

## Chapter 12: The Ukraine War as an Exogenous Shock for the Image of Russia and Alliance Solidarity in the German Population

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### Abstract

In response to Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, NATO and the Bundeswehr are returning to territorial alliance defense as their main mission. Does the German population support this turnaround in defense policy? Although a large majority is committed to NATO in principle, the results of previous population surveys also revealed a hesitancy to provide concrete military support to NATO's eastern partners. One reason for this was the missing perception of threat from Russia among the German population. However, the assessment of the threat situation changed abruptly and fundamentally with Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine – with repercussions for the alliance solidarity of the German people. This change in attitude should be accompanied by public communication efforts of the Bundeswehr, because the widespread ignorance among the population about its missions for alliance defense remains problematic.

### Keywords

public opinion, threat perception, Russia, alliance defense, NATO

### *1 Introduction*

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine means a new dimension of escalation in the tensions between liberal Europe and anti-liberal, autocratic, and revanchist Russia under Vladimir Putin. After a little more than thirty

years of “End of History”,<sup>1</sup> the peace dividend in Europe has finally been exhausted. NATO and the Bundeswehr are reacting to this by returning to territorial alliance defense as their main mission.

A gradual revitalization of alliance defense within the framework of NATO can already be observed since 2014 – as a reaction to Russia’s illegal and violent annexation of the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea and the abusive destabilization of eastern Ukraine.<sup>2</sup> NATO’s efforts since then have focused on protecting the alliance’s eastern flank and reassuring its eastern member states. Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine in 2022 thus accelerates the return to alliance defense as the primary mission of NATO and the Bundeswehr. NATO announced a doubling of its troop presence in Eastern Europe a month after the war began and named Russia as “the greatest threat to Allied security and security in the Euro-Atlantic area” in its June 2022 Strategic Concept.<sup>3</sup> At the Bundeswehr conference in September 2022, Chancellor Olaf Scholz reasserted national and alliance defense as the Bundeswehr’s main mission:

“For a long time, our country – and that explicitly includes politics – avoided a real prioritization of the Bundeswehr’s tasks. Drilling wells, securing humanitarian aid [...]. The core mission of the Bundeswehr is the defense of freedom in Europe – or in somewhat less lyrical terms: national and alliance defense. [...] All other tasks have to be subordinated to this mission.”<sup>4</sup>

Although Germany is not a frontline state in the conflict with Russia, the size and capability of its armed forces and its geographic location in the center of Europe give it a special responsibility for alliance defense in general and for defending NATO’s eastern flank in particular. The principle applies: “Keeping an enemy in check, together with our partners, at the Alliance’s border is better than having to fight it alone at home – with all the sacrifices that this entails.”<sup>5</sup> In response to Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine, the Bundeswehr stepped up its existing commitment in

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1 Fukuyama, Francis: *The End of History and the Last Man*. Penguin Books: London 1992.

2 BMVg: *Weißbuch 2016 zur Sicherheitspolitik und zur Zukunft der Bundeswehr*, Berlin 2016.

3 NATO: *NATO 2022 Strategic Concept*, Brussels 2022.

4 Scholz, Olaf: *Rede von Bundeskanzler Scholz bei der Bundeswehrtagung*, Berlin, 16 September 2022.

5 BMVg: *Auftrag Landes- und Bündnisverteidigung*, Berlin 2020, p.13.

the Baltic region (*Enhanced Forward Presence* in Lithuania and *Baltic Air Policing*) and immediately joined the newly initiated NATO missions to secure the eastern flank of the alliance in Poland, Romania, and Slovakia.

In view of the challenge, swift and decisive political and military action is called for, but this means that there will be a certain time lag before society comes to grips with the turnaround of Germany's defense policy. And while the public debate may be delayed, it cannot be avoided. Prior to 2022, only a few citizens perceived Russia as a threat, which had an impact on the population's alliance solidarity: although the majority of the population is clearly committed to NATO and the principle of collective alliance defense, the willingness to provide concrete military support to the eastern allies has been lacking. Has Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine made the German population finally see Russia for what it is? Against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine, are citizens finally supporting Germany's military commitment to securing NATO's eastern flank?

The chapter answers these questions on the basis of representative population surveys, which are conducted by the Center for Military History and Social Sciences of the Bundeswehr (ZMSBw) on behalf of the Federal Ministry of Defense (BMVg; hereafter MoD).<sup>6</sup> As an introduction to the empirical analysis, the fundamental importance of public opinion for collective defense and the influence of threat perceptions on citizens' alliance solidarity are discussed. Subsequently, the perceived threat from Russia and the alliance solidarity of the German population are examined over time and the relationship between these two aspects of public opinion is discussed. The reported findings are of particular value because recent empirical studies on the alliance solidarity of the German people are scarce<sup>7</sup> – especially those that can reliably measure the impact of the war

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6 The surveys have been conducted once a year since 1996 as face-to-face and computer-assisted interviews (CAPI) in participants' homes. Respondents are selected randomly in a multiple stratified procedure. Participation is voluntary, anonymous, and without remuneration. The sample is representative of the German-speaking population aged 16 and older living in households. More than 2,000 people were interviewed in each survey year (net sample). The data is collected by an external and professional survey institute. The contract is awarded through a public tender procedure. The ZMSBw is responsible for drawing up the questionnaire and evaluating the data collected.

7 Empirical studies on the German population's loyalty to the Alliance before 2022: Biehl, Heiko/Rothbart, Chariklia/Steinbrecher, Markus: Cold War Revisited? Die deutsche Bevölkerung und die Renaissance der Bündnisverteidigung. In: Hartmann, Uwe/von Rosen, Claus (Eds.): *Jahrbuch Innere Führung 2017: Die Wiederkehr der Verteidigung in Europa und die Zukunft der Bundeswehr*. Miles-Verlag: Berlin 2017,

in Ukraine.<sup>8</sup> The chapter concludes with a reflection on the implications of the empirical findings for the strategic and public communication efforts of the Bundeswehr and the MoD.

## 2 On the Importance of Public Opinion for Alliance Defense

Unlike the “classic” missions abroad such as in Afghanistan (ISAF and *Resolute Support*), the Bundeswehr’s participation in NATO’s missions to secure the alliance’s eastern flank does not require a mandate from the German Bundestag and is based solely on a decision of the German government. So, what is the significance of public opinion in this context?

First, a critical public opinion on alliance defense could lead to a loss of trust among Germany’s NATO partners.<sup>9</sup> After all, each member country decides on its own what contribution it is willing to make to the alliance’s defense – even in the case of an attack according to Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty.<sup>10</sup> For more than 70 years, the solidarity and trust amongst its members have been the foundation of NATO – and thus of Germany’s and Europe’s security.

Second, a lack of public support for alliance defense could impair civil-military relations in Germany. Such a development would run counter

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pp. 137–153; Fagan, Moira/Poushter, Jacob: NATO seen favorably across member states. Pew Research Center: Washington, D.C. 2020; Graf, Timo: Zwischen Anspruch und Wirklichkeit: Wie steht es um die Bündnistreue in der Bevölkerung? In: Hartmann, Uwe/Janke, Reinhold/von Rosen, Claus (Eds.): Jahrbuch Innere Führung 2021/22. Ein neues Mindset Landes- und Bündnisverteidigung? Miles-Verlag: Berlin 2022, pp. 129–155; Steinbrecher, Markus/Biehl, Heiko/Rothbart, Chariklia: Wachsamkeit als Preis von Sicherheit und Freiheit? Einstellungen der deutschen Bevölkerung zur Bündnisverteidigung. In: Steinbrecher Markus/Biehl, Heiko/Bytzeck, Evelyn/ Rosar, Ulrich (Eds.): Freiheit oder Sicherheit? Ein Spannungsverhältnis aus Sicht der Bürgerinnen und Bürger. Springer VS: Wiesbaden 2018, pp. 177–216; Stokes, Bruce: NATO’s Image Improves on Both Sides of Atlantic. Pew Research Center: Washington, D.C. 2017.

8 Zink, Wolfgang: Die Sicherheit aus Sicht der Bevölkerung: Ein Stimmungsbarometer, 2022.

9 Meyer zum Felde, Rainer: Deutsche Verteidigungspolitik: Versäumnisse und nicht gehaltene Versprechen. In: SIRIUS – Zeitschrift für Strategische Analysen, Vol. 4, Issue 3, pp. 315–332.

10 Giegerich, Bastian: Die NATO. Springer VS: Wiesbaden 2012; Hunter, Robert: NATO’s Article 5: The Condition for a Military and a Political Coalition. In: European Affairs, Vol. 2, Issue 4, 2001.

to the Bundeswehr's leadership and organizational philosophy of *Innere Führung* (inner leadership), which seeks to promote the societal integration of the Bundeswehr through, for instance, public approval for its missions.<sup>11</sup>

Third, defense policy has gained sociopolitical relevance as a result of the Ukraine war. It should be borne in mind that public opinion can influence the (perceived) room for maneuver of political decision-makers and thus defense policy decisions – at least in Western democracies such as Germany.<sup>12</sup> In concrete terms, public opinion can influence the shape of national involvement in a multinational military operation, i.e. not so much *whether* to participate, but *how*.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, a critical public opinion on alliance defense in general and on the Bundeswehr missions to secure NATO's eastern flank in particular could also have a negative impact on the motivation of the German soldiers deployed on those missions. Previous empirical research shows that a public opinion that is perceived by the soldiers as being critical can have both an immediate and a lasting negative effect on the motivation of the deployed soldiers.<sup>14</sup>

In light of these considerations, it is worth noting that Russia has been attempting to manipulate public opinion in Western countries in its favor

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11 Biehl et al. 2017, pp. 150–151.

12 Burstein, Paul: The Impact of Public Opinion on Public Policy: A Review and an Agenda. In: *Political Research Quarterly*, Vol. 56, Issue 1, 2003, pp. 29–40; Page, Benjamin I./Shapiro, Robert Y.: Effects of Public Opinion on Policy. In: *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 77, Issue 1, 1983, pp. 175–190.

13 Biehl, Heiko: United We Stand, Divided We Fall? Die Haltungen europäischer Bevölkerungen zum ISAF-Einsatz. In: Seiffert, Anja/Langer, Phil C./Pietsch, Carsten (Eds.): *Der Einsatz der Bundeswehr in Afghanistan: Sozial- und politikwissenschaftliche Perspektiven*. VS Verlag: Wiesbaden 2012, pp. 169–186; Haesebrouck, Tim: Who follows whom? A coincidence analysis of military action, public opinion and threats. In: *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 56, Issue 6, 2019, pp. 753–766; Viehrig, Henrike: *Militärische Auslandseinsätze. Die Entscheidungen europäischer Staaten zwischen 2000 und 2006*. VS Verlag: Wiesbaden 2010.

14 Biehl, Heiko: Einsatzmotivation und Kampfmoral. In: Leonhard, Nina/Werkner, Ines-Jacqueline (Eds.): *Militärsoziologie: Eine Einführung*. Springer VS: Wiesbaden 2012, pp. 447–474; Biehl, Heiko/Keller, Jörg: Hohe Identifikation und nüchterner Blick – Die Sicht der Bundeswehrsoldaten auf ihre Einsätze. In: Jaberg, Sabine/Biehl, Heiko/Mohrmann, Günter/Tomforde, Maren (Eds.): *Auslandseinsätze der Bundeswehr. Sozialwissenschaftliche Analysen, Diagnosen und Perspektiven*. Duncker & Humblot: Berlin 2009, pp. 121–141; Seiffert, Anja/Heß, Julius: *Leben nach Afghanistan: Die Soldaten und Veteranen der Generation Einsatz der Bundeswehr*. Zentrum für Militärgeschichte und Sozialwissenschaften der Bundeswehr: Potsdam 2020, p. 329.

with disinformation campaigns for many years. According to an investigative report published by the European External Action Service (EEAS) in March 2021, Germany is the main target of Russian disinformation campaigns in Europe.<sup>15</sup> Public opinion in Germany has thus itself become a target of Russia's hybrid warfare against the West. From the EEAS's point of view, the reason for Russia's focus on Germany is not only Germany's economic and political importance within the EU, but also the (Russian) assumption that large parts of the German population are Russia-friendly. As the following analysis reveals, this assumption was not entirely unfounded.

### 3 On the Importance of Threat Perceptions

The central hypothesis of the present study is that the German population's NATO alliance solidarity is significantly influenced by the public image of Russia. This hypothesis is derived from decades of research on the influence of country perceptions on foreign, security, and defense policy preferences and issue orientations, which enjoyed a particular boom during the Cold War. With the "cognitive revolution" in the social sciences beginning in the 1950s and the "constructivist turn" in political science in the late 1970s, the importance of realist, materialist, and game theoretical paradigms and their underlying assumption of a universally valid and "objective" rationality to explain international relations, particularly between the United States and the Soviet Union, was questioned. The constructivist approach did not deny the rationality of actors in international relations, but rationality *per se* was no longer recognized as being "universal" or "objective", but understood as being dependent on cultural imprints ("strategic cultures")<sup>16</sup> and subjective (mis)perceptions.<sup>17</sup>

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15 European External Action Service: Vilifying Germany, Wooing Germany, 9 March 2021.

16 Snyder, Jack L.: The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Limited Nuclear Options. RAND: Santa Monica 1977; Hurwitz, Jon/Peffley, Mark: How are foreign policy attitudes structured? A hierarchical model. In: American Political Science Review, Vol. 81, Issue 4, 1987, pp. 1099–1120.

17 Boulding, Kenneth: National Images and International Systems. In: Journal of Conflict Resolution Vol. 3, Issue 2, 1959, pp. 120–131; Holsti, Ole R.: The Belief System and National Images. In: The Journal of Conflict Resolution, Vol. 6, Issue 3, 1962, pp. 244–252; Hurwitz, Jon/Peffley, Mark: American Images of the Soviet Union and National Security Issues. In: Rattinger, Hans/Munton, Don (Eds.): Debating

The authoritative theory for explaining international relations on the basis of subjective country perceptions is *International Image Theory*.<sup>18</sup> The core of this theory is the assumption that foreign, security, and defense policy preferences of political decision-makers as well as citizens are influenced by structured perceptions of other countries (so-called *Images*), which resemble a stereotype in the socio-psychological sense and serve as a cognitive heuristic in preference formation.<sup>19</sup> This cognitive heuristic is particularly important for the “general population” because the majority of citizens have, on average, only little knowledge about foreign, security, and defense policy. So, the argument goes that attitudes towards the latter are formed less on the basis of (a lack of) expert knowledge and more derived from subjective country perceptions. In this context, the subjective perception of another country as a threat to national security is considered to play a central role in defense policy preference formation.<sup>20</sup> Cooperative relations are preferred with a country perceived as non-hostile. In contrast, perceptions of hostility should lead to a preference for defensive measures.

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- National Security. The Public Dimension. Peter Lang: Frankfurt am Main 1991, pp. 101–138; Jervis, R.: Perception and Misperception in International Politics. Princeton University Press: New Jersey 1976.
- 18 Alexander, Michele G./Brewer, Marilyn B./Herrmann, Richard K.: Images and Affect: A Functional Analysis of Out-group Stereotypes. In: Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, Vol. 77, Issue 1, 1999, pp. 78–93; Cottam, Richard W.: Foreign Policy Motivation: A General Theory and a Case Study. University of Pittsburgh Press: Pittsburgh 1977; Herrmann, Richard K.: Perception and Behavior in Soviet Foreign Policy. University of Pittsburgh Press: Pittsburgh 1985; Herrmann, Richard K.: The Power of Perceptions in Foreign-Policy Decision Making: Do Views of the Soviet Union Determine the Policy Choices of American Leaders? In: American Journal of Political Science, Vol. 30, Issue 4, 1986, pp. 841–875; Herrmann, Richard K.: Image Theory and Strategic Interaction in International Relations. In: Huddy, Leonie/Sears, David O./Jervis, Robert (Eds.): Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology. Oxford University Press: Oxford 2003, pp. 285–314.
- 19 Herrmann, Richard K./Fischerkeller, Michael P.: Beyond the Enemy Image and Spiral Model: Cognitive-Strategic Research after the Cold War. In: International Organization, Vol. 49, Issue 3, 1995, pp. 415–450; Herrmann, Richard K./Voss, James F./Schooler, Tonya Y.E./Ciarocchi, Joseph: Images in International Relations: An Experimental Test of Cognitive Schemata. In: International Studies Quarterly, Vol. 41, Issue 3, 1997, pp. 403–433.
- 20 Cottam 1977; Holsti, Ole R.: Cognitive Dynamics and Images of the Enemy. In: Journal of International Affairs, Vol. 21, Issue 1, 1967, pp. 16–39; Hurwitz, Jon/Peffley, Mark: Public Images of the Soviet Union: The Impact on Foreign Policy Attitudes. In: Journal of Politics Vol. 51, Issue 1, 1990, pp. 3–28; Silverstein, Brett: Enemy Images: The Psychology of U.S. Attitudes and Cognitions regarding the Soviet Union. In: American Psychologist, Vol. 44, Issue 6, 1989, pp. 903–913.

These relationships have been proven in numerous experimental and survey studies.<sup>21</sup>

The perception of Russia as a threat should influence the German population's attitude toward NATO and alliance defense, since NATO was initially founded to protect (Western) Europe from a threat by the Soviet Union. And it is precisely this defensive mission that NATO and the Bundeswehr have rediscovered for themselves as a result of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. An analysis of ZMSBw survey data from 2017 has already demonstrated a significant correlation between the respondents' general image of Russia and their attitude towards military support for NATO's eastern states: the more critical the image of Russia, the greater the alliance solidarity.<sup>22</sup> Those who perceive Russia as a threat should support the concrete efforts of NATO and the Bundeswehr to secure NATO's eastern flank more strongly than those citizens who do not see Russia as a threat.

#### *4 Russia as a Threat from the Perspective of the German Population*

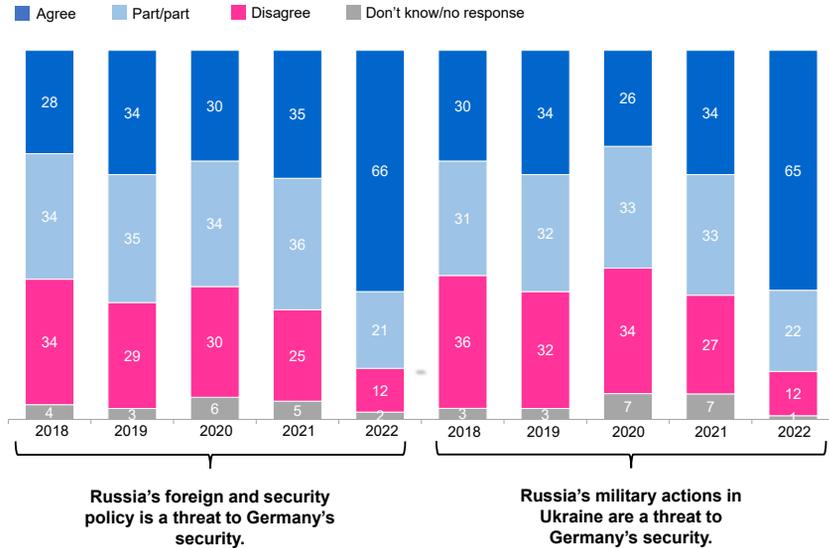
The results of the ZMSBw population surveys from 2018 to 2021 reveal a weak sense of threat from Russia: on average, only one-third of the respondents perceived Russia's foreign and security policy and its military actions in Ukraine as a threat to Germany's security; one-third had an ambivalent opinion, and one-fourth to one-third did not recognize any potential threat (see fig. 1).

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21 Alexander et al. 1999; Herrmann 1986, 2003; Herrmann, Richard K./Tetlock, Philip E./Visser, Penny S.: Mass Public Decisions on Going to War: A Cognitive-Interactionist Framework. In: American Political Science Review, Vol. 93, Issue 3, 1999, pp. 553–573; Schafer, Mark: Images and Policy Preferences. In: Political Psychology, Vol. 18, Issue 4, 1997, pp. 813–829.

22 Steinbrecher et al. 2018.

Figure 1: Perception of Russia as a Threat to Germany's Security



Notes: Figures are percentages. Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding. The response categories “agree fully” and “agree somewhat” as well as “disagree fully” and “disagree somewhat” have been combined respectively. Data source: ZMSBw population surveys 2018–2022.

Also, only a small proportion of citizens felt that their personal security was threatened by “war in Europe” or “tensions between the West and Russia” (see fig. 2). Overall, looking at the period before Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, it can be seen that the feeling of being threatened by Russia was rather weak among the German population and that only a minority feared a military conflict. These findings are consistent with the results of other representative population surveys for the period before 2022.<sup>23</sup>

With Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine in 2022, however, the sense of threat from Russia has changed fundamentally. According to

23 Institut für Demoskopie Allensbachs: Sicherheitsreport 2021; Kucarczyk, Jacek/Lada-Konefal, Agnieszka: Mit einer Stimme: Deutsche und Polen über den russischen Angriff auf die Ukraine. Deutsch-polnisches Barometer 2022 Sonderausgabe. Deutsches Polen-Institut: Darmstadt 2022; Vice, Margaret: Public Worldview Unfavorable Toward Putin, Russia. Pew Research Center: Washington, D.C. 2017.

a March 2022 survey by the Allensbach Institute for Public Opinion Research, three-quarters of Germans feel threatened by Russia.<sup>24</sup> A representative survey conducted in March 2022 for the “German-Polish Barometer 2022” shows that, on average, three-quarters of Germans perceive Russia as a political (73 percent agreement), economic (74 percent agreement), and military (74 percent agreement) threat.<sup>25</sup> In a May/June 2022 survey for the consulting firm *PriceWaterhouseCoopers*, 78 percent of respondents perceive EU member states and Germany to be threatened by violent acts, cyberattacks, and destabilization attempts from Russia.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, 66 percent feel that their personal security is threatened by Russian actions such as these.

The results of the ZMSBw population survey conducted in June/July 2022 also reflect the radical change in public threat perceptions. The rather ambivalent perception of relations with Russia in recent years has given way to the realization that Russia’s foreign and security policy (66 percent approval; +31 percentage points) and Russia’s military actions in Ukraine (65 percent approval; +31 percentage points) pose a threat to Germany’s security (see fig. 1). The sharp change in the public perception of Russia is also reflected in the reduced proportion of those who have an ambivalent attitude toward Russia. Compared with previous years, this proportion has fallen by more than 10 percentage points in each case. The proportion of respondents who did not want to give any answers has also decreased compared with the previous year. All in all, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has made the majority of Germans see Russia for what it is: a direct threat to Germany’s security.

Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine not only affects the strategic threat perception but also people’s *personal* sense of security. The share of those who feel personally threatened by war in Europe has tripled compared to 2021 – from 15 to 45 percent – and the share of those who feel threatened by tensions between the West and Russia has more than doubled (60 percent; +37 percentage points) (see fig. 2). Such massive changes have not been registered by the ZMSBw population survey since data recording began in 1996.

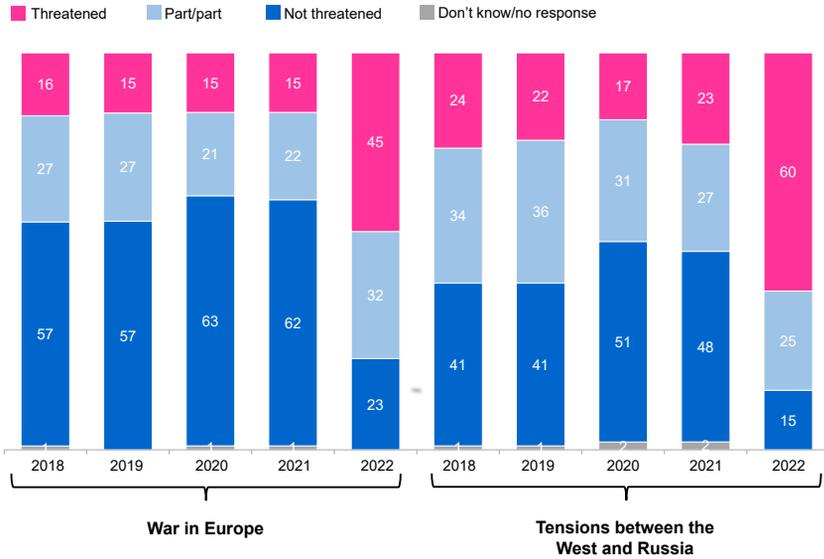
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24 Köcher, Renate: “Ein gefährliches Land“, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 15 April 2022.

25 Kucharczyk/Lada-Konefal 2022, p. 8.

26 Zink 2022.

Figure 2: Perceived Threats to Personal Security

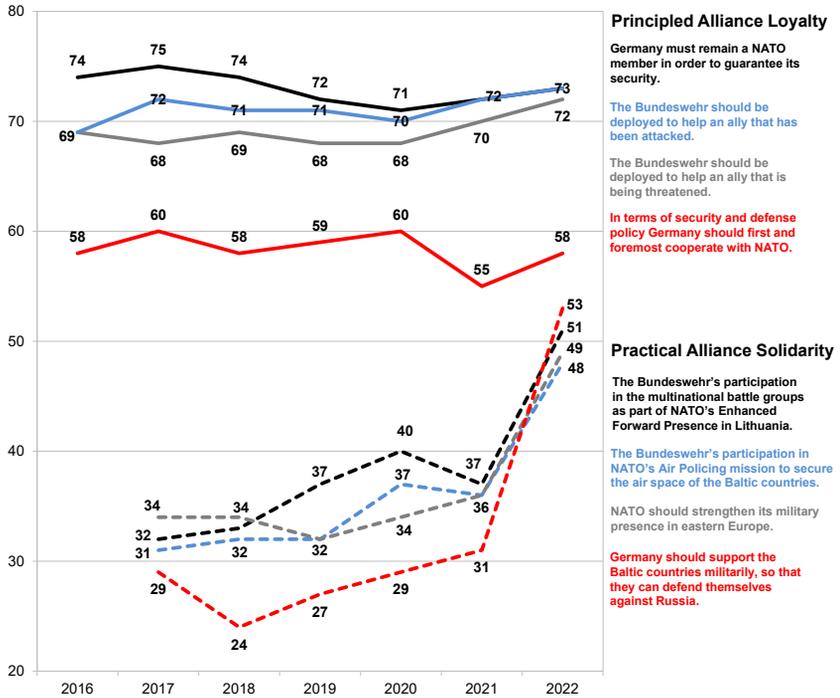


Notes: Figures are percentages. Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding. The response categories “strongly threatened” and “somewhat threatened” as well as “not really threatened” and “not at all threatened” have been combined respectively. Data source: ZMSBw population surveys 2018–2022.

### 5 Between Principle and Practice: The Alliance Solidarity of the Germans

For years, the ZMSBw population surveys have revealed a remarkable discrepancy between high approval of Germany’s membership in NATO and of the principle of collective defense on the one hand, and rather weak approval of military support for NATO’s eastern allies and of the Bundeswehr’s participation in NATO missions on the other hand (see fig. 3).

Figure 3: Public Support for Alliance Defense 2016–2022



Notes: Figures are percentages. Response categories “agree fully” and “agree somewhat” have been combined. Data source: ZMSBw population surveys 2016–2022.

Although public support for the Bundeswehr’s participation in the two NATO missions in the Baltics has already shown a slight increase since 2018, they remained only in the midfield of public approval compared with the Bundeswehr’s other foreign deployments for the period 2017–2021.<sup>27</sup> Also, the fundamental willingness to provide military support to the eastern allies increased slightly in the period 2018–2021, but remained significantly behind the principled loyalty to the alliance until recently (see fig. 3).

27 Graf, Timo/Biehl, Heiko: Einstellungen zu den Auslandseinsätzen der Bundeswehr. In: Graf, Timo/Steinbrecher, Markus/Biehl, Heiko/Scherzer, Joel: Sicherheits- und verteidigungspolitisches Meinungsbild in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland: Ergebnisse und Analysen der Bevölkerungsbefragung 2021. Zentrum für Militärgeschichte und Sozialwissenschaften der Bundeswehr: Potsdam 2022, pp. 253–269.

The pronounced discrepancy between “principle” and “practice” in the Germans’ attitude toward alliance defense thus persisted until 2021.

As a result of Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine, public approval for an active defense of NATO’s eastern flank has risen sharply.<sup>28</sup> The strengthening of NATO’s military presence in Eastern Europe is currently met with significantly greater approval from the population than in the previous year (see fig. 3): 49 percent (+13 percentage points) are in favor of NATO increasing its presence in Eastern Europe, while 22 percent are opposed and 24 percent are undecided. In addition, an absolute majority (53 percent; +22 percentage points) now advocates that Germany should provide military support to the Baltic states so that they can defend themselves against Russia; 16 percent oppose this and 27 percent have an ambivalent attitude. Public approval of the Bundeswehr missions on NATO’s eastern flank has also risen sharply: the participation of the Bundeswehr in the *Enhanced Forward Presence* in Lithuania is supported by an absolute majority of respondents (51 percent; +14 percentage points) and in the *enhanced Air Policing* in the Baltic states by a relative majority (48 percent; +12 percentage points). In addition, the Bundeswehr’s more recent engagements in Poland (51 percent), Slovakia (46 percent), and Romania (43 percent) also receive high approval ratings.

## 6 The Influence of Threat Perceptions on Alliance Solidarity

The above analyses suggest that concrete alliance solidarity in the German population has changed massively as a result of the Ukraine war and the accompanying change in threat perception. Furthermore, the results of the 2022 ZMSBw population survey show just how much alliance solidarity depends on threat perceptions. Those who perceive Russia as a threat to Germany’s security support all practical efforts to defend NATO’s eastern flank much more strongly than those respondents who do not perceive Russia as a threat or have an ambivalent threat perception: stronger NATO presence in Eastern Europe 57 percent to 30 percent; military support for the Baltic states 62 percent to 28 percent; stronger German military engagement on the eastern flank 57 percent to 33 percent; Bundeswehr

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28 Graf, Timo: Zeitenwende im sicherheits- und verteidigungspolitischen Meinungsbild. Ergebnisse der ZMSBw-Bevölkerungsbefragung 2022. Zentrum für Militärgeschichte und Sozialwissenschaften der Bundeswehr: Potsdam 2022, p. 6.

participation in the *Enhanced Forward Presence* in Lithuania 59 percent to 28 percent; Bundeswehr participation in the *Baltic Air Policing* 56 percent to 27 percent.

However, a significant association between the feeling of being threatened by Russia and support for NATO’s efforts to secure the eastern flank existed already prior to 2022 (see tab. 1). The results reported in Table 1 show that even before the beginning of the war approval of all aspects of concrete alliance solidarity is the strongest in the group of those who perceive Russia as a threat to Germany’s security (Russia’s security and defense policy as well as Russia’s military action in Ukraine) – but this group constituted only a third of the population. The strong association between the perception of threat from Russia and the respondents’ practical alliance solidarity has also been demonstrated for Germany with other representative survey data.<sup>29</sup>

*Table 1: The Impact of the Perception of Threat on Alliance Solidarity before the War (2021)*

<b>Please tell me to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statements:</b>				
	<b>Agreement: a) Stronger NATO pres- ence in east- ern Europe</b>	<b>Agreement: b) German mil. support to Baltic countries</b>	<b>Agreement: c) Bun- deswehr mission EFP Lithuania</b>	<b>Agreement: d) Bun- deswehr mission Baltic Air Policing</b>
<b>Perception of Russia</b>				
Threat	54	46	46	45
Part/part	32	28	35	35
No threat	19	16	33	33

Notes: Figures are percentages. Reported are the combined responses “agree fully” and “agree somewhat.” Data source: ZMSBw population survey 2021.

29 Stokes 2017.

Additional multivariate analyses based on data from the ZMSBw population surveys of 2020 and 2021 prove that public support in Germany for a concrete military engagement on NATO's eastern flank was significantly influenced by the feeling of being threatened by Russia: those who (did not) feel threatened by Russia were more likely (not) to support a concrete military engagement to secure NATO's eastern flank.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, the overall lack of a sense of threat from Russia in the German population has been demonstrated to widen the previously observed gap between principled alliance loyalty and concrete alliance solidarity. Importantly, these effects of the threat perception are statistically significant even when the influences of other relevant explanatory factors are taken into account in the analysis, such as trust in the U.S. as a reliable NATO partner, the respondents' general attitude toward the Bundeswehr, a preference for a multilateral orientation of German foreign policy, a fundamental willingness to deploy armed forces as a means of Germany's foreign and security policy, and the level of knowledge about the Bundeswehr's participation in NATO missions in the Baltic states.

The perception of Russia as a threat to Germany's national security thus plays a very decisive role in shaping citizens' attitudes toward collective defense within the framework of NATO in general and their willingness to provide concrete military support to the eastern allies in particular. Until Russia's attack on Ukraine in February 2022, the largely absent perception of threat from Russia dampened public approval of Germany's military engagement to secure NATO's eastern flank. As a result, in recent years there has been a pronounced mismatch between strongly held allegiance to the alliance in principle and rather low approval for the practical reinforcement of NATO's eastern flank (see fig. 3). Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine in 2022 has the majority of Germans perceive Russia as a threat to national security, which increases public approval for the concrete defense of NATO's eastern flank. As a result, the previously observed gap between principled alliance loyalty and concrete alliance solidarity has narrowed considerably (cf. fig. 3).

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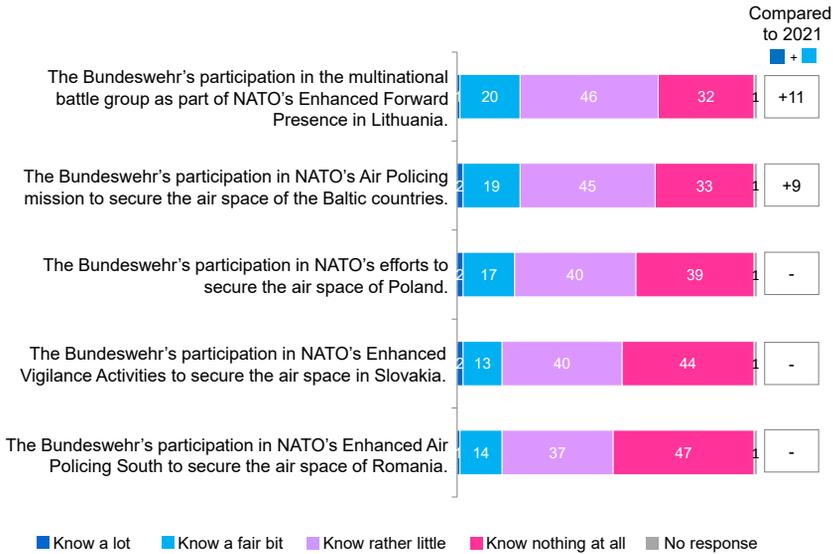
30 Graf, *Zwischen Anspruch und Wirklichkeit*, 2022; Graf, Timo: *Einstellungen zur Bündnisverteidigung*. In: Graf, Timo/Steinbrecher, Markus/Biehl, Heiko/Scherzer, Joel: *Sicherheits- und verteidigungspolitisches Meinungsbild in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland: Ergebnisse und Analysen der Bevölkerungsbefragung 2021*. Zentrum für Militärgeschichte und Sozialwissenschaften der Bundeswehr: Potsdam 2022, pp. 79–100.

### 7 Low Level of Knowledge about NATO Missions Remains a Problem

There is currently a great deal of indignation about the war in Ukraine and a heightened attention to issues of alliance defense. However, whether it will be possible to transform the current mood into lasting public support for the Bundeswehr's participation in NATO's efforts to secure the eastern flank will probably depend not only on the level of perceived threat from Russia, but also crucially on the ability of the Bundeswehr and the MoD to effectively inform the general public about those defense efforts.

As the mass media report on the war in Ukraine, there is also an increase in the reporting on the NATO presence in Eastern Europe and the corresponding Bundeswehr missions, which contributes to greater public knowledge about these missions. Compared to 2021, the current level of information among the population on the participation of the Bundeswehr in NATO missions in the Baltic states (*Enhanced Forward Presence* Lithuania: +11 percentage points; *Baltic Air Policing*: +9 percentage points) has increased significantly (see fig. 4). However, the absolute level of knowledge among the population about the Bundeswehr missions on the eastern flank remains rather low despite the increase: only 15 (Slovakia and Romania) to 21 percent (*Enhanced Forward Presence* Lithuania and *Baltic Air Policing*) of respondents say they know very much or rather a lot about these missions; the vast majority (78 to 84 percent) say they know little or nothing at all.

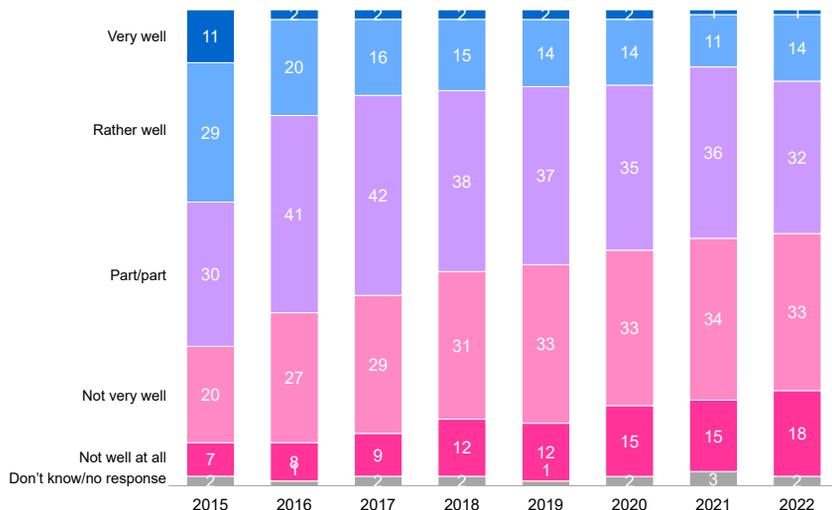
Figure 4: Knowledge about the Bundeswehr Missions on NATO's Eastern Flank  
 “How much do you know about the current Bundeswehr missions abroad?”



Notes: Figures are percentages. Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding. Comparisons are not possible for the missions in Poland, Slovakia, and Romania as they were launched in 2022. Data source: ZMSBw population surveys 2021–2022.

In addition, the average level of information among citizens about the Bundeswehr's missions abroad (covering all types of missions) has been declining for years. Currently, half of the citizens feel poorly informed about the Bundeswehr's foreign deployments. In 2022 the negative trend continues: the proportion of those who feel very badly or rather badly informed has risen steadily from 27 percent in 2015 to 51 percent in 2022, while in the same period the proportion of those who feel well informed has fallen from 40 percent to 15 percent (see fig. 5).

Figure 5: *Level of Information about the Bundeswehr Missions*  
 “How well informed do you feel about the current Bundeswehr missions abroad?”



Notes: Figures are percentages. Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding. Data source: ZMSBw population surveys 2015–2022.

The low level of knowledge among the population about the Bundeswehr missions to secure NATO’s eastern flank and the high proportion of respondents who feel generally ill-informed about the Bundeswehr’s foreign deployments are two extremely worrying findings because approval of Bundeswehr missions is strongly dependent on the level of knowledge about them. Respondents who say they have at least a basic level of knowledge about the Bundeswehr’s NATO missions to secure the eastern flank exhibit much higher approval ratings than those respondents who have little or no knowledge (see tab. 2). The differences in the approval ratings between more and less informed citizens are considerable and vary between 20 (Romania and Slovakia) and 26 percentage points (*Baltic Air Policing* and *Enhanced Forward Presence Lithuania*). In essence: respondents who claim to have some knowledge of the missions are also more likely to support them. Conversely, among the respondents with lower levels of knowledge, no Bundeswehr mission receives majority support. Thus, most of the reservations and opposition are concentrated among those segments of the

population that know less about the Bundeswehr's involvement on NATO's eastern flank.

Table 2: Attitudes towards the Bundeswehr Missions on NATO's Eastern Flank Depending on the Level of Knowledge

Please tell me to what extent you agree or disagree with the participation of the Bundeswehr in the following missions:				
	Agree <sup>1</sup>	Part/part	Disagree <sup>2</sup>	Don't know/ no answer
<b>Lithuania (Enhanced Forward Presence)</b> ***				
Knows something or a lot <sup>3</sup>	72	19	9	(3)
Knows little or nothing at all	46	26	24	8
<b>Poland (Air Defense)</b> ***				
Knows something or a lot	70	17	13	(0)
Knows little or nothing at all	47	25	24	4
<b>Baltic countries (Baltic Air Policing)</b> ***				
Knows something or a lot	68	(20)	(12)	(0)
Knows little or nothing at all	42	30	22	5
<b>Slovakia (Enhanced Vigilance Activities)</b> ***				
Knows something or a lot	63	24	12	(1)
Knows little or nothing at all	43	26	25	6
<b>Romania (Enhanced Air Policing South)</b> ***				
Knows something or a lot	61	23	17	(0)
Knows little or nothing at all	41	27	27	6

Notes: Figures are percentages. 1) Response categories “agree fully” and “agree somewhat” have been combined; 2) Response categories “disagree fully” and “disagree somewhat” have been combined; 3) Response categories “know a lot” and “know a fair bit” have been combined; 4) Response categories “know rather little” and “know nothing at all” have been combined. Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding. Analysis: Chi<sup>2</sup>-square-test of independence; significance levels are denoted as follows: \*\*\* p < 0,001; \*\* p < 0,01; \* p < 0,05; n.s. = not significant. Figures in parentheses: n ≤ 50. N = 2.741. Data source: ZMSBw population survey 2022.

## 8 Conclusion

As a result of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, the ambivalent image of Russia among the German population has given way to the realization that Russia poses a direct threat to Germany. This dramatic change in threat perception has boosted the willingness of the German people to support NATO's eastern member states militarily. Ultimately, this development has narrowed the gap between the German population's strongly pronounced allegiance to NATO in principle and its weakly pronounced solidarity with the alliance's eastern member states.

These findings highlight the importance of a shared threat assessment: if it is lacking, alliance solidarity can suffer. To put it differently: the willingness of the German population to provide military assistance to its eastern NATO allies depends to a large extent on their own sense of being threatened by Russia. The eastern allies, especially Poland and the Baltic states, have warned Germany for many years about the military threat posed by Russia. Instead of being listened to, they were confronted with an ambivalent attitude towards Russia in German politics, industry, and among the population. This ambivalent attitude has not been without consequences. Thus, the former director of the Institute for Security Policy at Kiel University (ISPK), Professor Dr. Joachim Krause, draws an extremely critical conclusion with regard to Germany's past contributions to securing NATO's eastern flank:

“[Germany's] alliance policy consisted primarily of distinguishing oneself by criticizing the U.S., but otherwise making only small contributions to alliance solidarity. The interests and concerns of our eastern allies were largely ignored. [...] Efforts within NATO to improve the defense capabilities of the Baltic states were only half-heartedly implemented by the German government.”<sup>31</sup>

Only now that the majority of Germans perceive Russia as a threat to national and personal security are they willing to support Germany's military contributions to securing NATO's eastern flank.

The current change in German attitudes towards collective defense is a logical consequence of the objectively changed threat situation. For this change in attitude to be sustainable, it must be accompanied by public

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31 Krause, Joachim: Ein Sicherheitsrat wäre das Ende der strategischen Blindheit. In: Die Bundeswehr, Vol. 11, 2022, pp. 14–16.

communication and information efforts of the Bundeswehr and the MoD. This is because public approval of the Bundeswehr missions on NATO's eastern flank depends not only on the feeling of threat but also to a large extent on the level of knowledge about these missions – which is extremely low on average. The consumption of daily news alone will not be able to remedy this deficit, especially if media reporting wanes as the war drags on. Also, in view of the large amount of “fake news” and disinformation on the NATO-Russia-Ukraine issue, it is necessary for the Bundeswehr and the MoD to provide citizens with as much information as possible so that they can develop a well-informed and resilient stance on the Bundeswehr's involvement in NATO's missions to secure the alliance's eastern flank.

There is no need to create enemy images unnecessarily, but the current situation calls for honesty in all matters of public communication. Russia is waging a war of aggression in the middle of Europe against a sovereign and democratic country that professes European values. Russian soldiers and mercenaries have killed thousands of civilians in Ukraine, deported hundreds of thousands to Russia, and displaced millions. Tens of thousands of Ukrainian citizens have died fighting for the survival of their families, the Ukrainian state, and Ukrainian culture. With its barbaric war of aggression and annihilation against Ukraine, Russia destroyed the European security order that had existed since the end of the Cold War, threatening the security, freedom, and prosperity of all of Europe. The Bundeswehr missions on NATO's eastern flank serve to defend Germany and its NATO allies against this threat. These points need to be communicated as clearly as possible because a critical public opinion on the Bundeswehr's participation in the missions to secure NATO's eastern flank could not only weaken the mutual trust among NATO's member states, but also impair the motivation of German soldiers on deployment, and strain civil-military relations in Germany for years to come. Such a development would weaken NATO's cohesion and ability to act and thus play into Russia's hands.

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