

WARS AND ELECTIONS: HOW EUROPEAN LEADERS CAN MAINTAIN PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR UKRAINE

Ivan Krastev, Mark Leonard

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SUMMARY

- As Russia's war on Ukraine approaches its second anniversary, the European Parliament and US presidential elections are also on the horizon. Against this backdrop, Vladimir Putin is banking on war fatigue in the West to help achieve a Russian victory.
- European public opinion can inform Europe's leaders about how best to make the case to continue support for Ukraine in this difficult environment.
- Europeans seem pessimistic about Ukraine's chances of winning the war, while a plurality think it will end in some kind of settlement. But most Europeans are not in the mood for appeasement either.
- They would be disappointed if Donald Trump were to be re-elected, and many believe his victory could also be a win for Putin. In most member states, a plurality would want Europe to maintain its current support or increase it in the event of the US scaling down its aid.
- Leaders in Ukraine and Europe need to adjust their language and define the meaning of a 'durable peace' to prevent Putin taking advantage of war fatigue.

Introduction

Wars play out on the battlefield but often end at the ballot box. From the French campaign in Algeria to the United States' war in Vietnam, it was a collapse in public support as much as military setbacks that pushed the participants to settle.

As Russia's war on Ukraine approaches its second anniversary, two major elections are also on the horizon. Europeans will participate in only one of these – the European Parliament election in June; they have no control over the other – the US presidential election in November. Yet, the outcomes of both will have a crucial impact on Europe's geopolitics. Projections of what will happen in these elections could impact on both Moscow's and Kyiv's military strategies. Dynamics on the battlefield will likely influence the votes.

Vladimir Putin is banking on war fatigue in the West to achieve a Russian victory. An ideal scenario for him would be a second Trump administration ending US support for Kyiv, and European interest in the war petering out. It would play into his hands if Ukraine turned into another element of the European culture wars ahead of the election in June, with anti-Europeans opposing continued support for Kyiv and pro-Europeans keen on maintaining it.

This paper takes stock of the current state of European public opinion on the war in Ukraine. It draws on the results of a poll ECFR commissioned in January 2024 in 12 European countries (Austria, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Spain, and Sweden). Given the mixed picture this analysis reveals, it then puts forward a strategy for how leaders can best make the case to continue European support for Kyiv.

On the one hand, Europeans seem pessimistic about Ukraine's chances of winning the war, and most predict it will end in some kind of settlement. On the other hand, most Europeans are not in the mood for appeasement either. They are also less than pleased about the prospect of Donald Trump's re-election – and many think his victory could also be a win for Putin.

Leaders in Ukraine and their allies need to find a new way of making the case to continue public support for Ukraine. They should root this in a reality in which Europeans do not want Russia to win, but are not feeling particularly heroic either. In the event of a Trump victory in November, it will be vital for Ukrainians and their European allies to develop a narrative that prevents Trump – and Putin – from posing as the ‘party of peace’ in a conflict whose outcome is still far from decided. The battle to frame the meaning of a ‘durable peace’ will thus be crucial.

European perceptions of the war in Ukraine

Two years ago, European publics reacted with extraordinary solidarity towards Ukraine – but also anxiety about the impact of the war. A major war so close to home forced European leaders and societies alike to wake up to a new reality in global politics.

Initially, Europeans’ anxiety seemed to affect their opinions about the outcome of the war: ECFR research in June 2022 revealed that many Europeans favoured a quick resolution, even at the cost of Ukraine losing territory. A year later, however, our polling showed that the Ukrainian army’s successes and a demonstration of US leadership had changed the European public perception – unlike many people in the global south, a plurality of Europeans wanted to support Ukraine until Kyiv had won back all of its territory. Now, in the aftermath of Ukraine’s disappointing counteroffensive and amid flagging support in Western capitals, some of that optimism seems to have dissipated.

ECFR’s latest polling uncovers three important features in European public opinion that could influence the strategies of political leaders – especially ahead of the litmus test of the European Parliament election in June.

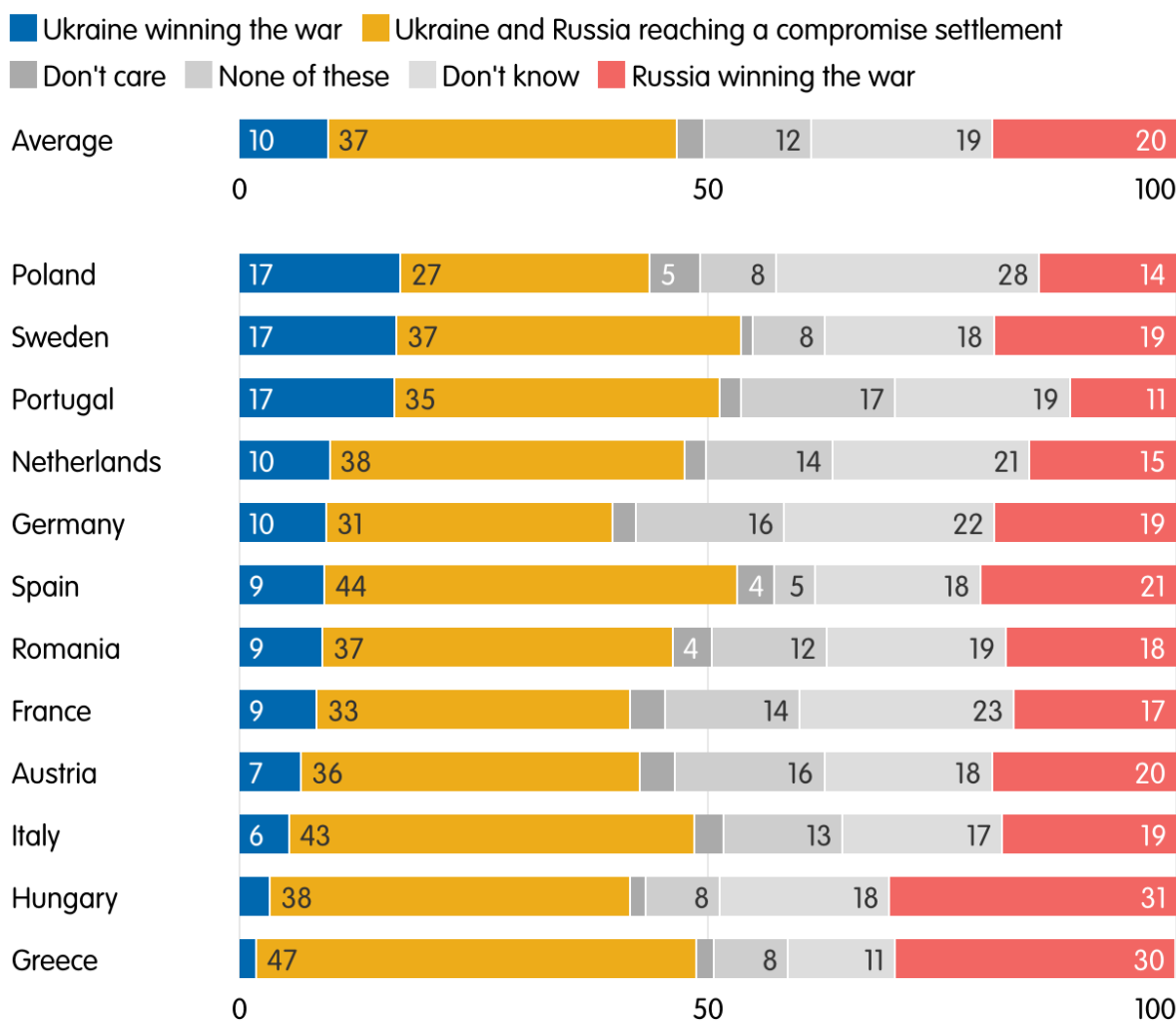
Total victory v a settlement

Firstly, Europeans appear pessimistic about the outcome of the war. An average of just 10 per cent of Europeans across 12 countries believe that Ukraine will win. Twice as many expect a Russian victory. We can only speculate as to how people define a Russian victory, but it seems plausible to suggest that, for many, the idea of a Russian victory means Ukraine will not be able to liberate all its occupied territories (and a Ukrainian victory that it will).

This weak confidence in Ukraine’s chances of victory is visible all over Europe. Poland, Portugal, and Sweden are the most optimistic countries. But even there, only 17 per cent of respondents believe Ukraine will prevail – and in Sweden 19 per cent think Russia will win.

Everywhere except for Poland and Portugal more people expect a Russian victory than a Ukrainian one, and as many as 31 per cent in Hungary and 30 per cent in Greece expect this. But the prevailing response everywhere we polled (37 per cent on average) is that the war will end in a settlement – with that response comfortably outweighing a Ukrainian victory even in Poland.

Which of the following, if any, do you think is the most likely outcome of the Russia-Ukraine war? In per cent



Source: Survey conducted by YouGov and Datapraxis in January 2024, in Austria, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Spain, and Sweden.
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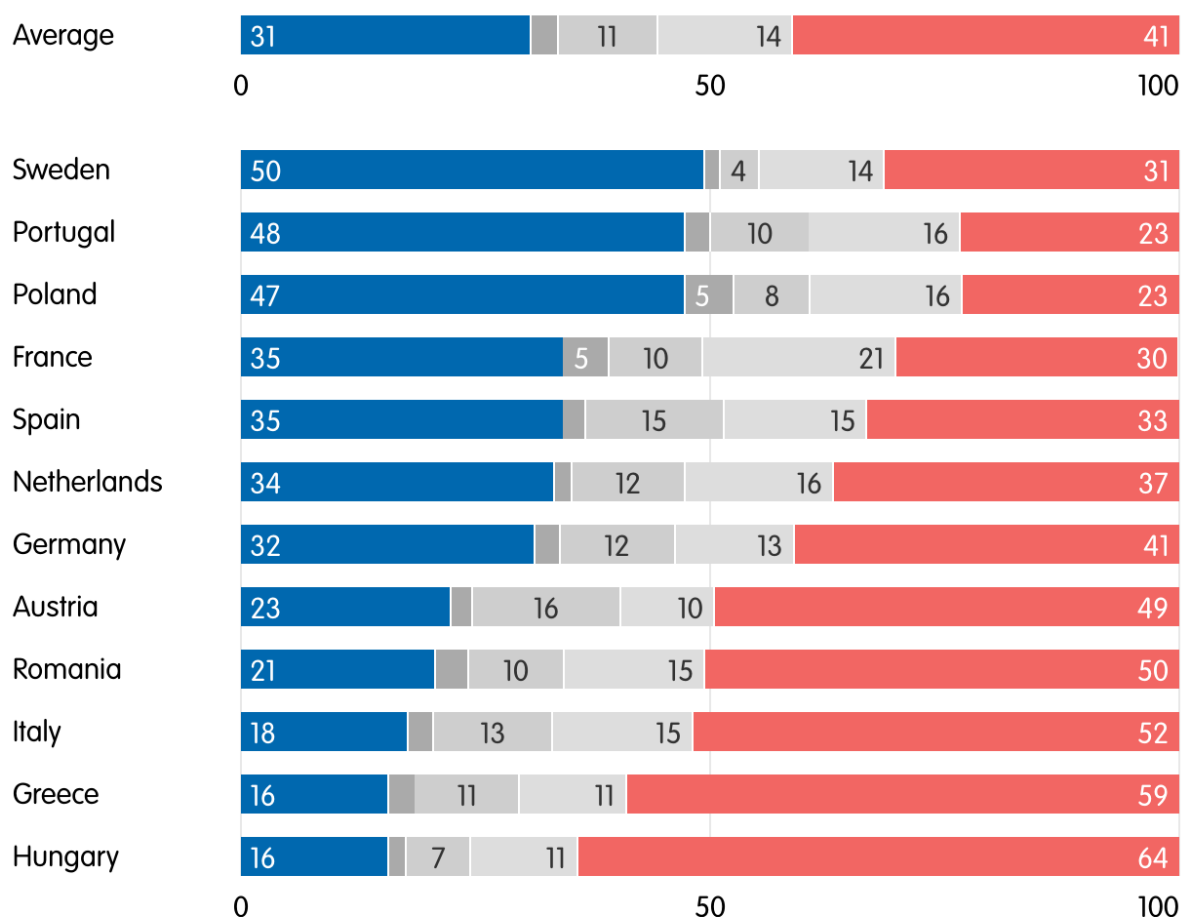
However, expecting a settlement is not the same as preferring such an outcome in this war. And, when we asked Europeans what action they want their governments to take on Ukraine, a more varied picture emerges.

Respondents in three countries – Poland, Portugal, and Sweden – express a clear preference for supporting Ukraine to take back its territory. But in five others – Austria, Greece, Hungary, Italy, and Romania – people tend to want their governments to push Kyiv to accept a settlement. Meanwhile, in France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Spain, the public is more divided on this point.

But this also means that many Europeans' expectations and preferences regarding the war in Ukraine do not match. Overall, among those who expect Ukraine and Russia to reach a compromise settlement, only about half (52 per cent) would also prefer to push Ukraine towards accepting such a solution – whereas a third of them (32 per cent) would rather support Ukraine in winning back its territories. Those who would prefer this continued support constitute as much as about a half of the settlement-predicting group in Poland (51 per cent), Portugal (51 per cent), and Sweden (48 per cent). These people therefore expect to be disappointed.

Which of the following best reflects your view on what Europe should do about the war in Ukraine more broadly? In per cent

■ If it was up to me, Europe should support Ukraine in taking back the territories occupied by Russia
 ■ Don't care
 ■ Neither
 ■ Don't know
 ■ If it was up to me, Europe should push Ukraine towards negotiating a peace deal with Russia



Source: Survey conducted by YouGov and Datapraxis in January 2024, in Austria, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Spain, and Sweden.
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Good neighbours v nervous neighbours

Secondly, our poll suggests a shift in the geography of Ukraine's support. Previously, the conventional wisdom was that Ukraine's closest neighbours were among its biggest supporters. This was the case in terms of government support for Kyiv and an openness to welcoming Ukrainian refugees. But Ukraine currently seems to have strongest public backing in distant Portugal and France, while people's solidarity appears to be wavering in some of the

country's next-door neighbours.

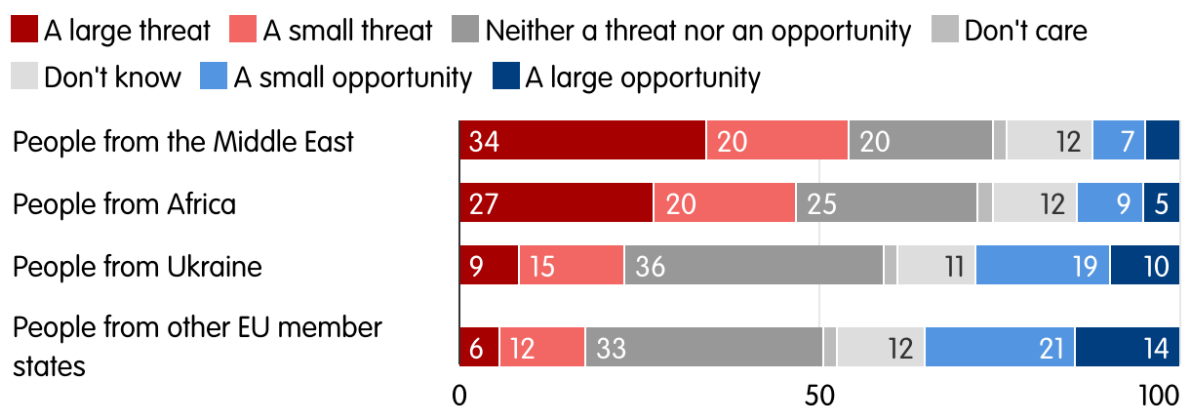
Hungary, under its pro-Putin prime minister Viktor Orbán, has often seemed an outlier over the past two years. Our latest polling also finds Hungary is where the largest number of people expect a Russian victory (31 per cent), and where most respondents want to push Ukraine to settle (64 per cent). But the figures for Romania are not dramatically different – with 18 per cent believing that Russia will win, and 50 per cent wanting to push Ukraine to settle.

Most notably, however, Poland – which, under both its previous populist and current pro-European governments, has positioned itself as one of Ukraine's keenest and most reliable supporters – is seeing its population grow increasingly tetchy when it comes to some Ukraine-related issues, particularly access of Ukrainian agricultural products to the Polish and European markets.

Moreover, although Poles (alongside Swedes and Portuguese) remain the keenest supporters of Ukraine's military campaign, they are not particularly optimistic about Kyiv's chances of victory (only 17 per cent think Ukraine will win). At the level of public opinion, evidence is also beginning to mount of mixed feelings towards Ukrainian refugees.

Indeed, one of the most striking findings in our survey concerns people's attitudes to Ukrainian migrants. We asked respondents in all 12 countries if they considered migrants from different parts of the world to be an opportunity or a threat. In many of the countries polled, there was a strong fear of immigration – but this was mostly limited to migrants from the Middle East or Africa. Ukrainians were usually viewed positively or at least neutrally, similarly to people from other EU member states. On average, 28 per cent of respondents saw migrants from Ukraine as an opportunity, 23 per cent saw them as a threat, while 36 per cent considered them neither of these.

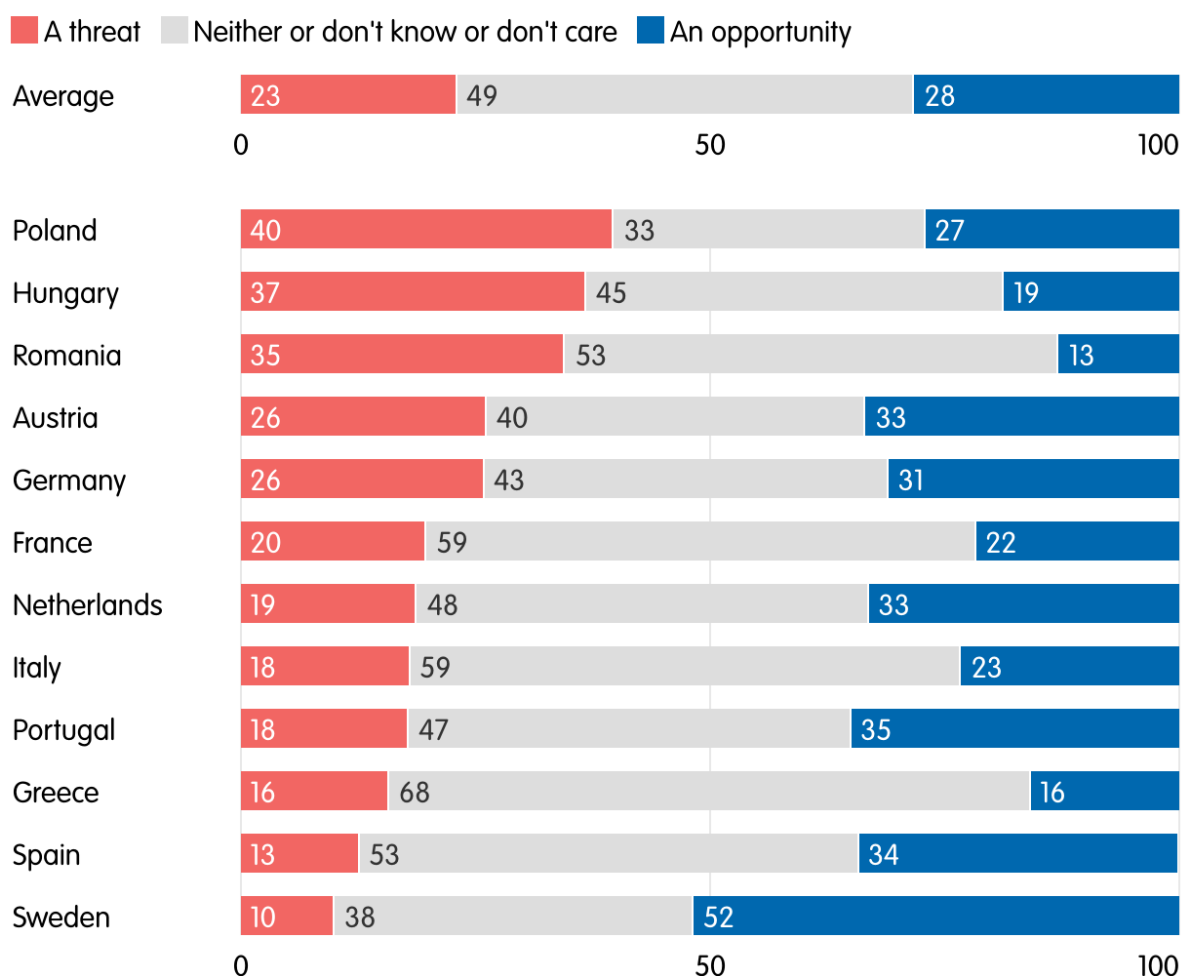
Are the following groups of migrants more of a threat or an opportunity for your country? Average across 12 countries polled, in per cent



Source: Survey conducted by YouGov and Datapraxis in January 2024, in Austria, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Spain, and Sweden.
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The largest proportions of people saw Ukrainian migrants as a threat in Poland (40 per cent), Hungary (37 per cent), and Romania (35 per cent). While this might be partly explained by the comparably large numbers of Ukrainians that Poland has welcomed since February 2022, it nonetheless constitutes a challenge. It likely also inspired efforts by some parties in the recent Polish election to win votes by weaponising anti-Ukrainian sentiment.

Are people from Ukraine more of a threat or an opportunity for your country? In per cent



Source: Survey conducted by YouGov and Datapraxis in January 2024, in Austria, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Spain, and Sweden.
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The danger is that, when it comes to Ukraine’s integration into the European Union (and contrary to European tradition), Ukraine’s immediate neighbours could become some of its fiercest critics rather than its strongest advocates.

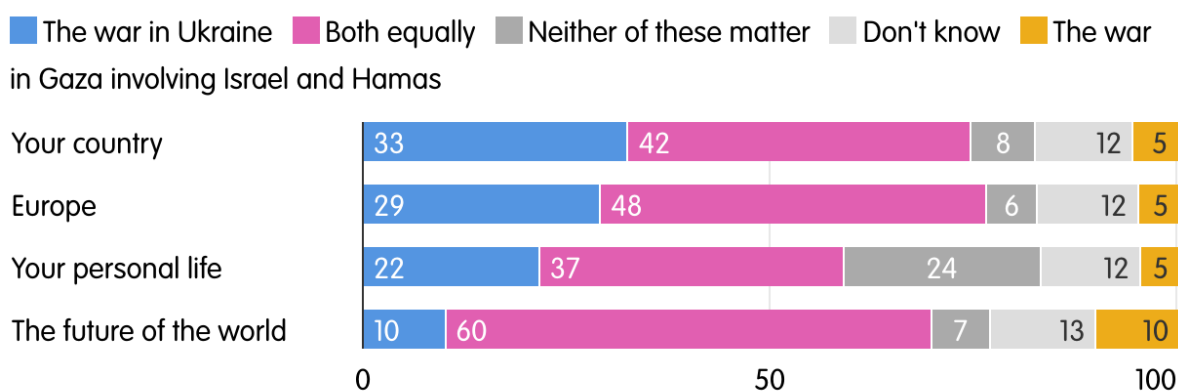
A war in Europe v a European war

Thirdly, our polling shows that a good chunk of the European public realise that the war in Ukraine is of greatest concern to Europe; while other wars may be equally consequential for

the wider world.

We asked people in all 12 countries whether the war in Ukraine or the war in Gaza had had more impact on their lives and countries, Europe, and the future of the world. While around a third of Europeans see the Ukraine war as having been more impactful for their countries and for Europe, they believe that this is not the case for the future of the world. In fact, a majority of Europeans (60 per cent) believe that the war in Gaza has been equally impactful for the future of the world as the war in Ukraine.

Has the war in Ukraine or the war in Gaza had more of an impact on ... Average across 12 countries polled, in per cent



Source: Survey conducted by YouGov and Datapraxis in January 2024, in Austria, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Spain, and Sweden.
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Meanwhile, the Trumpian spectre haunting Europe may be contributing to a perception that this is a European war – one that Ukraine, the EU, and its member states could need to fight on their own.

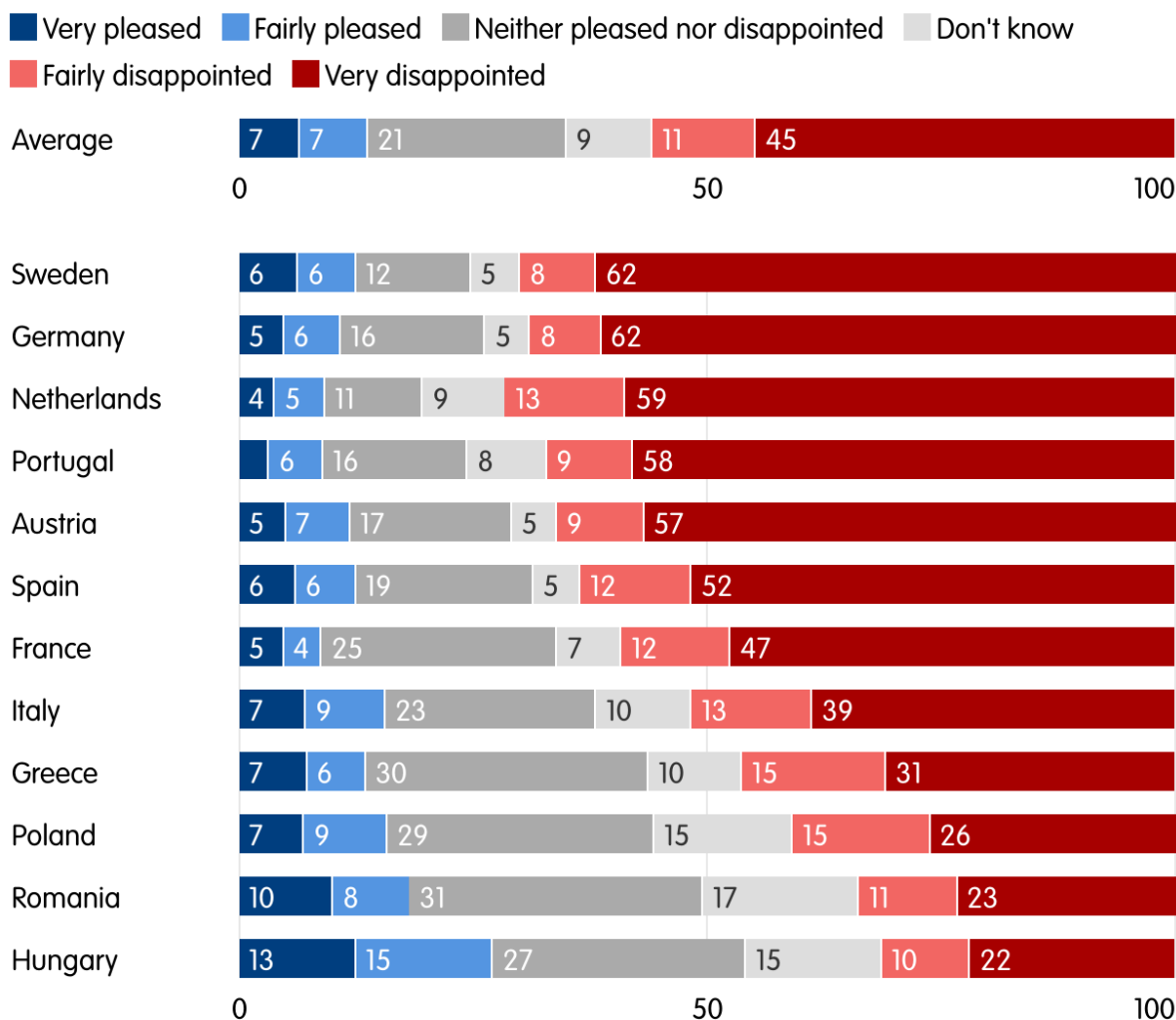
Trump's shadow

The Trump effect on global politics is rumbling away, even before it is clear whether he will be able to return to the White House or what kind of policies he will pursue if he makes it back.

It may come as no surprise that a majority of European voters would be disappointed if Trump wins, and few of them would be pleased. But even in Hungary – by far the most pro-Trump of the countries we polled – only 28 per cent of respondents would be pleased if he

returned. This is despite the fact that Hungarian government propaganda is consistently as pro-Trump as Fox News.

Would you be more pleased or disappointed if Donald Trump were to be elected as the next US president? In per cent



Source: Survey conducted by YouGov and Datapraxis in January 2024, in Austria, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Spain, and Sweden.
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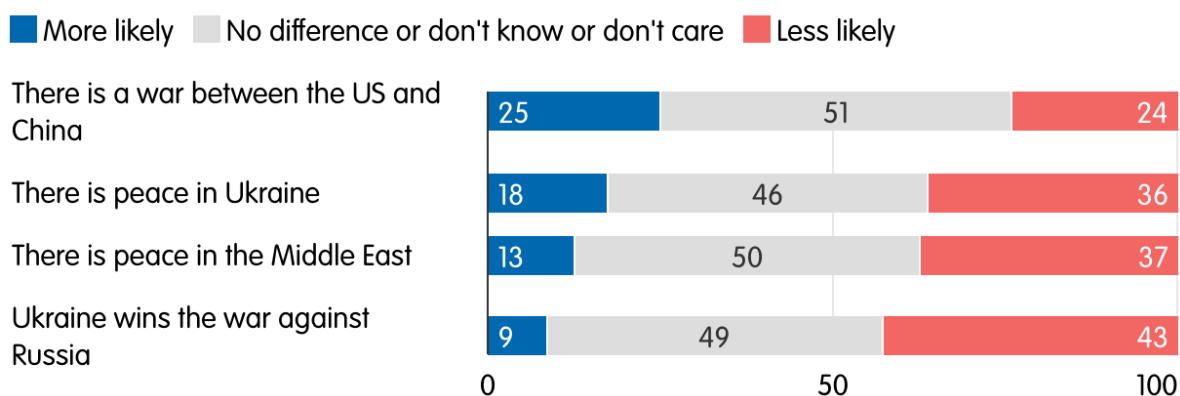
When Trump came to power in 2016, Europe’s radical right and populist parties hailed his victory as the start of a conservative revolution on this side of the Atlantic. That narrative was not wholly successful then, and it seems unlikely to motivate their electorates today. Indeed, only among supporters of Orban’s Fidesz party would a majority be pleased if Trump returned to power. This falls to around one-third of supporters of Brothers of Italy, Alternative for Germany, and the Freedom Party of Austria; the proportion is smaller still for voters of

France's Rassemblement National and Poland's Law and Justice. Trump may come to power in America, but a Trumpian revolution in Europe does not necessarily follow.

So, Europeans clearly would not welcome Trump back. But they are less certain, and more divided, about the consequences of a second Trump presidency for global affairs. For example, while just a quarter of Europeans think that Trump's election would make war between China and the US more likely, roughly the same proportion think he would make it less likely. Most striking of all is that around half of respondents, for all the conflicts we asked about, do not know what Trump's influence would be, do not see Trump making a difference, or do not care what would happen.

If Trump wins, will it be more or less likely that ...

Average across 12 countries polled, in per cent



Source: Survey conducted by YouGov and Datapraxis in January 2024, in Austria, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Spain, and Sweden.
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There are likely various reasons for this. Trump was disruptive in his first term, but Europeans' worst fears – for instance, that he could destroy the transatlantic relationship – did not materialise in an enduring way. It may be psychologically less taxing, given the various crises Europe has faced over recent years, for European publics to imagine a similar scenario this time round: the return of Trump would be unwelcome, they perhaps tell themselves, but his impact on world events might not be catastrophic. This perception could also be linked to an awareness of the limits of US power in today's world and of the dysfunctional nature of American domestic politics. (On average, according to our poll, 48 per cent of people across Europe view the United States' political system as broken, including large pluralities in all 12 countries polled except for Hungary, Poland, and Romania.)

However, there is one issue on which respondents expect the potential return of Trump to have more of an impact: Ukraine's chances of winning the war. Forty-three per cent of Europeans think that Trump will make a Ukrainian victory less likely – and just 9 per cent believe it would become more likely. Many Europeans may therefore see Trump's re-election as a gift for Putin. In this sense, Europeans tend to view Trump not as a peacemaker (as he would like to think) but as the 'appeaser in chief'.

Can Europe fight the war on its own?

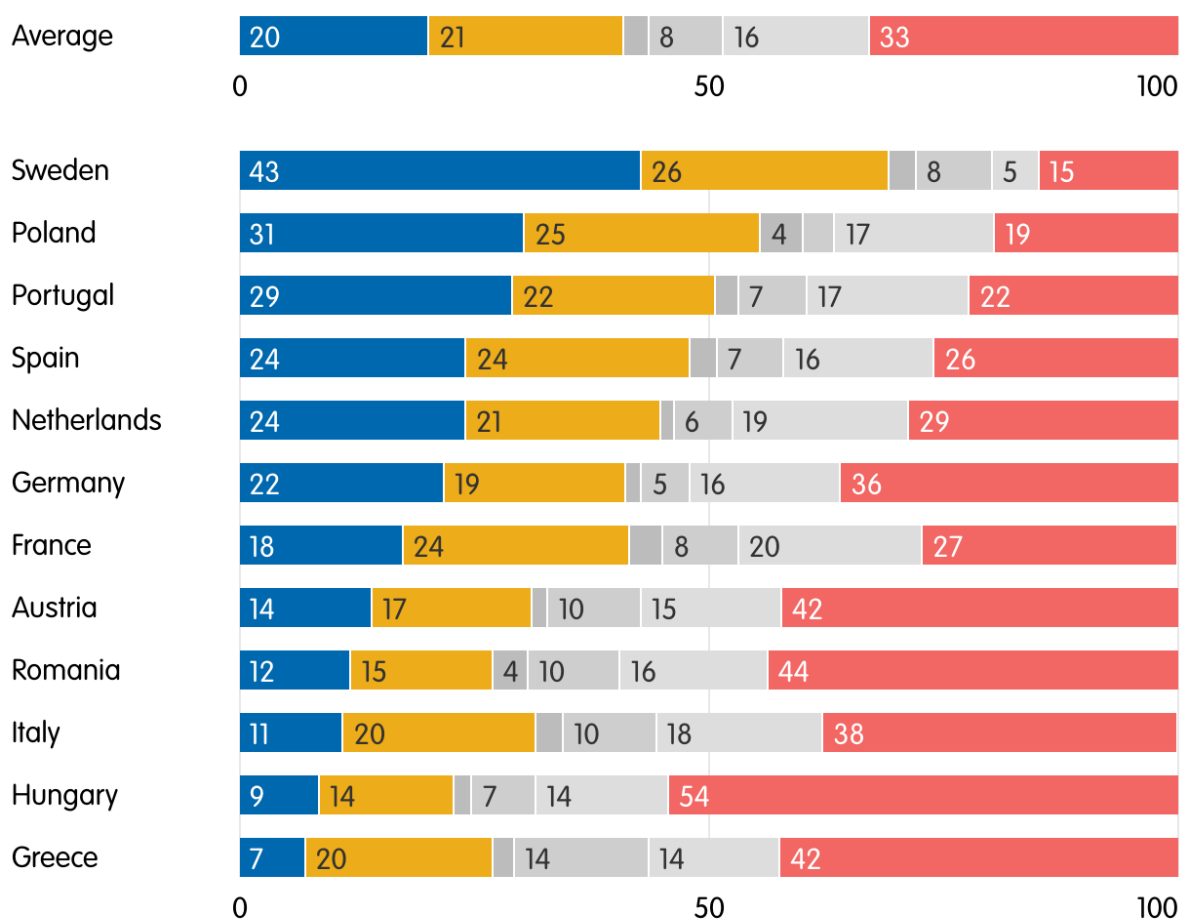
If Trump really does come back, and if he throws Kyiv under the bus, will the EU and member states be able to support Ukraine on their own? And would European public opinion be behind them in doing so? These are the questions giving European leaders sleepless nights.

Our poll shows that European citizens are not in an especially heroic mood. In the wake of a US withdrawal, only a minority of Europeans (just 20 per cent on average, ranging from 7 per cent in Greece to 43 per cent in Sweden) would want Europe to increase its support for Ukraine.

The prevailing view in some countries is that Europe should mirror a US that limits its support for Ukraine by doing the same, and encourage Kyiv to do a peace deal with Moscow. This view is shared by 54 per cent of respondents in Hungary, 44 per cent in Romania, and 42 per cent in Austria and Greece. As discussed, in all these countries majorities (or, in the Austrian case, a solid plurality) also prefer a settlement anyway, regardless of who the next US president is.

Imagine that the US under a new president significantly limits its support for Ukraine. What would you prefer Europe to do in such a situation? In per cent

■ Increase its support and replace the previous US aid to the maximum possible extent so that Ukraine can continue fighting the war
 ■ Keep its own support for Ukraine unchanged
 ■ Don't care
 ■ None of these
 ■ Don't know
 ■ Follow the US in limiting support for Ukraine and encourage a peace deal with Russia



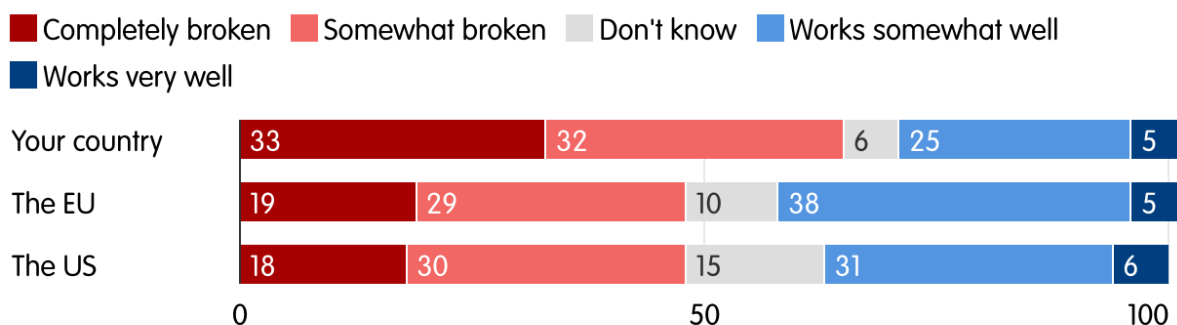
Source: Survey conducted by YouGov and Datapraxis in January 2024, in Austria, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Spain, and Sweden.
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This raises the question of whether Europeans are unwilling to support Ukraine in principle – or whether they are simply sceptical about the EU’s and member states’ capacity to do this effectively.

These two things might be hard to disentangle. But many Europeans – 47 per cent on average

– view the EU’s political system as either completely or somewhat broken (rather than working well). And people’s perception of the EU as dysfunctional correlates with their preference for pushing Ukraine towards a peace deal, and for reducing support for Ukraine in the case of a US withdrawal under a new US president.

Functioning of the political system in the respondent's country, the EU, and the US. Average across 12 countries polled, in per cent



Based on the question: "Thinking about the following political systems, do you think they work well or are they broken?"

Source: Survey conducted by YouGov and Datapraxis in January 2024, in Austria, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Spain, and Sweden.

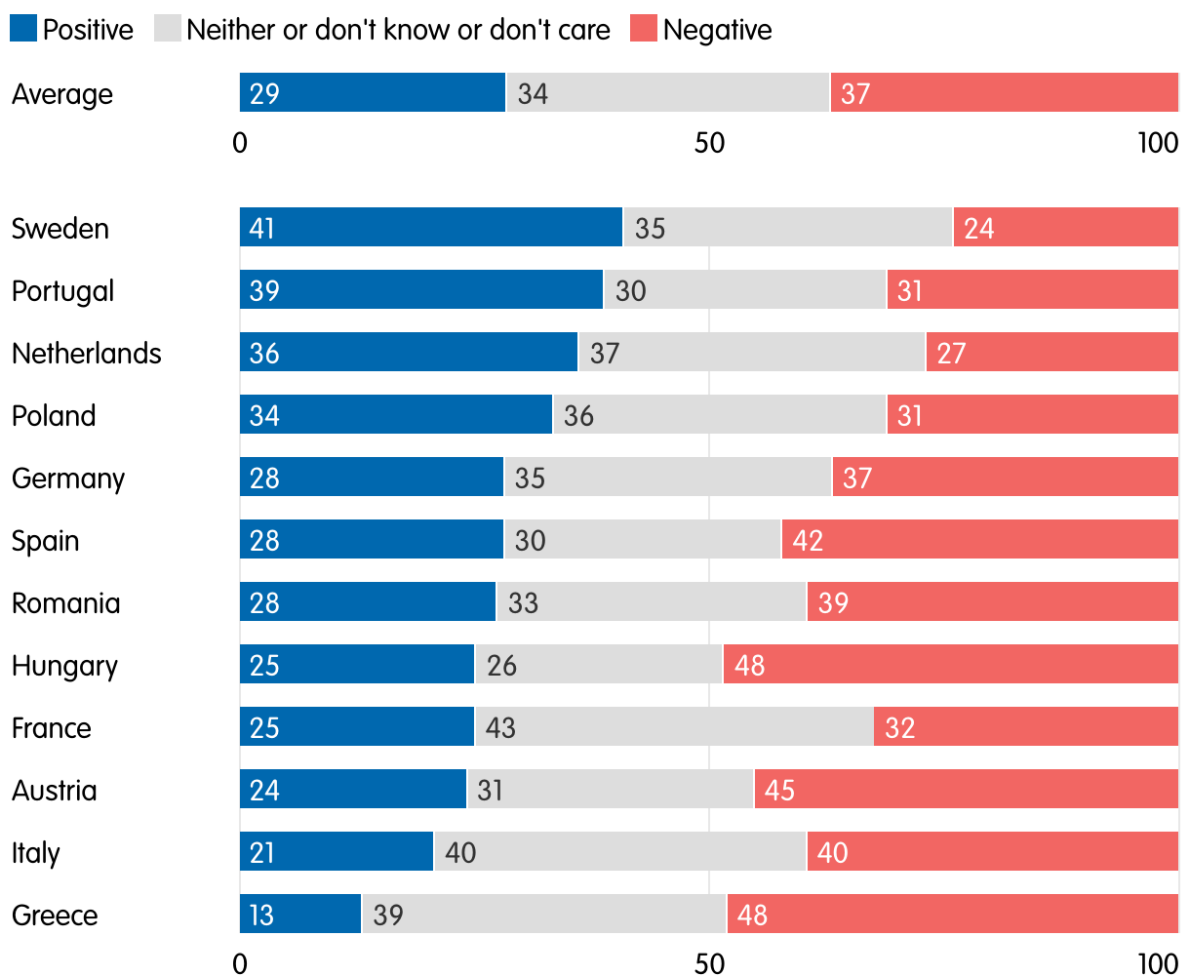
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It seems plausible that being a staunch supporter of Ukraine and staying positive about the EU have become, for many people, part of a single mindset, translating into an allegiance to specific political parties – and that the same has happened to the mirror-image of wanting to push Ukraine to negotiate for peace and being critical of the EU. If this is true, it would mean that the war in Ukraine may be part and parcel of the European “culture war” that opposes pro- and anti-Europeans. That could also make it a salient part of the political campaign ahead of the European Parliament election in June.

But it is also possible that many Europeans simply need to be convinced that the EU is capable of supporting Ukraine and helping it win the war. As long as they consider the EU dysfunctional and failing on many accounts, they might simply make a cool-headed assessment. As things stand, just 29 per cent of Europeans (on average) think that the EU has played a positive role in the war in Ukraine – while 37 per cent see it as having played a negative role, and the remaining 34 per cent think its role has been neither positive nor negative (or have no opinion on this issue).

Has the EU played a positive or negative role in the war in Ukraine?

In per cent



Source: Survey conducted by YouGov and Datapraxis in January 2024, in Austria, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Spain, and Sweden.
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What is clear is that the prospect of Trump's return to the White House is not (or, at least, not yet) leading people to revisit their assessment of the right thing to do when it comes to the war in Ukraine. Among those who currently prefer Europe to support Ukraine in winning back its territory, a majority (52 per cent) also say Europe should increase its support in the case of a US withdrawal, and a further third (32 per cent) want to maintain European support unchanged. Very few (8 per cent) believe that Europe should follow the US in limiting its support in such a scenario.

Similarly, among those who currently prefer to push Ukraine towards negotiating a peace

deal with Russia, a clear majority (63 per cent) would only consider Trump's victory as further corroboration of their opinion that Europe should reduce support for Kyiv. Just 17 per cent of this group would want to keep European assistance at the same level, and a mere 7 per cent would want Europe to replace the previous American aid to the maximum possible extent.

Conclusion: Who is the party of peace?

European publics are not feeling particularly heroic. They appear sceptical that Europe's support alone will be enough to lead to Ukraine's victory. But they are not inclined to appease Putin either. A plurality of Europeans believe that, in the event of change in the United States' position, the EU should either maintain or increase its support for Ukraine.

Politicians will not (and should not) design their policies around opinion polls. And it is clear that the EU and member states have an imperative to continue supporting Ukraine. Polls, however, can help to show leaders where things stand with the public, and how politicians can best make the case for the right policies. In this sense, European leaders – who for the last two years have sustained support for Ukraine and who recently adopted a €50 billion aid package for Kyiv – should find our results both sobering and encouraging.

The map of public opinion shows that many people in Europe believe that the war in Ukraine is a European war and that Europeans will be mostly responsible for its outcome.

When the war started, the major clash in Europe was between those who believed that Ukraine should win (the 'justice camp') and those who preferred the war to end as quickly as possible, no matter the cost for Ukraine (the 'peace camp').

But now a different division may be emerging around the idea of what achieving peace would mean. That is, many Europeans could now see some form of settlement as peace; others may hold onto the idea that the only peace is a Ukraine with its pre-2014 borders reinstated.

This new dichotomy could be due in part to the prospect of Trump's return, which is already reshaping the choices that European leaders are facing. The danger is that Trump – and Putin, who has hinted that he is open to negotiations – try to portray Ukraine (and its backers) as the 'forever war' party while they claim the mantle of 'peace'.

It is crucial for Ukraine and its European backers to do all they can to prevent this distortion of the truth. The challenge is to define what being in favour of 'peace' means in practice. European leaders could begin by making a distinction between a 'durable peace' and 'peace on Russian terms'. If people see that a Russian victory would involve stopping Kyiv from fulfilling its European aspirations, they can appreciate that this kind of peace would not just

be a defeat for Kyiv but one for Europe too.

This framing of the argument would put Kyiv in a better place to cope with any moves by Trump – or Putin – to change the debate. Many European leaders realise that Ukrainians will struggle to achieve any meaningful settlement from a position of military weakness. And Europeans will only have the moral right to advise Ukraine on its war aims if they have delivered the money and weapons they promised. What is more, meaningful security guarantees from the West and EU integration are likely to be the only way to convince Ukrainian society to accept any territorial sacrifices.

As Europe and the US enter election season, the quest to define peace will thus be a critical battleground in this war. Leaders will need to find a new language that resonates with the current sentiment if they are to maintain public support for Ukraine.

The best way to mitigate against war fatigue will be to define this idea of ‘durable peace’. Russian victory is not peace. And if the price of ending the war is turning Ukraine into a no man’s land, it will be a defeat not only for Kyiv but for Europe as a whole. In the event of negotiations, it is essential for both Ukrainian and Western publics to know what is on the table and what is not. What is not negotiable is Ukraine’s democratic and pro-Western future.

Methodology

This report is based on a public opinion poll of adult populations (aged 18 and over) conducted in January 2024 in 12 European countries (Austria, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Spain, and Sweden). The total number of respondents was 17,023.

The polls were conducted online by Datapraxis and YouGov in Austria (4-11 January, 1,111 respondents), France (2-19 January, 2,008), Germany (2-12 January, 2,001), Greece (8-15 January, 1,022), Hungary (4-15 January, 1,024), Italy (5-15 January, 2,010), the Netherlands (5-11 January, 1,125), Poland (2-16 January, 1,528), Portugal (3-15 January, 1,037), Romania (4-12 January, 1,030), Spain (2-12 January, 2,040), and Sweden (2-15 January, 1,087).

About the authors

Ivan Krastev is chair of the Centre for Liberal Strategies, Sofia, and a permanent fellow at the Institute for Human Sciences, Vienna. He is the author of “Is It Tomorrow Yet?: Paradoxes of the Pandemic”, among many other publications.

Mark Leonard is co-founder and director of the European Council on Foreign Relations. He is the author of “The Age of Unpeace: How Connectivity Causes Conflict”. He also presents ECFR’s weekly “World in 30 Minutes” podcast.

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