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How to strengthen European popular support for Ukraine

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 takeaways:

- *American support for Ukraine is doubtful and so the burden of aiding and rebuilding the country will shift to Europe. This confronts many governments with the question of how to sustain support for war-torn Ukraine despite tightening budgets and domestic divisions.*
- *European populations are generally not averse to supporting Ukraine, but there are worries and fears connected with this policy. Different groups in European societies have diverse priorities.*
- *Nonetheless, governments can galvanise popular support for their policies. Two things are needed for this: first, a policy shift that welcomes the US push for a diplomatic solution, but combines it with a set of principled aims; second, overarching narratives to bring different parts of European societies together.*

Introduction

Three years into Russia’s war against Ukraine, the Trump administration has given rise to a new diplomatic dynamic. This entails switching to a hybrid role of mediator between the two parties and also supporter of Ukraine. This has been accompanied by the exertion of public pressure on the Ukrainian government, as well as efforts to mend fences with Russia. But in the process Washington has left some of its allies dumbfounded and unclear about the aim of the current policies. The united Western front that has held since the beginning of Russia’s full-scale invasion is therefore crumbling.

In Europe this has triggered two interrelated developments. First, the burden of supporting Ukraine seems to have been shifted to Europe. UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer and French President Emmanuel Macron have been at the forefront of forging a European coalition of the willing to continue support for Kyiv. Second, there is a sense in Europe of abandonment by the United States, as the Trump administration seems to be wavering in its role as Europe’s security guarantor. Both developments have triggered unprecedented announcements of investments in European defence, both by national governments and by the European Union as a bloc.

More European responsibility necessitates strong and sustainable public support for the choices of national governments, as well as the European Commission. The data presented in the Security Radar 2025 allows us to take a deeper look into population attitudes in a representative set of countries of the European support coalition. On this basis we can draw conclusions about what aspects of Europe’s strategy towards Ukraine have garnered public support and should be underlined by decision-makers.

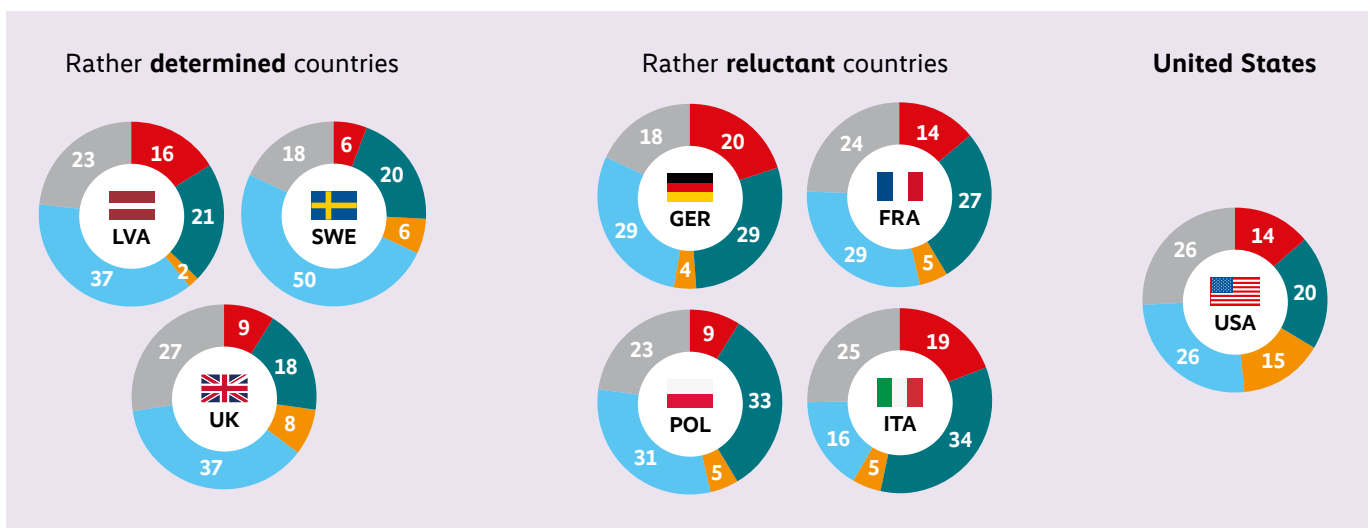
Because the United States has changed course so strikingly when it comes to Ukraine, we will draw some conclusions from US data to illustrate our points.

The five clusters

Opinion is not homogenous inside the countries of the support coalition. To get a sense of different ‘camps’ inside societies, we cross-tabulated two questions. The first concerns potential cooperation with Russia; the second the provision of more weapons to Ukraine. This gave rise to five unequal clusters expressing how respondents relate to Russia and Ukraine.

- **The Determined** support more weapons deliveries to Ukraine and are opposed to cooperation with Russia; they are the staunchest supporters of Ukraine.
- **The Reluctant** oppose both closer cooperation with Russia and more weapons deliveries to Ukraine; they are rather cautious bystanders or at best latent supporters of Ukraine.
- **Russia’s Friends** support closer cooperation with Russia and oppose more weapons deliveries to Ukraine; they are the weakest supporters of Ukraine and most susceptible to Russia’s narratives.
- **The Unaffiliated** refuse to give an answer or respond ‘don’t know’ to one or both of the questions; they are probably overwhelmed by the challenges of the war or have withdrawn from thinking about foreign policy altogether.
- **The Opportunists** support both closer cooperation with Russia and more weapons deliveries to Ukraine; they may be described as ultra-pragmatists.

In most countries of the support coalition the two groups of the Determined and the Reluctant taken together constitute an absolute majority. The Unaffiliated are the next biggest group, with some 20 to 25% of respondents in each country. Russia’s Friends is a considerable, but smaller group. The Opportunists are the smallest group in all European societies.



Looking at the various countries more closely, the Determined are particularly strong in Sweden, the United Kingdom and Latvia. But even in these countries they generally fall short of a majority. By contrast, the Reluctant have a significant presence in Germany, France, Italy and even Poland. The group of Russia's Friends is also considerably strong. The United States is a special case, with the Determined slightly stronger than the other groups, most of which are almost equally present.

This grouping of countries illustrates that joint policymaking in the support coalition is anything but a given, even among European nations. The fact that French and Italian (as well as Spanish) governments are reluctant to borrow more, on top of already high debt, to invest in defence, even after the European Commission relaxed the borrowing limits, is indicative. To date, France, Italy and Spain have paid just as much in support for Ukraine as Denmark.

To make things even more complicated, opinions differ not only between, but also within societies. Each of the five clusters is present in every country. This means that within a given society there are different attitudes to matters related to Ukraine, Russia and the war. To understand their perceptions better, we will take a closer look at how people in each cluster 'tick'.

How different clusters tick

We find that people in the same cluster are similar, irrespective of country. They share a common background, as well as a similar belief-system. This is good news for forging a 'popular coalition of the willing' or devising a more unified European strategy, in light of further reductions in US engagement.

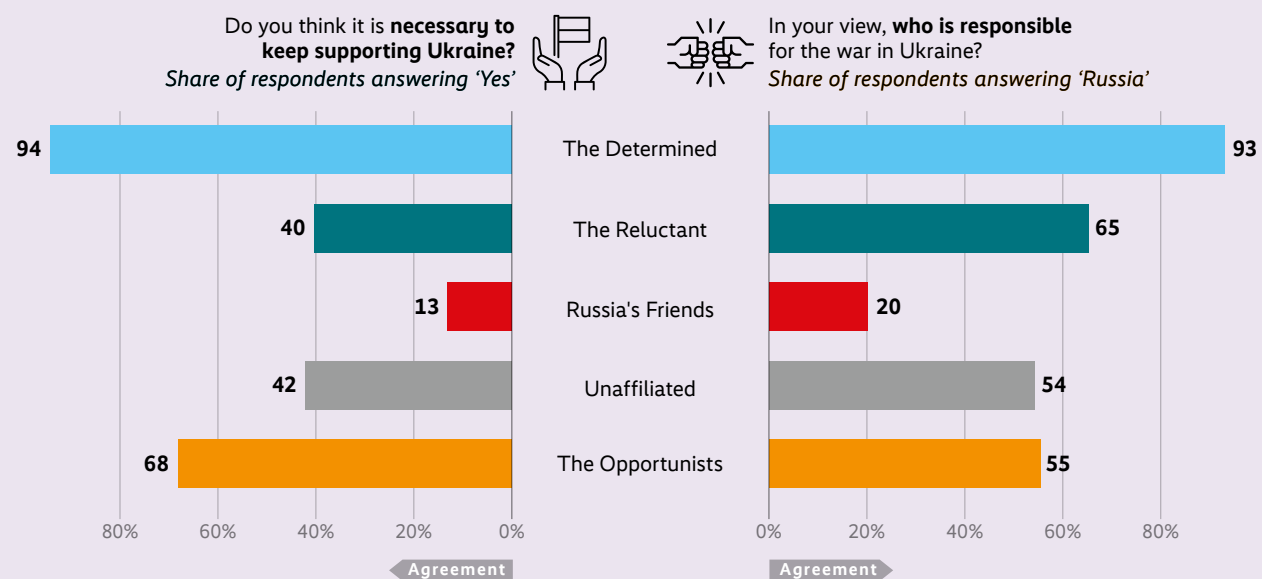
The **Determined** and **Russia's Friends** appear to be the most coherent groups, with strong, often opposite opinions on the war against Ukraine and a range of foreign policy topics. They also have opposite political preferences: Russia's Friends vote largely far-right and populist, while the Determined tend towards mainstream parties of the political centre.

In comparison, the **Reluctant** prefer an array of parties of the political centre. With regard to their opinions, they oscillate between the Determined and Russia's Friends. On questions concerning worldview the Reluctant lean more towards the Determined. Neither are convinced that the era of American supremacy is over, both are unsure whether the EU is becoming a global power, and both are more hopeful than other clusters about the importance of international law. By contrast, on concrete military-related issues such as increasing military spending or military intervention in conflicts, the Reluctant tend towards opposing these measures, aligning with Russia's Friends. In some cases, the opinions of the Reluctant lie somewhere in between the two groups, such as on the promotion of values at home or abroad, or on a common European army.

Hence the **Reluctant** and the **Unaffiliated** appear to constitute an indecisive political 'middle' and seem not to be set in their opinions. In fact, in most of the eight countries in the survey the median respondent is closest to these two groups. If European politicians want to build public support for their Ukraine policies, they can already count on the Determined. By contrast, Russia's Friends will be much harder, if not impossible to persuade. However, the Reluctant and the Unaffiliated offer political room for manoeuvre and might be won over. The ability to do so depends on whether politicians are able to address the topics these two groups find relevant.

Agreement to the following statements regarding the war in Ukraine.

All figures in %



Combined responses from Germany, France, Italy, Poland, Latvia, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States by clusters.

The Determined

Gender	Male-dominated (59%)
Age	Older
Trust in media	They believe that media reporting is objective
Ukraine	They favour continuing support and Ukraine's EU and NATO membership; they are convinced that Ukraine should be supported until it wins the war.
How the war should end	Restore the territorial integrity of Ukraine (47%), make Russia lose the war (26%)
Political affiliation	Consolidated political centre/mainstream parties; support the Democrats in the US
Worldview	Outward-looking, active engagement/interventionism, promotion of values abroad rather than at home
Military	Positive attitude, ready to increase military spending

The Reluctant

Gender	Female-dominated (59%)
Age	Rather young
Trust in media	Sceptical but not completely dismissive
Ukraine	Undecided on further support and on Ukraine's membership of the EU and NATO; support diplomatic efforts to end the war.
How the war should end	Stop the war as soon as possible (55%), restore territorial integrity of Ukraine (22%)
Political affiliation	Fragmented political centre
Military	Sceptical, reluctant to increase military spending

Russia's Friends

Gender	Male-dominated (59%)
Age	Middle-aged
Trust in media	Distrustful of the media
Ukraine	Opposed to further support and to EU or NATO membership; disagree that Ukraine should be supported until it wins the war; support diplomatic efforts to end the war
How the war should end	Stop the war as soon as possible (81%)
Political affiliation	Far-right and populist
View of the world	Inward-looking, isolationist tendencies, promotion of values at home and not abroad

Unaffiliated

Gender	Strongly female (66%)
Age	Rather young
Trust in media	Sceptical but not fully dismissive
Ukraine	Often no opinion
How the war should end	Stop the war as soon as possible (35%), don't know (31%)
Political affiliation	Do not vote

The Opportunists

Gender	Strongly male (64%)
Ukraine	In favour of continuing support and Ukraine's EU and NATO membership; convinced that support for Ukraine should continue until it wins the war.
How the war should end	Stop the war as soon as possible (51%), restore territorial integrity of Ukraine (34%)
Political affiliation	Mixed
Europe's defence	Strongest belief that Europe is a global player and can defend itself without the US; strongest endorsement of increased military spending; strongest wish that the EU should create its own army
Outlook into the future	Optimism (the only group)

Gender

The **Unaffiliated** and the **Reluctant** tend to be female. This is no surprise, given the much higher ‘don’t know’ ratio among women compared with men. Throughout the Security Radar survey, women are less likely to voice their opinion than men and respond ‘don’t know’ two or three times more often than men. This issue is not specific to the Security Radar, but a common observation in foreign policy surveys.

Building stronger support for Ukraine among Europeans

Faced with the US about-turn with regard to its policy on Ukraine, several European leaders have reacted by forging a coalition of the willing to continue support for Ukraine and bolster Europe’s defence. This is the right course of action, especially if the US further reduces its commitment to Ukraine and to European security. But public opinion appears to be mixed and support for this course of action may be unstable, for a variety of reasons. The groups we identified illustrate this. For example, the Determined may rely on moral arguments and solidarity with Ukraine. The Reluctant may be motivated by feelings of insecurity and a wish to be safe. Russia’s Friends may be driven by a wish to be more independent from the United States. The Unaffiliated may take the view that the issues at stake are worth caring about because otherwise their lives may be negatively affected. However, these different motives have not yet been presented with a narrative that links support for Ukraine and investment in European defence with some of their key issues.

To mobilise more than just the core supporters of the Determined group, issues that unite citizens across groups need to be addressed. What practical steps should politici-

ans take if they want to secure support for their policies and persuade undecided groups in their electorates?

1. Frame support as a defence of international law

The group most susceptible to being swayed in favour of stronger support for Ukraine are the Reluctant. They tend to have a common worldview with the Determined, most vividly demonstrated by their shared belief in the importance of international law. This can provide the first part of a common approach across the countries of the support coalition, addressing Russia’s aggression against Ukraine and their annexation of parts of Ukraine’s sovereign territory as a clear breach of international law. Other rather grandiloquent narratives such as ‘democracy vs autocracy’ or ‘a fight against imperialism’ have not only failed to win broad global support, but are also not helpful in convincing doubtful parts of the domestic audience. One key element in defending international law in this framing should be European sanctions against Russia. Not only the Determined and the Reluctant support sanctions, but even the Unaffiliated.

Thus the argument is that Russia has breached international rules and that is why Europe supports Ukraine on the one hand with weapons to defend itself against the rule-breaker and, on the other hand, by sanctions Russia.

2. Promote a diplomatic resolution of the conflict

There is widespread war fatigue and an expectation of a diplomatic solution to Russia’s war against Ukraine. Only very small minorities in all clusters across countries expect Ukraine to prevail militarily. Majorities in four groups want the war ‘to stop as soon as possible’. The Determined are the only group that differs by prioritising the restoration of Ukraine’s territorial integrity. With the current US strategy of strong-arm negotiations towards Ukraine, this necessitates a careful adaptation of the European approach. Europe should openly welcome the current diplomatic push and commit to the goal of a negotiated settlement. It should

How do you believe Russia’s war against Ukraine is going to end?

All figures in %



Due to rounding, totals may not correspond with the sum of the separate figures.

avoid the impression that it is prolonging the war. However, it also needs to introduce some principled aims into this process: maintaining Ukrainian sovereignty with the ability to defend itself against further aggression, as well as securing the country's long-term reconstruction and peace should be the common aim of the European coalition.

3. Maintain social and economic security

A common security agenda can be built on the shared sense that the EU is not able to defend itself without the United States. This sentiment of vulnerability is shared across clusters. It goes hand in hand with widespread worries and a general sense of pessimism about peace and security in Europe and the world. In all clusters, worries about wars and conflicts, economic crises and inflation are dominant.

However, investment in defence and the military alone will not suffice to address all of these issues. In order to secure more European investment in security and peace, the 'guns versus butter' question remains key: across all clusters in all countries people favour social and economic expenditure over defence expenditure. Hence security should be addressed not only from the point of defence and military capabilities, but also social and economic security. There is a positive example that takes this dilemma for decision-makers into account, namely the current approach of the new German government, which includes spending on infrastructure as well as on defence. The same does not yet apply to the EU's ReArm Europe programme. In other words, investing more in defence should not endanger current European living standards.

Maintaining a high level of social security underpins cohesion and strengthens the resilience of European societies and democracies. It is therefore key to peace and security on the continent.

4. Taking Europe's fate in our own hands

An issue likely to facilitate a European coalition of the willing is the general support for an EU that is increasingly independent from the United States. Even before the US election and Trump's inauguration, people in all clusters tended to favour European strategic autonomy. This provides an opportunity for decision-makers to forge a European strategy to continue support for Ukraine, while distancing this approach from the current US administration.

There is a broad societal basis for such approach. In all the countries analysed, European solutions garner strong support. In the big four EU countries Germany, France, Poland and Italy there are majorities who put their faith in the union: across clusters, most people either want their country to assume a stronger leadership position in the EU or to promote stronger European institutions. In the United Kingdom, there is a similar perception, which allows Prime Minister Keir Starmer to present himself as a leader of the European support coalition. Strong majorities in all clusters in

the United Kingdom (and even a sizeable share in the Un-affiliated cluster) believe that their country should align more with Europe, instead of aligning with the United States. This might not (yet) translate into a 'Make Europe Great Again' agenda, but certainly represents support for 'Taking Europe's fate in our own hands'. As this stance is not limited to defence alone, it would allow for a broader European strategy aimed also at economic and industrial aspects, shielding Europeans against more and more erratic policymaking from Washington.

Box 2

USA – unreliable ally?

Europe faces a wavering and unreliable United States under President Trump. His questioning of the US commitment to European security, imposition of sweeping tariffs even against allies, refusal to condemn Russia's war, bullying of Ukraine and positioning of the US as mediator in the war rather than part of the support coalition has shocked European capitals. In fact, this 'special position' of the United States was already discernible in the Security Radar data gathered before the presidential election in September 2024. Most Americans, especially Republican voters, want to continue providing security for Europe only under certain (monetary) conditions. Even before the election and the changed course on Ukraine, public support in the US clearly followed partisan lines, with Democratic voters (70%) more than twice as willing to keep supporting Ukraine as Republican voters (only 33%).

Conclusion

To garner support for continuing to support Ukraine and strengthen Europe, politicians will need to continue their work of persuasion and take corresponding political steps, especially in Italy, France, Germany and Poland.

The most promising segment of European societies to address is the wobbly political middle. Situated between two rather stable and firm fringes, this centre offers political scope for persuasion. Possible options to this end include:

- starting a negotiating process with the goal of ending the war (but also winning the peace), approached from the perspective of defence of international law;
- addressing worries and economic concerns and investing in peace and security beyond 'just' defence and the military;
- taking practical steps to become more independent from the United States.

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