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Ukraine's NATO accession – a reality check

For years NATO has faced the same dilemma: on one hand it wants to maintain an open-door policy, but on the other it's reluctant to provoke Russia. That's why no former Soviet republic has been offered concrete membership prospects.

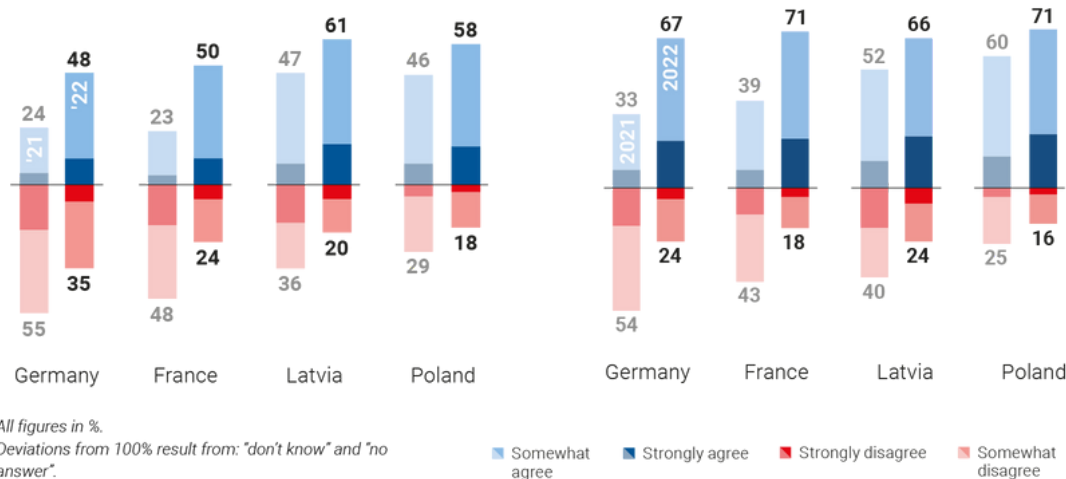
OSCE's very founding documents, which set the seal on the Cold War, contain a contradiction: the principle of freedom of alliance is juxtaposed with the indivisibility of security. In other words, every country is free to choose its own alliances and foreign-policy orientation without restriction, although not at the expense of its neighbours' security.

This leaves considerable scope for interpretation, harbouring the risk of conflict. Russia has long complained about existing and potential NATO eastward expansion, citing its own security interests. It even offered it as an excuse for invading Ukraine. The Kremlin thinks in terms of spheres of influence and thus fails to understand that NATO enlargement doesn't happen as a matter of course. Nor is it a tool of US expansionism. Rather it requires an active accession bid from a given state, which then has to be approved unanimously.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine upended the security order that emerged after 1989. War is now once more on every European's mind. The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's representative survey »Security Radar« shows that people are worried about new wars and consider military confrontation between Russia and the West to be entirely possible. The survey was conducted in four states immediately before the war broke out and again a year later.

I consider a direct, military confrontation between Russia and the West to be likely.

In view of increasing tensions between Russia and the West, I think new wars in Europe are likely.



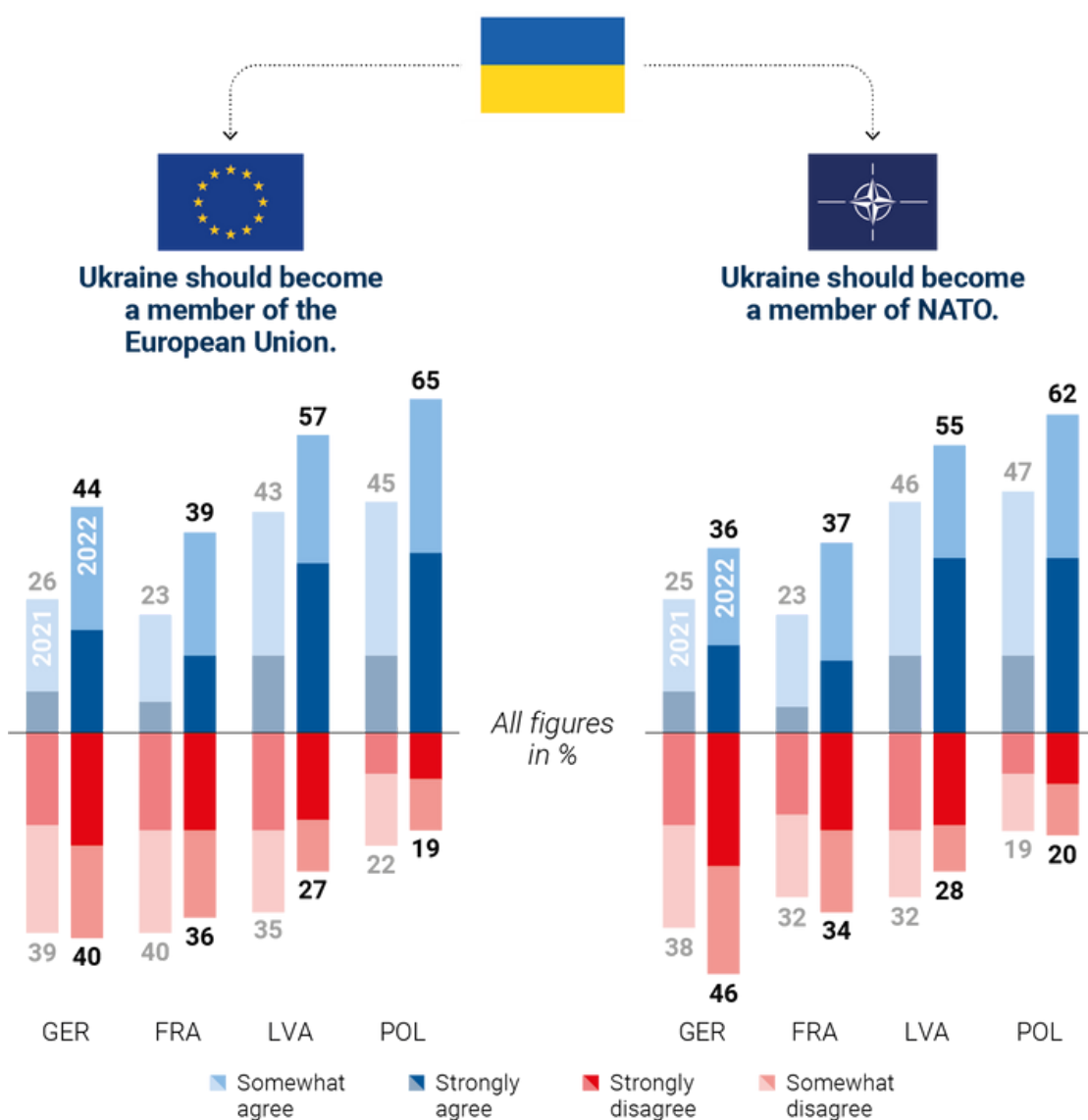
Ukraine finds itself in an extremely perilous situation, with war on its own soil and loss of control over parts of its territory; vague promises of NATO membership since 2008, but without a membership action plan; and no clear prospect of accession. But this is set to change, at least if the Ukrainian government has its way. Ukraine's neutrality was still on the table during negotiations in the first phase of the war, late in March 2022. Since their collapse, however, Ukraine has set its sights on NATO integration, riding a wave of national unity and enshrined in the constitution. NATO accession is in Ukraine's interest because it would externally guarantee its sovereignty.

OPINIONS ON SECURITY



The accession issue will be raised again at the Vilnius NATO summit on 11–12 July 2023. Ukraine is urging a firm commitment to membership in the post-war period, as well as security guarantees in the meantime. President Zelensky and Defence Minister Reznikov have warned the West not to repeat »the mistake of 2008«. Ukrainian NATO membership is »non-negotiable«.

European public opinion is in flux, however, and hard to pin down. The Security Radar survey shows that most Germans reject Ukrainian NATO accession, while Poles and Latvians would welcome it. French respondents are on the fence. Since the invasion approval has grown in all four countries, but a gulf divides NATO's »East« and »West«. Ukraine's potential EU accession can count on more goodwill, but opinion is divided.



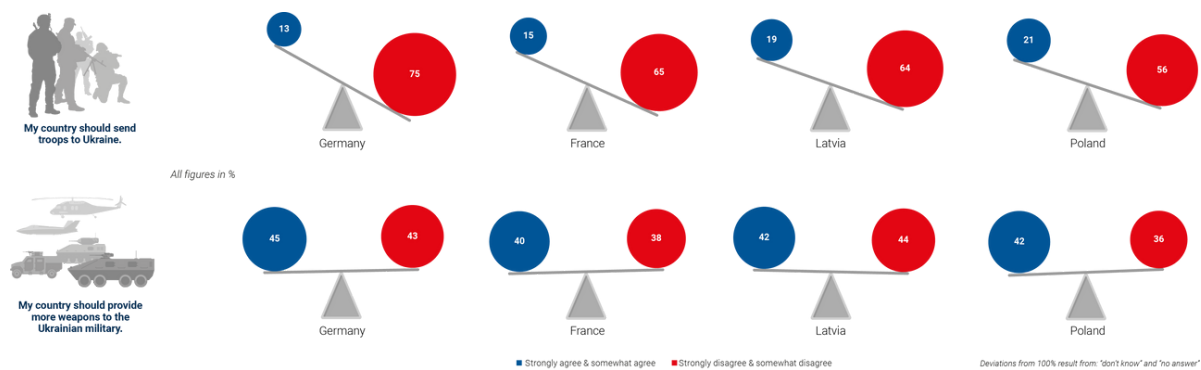
Deviations from 100% result from: "don't know" and "no answer"

OPINIONS ON SECURITY

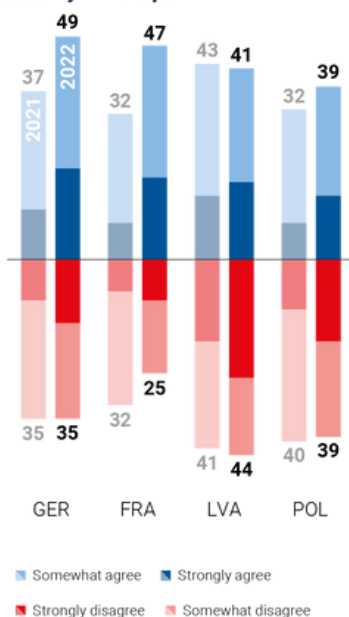


How do things stand with regard to guarantees of Ukrainian security? From a certain standpoint the West already makes a decisive contribution through its financial and military support. The lion's share of the Ukrainian budget goes on defence and it depends almost entirely on Western financial assistance. Without Western arms shipments Ukrainian troops probably couldn't go on. US president Joe Biden and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz have already ruled out the sole potential game changer and most potent security guarantee, Western boots on the ground. They simply don't want a war with Russia.

Government heads are merely sticking to the red line their electorates prescribe. In Germany, France, Latvia and Poland overwhelming majorities are against sending their own troops to Ukraine. Ukrainian NATO accession, of course, would put this on the agenda. The Security Radar also makes clear that people are split on arms deliveries to Ukraine. Only narrow majorities are on board, and almost as many reject more military aid.



The enlargement of NATO towards the Russian border poses a threat to security in Europe.



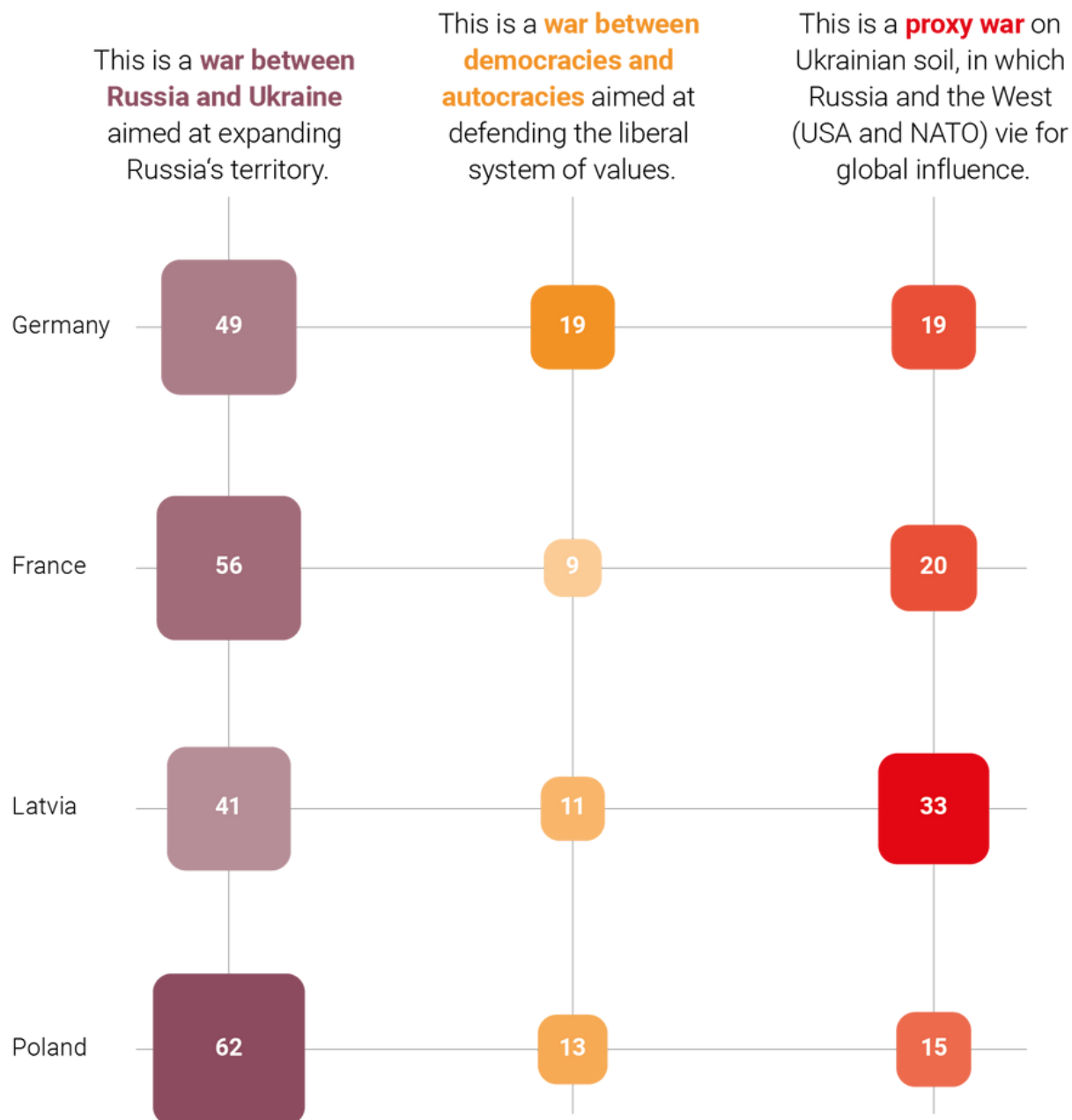
All figures in %.
 Deviations from 100% result from: "don't know" and "no answer".

Most respondents unequivocally blame Russia for the war. They want to see it punished, not least through economic decoupling and stepping up sanctions. Many people are critical of NATO eastern enlargement, especially in Germany and France. Most respondents look at the war with a certain detachment, however. They don't regard it as a proxy war between Russia and the West or NATO, but rather as a bilateral affair between Russia and Ukraine.

Ukraine has every reason to want to join NATO and every right to apply for accession. It has a realistic chance only on two conditions, however. The first – which is scarcely on the horizon – is the end of the war and a certain stability between Ukraine and Russia. The second is the vote of the 31 alliance members, which is entirely a political issue. Key to this is whether Ukraine's accession would strengthen NATO or not. On top of that it hangs on 31 domestic debates. Turkey and Hungary's vetoes of Swedish accession highlight the problems. At the end of the day the governments in power at the relevant time will decide, based on their particular interests and agendas. To that extent, the alliance members in Vilnius should engage in expectation management, while reaffirming their commitment to restoring Ukrainian sovereignty.



How would you characterise Russia's war against Ukraine?



*Combined responses "strongly agree" and "somewhat agree".
Deviations from 100% result from: "don't know" and "no answer". All figures in %*