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The ongoing German Zeitenwende

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has shaken Germany to the core. On the one hand, there are the direct consequences of the war, such as inflation, countless war refugees from Ukraine and more complex demands on German defence policy, to name but a few. On the other hand, the invasion has permanently altered the foreign and security policy conceptions of both German politicians and citizens.

This paper focuses on the second dimension of the *Zeitenwende*. The question is, to what extent has the German population's world view changed, how has their outlook on security challenges developed and what policy conclusions can be drawn from this? To answer these questions we draw on three surveys carried out within the framework of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's Security Radar in 2021, 2022 and 2024. The survey focus was European security, with a particular emphasis on Ukraine. The autumn 2021 survey provides a useful point of departure, highlighting what perceptions and priorities dominated security policy and to what extent Russia was regarded as a threat before its all-out war of aggression against Ukraine. This can be used as reference when it comes to drawing conclusions about the extent of people's »*Zeitenwende* in the head«.

The survey analysis highlights three interesting developments from which policy recommendations may be drawn.

1. Popular conceptions of Russia in Germany have changed for good

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has fundamentally altered Germans' attitude to it. We can begin with perceptions of Russia as a threat to European security. This has increased significantly since 2021 and 73% of Germans now hold this view. Hand in hand with this goes the perception that Russian and European interests are diametrically opposed. This conviction has also consolidated,

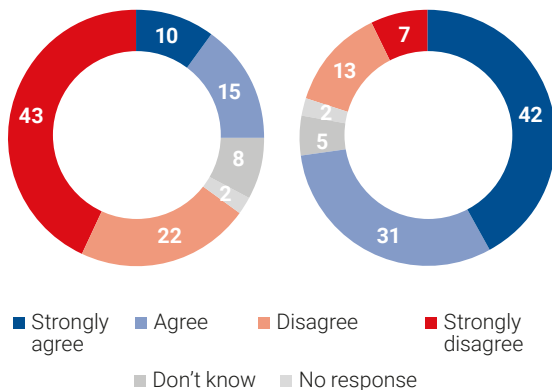
rising from 46% to 60% support, with only 19% of Germans taking a different view. These perceptions have a direct influence on respondents' attitudes to cooperation with Russia and support for sanctions: 53% favour stepping up sanctions, while 36% are against. The proportion of those opposed has largely remained constant, while support for sanctions has risen substantially (from 38% in 2021).



Furthermore, only 25% of respondents are in favour and 65% are against increasing cooperation with Russia, in comparison with figures of 37% and 45% in 2021.

Should Germany cooperate more closely with Russia?

All figures in %



These developments are intriguing in two respects. First, the notion that Russia is a threat to both European and German security has become more firmly established. A majority regard the interests of Russia and the EU as in conflict and reject cooperation with Moscow. Second, a relatively stable minority of around a quarter take a very different view (see the box on p. 6). This group is also characterised by an emphatic ant-Americanism; its views on China are also at variance with those of the majority of respondents.

2. Germany's new inwardness

Concerns about security have increased significantly and the danger of a war in Europe is regarded as more credible. At the same time, people have turned inwards. In keeping with this is the fact that since 2021 worries have grown about a decline in social cohesion. For example, 65% of those asked take the view that German policymakers should concentrate on asserting their own values in their own country and not beyond its borders. This is by far the highest value among the 14 countries in the survey.

65% of people take the view that German policymakers should concentrate on asserting their own values in their own country.

This is underpinned by the 57% of respondents who take the view that Germany should concentrate on its own prosperity and avoid international entanglements.

3. Disillusionment sets in regarding issues related to Ukraine

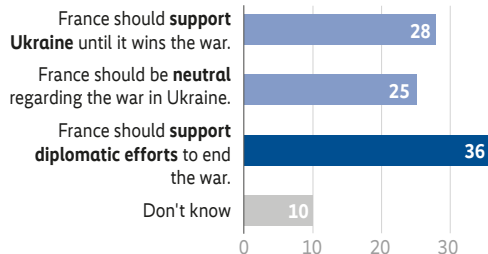
Between the surveys, which were conducted six months and two and a half years after the outbreak of war, a trend towards disillusionment or even fatigue set in with regard to Ukraine. For example, support for weapons deliveries and even for Ukraine's accession to the EU and NATO has fallen. The expansion of sanctions against Russia is also viewed more critically in 2024 than in 2022. This rather cautious position is illustrated by the slight majority of 53% of respondents who believe that the war should be ended as quickly as possible, even if that means territorial losses for Ukraine.



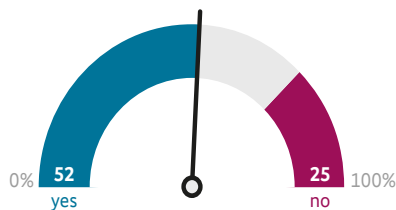
War in Ukraine

All figures in %. Deviations from 100% result from:
'Don't know' or 'No response'.

What position should France take in the war in Ukraine?

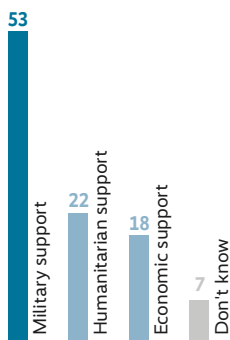


Do you think it is necessary to keep supporting Ukraine?



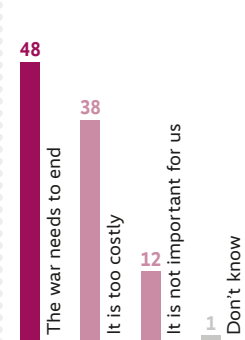
How should Ukraine be primarily supported?

(Respondents who answered that Ukraine should be supported)

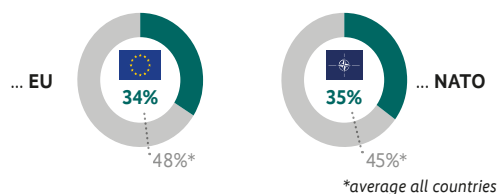


Why do you think Ukraine should not be supported?

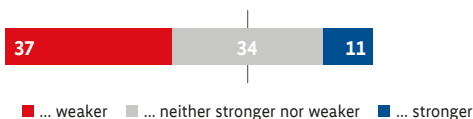
(Respondents who answered that Ukraine should not be supported)



Should Ukraine become a member of...?



What effect, if any, does Russia's war against Ukraine have on France? Did it become...



Conclusions

A number of conclusions emerge from these observations for German policymakers, who will face a series of international challenges, especially in the wake of Donald Trump's election victory in the United States. Other data from the Security Radar have been used in reaching these conclusions that could serve as starting points for a foreign and security policy approach that meets with broad popular support. The way ahead comprises a smart combination of accelerating Zeitenwende and maintaining elements of a culture of restraint.

European cooperation will be crucial in the coming months when it comes to handling Russia and supporting Ukraine. Although Germans have become slightly more sceptical, more commitment to the European institutions is to be expected, as well as more German leadership. Germany is the only country in the Weimar Triangle in which slightly more people would prefer their own country to adopt a leadership role (30%) than all three states together (28%) – these two positions are in balance even in France. This represents both an opportunity and a mandate for German policymakers to make proactive use of the European level and to strengthen it. But a lot more effort needs to be put into the Zeitenwende in order to carry out this role.

69% believe that Germany could not defend itself against an attack by Russia

57% also believe that the EU could not defend itself without the United States

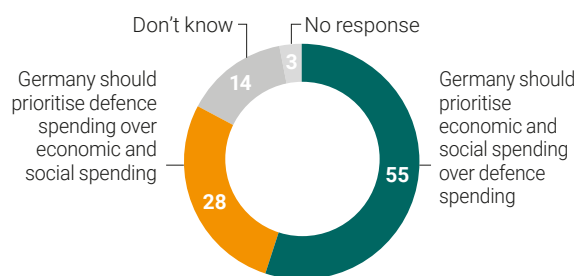
Boosting Germany's defence capabilities and pushing ahead with de-risking

The second conclusion concerns what needs to be done in order to be able to cope with the new security policy challenges arising from an increasingly geopoliticised world. The first item on the agenda is boosting Germany's own defence capabilities. There is a general public perception that Germany could



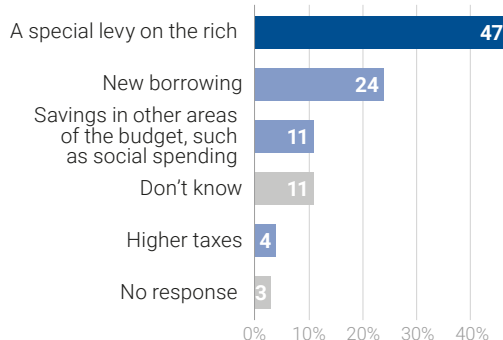
If you had the choice, what would you rather spend money on, given a limited state budget?

All figures in %



Funding a higher military budget: Germany is increasing its defence budget. How should that be paid for, in your opinion?

All figures in %



not defend itself against a Russian attack (69%) and also that the EU could not defend itself without the United States (57%). At the same time, support has risen for increasing defence spending – at 54% it is now 16 percentage points higher than in 2021. Some caution is warranted here, however, because 55% reject the proposition that defence spending should be prioritised over social spending, while only 28% support it. A higher defence budget must therefore be accompanied by policies to improve social justice. One such measure would be a special levy on the rich, favoured by 47% of respondents when asked how an increase in the defence budget should be funded. The upshot is that it's important

not to lose sight of social cohesion as a basis for Germany's defence capabilities in response to the burdens on a crisis-weary population when it comes to providing financial support for the *Zeitenwende*.

The second challenge concerns strengthening resilience with regard to economic interrelations with Russia and China. On one hand, 60% of respondents believe that Germany's prosperity depends on the prosperity of other countries. On the other hand, almost 70% agree that dependence on countries that do not share our values should be reduced. Asked specifically about Russia and China a majority favour this, even if that entails a decline in living standards: 64% in the case of Russia and 57% in the case of China. That indicates that people are aware that economic interdependence can be exploited to Germany's detriment. A de-risking strategy enjoys public support and may therefore be pursued, albeit with caution.

These two central elements of the *Zeitenwende*, which represent a significant change in relation to German policy before 2022, thus continue to enjoy public support. If they are implemented consistently concerns about a changing world can be mitigated and the trend towards a new inwardness can be curbed.



Diplomacy and international cooperation as central instruments

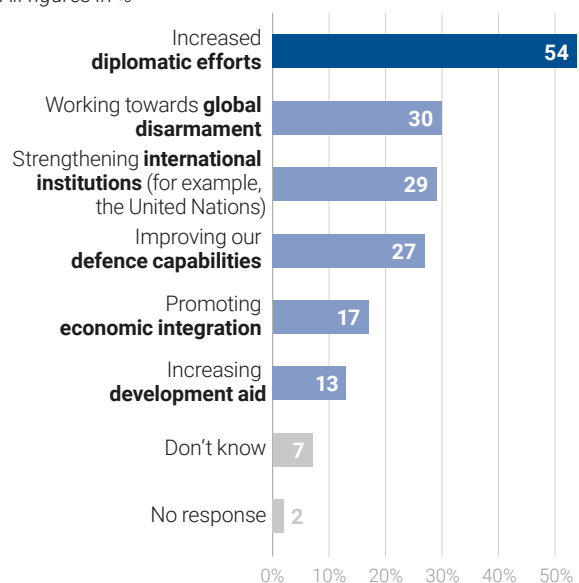
The third conclusion concerns the continuing existence of a German culture of restraint. The Zeitenwende has not led to a re-militarisation of society. Although support has grown for increasing investment in national defence, scepticism towards military intervention has also increased. Particularly by international comparison respondents in Germany tend to believe that rules and laws remain important in international relations. When it comes to foreign policy instruments and options for promoting peace they particularly favour such traditional means as diplomacy, reinforcing international organisations, but also disarmament initiatives.

This points to the need for policymakers to pursue an approach including these traditional elements if they want to keep the German population on board with regard to foreign and peace policy.

In summary, and after the cold shower of the US election results, it is clear that the Zeitenwende has become established in people's minds. Russia's attack on Ukraine has changed perceptions, but people still yearn for tried and tested tools and their continued implementation. The growing distributional conflict between defence and social policy requires new investments in both areas, which gives the polarising issue of the debt brake new urgency. Some 45% of Germans favour debt reduction so as not to »burden future generations«, while 40% see the need for new borrowing for the sake of investment. The situation is crying out for political leadership. Conflicting goals are thus coming to the sur-

What, in your opinion, are the two most important elements in promoting international peace?

All figures in %



face among the population, with a leaning towards social spending. To ensure that the new inwardness does not lead to isolationism new paths must be followed to take account of social justice and cohesion.



AfD voters: No to Ukraine, yes to Russia, steady as we go on China

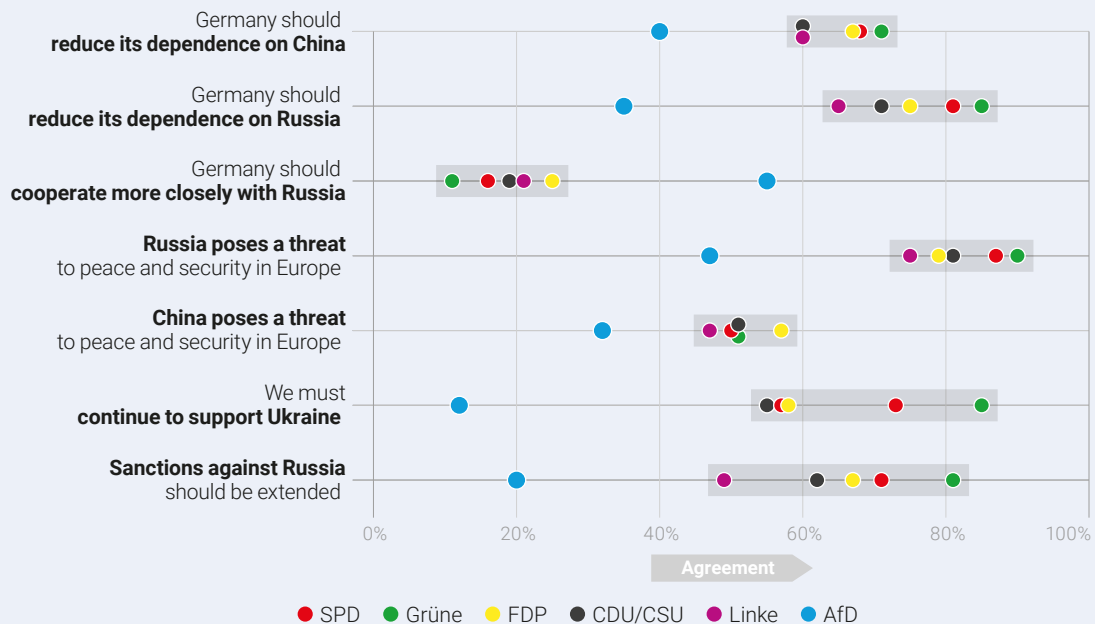
A fascinating picture emerges when one looks more closely at the party preferences revealed by German survey data. The *Zeitenwende* since 2022 can be traced to three factors in particular: first, people's positions on support for Ukraine; second, perceptions of Russia; and third, perceptions of China. Taking into account which parties people voted for in the last Bundestag elections shows that the *Zeitenwende* is far from a uniform phenomenon.

In the abovementioned three categories a fairly broad consensus can be discerned between supporters of the parties of the democratic centre: SPD, CDU/CSU, FDP and the Greens. The majority firmly believe that we must continue to support Ukraine, that Russia is a danger to Europe and that it makes sense to decouple from Russia and China. These convictions are even largely shared by voters of the Left (Die Linke).

By contrast, a quite different picture emerges of AfD supporters. They strongly oppose continuing support for Ukraine, are uncertain whether Russia poses a danger to Europe and are clear that there should be more cooperation with Russia. They see no need to reduce Germany's dependence on Russia and reject any extension of sanctions. They have similar views on China. Interestingly, they regard the United States as the biggest danger to Europe, even in comparison with Russia and China.

To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

Combined answers »Strongly agree« and »Somewhat agree«. All figures in %



FES ROCPE in Vienna

Established in 2016, the 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 on integrating young voices in European security debates and the interface between security and environment.

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 Charter (1990) and the Istanbul Charter (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:

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- » maintaining 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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