

WHAT EUROPEANS THINK ABOUT THE US-CHINA COLD WAR

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SUMMARY

- A majority of European citizens believe a new cold war with both China and Russia is under way – but they mostly do not think that their own country is involved.
- Most believe the US is already taking part in these confrontations, and they consider EU institutions as more likely than their own governments to be in a cold war with China and Russia.
- An optimistic interpretation sees the outsourcing of such great-power competition to Brussels as the arrival of a true EU foreign policy – but a more pessimistic analysis sees a gap emerging between Brussels on the one hand and member state capitals and EU citizens on the other.
- This difference in views between whether one's own country is taking part in the brewing conflict, as opposed to whether America and the EU are, suggests there is no European public consensus that the world of tomorrow will be one of growing competition between democracy and authoritarianism.
- Given this risk, policymakers should find a different, less ideological, framing to generate public support for a strong transatlantic alliance.

Introduction

Is the cold war back, as pundits would have it? Is the ‘free world’ once again facing an axis of rising authoritarianism? Will our future resemble a past that we have already almost forgotten?

A major poll conducted by the European Council on Foreign Relations in 12 EU member states in May and June this year shows that most European citizens tend to agree that the cold war is back. They see the growing rivalry between the United States and China as the new geopolitical reality. But this new confrontation has a twist: most Europeans do not feel that their own states are part of the new cold war.

This finding should not come as a surprise. Previous ECFR surveys revealed that, although Europeans feel much closer to the US than to China – and in most countries closer to the US than Russia (with the only exception being Bulgaria) – they do not see the growing rivalry between Washington and Beijing as their war. What is a surprise is that, out of those who expressed their view, a plurality of Europeans in ECFR’s sample believe that the European Union is engaged in the cold war with China, while most do not think the same of their home countries. In their minds, the EU institutions have emerged as the biggest hawks in Europe; citizens are more likely to believe that a new cold war will be fought by Brussels and Washington rather than by Paris and Berlin, or Warsaw, Rome, and Madrid.

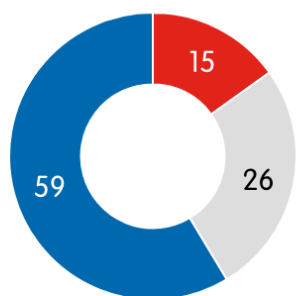
This paper examines some of the implications of these poll findings for the debate about European strategic autonomy. It explores why the idea of a ‘new cold war’ is more likely to divide Europeans from Americans than to unite them.

The new cold war will happen – just not how we think it will

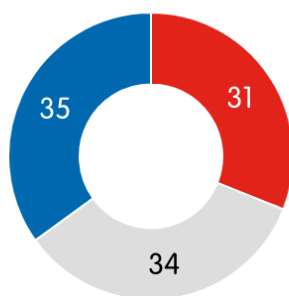
ECFR’s survey shows that nearly two-thirds of EU citizens (63 per cent) believe that there is a new cold war developing between China and the US. Only 15 per cent disagree. The same dynamic is true of Russia: 59 per cent of Europeans think that a new cold war is brewing between Washington and Moscow, with only 16 per cent disagreeing.

More than two-thirds of Europeans believe that the US is in a new cold war with China. In per cent.

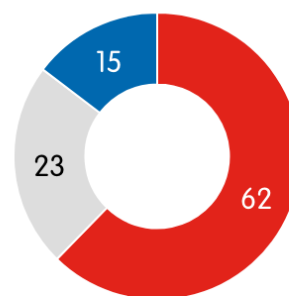
■ Cold war happening ■ Not sure ■ Cold war not happening



Between own country and China



Between the EU and China



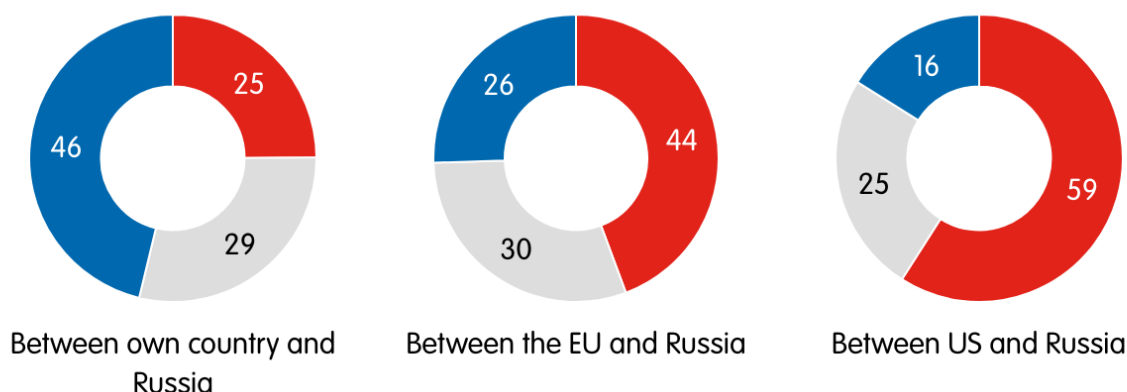
Between the US and China

Jointly for all 12 countries polled. Excluding those who responded 'Don't know'; these represented 19 per cent, 20 per cent, and 18 per cent of the total for respective options. The question read: "A cold war is a type of conflict that doesn't involve direct military action but instead may include economic or political acts (e.g. sanctions, propaganda, proxy conflicts etc), such as the cold war between the West and the Soviet Union in the second half of the twentieth century. To what extent, if at all, do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements? (a) There is a cold war between your country and China, (b) There is a cold war between the EU and China, (c) There is a cold war between the USA and China." 'Happening' is a sum of (1) This is definitely happening and (2) This is probably happening; 'Not happening' is a sum of (3) This is definitely not happening and (4) This is probably not happening; 'Don't know' refers to (5) I am not sure if this is or is not happening.

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A majority of Europeans believe that there is a new cold war between the US and Russia. In per cent.

■ Cold war happening ■ Not sure ■ Cold war not happening

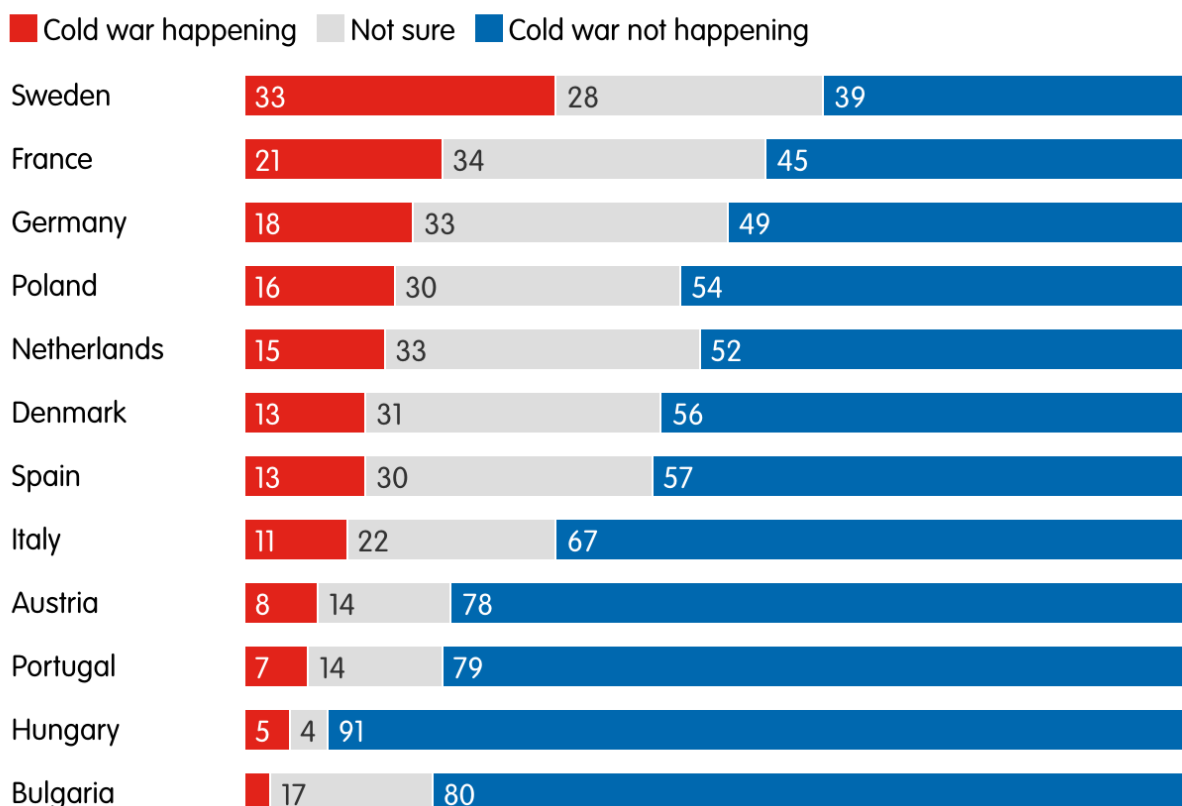


Jointly for all 12 countries polled. Excluding those who responded 'Don't know'; these represented 18 per cent, 19 per cent, and 18 per cent of the total for respective options. The question read: "A cold war is a type of conflict that doesn't involve direct military action but instead may include economic or political acts (e.g. sanctions, propaganda, proxy conflicts etc), such as the cold war between the West and the Soviet Union in the second half of the twentieth century. To what extent, if at all, do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements? (a) There is a cold war between your country and Russia, (b) There is a cold war between the EU and Russia, (c) There is a cold war between the USA and Russia." 'Happening' is a sum of (1) This is definitely happening and (2) This is probably happening; 'Not happening' is a sum of (3) This is definitely not happening and (4) This is probably not happening; 'Don't know' refers to (5) I am not sure if this is or is not happening.

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But when it comes to their own countries, only 15 per cent say they are definitely or probably in a cold war with China, while 59 per cent believe their country is still uninvolved. Twenty-five per cent think that their country is definitely or probably in a cold war with Russia, but 46 per cent disagree. The remainder are unsure whether a cold war is happening. There are nuances between different member states, but the same broad picture emerges: in every country polled, more people deny that a new cold war is taking place between their country and China than agree it might be happening. (The Swedes are the most divided on this issue.) Poland and (very narrowly) France are the only countries polled where more people think their country is involved in a cold war with Russia than disagree.

Most Europeans do not believe that a new cold war is happening between their own country and China. In per cent.

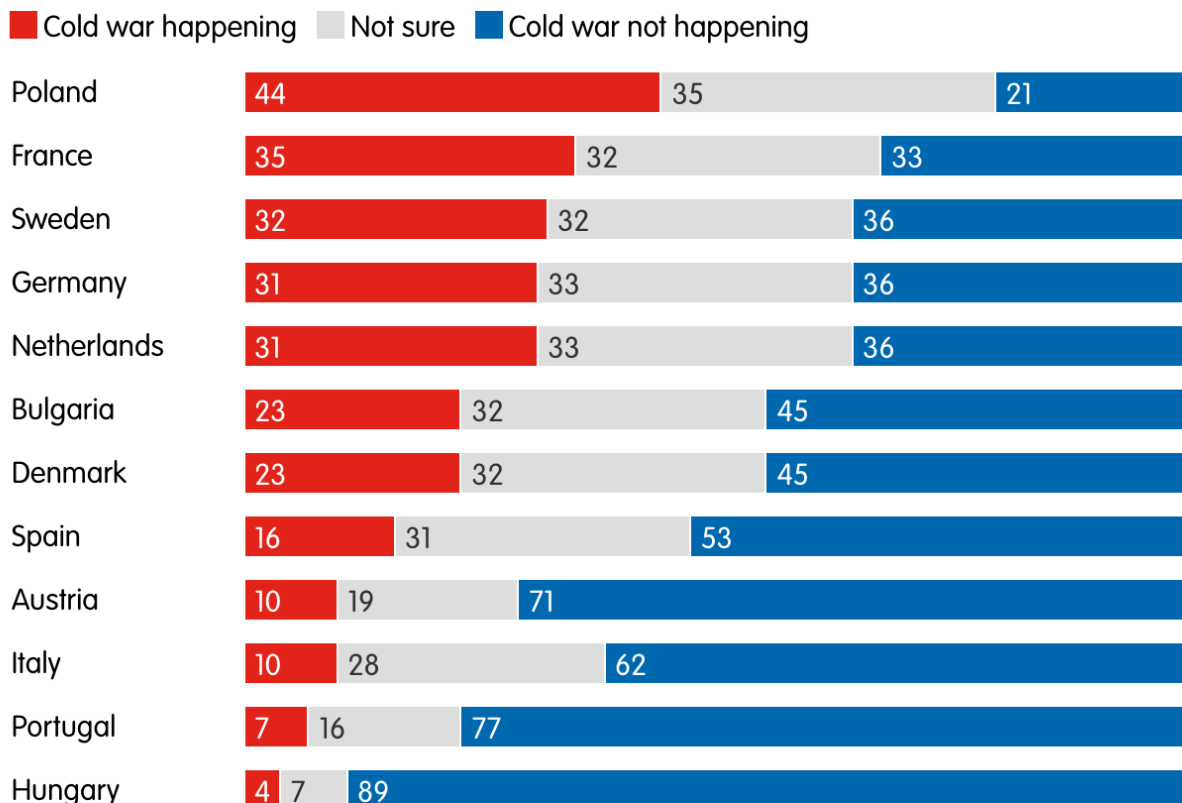


Excluding those who responded 'Don't know'; these represented in DE (18 per cent), ES (13 per cent), BG (17 per cent), HU (10 per cent), IT (17 per cent), AT (15 per cent), SE (17 per cent), PL (20 per cent), DK (22 per cent), NL (25 per cent), PT (18 per cent), FR (23 per cent). The question read: "A cold war is a type of conflict that doesn't involve direct military action but instead may include economic or political acts (e.g. sanctions, propaganda, proxy conflicts etc), such as the cold war between the West and the Soviet Union in the second half of the twentieth century. To what extent, if at all, do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements? There is a cold war between your country and China".

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Aside from Poland and France, most Europeans do not believe that a new cold war is happening between their own country and Russia. In per cent.



Excluding those who responded 'Don't know'; these represented in DE (17 per cent), ES (13 per cent), BG (14 per cent), HU (10 per cent), IT (17 per cent), AT (16 per cent), SE (17 per cent), PL (18 per cent), DK (22 per cent), NL (24 per cent), PT (20 per cent), FR (23 per cent). Question asked: "A cold war is a type of conflict that doesn't involve direct military action but instead may include economic or political acts (e.g. sanctions, propaganda, proxy conflicts etc), such as the cold war between the West and the Soviet Union in the second half of the twentieth century. To what extent, if at all, do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements? There is a cold war between your country and Russia".

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It is striking that, when it comes to a confrontation with Russia or China, Europeans tend to see Brussels, and not their own countries, as part of the new cold war – and therefore could potentially see it as the United States' ally in this conflict. Across the EU as a whole, 31 per cent believe that the EU is probably or definitely in a cold war with China – meaning that twice as many people think the EU is in a cold war with China than think this of their own country. And, on Russia, a plurality say

that the EU is engaged in a cold war: 44 per cent agree that it is taking place while only 26 per cent disagree. The remainder are unsure whether there is a cold war between the EU and China or Russia.

Why are ECFR's findings so surprising?

It has become a strongly held view among foreign policy analysts that the EU's common foreign policy is weak because EU member states have such divergent threat perceptions. The argument is that Poles and citizens of the Baltic states view the EU as too soft on Russia while Bulgarians, Slovaks, and Italians view it as too tough and do not recognise Russia or China as a threat. Yet ECFR's survey challenges this view of Brussels' role. National governments continue to disagree about the EU's policy on China or Russia but, in the eyes of people in every surveyed EU member state (apart from Poland), Brussels seems to be understood as the foreign policy hawk when it comes to dealing with China and Russia. The new West is a coalition between Washington and Brussels rather than between the US and Europe.

Why is this? The positive interpretation is that people are finally recognising the existence of a common European foreign policy. Looked at through this lens, in dealing with global powers such as China and Russia, it is the EU as a continental power, rather than any member state, that is better positioned to defend European interests and values.

But there is a less benevolent interpretation: that the EU allows member states to retire from foreign policy and concentrate on their economic interests. In this reading, the very existence of the EU as a foreign policy player insulates its member states from the troubling problems of the modern world. It allows a new division of labour in which individual states act primarily as mercantile powers while it is up to Brussels to demonstrate toughness and defend European values. This pattern is easily recognisable in Europe-Russia relations.

The irony of Brussels' new hawkishness is that, in the eyes of many European leaders, a muscular EU foreign policy would allow the union to become a sovereign and independent voice in international affairs. Political leaders such as the French president, Emmanuel Macron, hoped that investing in the EU's collective sovereignty would make the EU more independent from the US. Our finding, however, is that European citizens appear to believe that Brussels, rather than their own country, is Washington's most reliable ally when it comes to facing off against China and Russia. More EU integration could, in fact, mean moving closer to the US.

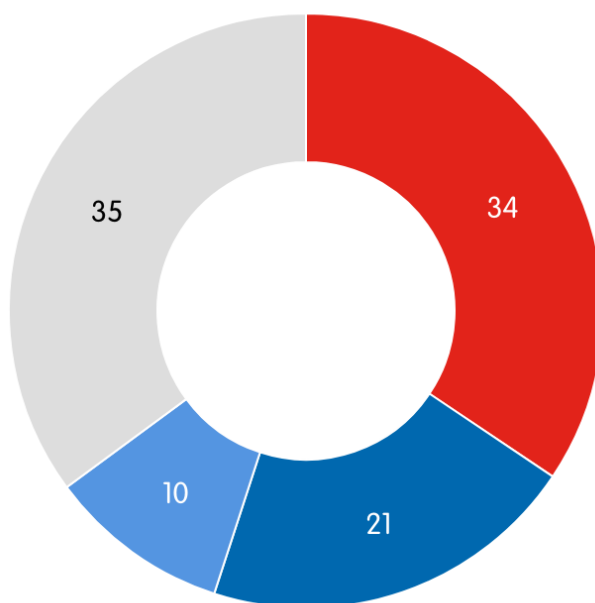
The fact that Brussels is seen as so out of step with national foreign policy positions also challenges a new idea that has taken hold among foreign policy elites: that Germany is a divisive player on foreign policy. Our survey does not support the hypothesis that, in the wake of Brexit, Europeans are obsessed

with German power and that it is Berlin that divides Europe. In reality, large numbers of Europeans trust Germany to defend their interests in a range of policy areas – from economics and security to issues of democracy and human rights. Only 16 per cent do not trust that Germany will defend European interests at all, and one-quarter do not even have an opinion on the matter. Moreover, in very few member states do people worry about a surge of German power in the future: 34 per cent believe that post-war Germany's age of power and prosperity lies firmly in the past, while only 10 per cent believe the best is yet to come for Germany. Europeans may see Berlin as just another dove alongside all the other member states, while Brussels remains the key hawk.

Most Europeans believe that Germany's golden age is in the past.

In per cent.

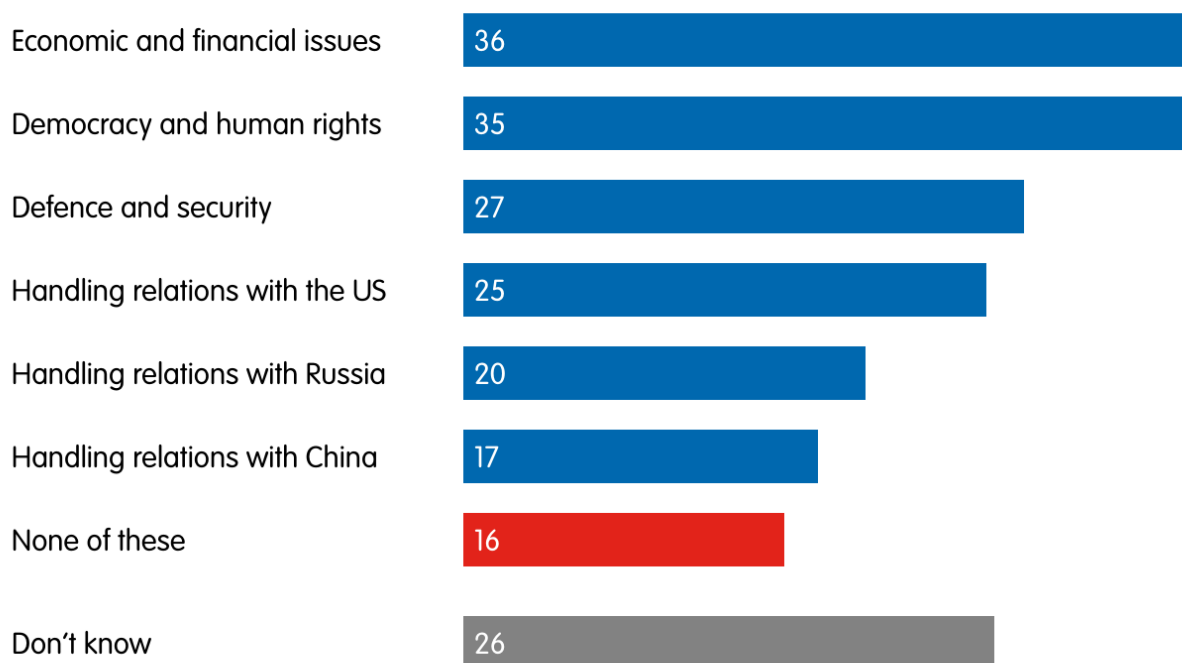
- Germany's golden age is in the past
- Germany is in its golden age today
- Germany's golden age is still to come
- Don't know



Jointly for all 12 countries polled. The question read: "In your opinion, do you think Germany's golden age is past, present or still to come?"

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Large numbers of Europeans trust Germany to defend their interests on a range of policy areas. In per cent.



Jointly for 12 countries polled. The question read: "Do you trust Germany to defend European interests if it plays a leadership role in each of the following areas? Please tick all the areas where you trust Germany."

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Divided by the cold war: The four ideas separating the Atlantic

Many people hoped that the re-emergence of great-power competition in recent years would act as an external federator – both for the West as a whole and within the EU. It is too early to know what the long-term consequences of these dynamics will be. But, in the short term, the idea of a new cold war seems to bring division rather than unity. The data in ECFR's survey point to four visible new cleavages.

The fragmenting framing of the ‘free world versus autocracy’

The Biden administration hopes to bring democracies together in a new alliance against autocratic powers led by Beijing. It has been buoyed in this hope by the more hawkish tone adopted by European governments on China and Russia, and the emergence of the idea of “systemic rivalry” in EU policy documents and speeches. However, ECFR’s poll shows that European publics have mostly not bought into this, at least when it comes to their own countries’ relations with China and Russia.

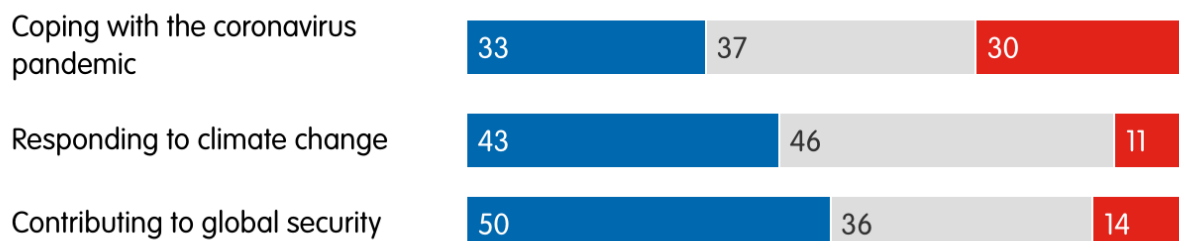
The biggest challenge to Washington’s framing of the conflict may be that, while many EU governments have begun to recognise the systemic rivalry inherent in the EU’s relationship with Beijing, a majority of Europeans do not see China as a threat to their way of life. In fact, only 5 per cent of Europeans say they believe that China rules the world.

In 1948, at the beginning of the first cold war, Hannah Arendt argued that “the most essential criterion for judging the events of our time: Will it lead to totalitarian rule or will it not?” This is not the way most Europeans judge political events today. They do not believe that the distinction between democracies and autocracies is one that structures the world. The largest share of respondents to ECFR’s poll think that the nature of a particular political regime does not sufficiently explain governments’ failure or success to deal with the pandemic or climate change. Even on the issue of contributing to global security, only 50 per cent agree that democracies do more than autocracies, while 36 per cent believe that regime type does not make a difference.

The problem might not be that Europeans are tempted by the lure of Chinese or Russian authoritarianism, but that the border between democracy and authoritarianism is blurred. It may be that Europeans are much more preoccupied with internal threats to freedom, political polarisation, and the power of big money than the threats coming from hostile external powers – in this, there is a stark contrast with the West’s conflict with the Soviet Union in the second half of the twentieth century.

Are democracies better prepared than autocracies to deal with major problems? Europeans are not convinced. In per cent.

- Democracies like Germany and the US are doing better
- Neither is doing better than the the other
- Autocracies like China and Russia are doing better



Jointly for 12 countries polled. Excluding those who responded 'Don't know'; these represented 19 per cent, 20 per cent, and 21 per cent of the total for respective options. The question read: "Which do you believe is doing better, democracies like Germany and the US or autocracies like China and Russia, when it comes to: (a) Coping with the coronavirus pandemic; (b) Responding to climate change; (c) Contributing to global security."

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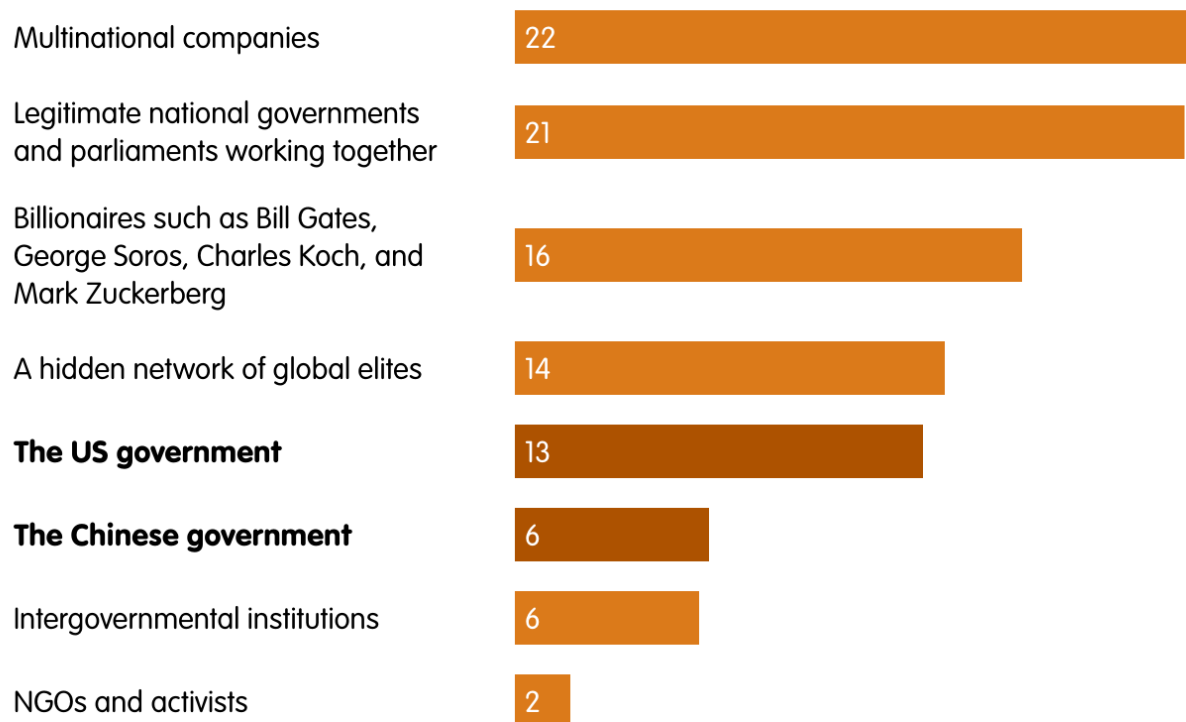
An absent powerful external enemy

A second challenge to policymakers hoping for public backing in the emerging cold war is the lack of agreement among Europeans over whether an existential threat even exists. During the first cold war, people were willing to subordinate their priorities for the sake of protection from Soviet tanks or a nuclear holocaust. In a [survey](#) carried out at the end of 2020, ECFR discovered that less than one in ten citizens in Germany and France thought that their country depended strongly on the American security guarantee. Almost one-third of people in both those countries thought they did not need the guarantee much at all.

ECFR's new survey provides more detail about the drivers behind these perceptions. When respondents were asked who had the most power in the world, most did not focus on the largest states. In fact, European publics seem to have fully internalised the idea that power is much more diffuse. Only 13 per cent of Europeans think that the American government has the most impact on the way the world is run; only 6 per cent think this about the Chinese government. In fact, they tend

to believe that non-state actors, companies, and super-rich individuals together form the most influential groups in the world today.

Very few Europeans think neither the US nor China has the most impact on the way the world is run. In per cent.



Jointly for 12 countries polled. Excluding those who responded 'Don't know', 'Other', or 'None of these'; they jointly represented 27 per cent of the total (21 per cent, 1 per cent, and 5 per cent respectively). The question read: "Which of these groups has the most impact on the way the world is run?"

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The power of geography

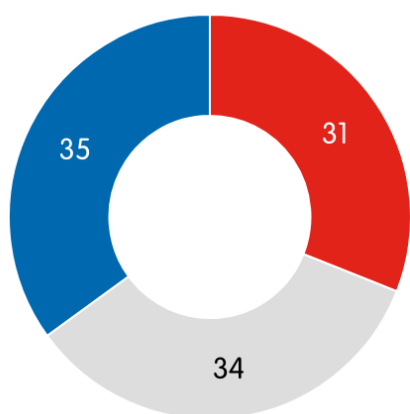
A third problem for the new cold war narrative comes from geography rather than history. It is telling that Europeans perceive the cold war with Russia as more real than the cold war with China. As noted earlier, only 31 per cent of respondents think that a cold war between the EU and China is taking place, but a plurality of 44 per cent think this is true for the EU and Russia. All this suggests an important difference in comparison with the old cold war. The US-China clash has a global dimension, but it is clear that the major theatre of the confrontation will move to Asia. In this new

cold war, Europe finds itself in the position of Japan before 1989. Japan was a reliable American ally, but it was outside the main field of confrontation – which enabled it to focus on its economic development.

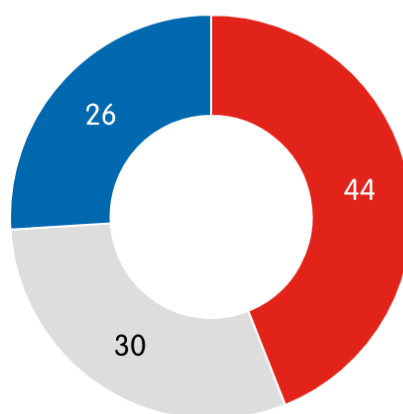
Europeans think a cold war with Russia is more real than with China.

In per cent.

■ Cold war happening ■ Not sure ■ Cold war not happening



Between the EU and China



Between the EU and Russia

Jointly for all 12 countries polled. Excluding those who responded 'Don't know'; these represented 20 per cent and 19 per cent of the total for respective options. Question asked: "A cold war is a type of conflict that doesn't involve direct military action but instead may include economic or political acts (e.g. sanctions, propaganda, proxy conflicts etc), such as the cold war between the West and the Soviet Union in the second half of the twentieth century. To what extent, if at all, do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements? (a) There is a cold war between the EU and China, (b) There is a cold war between the EU and Russia."

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Sovereignty as non-alignment

Given the absence of a disciplining ideological unity between the US and Europe, and of an existential threat in Europe's neighbourhood, it is not altogether surprising that Europeans are thinking differently about alliances, which is the fourth area of divergence.

In the cold war and in the post-cold war period sovereignty – particularly for east Europeans – meant the possibility to join any political and military alliance that you want. But, in today's world, at least some EU member states are trying to prove their capacity for sovereign power by dissenting from

their partners in the EU or NATO rather than by following a common line. Some European citizens now find it more tempting to stand apart from joint activity with the US and other allies rather than to align with the US – as previous ECFR research found.

In ECFR's 2019 pan-European poll, a large majority of respondents said that they would prefer to remain neutral (rather than align with Washington) in a conflict between the US and China or Russia. Even in Poland, the prevailing view was that the country should remain neutral rather than side with the US. Since Joe Biden's election as US president, at least half of the electorate in every surveyed country would still like their government to remain neutral in a conflict between the US and China. In Denmark and Poland – the two countries with the highest proportions of people who would like to take the United States' side – this group accounts for 35 per cent and 30 per cent respectively.

Confirming this reluctance, ECFR's polling in April 2021 showed that Europeans see a world of “necessary partners” rather than fixed alliances. The most striking result was that the biggest share of Europeans (44 per cent) even saw the US as a necessary partner rather than an ally that “shares our [European] interests and values” (21 per cent). Support for an alliance was, again, most pronounced in Denmark and Poland but, there too, the greatest number of citizens regarded the US as a necessary partner. At the same time, a large share of European respondents also considered China (36 per cent) and Russia (35 per cent) to be necessary partners. Only 12 per cent of all respondents saw China as an adversary.

Conclusion: Mind the gap

If this new polling has captured a lasting trend, it reveals the risk inherent in any effort by foreign policymakers in Washington and Brussels to prepare for an ‘all of society’ generational struggle against autocracies in Beijing and Moscow. European and American leaders could well come up short when they discover that they do not have a societal consensus behind them. So far, it is only European institutions rather than European publics that are ready to see the world of tomorrow as a growing system of competition between democracy and authoritarianism.

On its own, this gap in views of geopolitics is not necessarily a sign of the declining importance of the Western alliance. But it is a signal that, should a moment of crisis come, Brussels could be accused of being an American voice in Europe rather than a European voice in the world.

ECFR polls have revealed growing scepticism about Beijing and an unchanged negative perception of Moscow’s intentions. They have also picked up a ‘Biden dividend’ in attitudes towards the US.

However, our latest survey shows that a cold war framing is likely to repel more voters than it attracts and that policymakers will need to make the case for a strong Atlantic alliance in a new way.

To do this, they will need to focus less on ideological divisions and the need for alignment, and to concentrate on showing how a rebalanced alliance can empower and restore sovereignty to European citizens in a dangerous world.

Methodology

This paper is based on a public opinion poll in 12 EU countries that the European Council on Foreign Relations commissioned from Datapraxis and YouGov (Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden), AnalitiQs (the Netherlands), Alpha (Bulgaria), and Szondaphone (Hungary). The survey was conducted in late May and early June 2021, with an overall sample of 16,267 respondents.

This was an online survey conducted in Austria (n = 1,014), Denmark (n = 1,015), France (n = 3,110), Germany (n = 3,001), Italy (n = 1,002), the Netherlands (n = 1,004), Poland (n = 1,060), Portugal (n = 1,000), Spain (n = 1,011), and Sweden (n = 1,047). In Bulgaria (n = 1,002), the survey was conducted online and through telephone interviews. In Hungary (n = 1,001), it was conducted using telephone interviews only. The results are nationally representative of basic demographics and past votes in each country. YouGov used purposive active sampling for this poll.

The general margin of error is ± 3 per cent for a sample of 1,000 and ± 2 per cent for a sample of 3,000.

The exact dates of polling are: Austria (19-27 May), Bulgaria (28 May-6 June), Denmark (19-26 May), France (26 May-4 June), Germany (20-27 May), Hungary (27 May-7 June), Italy (25 May-4 June), the Netherlands (20-24 May), Poland (21 May-9 June), Portugal (20 May-2 June), Spain (2-7 June), and Sweden (25 May-1 June).

For three survey questions discussed in the paper (on the cold war, on are democracies better than autocracies, and on who has the most impact on how the world is run), the non-substantial answers (“Don’t know”, “Other”, and “None of these”) were excluded from the analysis. Hence, one should assume that, for these three questions, when the text refers to a certain percentage of respondents, it refers to those who expressed a question-defined opinion.

About the authors

Ivan Krastev is chair of the Centre for Liberal Strategies, Sofia, and a permanent fellow at the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna. He is co-author of *The Light That Failed: A Reckoning*, among many other publications.

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We very much appreciate the partnership with Thinktank Europa on this project, and on our polling work in general. We would also like to thank the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation for their support for the research in this project.

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