

Sabrina Kaschowitz

# Climate cooperation in a divided world

## About Security Radar 2025

For Security Radar 2025, the FES Regional Office for Cooperation and Peace in Europe polled 14 countries in September 2024 on public attitudes towards foreign policy and security questions. FES surveys countries under the aegis of Security Radar at regular intervals. More information can be found on our website.

### Key messages:

- *Public opinion on climate action is contradictory: respondents are deeply concerned about climate change, but their views reflect growing tensions between ideology and pragmatism.*
- *Respondents strongly support international climate cooperation, but almost as many prioritise border security and resource competition, revealing confusion about the right approach in a world driven by national self-interest and zero-sum thinking.*
- *A balanced approach between strategic autonomy and international cooperation is essential to tackle climate change in today's challenging geopolitical landscape. Political leaders must counter polarisation and nationalist rhetoric to prevent public fears from being exploited.*
- *Strong public support for international and regional organisations such as the UN, the OSCE and the EU shows their potential for promoting international climate action.*

## Introduction

International cooperation has been a key element of international relations in recent decades as a means of managing cross-border challenges. Specifically, efforts to mitigate climate change have been organised globally, as the cross-border character of this development is self-evident. Today, climate change is still universally recognised as a global threat, but responses to it are increasingly linked to wider geopolitical dynamics, foreign policy priorities and national security concerns. While many agree that global challenges such as climate change require collective action, there is a growing shift towards »my country first« policies, focusing on a narrowly defined national interest, economic decoupling and the securitisation of climate change. This is evident in efforts to secure borders and compete in the global market for natural resources and new technologies, reflecting a larger trend to frame climate change and international cooperation through the lens of national security, geopolitical advantage and rivalry. This narrative has seeped into the public debate and leaves citizens confused about whether cooperation and joint action might mean that they lose out in the global competition for resources and thus restrict their country's ability to adapt to climate change in a zero-sum geopolitical context. These trends are embedded in a landscape of rising global insecurity, fears of a new era of conflict, perceptions of declining Western influence, and growing public scepticism about international norms. Despite these challenges, support for international and regional institutions such as the United Nations and the OSCE remains high. This demonstrates that multilateralism is still a viable approach to tackling both climate change and broader geopolitical instability, provided that international cooperation and these organisations are reframed within a narrative that emphasises mutual benefit and collective action.

### Climate change as a global threat

In our survey, climate change is widely recognised as a global threat, with concern spread evenly across age and gender. It ranks fourth out of nine global foreign and security policy problems that should be given priority, after terrorism and extremism, human rights abuses and geopolitical tensions and conflicts.

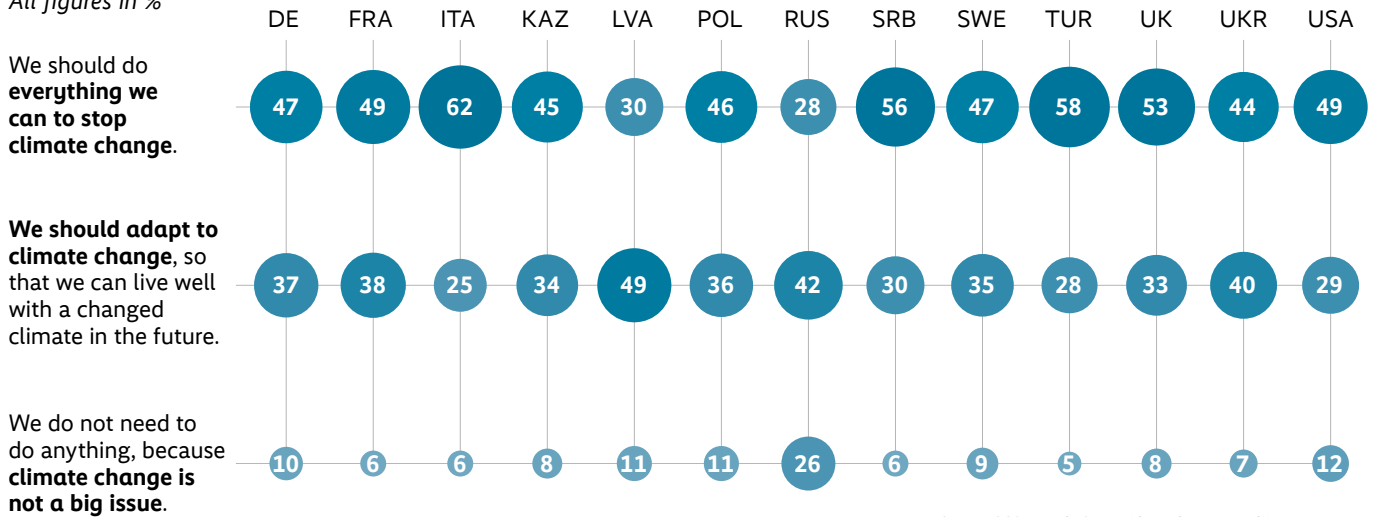
Respondents from Northern and Central European countries are relatively less concerned about climate change than others, with Sweden, Latvia and Germany expressing the lowest levels of concern (just above 60%). The United States follows at 64%. Italy, Serbia, Türkiye, Georgia and France are the most concerned (76–80%). The fact that, generally, those who are most concerned about climate change are also those who are least satisfied with current climate change measures and policies suggests that current climate policies at the national and international level are not viewed as sufficient to tackle climate change. Confidence in EU climate policy is on average higher than in national and international efforts. Only 26% express satisfaction with government action, the lowest levels being in Serbia, followed by Ukraine and Italy. Satisfaction with EU efforts, in the EU Member States, is slightly higher at 29%, with respondents less critical of the EU than of their respective governments, which score an average of 25%. Across all countries surveyed except Russia, where the question was not asked, only 24% express satisfaction with the actions of the international community. We thus have a considerable level of concern and a quite low level of approval with current policies. When it comes to the details of climate action, however, differences emerge.

### Approaches to combating climate change

A relative majority (47%) prioritise mitigation measures to halt climate change, such as reducing greenhouse gas emissions, compared with 35% who prefer to focus on adaptation measures to adjust to climate change. Latvia and Russia are notable exceptions, where adaptation is strongly preferred. In Russia, this public attitude is in line with [the government's strategic focus on responding to the negative impacts of climate change](#) rather than tackling its root causes and introducing mitigation measures. A worrying 26% of respondents in Russia also believe that no action is needed, well above the average of 8% in the other countries surveyed. The second highest rate after Russia is in the United States, where 12% of respondents hold this view. However, there are strong partisan differences: only 2% of Democrats share this view, while 26% of Republicans believe no action is needed.

## Taken together, what should people in your country do to respond to climate change?

All figures in %



Deviations from 100% result from: 'don't know' and 'no response'.

There is scepticism about whether new technologies will be capable of alleviating the impacts of climate change. However, across all countries except Russia and Georgia, where the detailed question was not asked, there is broad support (60%) for prioritising the security of borders and focusing on competition in the global market for natural resources and new technologies. The level of this support almost matches the 71% in favour of international cooperation on climate change. The populations of Germany, the United States and Latvia are also less willing to support climate-vulnerable countries, while there is greater support for such measures in non-EU countries Kazakhstan, Serbia, Türkiye and Ukraine, but also in Sweden.

This tension between »my country first« and cooperative approaches to combating climate change is embedded in a general, non-climate related trend in which majorities in all countries agree that their country should concentrate on its own well-being and try to avoid international entanglements. This sentiment is strong in Türkiye (83%), Georgia and Serbia (73%), as well as in France and the United Kingdom (both over 70%) and the United States (66%). Less

than half of all respondents agree that their country should take more international responsibility and help other states when there are no direct benefits for their own country.

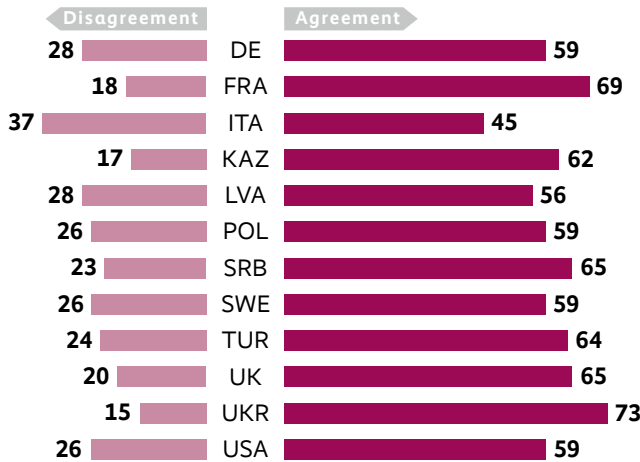
When this is broken down into groups defined by their degree of concern about climate change, however, the picture is slightly different. Of those most concerned about climate change, 53% agree that their country should take international responsibility, even if there are no direct benefits for their own country. Some 68% of this group even support cooperation with countries that do not share the same values, a significantly higher rate than among less concerned groups. Turning again to climate action, among those who are most concerned about climate change, the most prominent approach to tackling climate change is for rich countries to protect poorer countries from the effects of climate change, closely followed by seeing climate change as an opportunity to bring about positive social change. Conversely, among those who are not concerned about climate change, the highest levels of support are for securing borders and competing in the global market for natural resources and new technologies.

## Attitudes to Climate Change

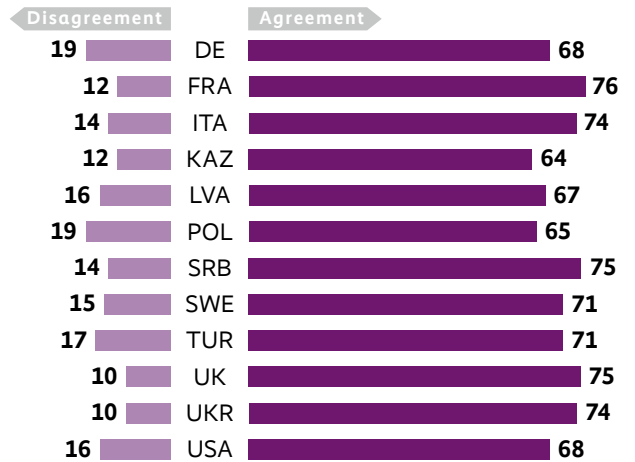
All figures in %



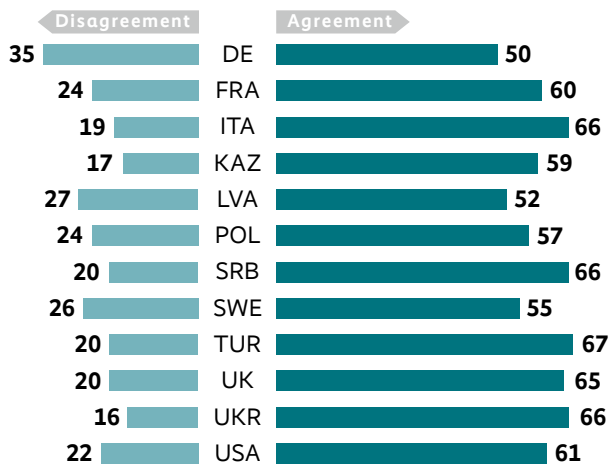
Climate change represents a challenge to global peace and security.



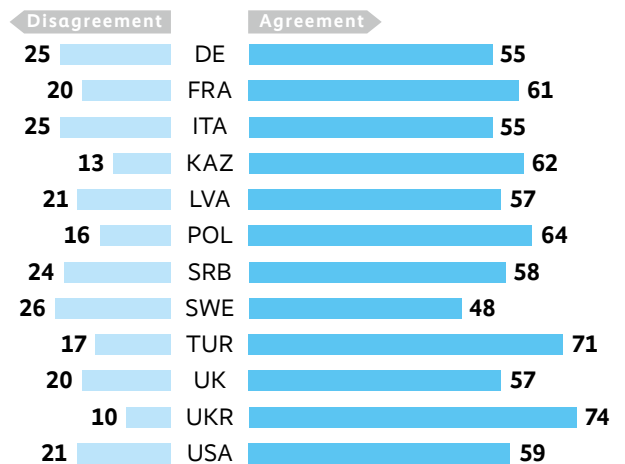
International collaboration is key to address global climate change beyond rivalries in other areas.



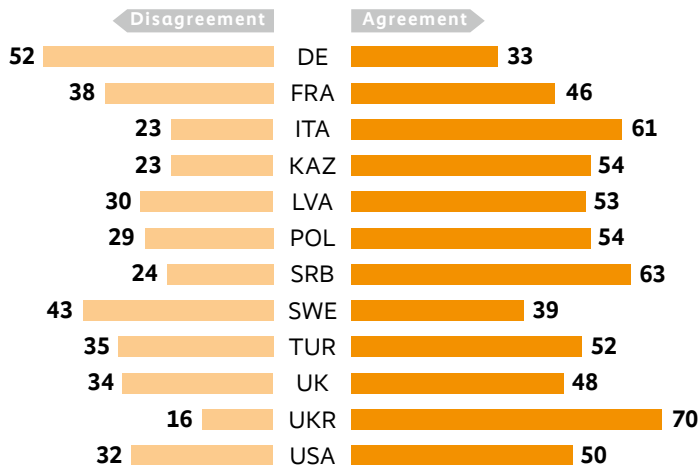
If my country acts early and decisively, climate change can be a unique opportunity to completely transform our lifestyles towards a fairer, healthier society.



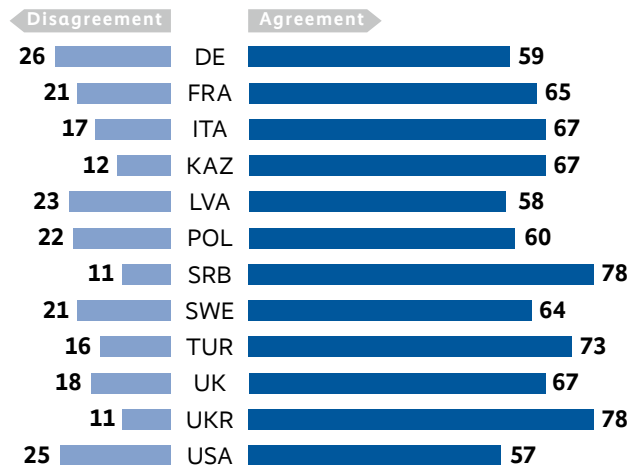
With climate change leading to instability, my country should prioritise securing its borders and competing in the global market for natural resources and new technologies.



I trust that investment in new technologies in my country can sufficiently tackle climate change.



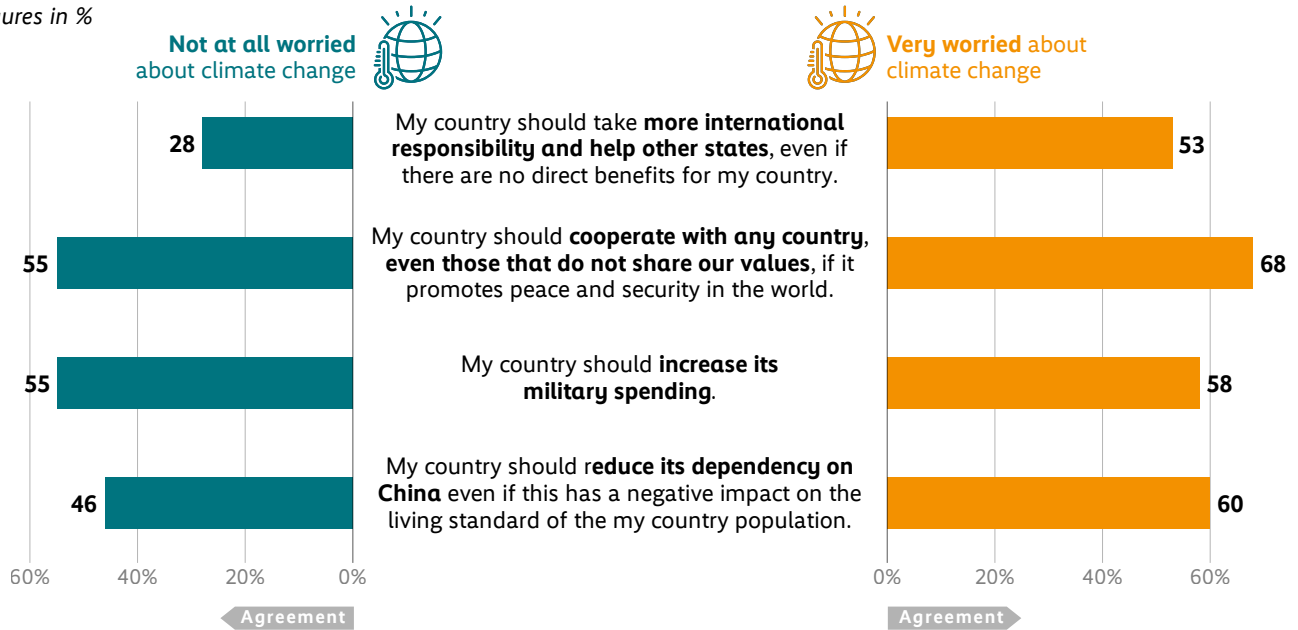
Rich countries should protect poor and vulnerable countries from the impacts of climate change.



Deviations from 100% result from: 'don't know' and 'no response'.

## Agreement to the following statements by concern about climate change.

All figures in %



At the same time, there is a strong desire among those most concerned about climate change to reduce dependence on countries with differing values: 73% of them favour reducing dependence on countries that do not share our values, with a similar trend among the somewhat concerned (70%). This desire for decoupling is particularly strong in relation to China and Russia, even if it means economic sacrifices. For example, 60% of those most worried about climate change favour economic decoupling from China, compared with 46% of the least worried. There is a similar pattern for Russia, with 68% of those most worried in favour of decoupling, compared with 49% of the least worried. Strikingly, 58% of those most concerned about climate change also support an increase in military spending. This suggests that for some, both pragmatism and idealism are not fixed principles but vary depending on the issue at hand. We look at this group more closely in the following section.

### Between ideology and pragmatism

What has been said so far points to conflicting priorities in terms of ideological values on one hand, and pragmatic considerations that should guide the foreign policy of respondents' respective countries on the other. Respondents prioritise cooperation with states perceived as ideologically aligned within a binary framework of »us versus them« and would like to isolate themselves from perceived adversaries through economic decoupling. At the same time, they recognise the need for pragmatic cooperation on climate change, acknowledging that effective action requires the involvement of non-aligned countries. The high level of awareness of climate change and the urgency of addressing it also contrasts with their push to increase military spending, as militarised states cause significant environmental damage even in peacetime, for example, through

the fossil fuel demands of operations, the chemical-intensive maintenance of equipment, and the destructive environmental impacts of military research and testing. This contradiction reveals a blind spot in respect of which defence capabilities and climate change are treated in isolation from each other, ignoring the impact of one on the other.

The current trend to put »my country first« and, more broadly, to work almost exclusively with »the good guys« against »the bad guys« has spilled over into the question of how to tackle climate change. This is reflected in the contradiction between recognising the need for collective efforts to address climate issues and simultaneously seeing competition and border security as solutions to climate challenges. This contradiction reflects a broader trend towards the securitisation of climate change, in terms of which the issue is framed through the lens of national security, geopolitical advantage and rivalry. Public confusion is exacerbated by mixed messages from political leaders who increasingly portray international cooperation – including on climate change – as a zero-sum game. This is evident in the geopolitical rivalry for access to natural resources and critical minerals to secure competitive position and supply chain resilience, and in protectionist policies in the race to develop green technologies. These dynamics are reflected in policies such as the US Inflation Reduction Act and Western countries' attempts to reduce their dependence on Chinese supply chains. The latter creates a paradox, as efforts to decarbonise economies clash with the reality of China's dominance in the refining and processing of critical minerals needed for green tech supply chains. Similarly, international climate cooperation has been hampered by the strategic use of climate change agendas as a geopolitical tool. The EU's CBAM initiative has been criticised for acting as a de facto trade barrier dis-



guised as environmental protection, while Azerbaijan has weaponised environmental activism as a pretext for its blockade of Nagorno-Karabakh before militarily reclaiming the region.

These trends fuel the perception that an openness to collaboration in general risks marginalisation in a world increasingly defined by confrontation and competition. This sentiment is underscored by survey results, as 65% of respondents across countries believe we are entering an era of »my country first«, with nations prioritising their own particular interests over collective action.

### International organisations: a stabilising factor in an unstable world?

The shift towards confrontation and competition described above, which has started to shape public perceptions, is driven by a sense of a general increase in insecurity, with new devastating wars – including one in Europe – heightening global polarisation and shifts in global and regional power dynamics. Indeed, 45% of respondents globally believe that the era of American (or Western) supremacy is over, with over 50% agreement in Kazakhstan, Serbia, Russia and Türkiye, and 46–47% in Germany, France, the United Kingdom and Sweden. Even in the United States, 43% share this view. Some 67% of respondents agree that an era of wars and conflicts is emerging, with nearly 80% agreement in Italy, Sweden and Türkiye. Meanwhile, 53% overall think there will be a new Cold War between China and the United States, in which all other nations will be forced to choose sides. In the United States, 54% agree with this view.

This growing uncertainty also affects the perception of international and regional organisations, raising questions

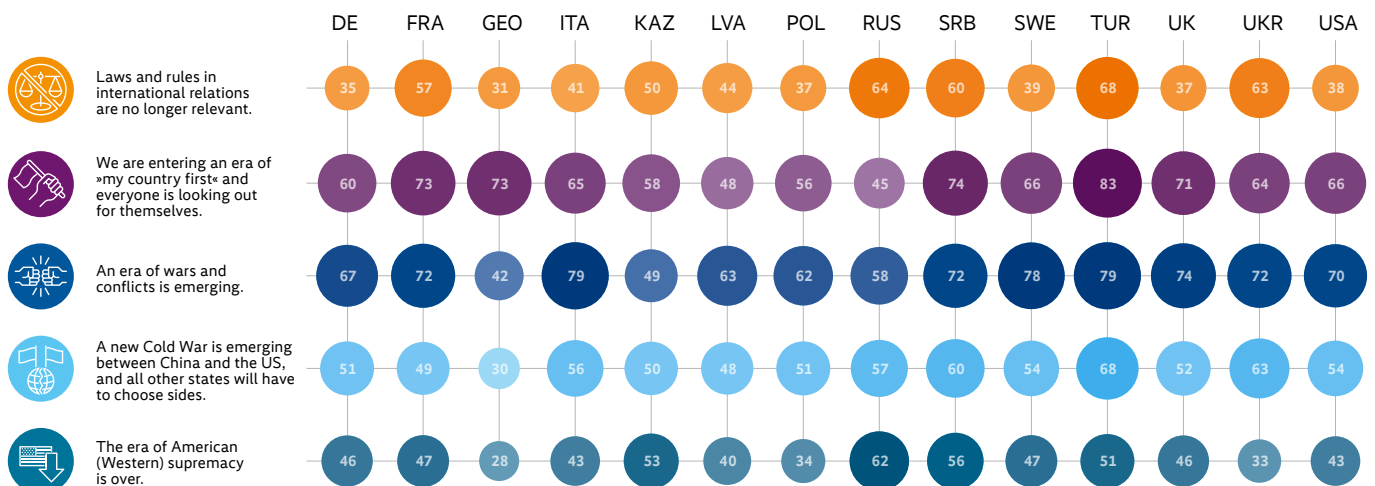
about their role and effectiveness. Established in the aftermath of the Second World War to prevent future wars and maintain global peace, these institutions have in many cases played a key role in conflict prevention and mediation. However, scepticism about the relevance of international relations is growing. More than 50% of respondents in Ukraine, Russia, Kazakhstan, Serbia, Türkiye and even France express doubts about the importance of laws and rules in contemporary international relations.

Nevertheless, and this is a crucial point, support for international and regional organisations remains strong across the sample. Among such organisations, the United Nations enjoy the highest level of support, ahead of the EU, the OSCE and NATO, even in Russia and the United States. Only in Germany does support for the UN dip just below 50%, possibly because of a loss of credibility as an outcome of the rather dismissive depiction of the United Nations in the German debate about Israel’s actions in Gaza. The OSCE enjoys considerable support in all countries, and particularly in those where it is directly active or operates in the immediate neighbourhood: support exceeds 50% in Kazakhstan, Serbia, Turkey and Ukraine. The question was not asked in Georgia.

Overall, 71% agree that international cooperation is crucial in tackling global climate change, over and above rivalries in other areas. Among this group, a greater role for the UN is particularly favoured (70%), but also for the OSCE (56%) and the EU (62%). This indicates a strong belief that global cooperation through international organisations is essential to tackle climate change effectively, and that climate change is an issue which has not yet been fully subordinated to the binary thinking triggered by the war on Ukraine. There still seems to be room for more cooperative approaches.





### To what extent do you agree with the following statements about the state of the world?

Combined responses 'strongly agree' and 'somewhat agree'. All figures in %



## Which of the organisations mentioned should play a bigger role in the future?

Response 'Yes, it should play a bigger role'.

|                | <br><b>UN</b><br>United Nations | <br><b>NATO</b><br>North Atlantic Treaty Organization | <br><b>OSCE</b><br>Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe | <br><b>EU</b><br>European Union |
|----------------|--|--|---|--|
| Germany        | 48   | 47   | 47  | 49   |
| France         | 60   | 48   | 43  | 56   |
| Italy          | 61   | 39   | 52  | 63   |
| Kazakhstan     | 65   | 27   | 50  | 42   |
| Latvia         | 61   | 62   | 52  | 67   |
| Poland         | 66   | 76   | 57  | 57   |
| Russia         | 51   | 14   | 48  | 30   |
| Serbia         | 60   | 9  | 53  | 42   |
| Sweden         | 63   | 49   | 46  | 51   |
| Türkiye        | 67   | 56   | 54  | 61   |
| United Kingdom | 62   | 53   | 42  | 53   |
| Ukraine        | 70   | 77   | 63  | 79   |
| United States  | 57   | 53   | 36  | 46   |

The question was not asked in Georgia.

## The way forward

In an era of increasing competition and confrontation, pragmatic cooperation will be needed, especially to cope with cross-border challenges such as climate change. Political leaders must understand and communicate to their populations that »my country first« and polarisation are not the only avenues to pursue. Failure to do so risks strengthening populist movements that offer simplistic solutions ill-equipped to deal with today's complex geopolitical challenges. Cooperative security may not be in vogue globally at the moment, but a balanced approach that combines strategic autonomy for nation states with international cooperation offers a more viable long-term path. Pursuing such an approach could enable political leaders to alleviate widespread fears and confusion within societies. Achieving peace in Europe and tackling climate change and its cascading effects are two urgent, interlinked challenges that require overcoming divisions and finding common ground.

International and regional organisations, such as the UN and the OSCE, can play a key role in identifying and advancing such a common agenda. By managing communication and promoting pragmatic cooperation on climate action, international organisations can help to mitigate the growing trend towards the geopoliticisation and securitisation of climate change. This would not only enhance their legitimacy and capacity to drive global climate action, but also contribute to stabilising relations between non-aligned states in areas of common interest, despite differences in other areas.

For this to happen, leaders need to adopt a clearer and less confrontational approach to climate issues, as well as to other priorities that lend themselves to structured international cooperation in the service of national interests. This is important to prevent public perceptions that climate cooperation could put their countries at a disadvantage in the global competition for resources or weaken their ability to adapt to climate change in a zero-sum geopolitical context. Ensuring this would allow international organisations to advance the key interests of participating states, even in a world shaped by national self-interest, while fostering conditions for sustainable, long-term climate solutions.

## Authors

### **Sabrina Kaschowitz**

Senior Researcher at FES ROCPE

## General Information

### **Publisher**

FES Regional Office for International Cooperation  
Cooperation and Peace  
Reichsratsstr. 13/5, A-1010 Vienna  
Phone: +43 1 890 38 11 205

### **Responsible**

Christos Katsioulis

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