public has been wary of increasing the defence budget, as both waves of the FES Security Radar in 2018 and 2021 show; the highest level of support was 38% in 2021. However, four months into Russia’s war against Ukraine, a solid majority of 64% endorses increased military spending, thus supporting the policy of the German government.

Again, stark inner-German differences stand out: 55% of East German respondents reject the increase, while the West German respondents endorse it. Looking at the preferences of different party supporters, conservative (CDU/CSU) and liberal party (FDP) voters show overwhelming support for the increase, as well as Green voters, with over 70%. SPD voters follow, with approximately 60% support for an increased defence budget, while a slight majority of AfD voters (53%) and a clear majority of Die Linke voters (77%) reject it.

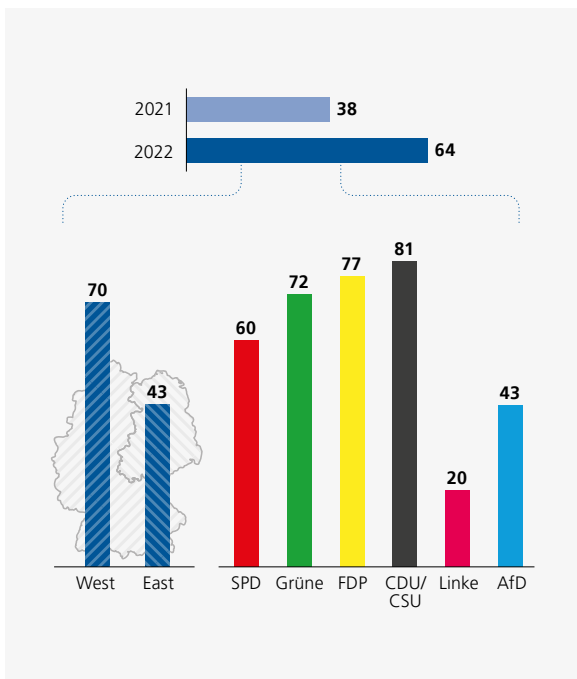
<sup>1</sup> Unless stated otherwise, figures in graphs represent combined responses »Strongly agree« and »Somewhat agree«.

Figure 2: Shifted perspectives on the threat from Russia



Source: Security Radar October 2021, Security Radar June 2022.

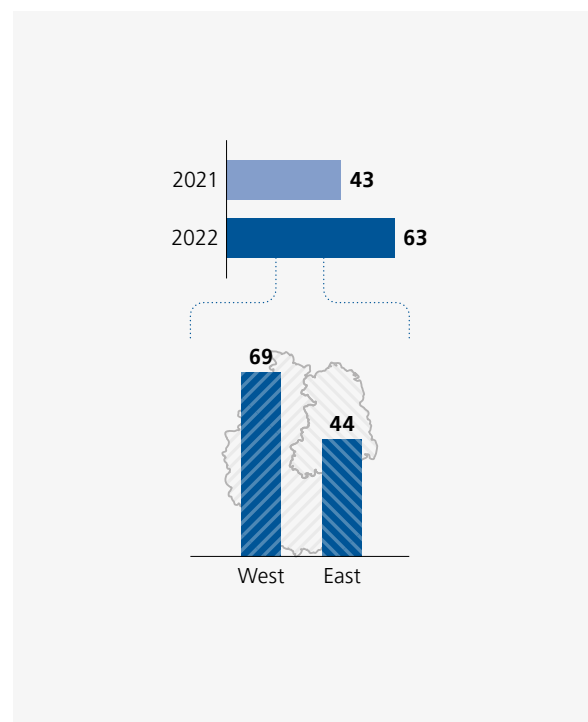
Figure 3: Shifted perspectives on an increase in military spending



Source: Security Radar October 2021, Security Radar June 2022.

However, in addition to the national framing of the German response to the Russian war, perceptions have also been shifting of both Europe’s role and its resources. After 24 February 2022 the German public’s attitude to the **building up of a European army** has changed considerably: endorsement has increased from 43% in 2021 to over 63% in 2022.

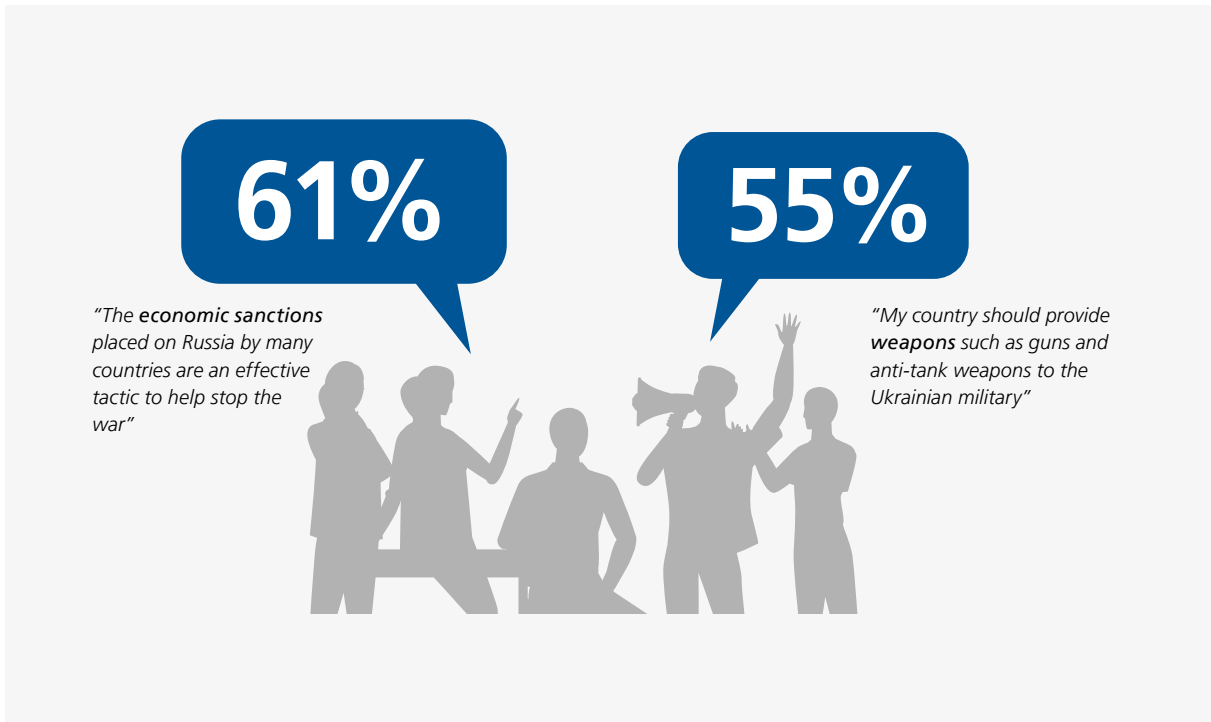
Figure 4: Attitudes towards the build-up of a European army



Source: Security Radar October 2021, Security Radar June 2022.



Figure 5: Attitudes to sanctions against Russia and weapons deliveries to Ukraine



Source: Ipsos March 2022.

### **Support for the government’s response to the war in Ukraine**

Recent surveys reveal that the German public supports its government’s help for Ukraine and economic decoupling from Russia. Majorities endorse both deliveries of weapons to Ukraine and economic sanctions against Russia.

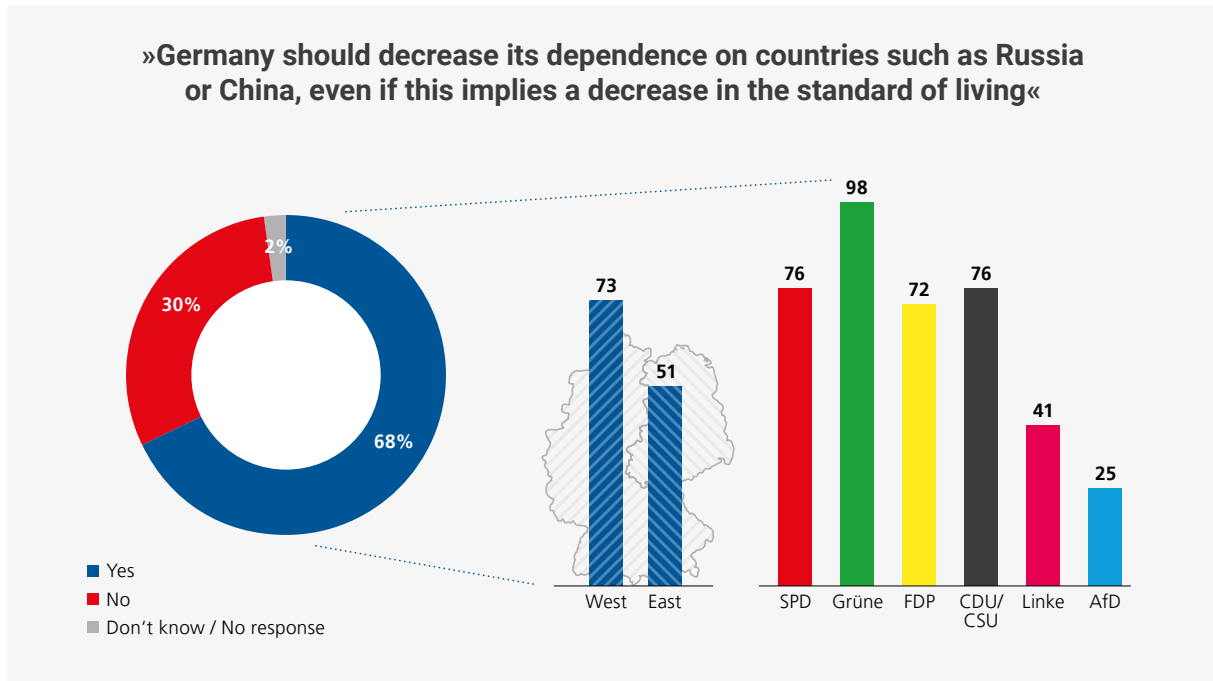
Not only do German respondents support sanctions against Russia in general, but they are also overwhelmingly ready to shoulder the costs of economic decoupling from Russia and to make sacrifices. Almost 70% want Germany to **decrease dependence on Russia** even if it leads to lower living standards. This is a remarkable attitude given that respondents view the **economic situation in Germany** as grimmer than for a decade (with the exception of the pandemic years 2020–2021). According to regular polling by Ipsos, June 2022 marks the lowest score for confidence with the economic situation since 2012 (Ipsos June 2022).

Again, however, attitudes in the East differ starkly: just 51% agree with decreased dependence on

Russia, even if it affects living standards, while in West Germany 73% are in favour. Political affiliations show three interesting outliers. While the presumably more affluent Green voters show nearly total support for this statement, the voters of Die Linke (41%) and AfD (25%) are less inclined to make sacrifices for less dependency. The other parties have slightly above average support of around 70%.

Another shift in German public opinion is discernible in the support for the **prospect of EU membership for Ukraine**, following the changing stance of the German government, but not yet fully endorsing it. Within slightly more than six months German public opinion has changed from overwhelmingly rejecting Ukrainian EU membership to a much more supportive stance. Backing of Ukraine’s EU membership has almost doubled, from 24 to 44%, but the majority still reject it, especially in the Eastern part of Germany. Strong differences are seen among supporters of the three governing parties: Green voters are overwhelmingly in favour of Ukraine’s EU membership (71%), SPD voters are split (51% in favour) and FDP voters reject it (only 40% in favour).

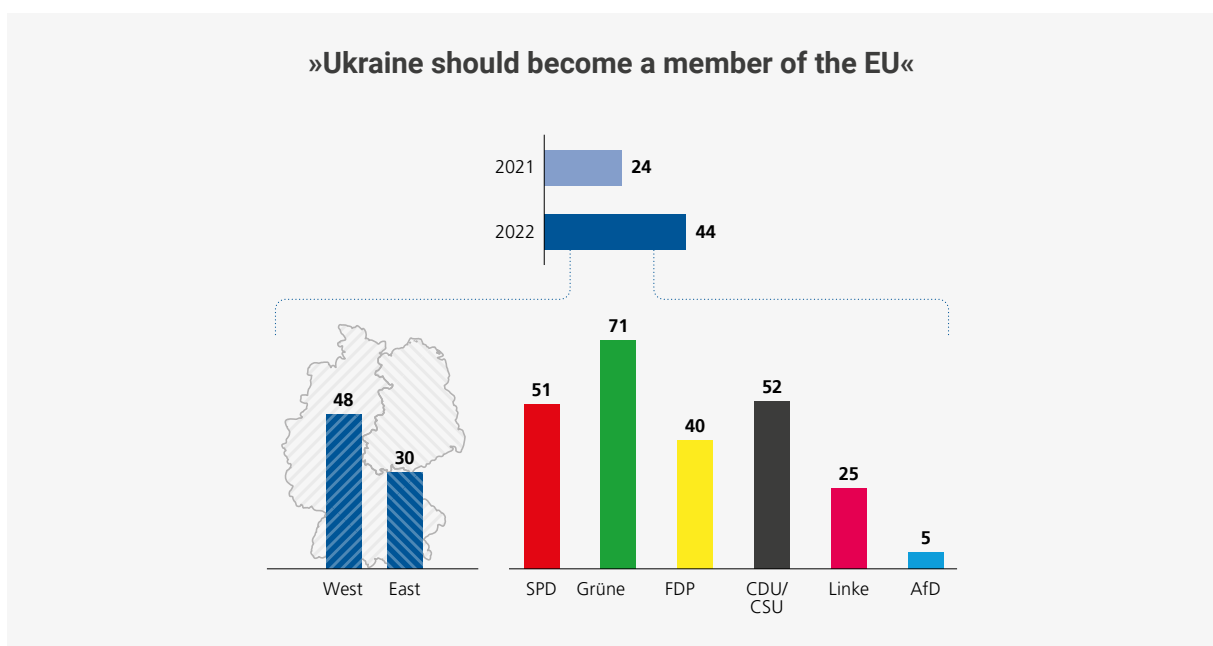
Figure 6: Readiness to decrease dependence on Russia



A similar but even more sceptical picture emerges with regard to **Ukraine’s potential membership of NATO**. Overall, the German public still rejects it, although support has risen considerably, from 24%

prior to the war to 37% in June 2022. Notably, of all socio-demographic subgroups only Green voters are in favour of Ukraine’s NATO membership (58%).

Figure 7: Ukrainian membership of the EU



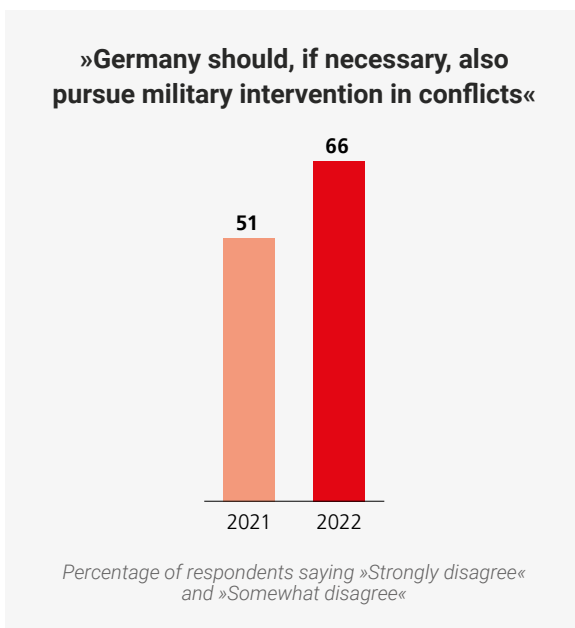


## Continuity – No departure from pragmatism and pacifism

Whilst endorsing the set of changes that the »Zeitenwende« has brought, German public opinion has not yet fundamentally turned away from pacifism and pragmatism. Quite to the contrary, compared with the time before the start of the war German respondents are even more cautious about the use of military force and exhibit even stronger support for pragmatic and interest-based foreign policy. Support for diplomatic means as opposed to military means in foreign policy has increased. Peace remains a strong priority for an overwhelming majority of polled Germans.

In other words, the new security environment and changed attitudes have not translated into new belligerence or readiness to deploy the military. The German »culture of restraint« seems very much alive. In fact, rejection of **military involvement in conflicts** has become stronger, rising from 51 to 66%. Only Green voters are in favour (53%). By the same token, support for **peaceful mitigation of conflicts** has increased from 80 to 86%, with SPD voters almost universally supporting this policy (98%).

Figure 8: Rejection of military intervention in conflicts

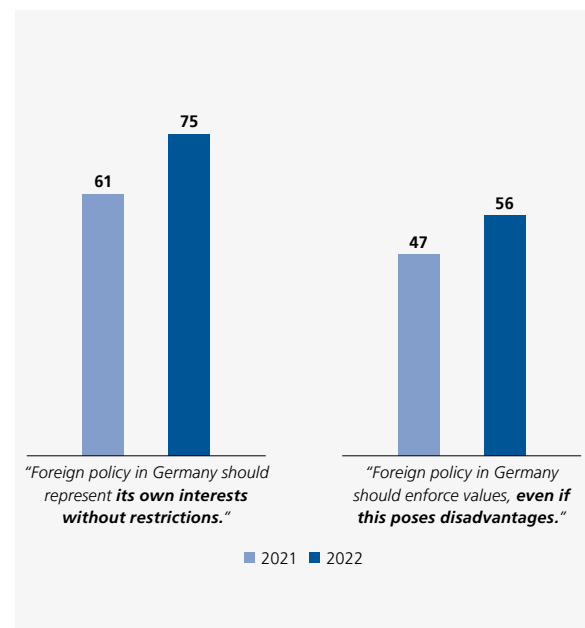


Source: Security Radar October 2021; Security Radar June 2022.

Asked specifically about the war in Ukraine, an overwhelming majority rejected deploying troops in the country in the early stages of the war. In fact, according to the same poll no other EU or NATO country supports **sending troops to Ukraine**, in line with their governments’ official policies of avoiding direct involvement in the war (Ipsos March 2022).

A considerable part of the internal German debate on how to react to Russia’s war against Ukraine has revolved around values: the fight of democracies versus autocracies, defence of freedom and the European way of life, and more generally the importance of value-based foreign policy. However, comparison of polling data from before and since the outset of the war reveals that the German public seems to put **interests** before **values** and supports **pragmatism** in foreign policy even more strongly than in the past. Notably, even Green voters support a pragmatic foreign policy (58%), understood as cooperation with non-like-minded states for the sake of promotion of peace. In the East of Germany support for such policy is even stronger than in the West (78% versus 63%). Overall, these findings reveal not a turn to value-based foreign policy in Germany, but rather a new realism.

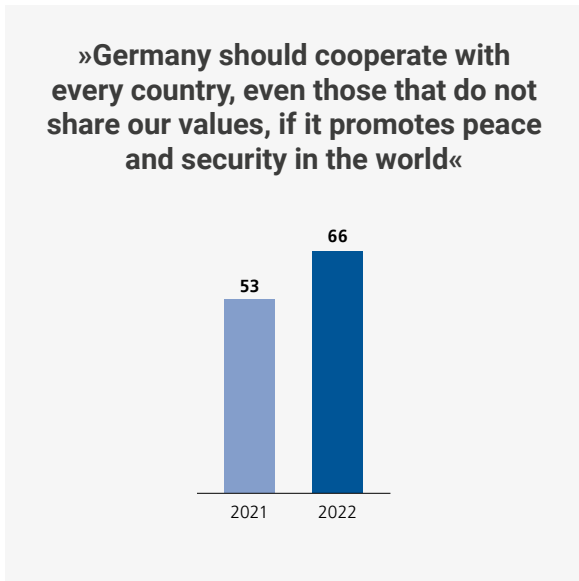
Figure 9: Interest-based versus value-based foreign policy



Source: Security Radar October 2021; Security Radar June 2022.



Figure 10: Pragmatic foreign policy

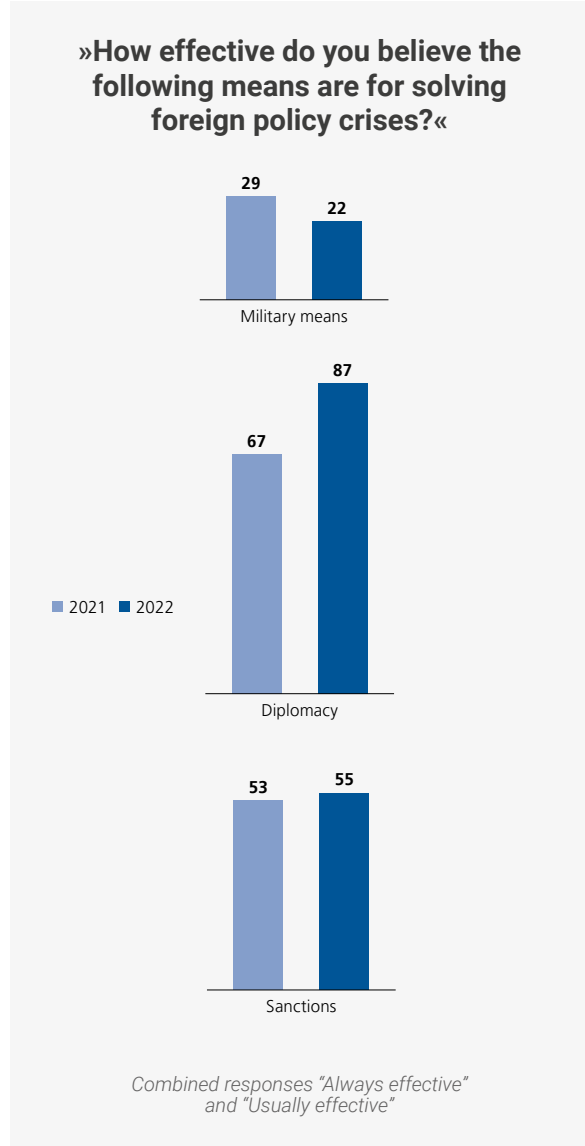


Source: Security Radar October 2021; Security Radar June 2022.

A similar picture emerges when asked about the **effectiveness of foreign policy means**. Compared with attitudes before the start of the war, military means are viewed as less effective and **diplomacy** regarded as much more effective. Assessment of **sanctions** remains similar.

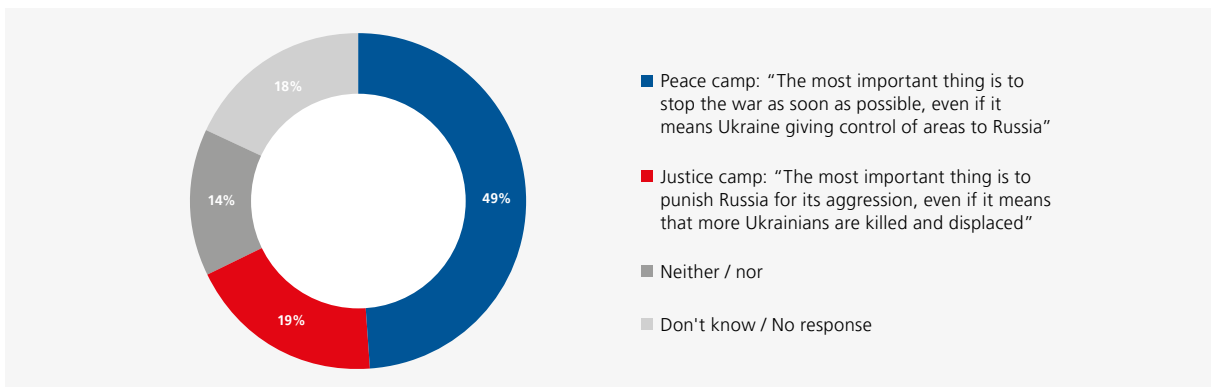
All these findings are in line with a recent study suggesting that more respondents in Germany belong to the so-called »Peace camp« (wishing to stop the war as soon as possible, even at the cost of territorial concessions) as opposed to the so-called »Justice camp« (wishing to punish Russia for its aggression, even at the cost of prolonging the war).

Figure 11: Effectiveness of foreign policy means



Source: Security Radar October 2021; Security Radar June 2022.

Figure 12: Pathways to peace in Ukraine: Peace versus Justice



Source: ECFR May 2022.



### ***In Germany the hawks are Green***

- Green voters represent the only subgroup in favour of military intervention in conflicts (53%), with a majority approving;
- Green voters exhibit the highest share of people who view military means as effective (31% compared with 21% on average and 14% among SPD voters);
- Green voters comprise the only subgroup a majority of which supports Ukraine’s NATO membership, and also show the highest support for Ukraine’s EU membership;
- Nearly 100% of Green voters view Russia as a threat and are prepared to bear the cost of decoupling, universally endorsing the reduction of dependence on Russia and China;
- Strongest endorsement of sanctions as effective foreign policy means;
- Stronger than average (and much stronger than SPD) support for increased military spending;
- Clear preference for value-based foreign policy, much stronger than average and all other voters (84%; compared with 60% among SPD voters or 53% among conservatives).

### ***Social democrats are the strongest proponents of diplomacy***

- SPD voters are the only subgroup that universally endorses peaceful mitigation of conflicts (98%) and also are among the strongest supporters of diplomacy, along with Die Linke voters (93%);
- SPD voters appear less hawkish than Green voters, especially with regard to military intervention in conflicts, pragmatic cooperation with non-like-minded countries and decoupling from Russia. Here SPD voter attitudes are close to those of FDP and CDU/CSU voters;
- SPD voters exhibit a much stronger preference for interest-based foreign policy than Green voters (77% versus 53%);
- SPD voters are rather split on the issues of increased military spending (59% in favour and 39% against) and Ukrainian membership of the EU (51% in favour, 46% against), while voters of most other parties have a clear opinion;
- Among coalition parties SPD voters are least supportive of military intervention in conflicts (24%). Only AfD (11%) and Die Linke (5%) voters are more sceptical;
- The build-up of a European army is one of the few issues on which SPD voters have a similar opinion to voters of other coalition partners (between 75 and 80% endorse it).



## **Outlook**

Germany is in the middle of a heated political debate about its foreign policy. The latest polling – used in this analysis – was undertaken about 100 days into the war and over the course of this short time-span the changes in the political arena, as well as public perceptions have been considerable. With further developments in Ukraine and in relations with Russia, more changes may be expected. However, even the current picture shows some interesting trends.

The »*Zeitenwende im Kopf*« (mental watershed moment) has already started, but the differences between East and West Germany, as well as between supporters of different political parties are glaringly obvious. The divisions in the government between the position of Green voters and those of the SPD and the FDP could make the formulation of common positions more difficult. More disquieting, however, are the stark differences between the East and West of Germany, allowing parties on the fringes to exploit the distinct perceptions of people living in the East.

For Germany’s allies in NATO and the EU, there is also good news. Support for the government’s policies is strong; there has been a shift towards a more robust defence policy, including an increase in the military budget; and the ongoing support for Ukraine is generally supported, not only by voters of the coalition parties, but more broadly. The linkage between the strengthening of national defence capabilities and a stronger and more capable European Union is also broadly supported, as even the still rather visionary idea of a European Army garners a strong support base.

However, the »*Zeitenwende*« has not changed Germany into a completely different state. The scepticism towards military means has even slightly strengthened since the beginning of the war. Value-based foreign policy is supported by Green voters, but in the general public as a whole the interest-based and pragmatic approach of cooperating even with countries that are not like-minded prevails. Combined with the responses to the questions regarding possible sacrifices in living standards to reduce dependencies from Russia, it becomes clear that the current German position remains fragile. Should the economic or social burden become more onerous, support for sanctions might wane and parties prioritising a quick end of the war »whatever it takes« may gain momentum.







## Annex

### Methodological details on the surveys cited:





#### Security Radar 2022:

<https://peace.fes.de/security-radar-2022>

 <b>What?</b> Representative public opinion poll in 14 countries: Armenia, Austria, France, Germany, Italy, Latvia, Norway, Poland, Russia, Serbia, Turkey, Ukraine, United Kingdom, and the United States	 <b>Who?</b> 27,500 respondents surveyed in 14 countries Representative samples in each country
 <b>When?</b> September-October 2021	 <b>How?</b> CATI (Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing) in Armenia CAWI (Computer Assisted Web Interviewing) in the 13 other countries carried out by Ipsos on behalf of FES

#### Security Radar Germany 2022:

<https://www.fes.de/themenportal-die-welt-gerecht-gestalten/frieden-und-sicherheit/zeitenwende-sicherheitspolitik/artikelseite-ukraine/umfrage-deutsche-aussenpolitik-nach-der-zeitenwende>

 <b>What?</b> Representative public opinion poll in Germany	 <b>Who?</b> 2,500 respondents surveyed in Germany Representative sample
 <b>When?</b> June 2022	 <b>How?</b> CAWI (Computer Assisted Web Interviewing) carried out by civey on behalf of FES

### Other surveys cited in this report:

- Ipsos March 2022: »The World’s Response to the War in Ukraine«. 19,000 respondents surveyed in 27 countries. CAWI carried out by Ipsos; available at: <https://www.ipsos.com/en/war-in-ukraine-april-2022>
- Ipsos June 2022: »What Worries the World?« 19,000 respondents surveyed in 27 countries. CAWI carried out by Ipsos; available at: <https://www.ipsos.com/en/what-worries-world-june-2022>
- ECFR May 2022: »Peace versus Justice: The Coming European Split Over the War in Ukraine«. 8,170 respondents surveyed in 10 countries. CAWI carried out by YouGov; available at: <https://ecfr.eu/publication/peace-versus-justice-the-coming-european-split-over-the-war-in-ukraine>

## ***FES ROCPE in Vienna***

Established in 2016, the FES Regional Office for International Cooperation, Cooperation and Peace (former FES Regional Office for Cooperation and Peace in Europe – FES ROCPE) addresses today's profound challenges to European security, It also works closely with the OSCE towards revitalising cooperative security.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 was a watershed moment for security in Europe and has rendered obsolete previous visions of European order. A new Cold War or even more unstable relations between Russia and the West are the probable outcome of this war, creating an environment of confrontation and containment in Europe. At the same time, planetary challenges such as climate change or pandemics continue to threaten peace and security and require cooperative approaches.

In these uncertain times, FES ROCPE continues to develop new ideas under the aegis of solution-oriented policymaking, together with experts, politicians and policy planners from Eastern Europe, Russia, the EU and the US. The aim is to tackle interconnected security challenges, contribute to conflict resolution and strengthen the idea of common and indivisible security in Europe in the spirit of the Paris and Istanbul Charters (1990/1999). It is our belief that organisations such as the FES have a responsibility to come up with new ideas and to introduce them into the political process in Europe.

Our activities include:

- regional and international workshops aimed at developing new concepts on stabilising the security situation in Europe, dealing with conflicts and achieving lasting peace in Europe;
- a regional network of young professionals working on de-escalation, cooperation and peace in Europe;
- regular public opinion polling on security matters;
- cooperation with the OSCE in the three dimensions of security: the politico-military, the economic and environmental, and the human.

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