

HOME ALONE: EUROPEANS ARE READY TO DEFEND THEMSELVES

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SUMMARY

- Amid geopolitical turmoil, Europeans are taking nuanced and realistic positions that demand tough choices from their leaders.
- A major new ECFR poll shows Europeans embrace self-reliance and are clear-eyed about Donald Trump—but do not expect a permanent break from the US.
- They back Ukraine—but are anxious about bringing it into the European Union now or sending troops there.
- They know they face an energy crisis—but remain solidly opposed to Russian fossil-fuel imports.
- Leaders therefore have the public's backing to pursue strategic autonomy without posturing, to seek out new mechanisms for supporting Ukraine, and to push ahead on energy sovereignty.

The art of the possible

Like little Kevin in the classic comedy film, European citizens have woken up to an uncomfortable truth: they have been left Home Alone. Not by their parents and siblings, but by an America on whom many thought they could depend.

Left to fend for himself, Kevin has to be starkly realist and challenge some old assumptions. He booby-traps the house, protects himself and it, and learns self-reliance in the process. Europeans too are finding the experience of being Home Alone is breaking some old taboos and ways of thinking. They are willing to go much farther than before to defend themselves despite being optimistic that the US will “come home” to the transatlantic alliance eventually. They prioritise domestic security and are wary of exposing themselves to a direct fight in the EU’s neighbourhood. Like Kevin they are embracing their self-sufficiency; resisting the temptation of new Russian fossil fuel imports even as energy prices rise.

In other words, like Macaulay Culkin’s character in the film, they have become more “grown up”. Their leaders will have to reckon with this new reality fast—it both opens up political space but also entreats them to act on the harsh realities of the moment.

Europeans’ new-found realism manifests itself in three notable areas:

- First, European trust in the US has crashed to new lows. Europeans do not expect America under Donald Trump to protect them, and they recognise the need for more autonomous security (even funded by common debt). But they do think the relationship will likely improve after Trump and want to leave the door open to that possibility.
- Second, although they continue to back Ukraine, Europeans do not believe the EU’s eastward enlargement would be a good idea in the current context. They are also reluctant to send their own troops to keep the peace in a post-war Ukraine.
- Third, Europeans have learned the lessons of depending on Russian oil and gas. Even as a new energy crunch bears down on living standards, they are resolute in opposing purchases of fossil fuels from Russia—with majorities across the continent for prioritising European renewable energy.

These are the main results of a major public opinion poll, totalling 19,481 respondents, commissioned by ECFR and conducted in May 2026 in 15 European countries: Austria, Bulgaria, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the UK. It finds Europe’s publics internalising the geopolitical shifts of recent years, recognising the finite limits of the continent’s current power to change them, but also supporting bold and pragmatic action.

Within that popular realism, however, dwells a challenge to Europe's leaders: to adapt to voters' sense of the possible and, with several major European elections looming in 2027, to use its opportunities while they can.

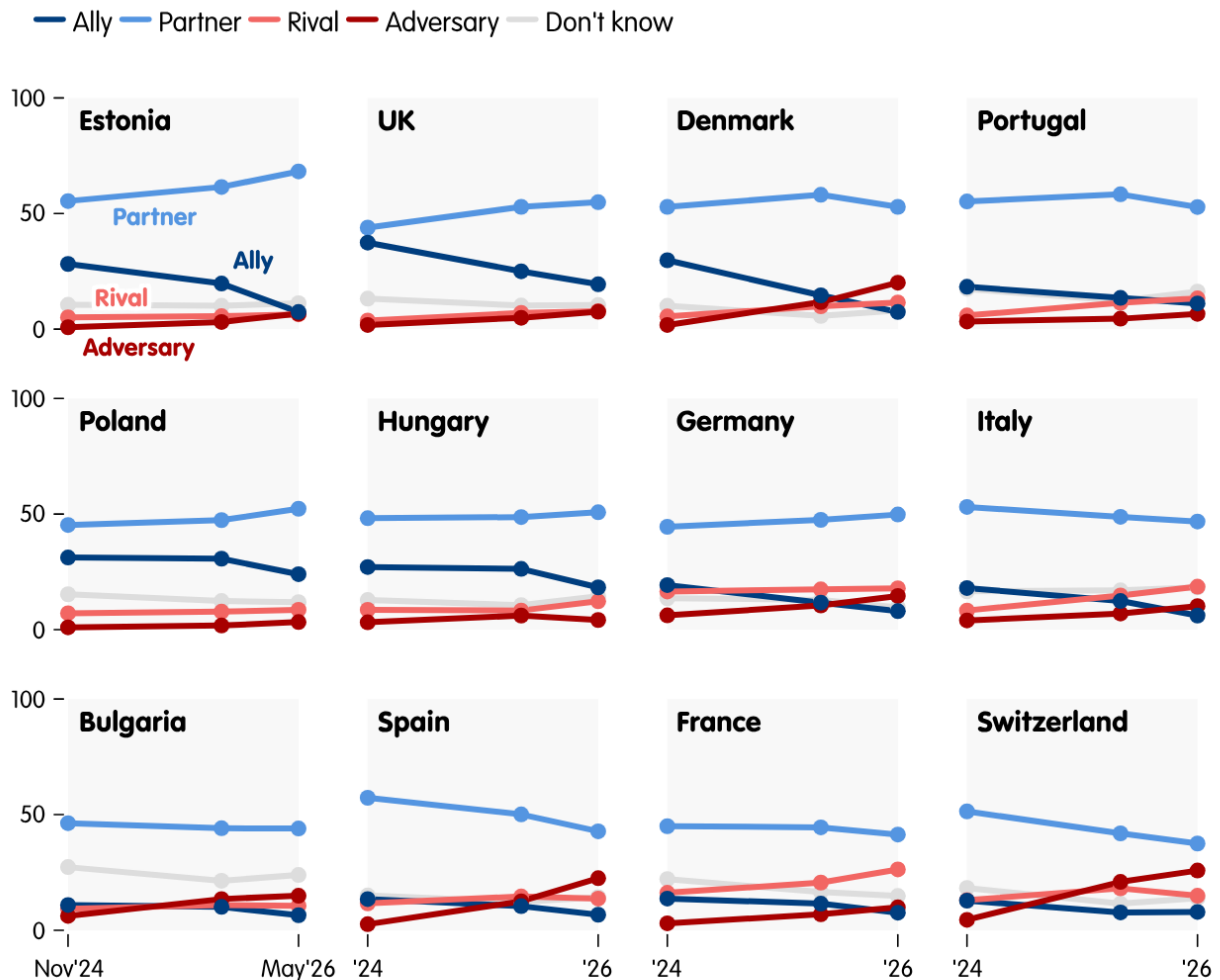
Booby-trapping the house

In *Home Alone*, Kevin realises that the house is undefended and threatened by intruders, but he still hopes and even expects his family will come back eventually. European public opinion today exhibits a similar outlook.

A dawning realisation

ECFR's poll confirms the collapse in European faith in the US. Only 11% of respondents now consider it an ally, down from 16% half a year ago and 22% in November 2024. Meanwhile fully 25% see it as either a rival or an adversary. In most countries, the decline has been steady, except for Poland and Hungary where it is a newer phenomenon. Across the states polled, supporters of only two right-populist political parties—Law and Justice (PiS) in Poland and Reform UK—continue to view America primarily as an ally. Trump's US is now losing the trust of all but its most faithful European comrades.

Generally speaking, thinking about United States, which of the following best reflects your view on who they are to the EU*? 2024-2026, in %



*In the UK and Switzerland, the question concerned perceived relationship of the US with respondents' country, not with the EU.

The options included: an adversary—with which we are in conflict; a necessary partner—with which we must strategically cooperate; a necessary partner—with which we must strategically cooperate; an ally—that shares our interests and values.

Source: ECFR-commissioned public opinion survey, conducted by YouGov, Mandate Research and Turu-uringute in May 2026

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Fully half the European public now see the US as not an ally but a “necessary partner”. A growing number, especially in Denmark, France, Spain and Switzerland, see it as a rival or even an adversary. This outlook is pronounced among the voters of some western European progressive parties, such as Spain’s Socialists (PSOE). But it is still far from majoritarian across the continent. Pedro Sánchez’s defiant stance against Trump does not (yet) reflect average European opinion.

Generally speaking, thinking about the United States, which of the following best reflects your view on who they are to the EU*? By voter intention, in %



*In the UK and Switzerland, the question concerned perceived relationship of the US with respondents' country, not with the EU.

Source: ECFR-commissioned public opinion survey, conducted by YouGov, Mandate Research and Turu-uuringute in May 2026
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This shift comes after Trump threatened to annex Greenland; attacked Iran without a plan then demanded Europeans resolve the resulting problems; pressured Kyiv without delivering a Ukraine-Russia peace; dismissed US commitments to NATO and announced withdrawals of some US troops from Europe.

Little surprise, then, that majorities in every European country polled think that the US would not support them if they came under attack—whereas they do trust their European neighbours to do so. Again, PiS and Reform are the stand-out parties whose supporters still have faith in the US, followed by those of Giorgia Meloni's Brothers of Italy (FdI), who are evenly split on this point.

Meanwhile, majorities in almost every country polled except Bulgaria say they are confident that “at least some European countries” would come to their aid if their country were attacked. Strikingly, this neighbourly optimism extends far beyond Europhile usual suspects; even supporters of the National Rally (RN) in France, Giorgia Meloni's Brothers of Italy, the Party for Freedom in the Netherlands and the Sweden Democrats vest their hopes in fellow Europeans.

If your country were attacked, how confident are you that...

Net value, in %

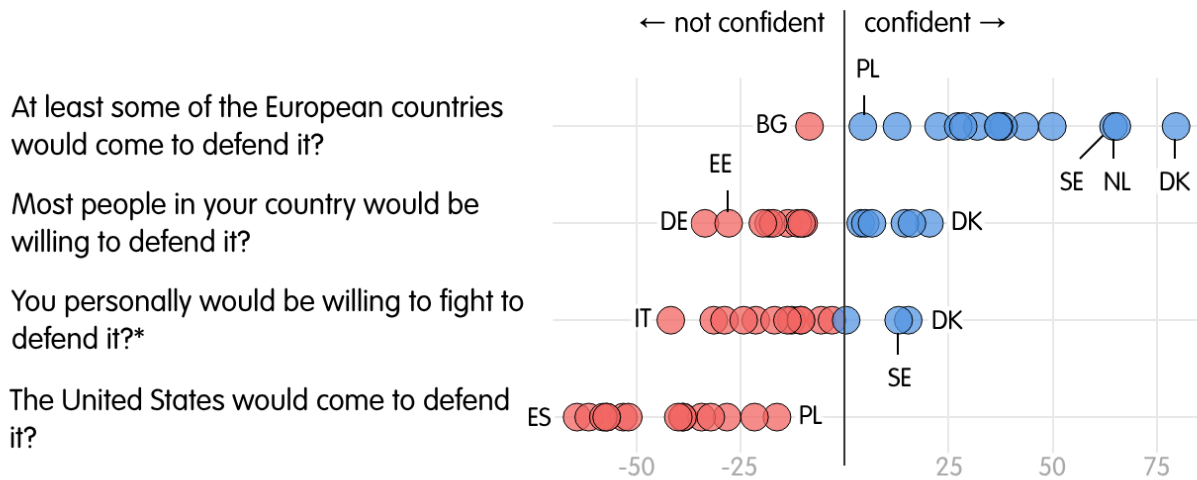


Chart shows net difference between "very" or "fairly" confident, and "not very" or "not at all" confident.

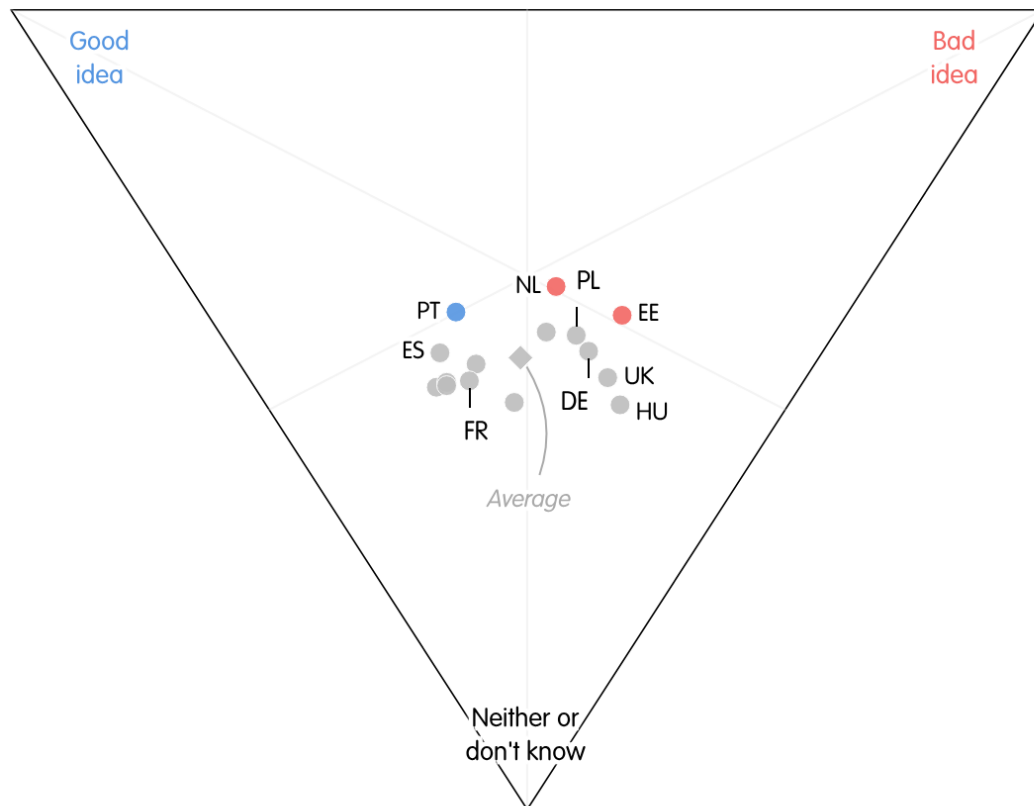
*The question about people's readiness to fight was asked only among respondents aged 18 to 60.

Source: ECFR-commissioned public opinion survey, conducted by YouGov, Mandate Research and Turu-uuringute in May 2026

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Yet the broad European distrust towards the US does not translate into majoritarian support for replacing NATO with a Europe-only defence organisation. Only 29% of respondents think this would be a good idea—and about as many (28%) oppose it. Most people do not take a firm view on this issue, which means that the balance could still be swayed in one direction or another if this eventually becomes a topical matter.

In the current context, do you believe it would be a good or a bad idea for the European countries to replace NATO with a Europe-only defence organisation? By country, in %



The colour of the dots shows whether a positive, a negative or a neutral outlook prevails in a country.

Source: ECFR-commissioned public opinion survey, conducted by YouGov, Mandate Research and Turuuringute in May 2026.

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Homemade defence

A vulnerable house needs good defences. Europeans broadly get this. They generally favour higher defence spending, an independent European nuclear deterrent, and a more “buy European” approach to defence procurement (even if Germans and Italians are finely balanced on this latter point). Italians stand out among citizens of major European states in their opposition to several of these positions, especially the spending increases. Most Europeans also want to reduce their security dependence on the US. Only in Poland do most voters consider it a good idea to buy more American weapons.

At the current time, would you support or oppose your country...

Net value, in %

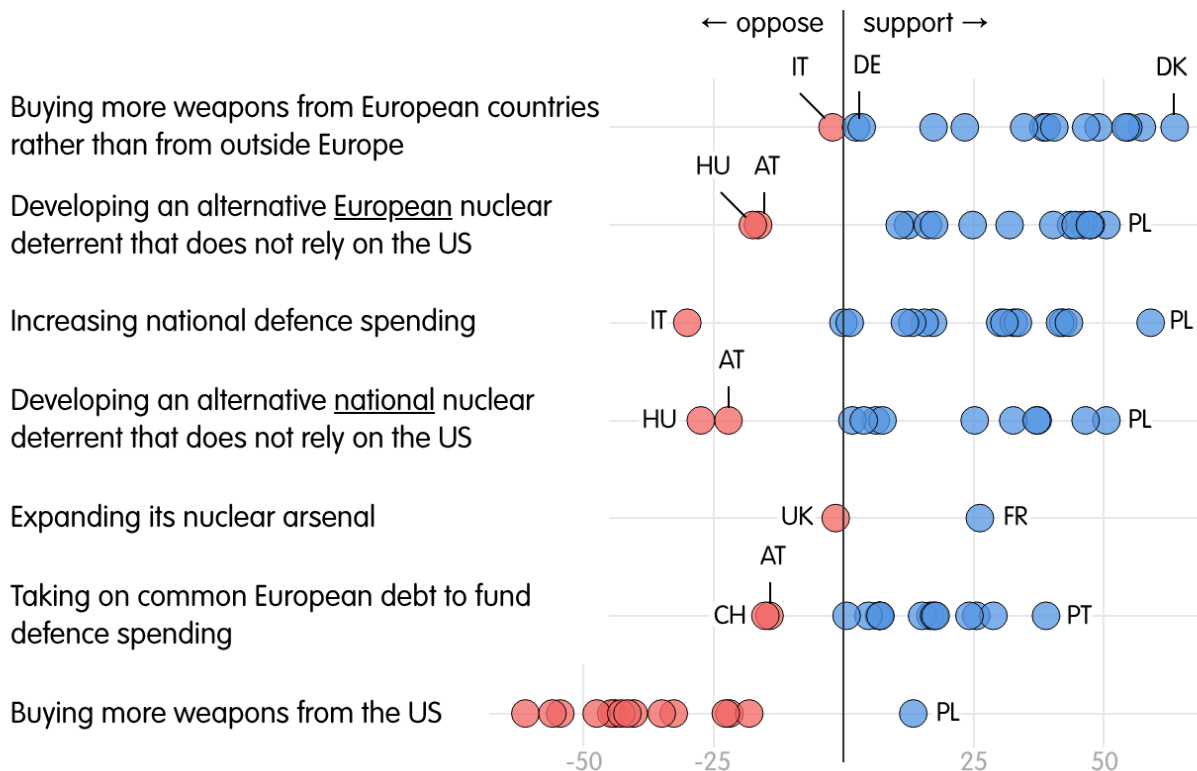


Chart shows net difference between support and oppose answers.

Source: ECFR-commissioned public opinion survey, conducted by YouGov, Mandate Research and Turuuringute in May 2026

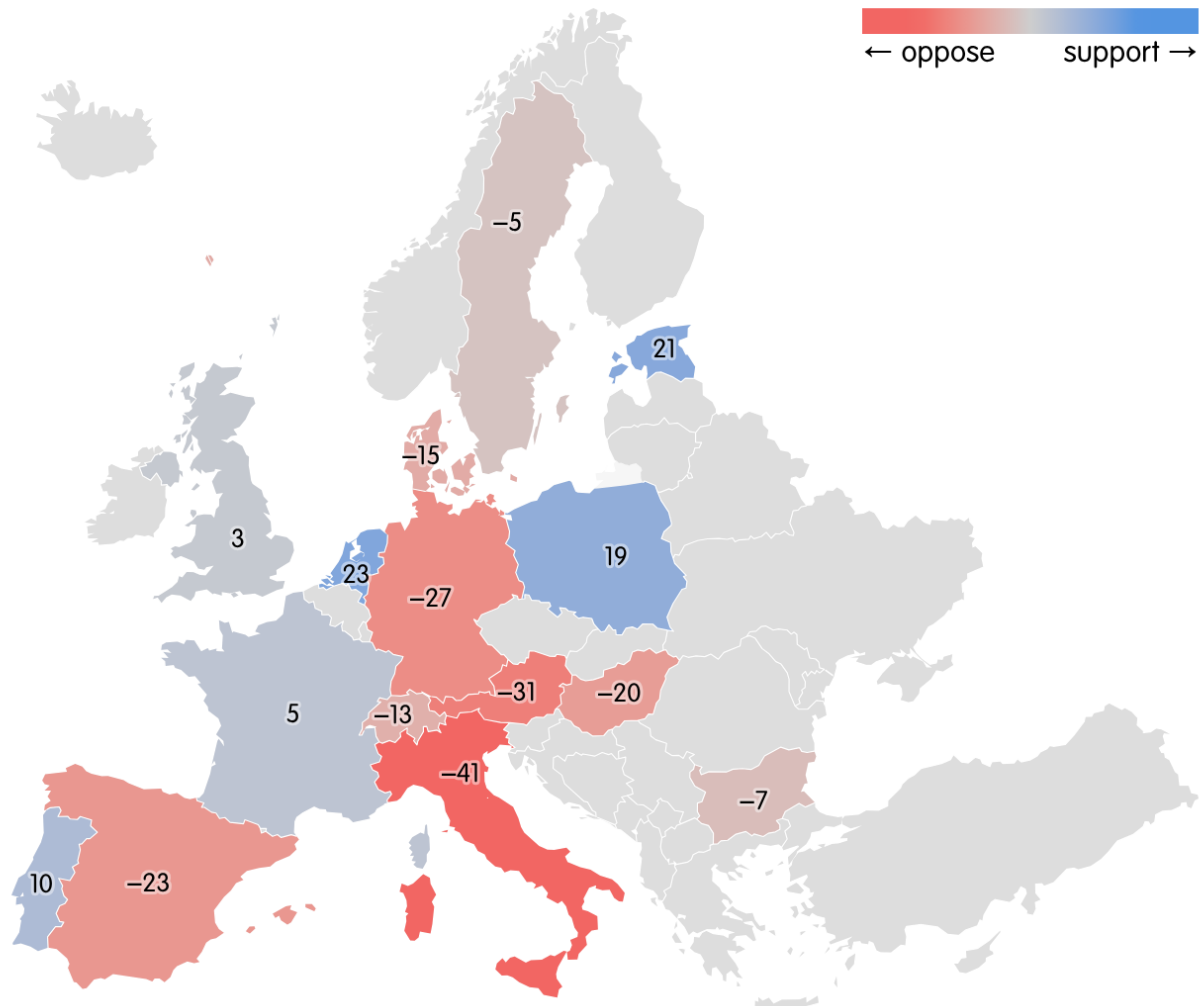
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Europeans are also ready to revisit their views on how to pay for their greater security autonomy, even if that means taking on common debt to fund the investments. Predictably, supporters of radical-right parties tend to oppose this position—or are divided over the matter. But most other voters back it, including in some countries traditionally sceptical about European fiscal integration. Asked whether they support joining other European countries in taking on common debt for defence spending, even voters for the governing parties in steely Austria, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden are mostly in favour.

Admittedly, when forced to choose between defence and other public-spending needs, Europeans are more ambivalent. A plurality oppose choosing defence; including majorities in Germany, Italy and Spain. But that trade-off would be acceptable to most people in Estonia, France, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal and the UK.

Would you support or oppose your country accepting some cuts to public spending for the sake of investment into your country's defence? Net value, in %

Spending trade-off Peacekeeping in Ukraine Sending troops to Baltics



Source: ECFR-commissioned public opinion survey, conducted by YouGov, Mandate Research and Turu-uuringute in May 2026
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Overall, the direction is clear. Between ECFR's last European poll in November 2025 and this new one in May 2026, publics in most states (most notably in Spain) have shifted in favour of increased defence spending. In some places there is also new openness to a European nuclear deterrent; with Danes and Italians warming to the idea and Brits, once firmly opposed to sharing their nuclear arsenal, now evenly split on the issue.

At the current time, would you support or oppose your country increasing national defence spending? Net values, in %, change 2025 v 2026

European nuclear deterrent / National nuclear deterrent / **Defence spending** / Nuclear arsenal

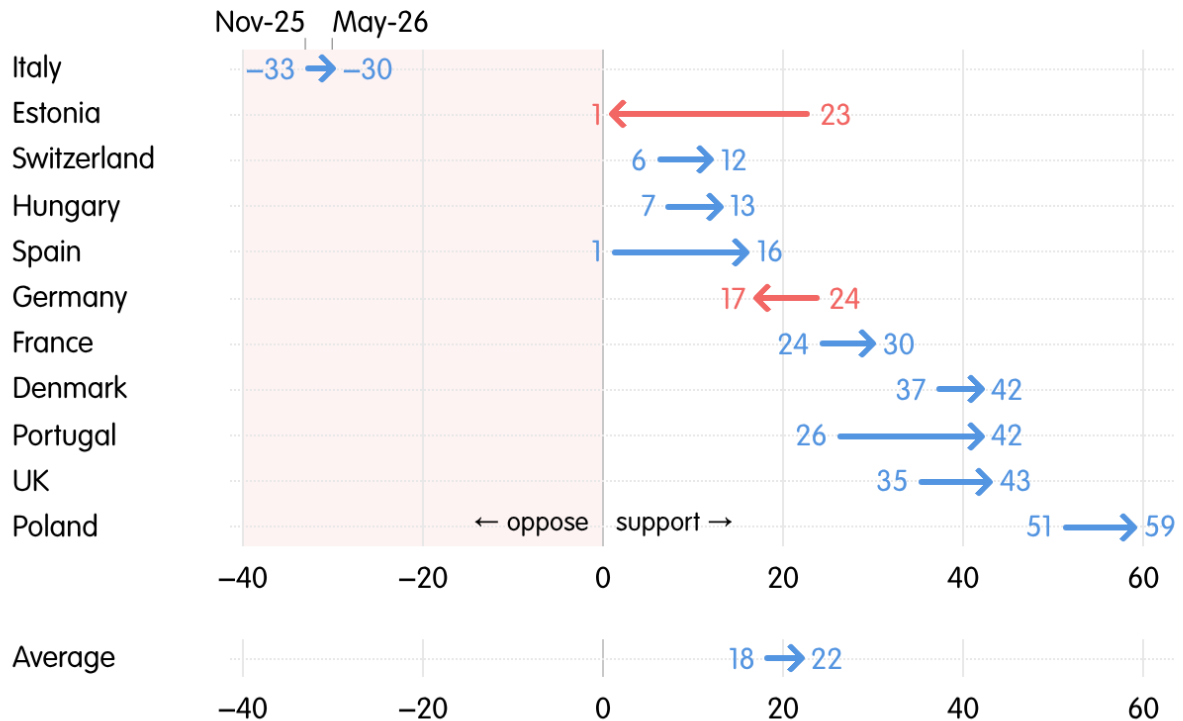


Chart shows a change in net difference between “support” and “oppose” answers.

Source: ECFR-commissioned public opinion survey, conducted by YouGov, Mandate Research and Turu-uuringute in May 2026

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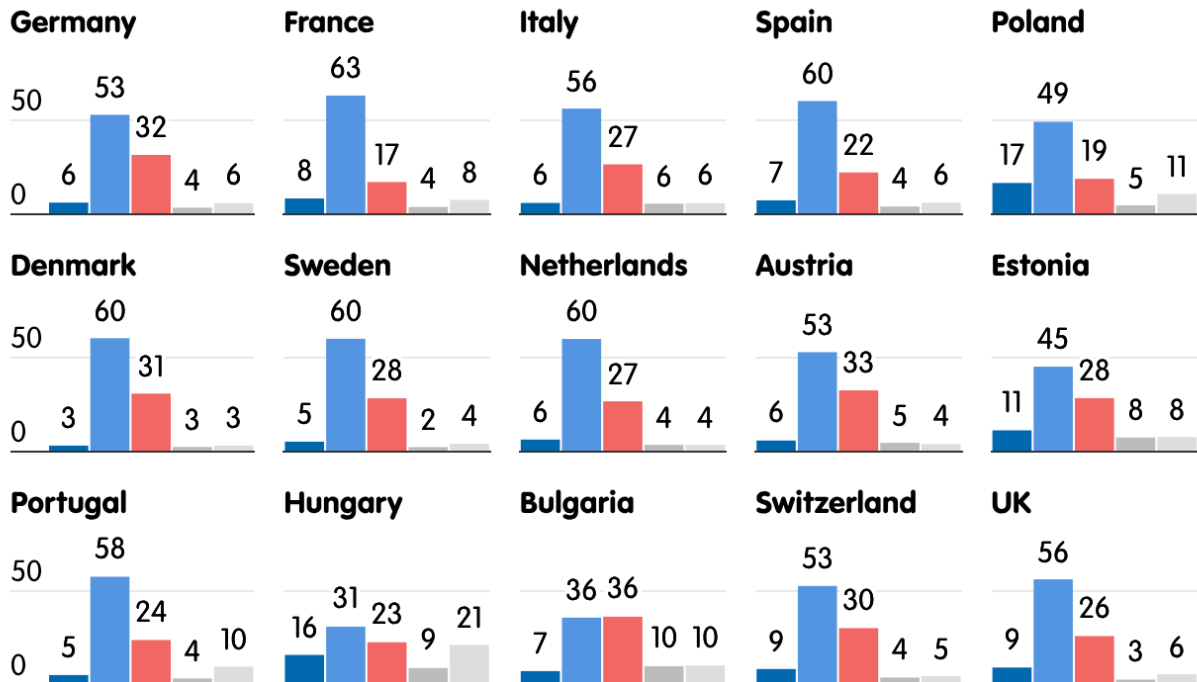
Hoping for a return

Kevin might be home alone (initially happily so), but he ends up hoping that his family will come back.

This reflects the European outlook: citizens know that they must do more for their own security, but still expect a return to normal transatlantic relations after Trump. Most believe that the transatlantic relationship will “probably get better” once Trump’s presidency is over. On that point, there has been barely any change since a year ago, when ECFR asked the same question. Notably, even supporters of Spain’s governing PSOE, whose opposition to Trumpian policy has distinguished Spanish diplomacy in recent months, mostly (68%) think transatlantic relations will improve.

Which of the following best reflects your view? In %

- Donald Trump hasn't really damaged the relationship between Europe and the USA
- Donald Trump has damaged the relationship between Europe and the USA, but it will probably get better again once he has left office
- Donald Trump has damaged the relationship between Europe and the USA and the damage will probably last even once Trump has left office
- None of these
- Don't know



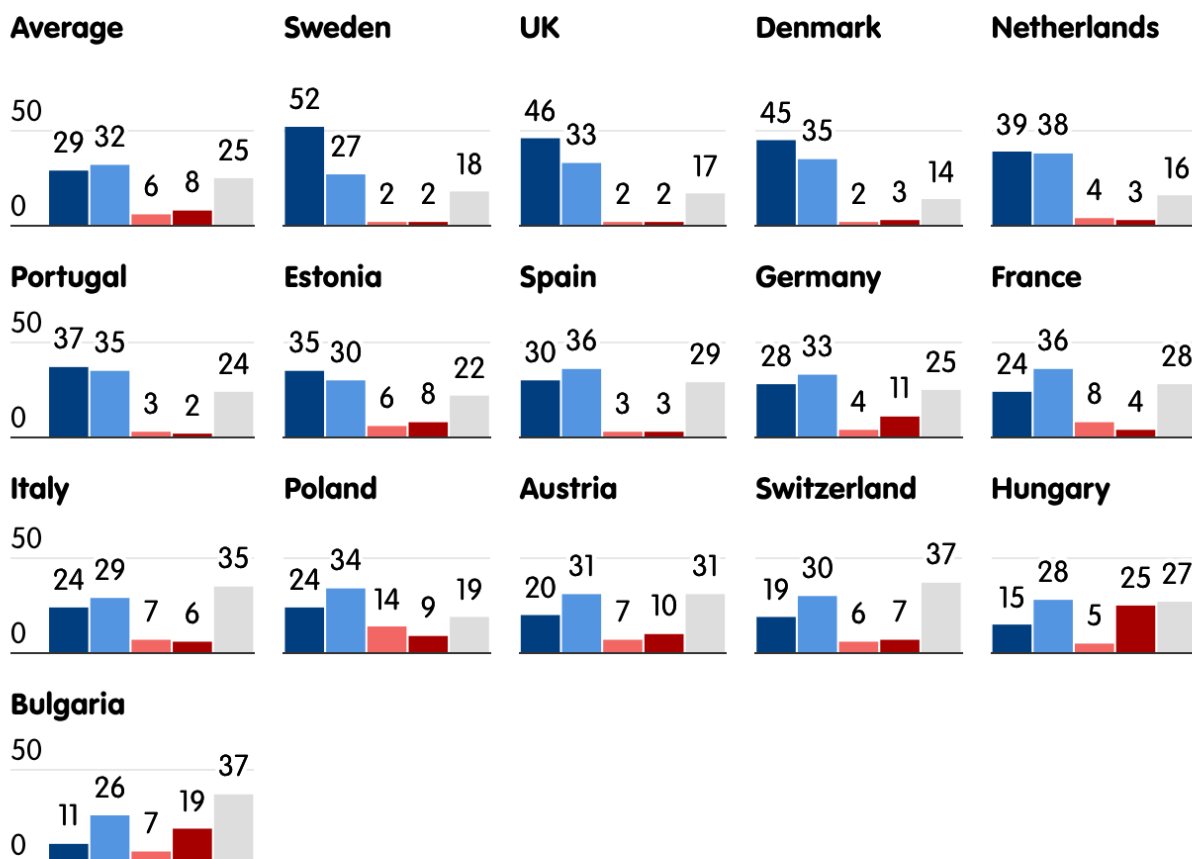
Source: ECFR-commissioned public opinion survey, conducted by YouGov, Mandate Research and Turu-uuringute in May 2026
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Not going out (for now)

Europeans continue to support Ukraine in its self-defence against Russia: majorities in most countries see Ukraine either as an ally or a necessary partner with which Europeans should strategically cooperate. On this point, perceptions of the country are more positive than those of America almost everywhere (except for Poland and Hungary, which both have thorny bilateral relations with Kyiv).

Generally speaking, thinking about Ukraine, which of the following best reflects your view on what it is to the EU*? In %

- An ally – that shares our interests and values
- A necessary partner – with whom we must strategically cooperate
- A rival – with whom we need to compete
- An adversary – with whom we are in conflict
- Don't know



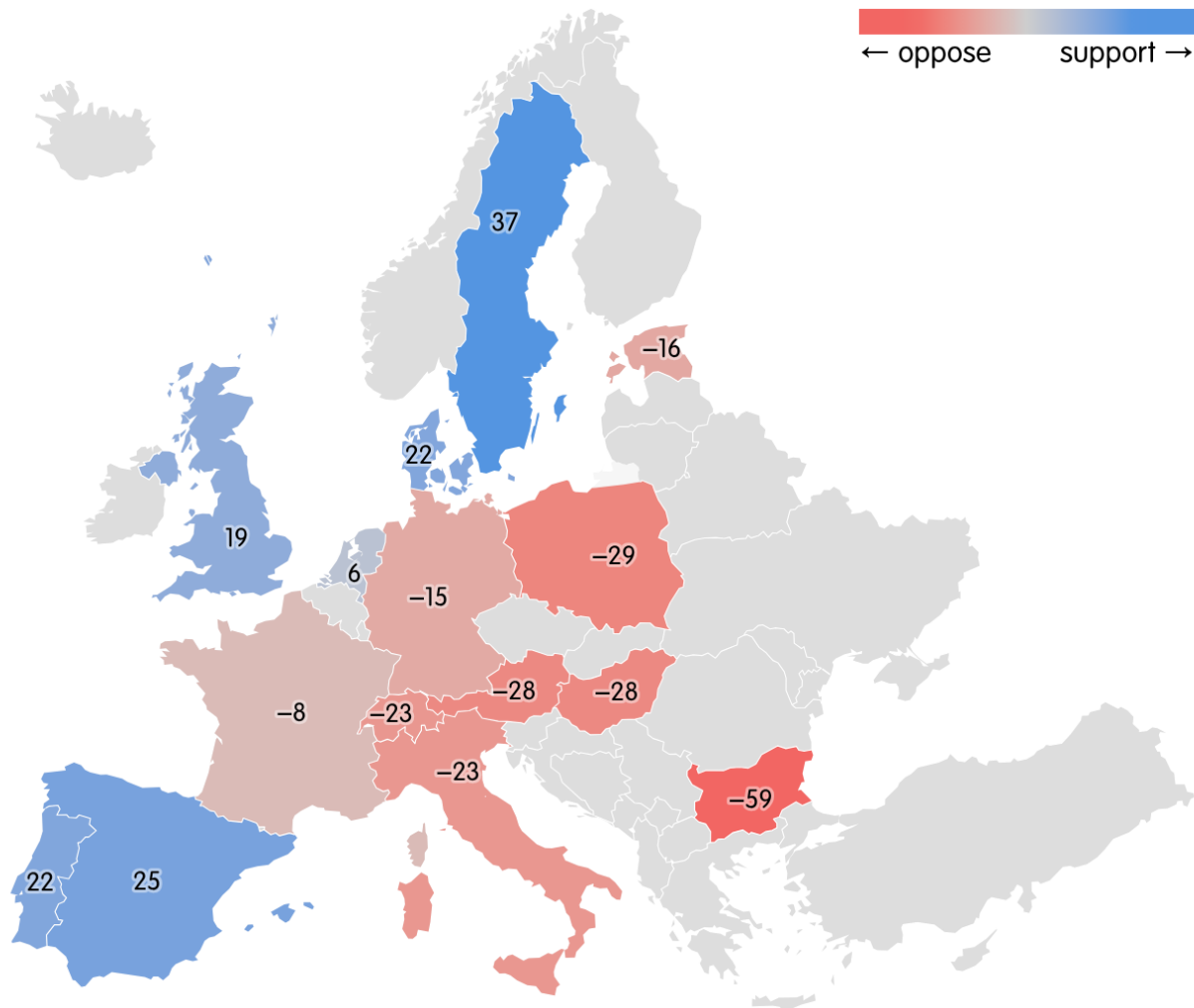
*In the UK and Switzerland, the question concerned perceived relationship of Ukraine to respondents' country, not to the EU.

Source: ECFR-commissioned public opinion survey, conducted by YouGov, Mandate Research and Turu-uringute in May 2026
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And yet for European citizens, this favourable view does not imply a military commitment to Ukraine. Their prevailing stance is to oppose sending troops there after any peace. This view commends a majority in Germany, France and Poland, three of the EU's keystone defence powers.

Would you support or oppose your country sending its troops to keep peace in Ukraine after the war? Net value, in %

Spending trade-off Peacekeeping in Ukraine Sending troops to Baltics



Source: ECFR-commissioned public opinion survey, conducted by YouGov, Mandate Research and Turu-uuringute in May 2026
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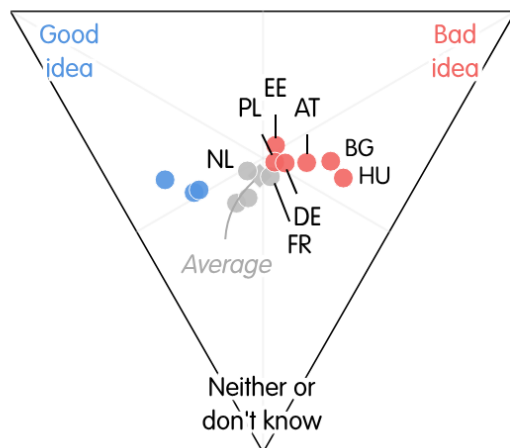
Even more importantly, today, there is no public consensus to bring Ukraine into the EU “in the current context”, including among Ukraine’s geographically closest neighbours. This is not about people’s rejection of enlargement as such—because views are much more sympathetic to the EU’s westward expansion (for example, by having the UK rejoin).

Meanwhile, eastward enlargement elicits strong opposition in Austria, Bulgaria and Hungary. Opinion is more finely balanced in Estonia, France, Germany and Poland. Surprisingly, in the usually enlargement-sceptic Netherlands, the public leans (slightly) towards supporting the EU’s eastward enlargement.

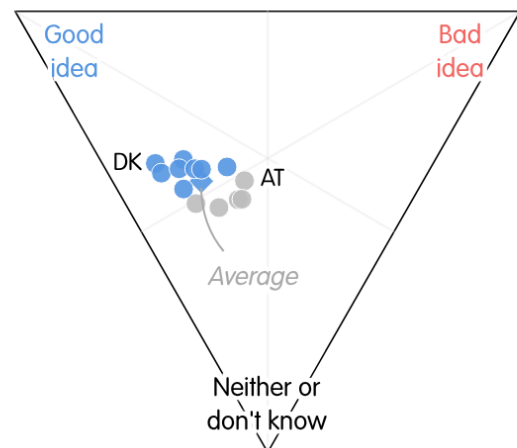
That said, in all countries many voters simply decline to position themselves decisively on the issue. Therein lies room to change opinions—in one direction or the other.

In the current context, do you believe it would be a good or a bad idea for the European countries to... By country, in %

Create a new and larger European Union, extending to the east (e.g. including Ukraine)



Create a new and larger European Union, extending to the west (e.g. including the UK)



The colour of the dots shows whether a positive, a negative or a neutral outlook prevails in a country.

Source: ECFR-commissioned public opinion survey, conducted by YouGov, Mandate Research and Turu-uuringute in May 2026.

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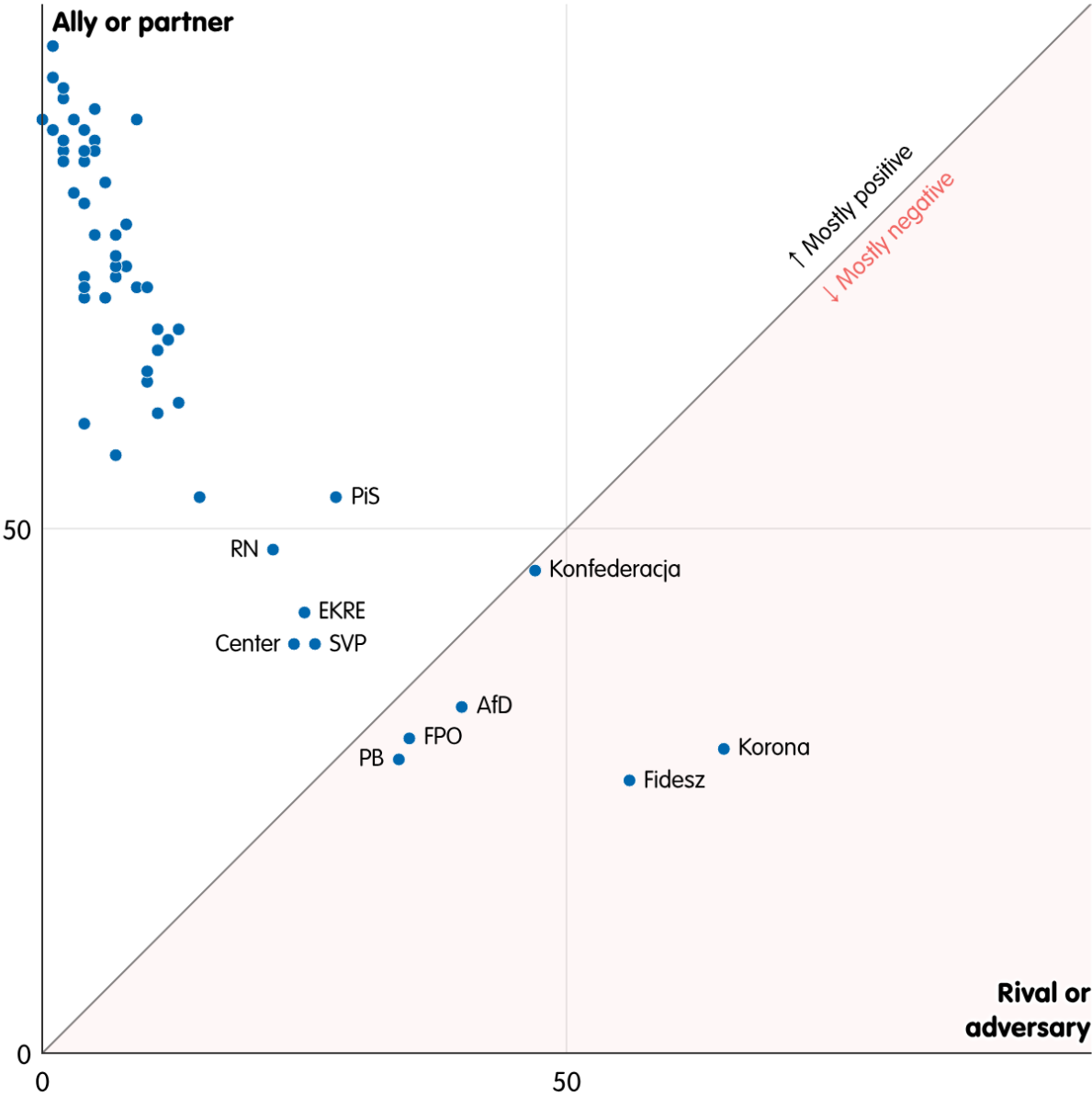
Taken together, this shows the limits of the two main frameworks in which European leaders are currently viewing Ukraine: that of enlargement and that of a potential peacekeeping mission after the war. Both currently lack broad public support across Europe.

Worryingly, European populists are espousing more assertively anti-Ukrainian views. Viktor Orban focused his unsuccessful election campaign to remain Hungarian prime minister on that theme. Meanwhile ECFR's polling shows that voters of the far-right Freedom Party in Austria (FPÖ), the AfD in Germany, two far-right parties in Poland, and the governing and populist Progressive Bulgaria all see Ukraine as chiefly a “rival” or “adversary”.

Things could therefore still get worse. And these feelings might be further weaponised during electoral campaigns; especially if they are coupled with the sense of a “forever war” in Ukraine,

anxieties about Ukraine’s EU accession, or an imagined link between that war and people’s growing cost-of-living worries.

Generally speaking, thinking about Ukraine, which of the following best reflects your view on what they are to the EU*? By voter intention, in %



*In the UK and Switzerland, the question concerned perceived relationship of Ukraine with respondents' country, not with the EU.
Source: ECFR-commissioned public opinion survey, conducted by YouGov, Mandate Research and Turu-uuringute in May 2026
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Unless addressed with more creativity, these trends may create a headache for the bilateral EU-Ukraine partnership in the near future.

Relying on oneself

Ultimately, Kevin had to rely on himself. And Europeans seem to be reflecting that wisdom in their approach to not only defence—but also energy.

This is a sensitive topic, with the war in Iran driving oil and gas prices up, and with them inflation in a heavily exposed Europe. So, the fact that relatively few voters want to turn back to oil and gas imports from Russia speaks of a continent newly savvy about its geoeconomic dependencies. Only in Bulgaria, Hungary and Italy, and among some radical-right electorates elsewhere (including the AfD and France's RN), does this turn back to Moscow command strong support.

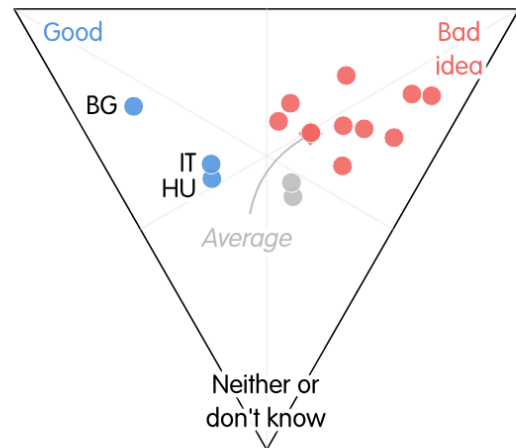
Instead, majorities across Europe want to prioritise home-generated energy from renewables and other energy sectors. This view commands majority support across the countries surveyed (with the exception of Estonia) and across political tendencies including most radical-right ones (with the AfD and Reform UK as rare exceptions).

In the current context, do you believe it would be a good or a bad idea for the European countries to... By country, in %

Prioritise developing the renewables and clean energy sectors



Resume importing oil and gas from Russia



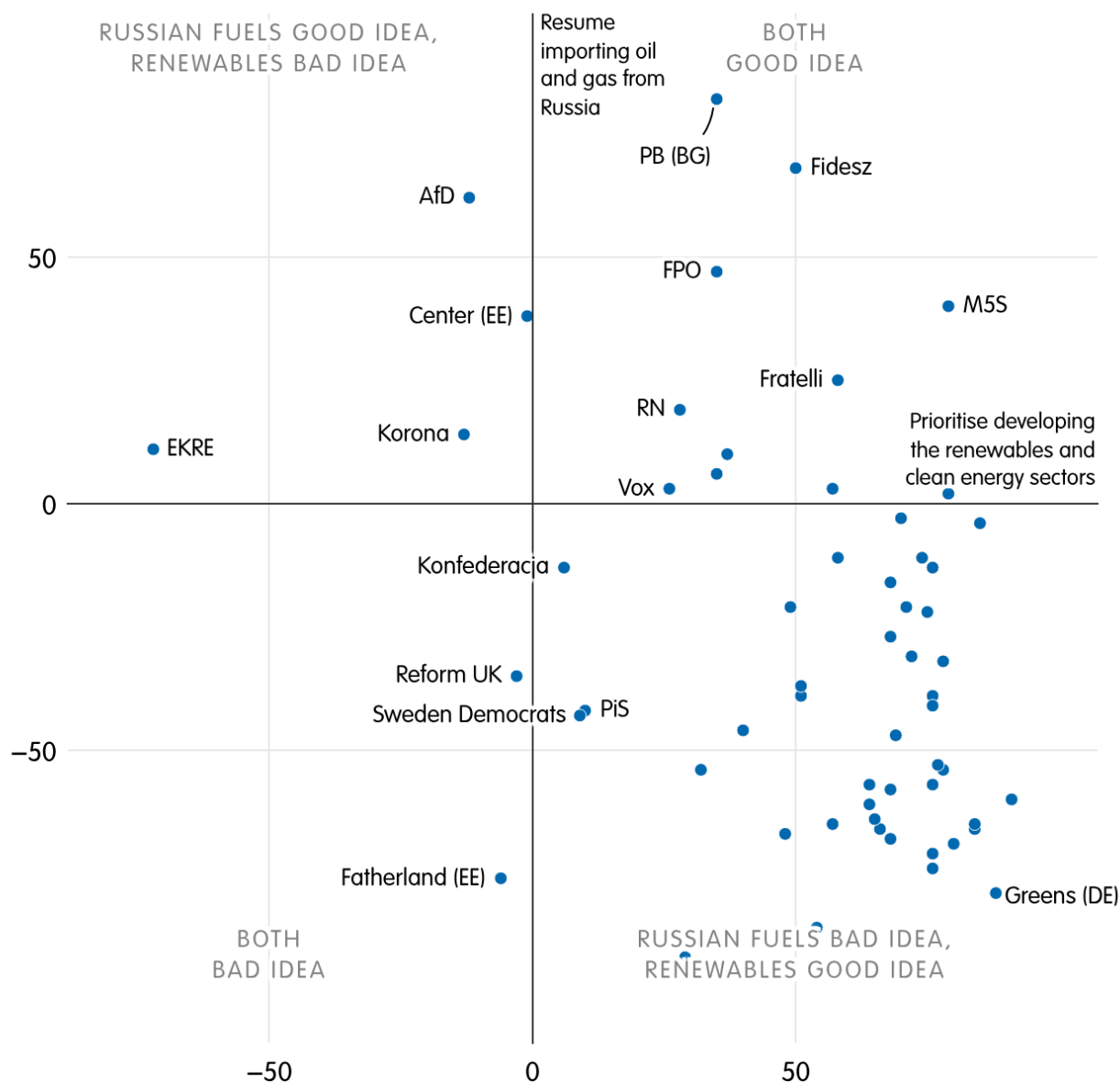
The colour of the dots shows whether a positive, a negative or a neutral outlook prevails in a country.

Source: ECFR-commissioned public opinion survey, conducted by YouGov, Mandate Research and Turuuringute in May 2026.

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In other words, European leaders can push much harder towards clean energy, and can resist the urge to restart Russian energy imports, with strong backing from their voters.

In the current context, do you believe it would be a good or a bad idea for the European countries to do each of the following? Net views, %, by voter intention



Source: ECFR-commissioned public opinion survey, conducted by YouGov, Mandate Research and Turu-uuringute in May 2026
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The challenge for Europe's leaders

European leaders should heed the major individual points of this ECFR polling. Voters no longer trust the US, and largely accept the efforts necessary to cover for the (ongoing) doubts about American security provision. They back Ukraine, but their support currently has limits.

And they choose European-made clean energy over Russian imports, even in a moment of rising prices.

Together, those findings tell a story of a mature and realistic European electorate—in several ways a few steps ahead of their leaders. But they also challenge leaders to catch up and adapt.

- They reveal a public that will judge governments by their real action in pursuing European strategic autonomy and is unlikely to be impressed by hollow anti-Trump posturing. Substance matters and many voters are ready to accept the costs.
- They tell of genuine support for Ukraine, but necessitate a creative shift of framing by governments. Besides the language of accession and boots-on-the-ground, they also need to come up with new ways of framing these issues as well as new mechanisms for backing Kyiv that have real and lasting public backing across Europe, especially on defence and security matters.
- They liberate governments to build energy resilience without worrying about the anti-Russian consensus in Europe collapsing. In other words: policymakers have no excuses for not accelerating progress towards European energy autonomy.

This poll, then, defies political leaders to use the political space available to them. Indeed, it rebukes them for not doing so more. But it also hints at a ticking clock: the prospect of that political space closing if they do not act soon. Two last findings make that particularly stark. Both jeopardise the European mainstream's "licence to operate" among voters.

The first is that Europeans are primarily concerned about a new economic crisis. This may well reflect the recent energy shock triggered by Trump's war in Iran. But it also speaks of voters whose faith in the system will depend on its ability to shield them from the financial turmoil of our times. A prolonged failure to do so could undermine leaders' arguments on other topics raised in this paper, from Europe's geopolitical demeanour to its energy sources.

Generally, in your daily life, how worried are you about the following potential events? Very worried, in %

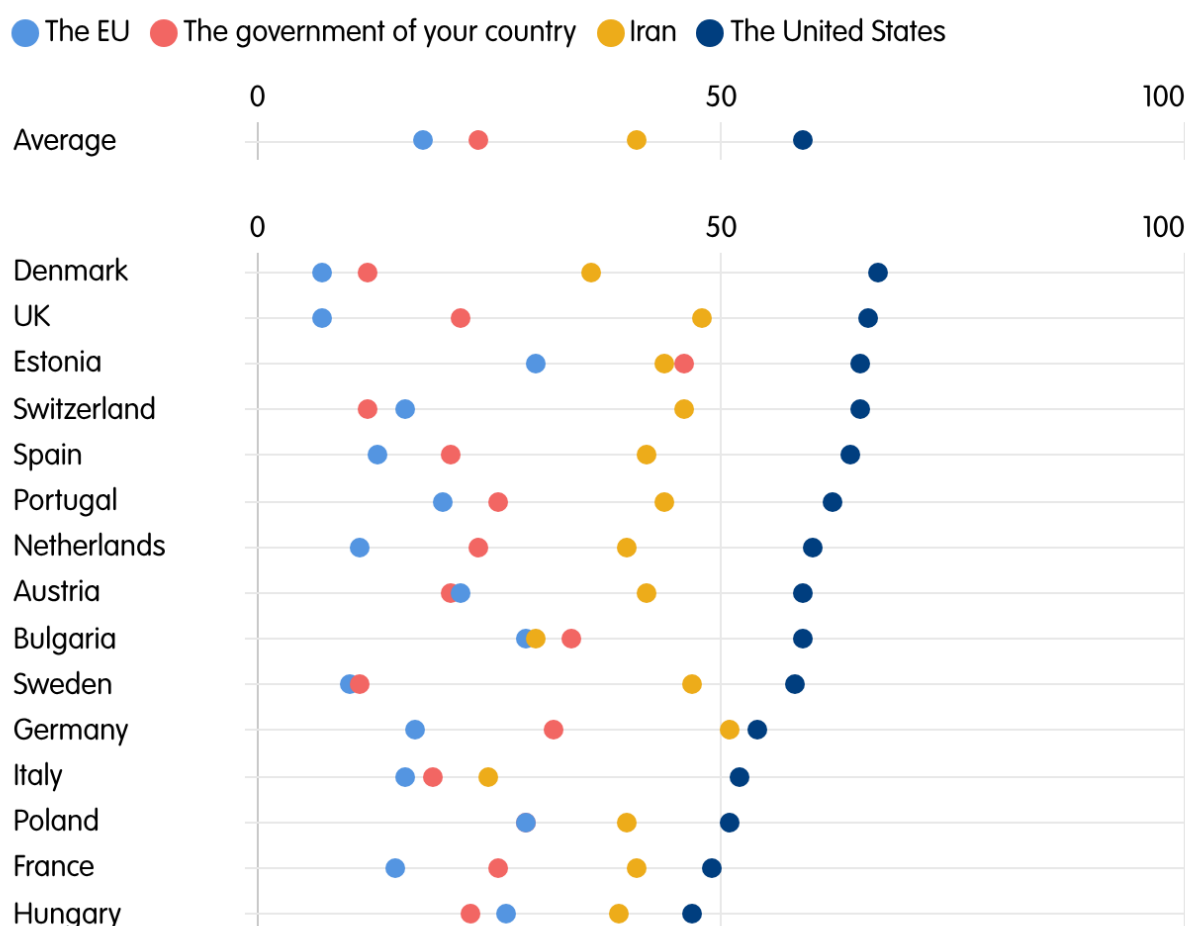


	Average	DE	FR	IT	ES	PL	DK	SE	NL	AT	EE	PT	HU	BG	CH	UK
A major economic crisis in your country	32	40	33	34	58	29	11	17	14	24	48	48	27	54	14	33
Democracy declining in your country	28	31	31	22	51	29	13	22	27	18	35	37	22	30	15	30
A new migration crisis at the EU's borders	26	28	25	21	39	27	17	18	27	26	27	37	25	29	22	29
The US under Donald Trump pulling your country into a war with another country	23	24	21	28	40	30	15	12	22	16	17	33	8	41	12	30
There being a major European war (i.e. not just in Ukraine)	23	21	18	22	44	34	10	11	12	15	31	38	17	37	15	15
Climate change having serious effects on life in your country	21	19	20	25	36	16	13	21	14	18	10	37	25	23	16	20

Source: ECFR-commissioned public opinion survey, conducted by YouGov, Mandate Research and Turu-uuringute in May 2026
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The second cautionary finding is that, while most Europeans blame the US for the current fuel and energy turmoil unleashed by the war, many—notably in Estonia and in Germany—also blame their national governments.

Thinking about recent increases in energy and fuel prices, how much do you think each of the following is responsible for causing these increases? Those responding "a lot" as share of the public, in %



Other possible responses were: "some", "a little", "not at all", and "don't know".

Source: ECFR-commissioned public opinion survey, conducted by YouGov, Mandate Research and Turu-uuringute in May 2026
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That too points to mainstream vulnerabilities. The way leaders navigate the energy crunch may determine whether people feel they can trust them to provide a broader sense of security. Without that trust, it will be hard for policymakers to keep the public on board with difficult efforts in the areas of defence and energy, or when it comes to shaping of the EU's relations with Ukraine.

And the series of upcoming elections—from Sweden to France, Poland, Italy and Spain—provides ample room for sceptics of a self-sufficient Europe (those who oppose clean energy, jointly financed defence spending, a viable and European future for Ukraine) to sway the views of the European public in a much less promising direction.

The new-found realism of the European public needs to be harnessed quickly. But otherwise the current opening risks being wasted.

In *Home Alone*, Kevin learned independence only when his parents left him alone. He recognised the requirements, possibilities and limits of his self-defence. And he demonstrated the value of self-sufficiency. But for all of this to work, he had to act quickly.

Methodology

This report is based on a public opinion poll of adult populations (aged 18 and over) conducted in May 2026 in 15 European countries: Austria, Bulgaria, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the UK.

The polls were conducted online by Mandate Research and YouGov in Austria (1,012 respondents, 30 April – 12 May, margin of error 3.4), Bulgaria (1,013, 30 April – 18 May, 4.08), Denmark (1,004, 30 April – 11 May, 3.5), France (1,501, 5-15 May, 3.43), Germany (2,138, 30 April – 13 May, 2.21), Hungary (1,005, 30 April – 19 May, 4.46), Italy (1,503, 30 April – 14 May, 3.1), Netherlands (1,012, 30 April – 15 May, 4.08), Poland (1,570, 30 April – 15 May, 3.09), Portugal (1,003, 1-19 May, 4.19), Spain (1,542, 30 April – 11 May, 2.56), Sweden (1,077, 30 April – 11 May, 3.3), Switzerland (1,067, 30 April – 18 May, 3.39) and the UK (2,033, 30 April – 7 May, 2.39). Polls were conducted online and telephonically (CATI) by Mandate Research and Turu-uuringute in Estonia (1,001, 30 April – 8 May, 3.27).

Assessments of different party electorates presented in this paper are based on the voter intention question (“If the next parliamentary election was held tomorrow, how would you vote?”). The one exception was France, where they are based on the electoral sympathy question (“Which political party best defends your ideas?”). The analysis includes only those parties whose supporters meet a minimum sample size of 90 respondents.

About the authors

Jana Kobzová is co-director of the European Security Programme and senior policy fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations.

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