

DYNAMICS OF PUBLIC OPINION IN THE EU COUNTRIES REGARDING SUPPORT FOR UKRAINE: PATTERNS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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Sociological surveys conducted in European countries in late 2022 and early 2023 demonstrate a gradual decline in readiness to support Ukraine and continue pressure on Russia in various areas (arms supplies, refugee acceptance, increased sanctions, etc.).

The fastest and most dramatic decline is in the level of approval for accepting and accommodating Ukrainian refugees in their own country. Among the key European allies, France and Germany have the most pessimistic public opinion about further assistance to our country, and Italy has the lowest approval rates for pro-Ukrainian policies.

Importantly, 48% of respondents in 9 EU countries support the formula “peace at the cost of territories” (in their opinion, the war should be stopped as soon as possible, even if Ukraine has to “give up” some of its territories to Russia). Respondents who have suffered the most from rising energy prices are more likely to support the earliest possible cessation of hostilities at the cost of giving up the full de-occupation of Ukrainian territories.

More than 50% of respondents in key European allied countries support such measures as hosting Ukrainian refugees, supplying weapons to Ukraine, economic sanctions against Russia, and Ukraine’s accession to the EU.

However, there are negative trends in the dynamics (from -5% to 15% according to various indicators), which could lead to a transformation of the policies and rhetoric of current European governments towards Ukraine, or political crises and the coming to power of opposition forces skeptical of our country in the fall and winter of 2023. The pessimistic scenario would mean a curtailment of practical assistance and a rapid escalation of disputes between EU member states, which could ultimately undermine the consolidated position and strategy of the United Europe towards Ukraine.

The gradual decline in support for Ukraine may be due to a shift in focus to domestic socioeconomic problems and downgrading of the Russian military threat to European

countries.

A significant proportion of EU citizens are likely to associate strategic support for Ukraine and increased pressure on Russia with further financial costs for their own households and a drop in living standards.

Public sentiment has a substantial impact on political decision-making by EU governments and the formation of the future strategy of the United Europe regarding the Ukrainian-Russian war.

Timely and systematic analysis of public opinion trends regarding Ukraine, as well as constant updating of our communication approaches in line with new realities, demands and expectations of the European public is one of the key priorities of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and all institutions responsible for maintaining a pro-Ukrainian consensus among the allies.

In order to assist the MFA in fulfilling this task, a systematic analysis of the results of open sociological surveys in the EU countries was conducted. The analysis of “sociological inputs” is the first step in building relevant and proactive communication.

To identify the trends, the author selected the most notable studies with great explanatory potential conducted by reputable sociological organizations and research centers at the European and national levels.

Preference was given to trend polls (when respondents in a particular country were asked the same questions at different time intervals, which allows for accurate tracking of public opinion dynamics) and cross-national polls (when the same questions were asked to respondents in different countries, which allows for accurate comparison of indicators with each other).

The focus of this desk research is on studies that were conducted among all (27) or a significant number of EU countries. This made it possible to obtain a generalized snapshot of the opinions of the European public. Particular attention was paid to surveys in key partner countries of Ukraine, which provide the largest amounts of military and financial assistance, as well as play a significant role in shaping the EU's foreign policy and position on the Ukrainian-Russian war. These are Germany, France, and Italy.

Most of the analyzed studies were conducted at the end of 2022 and in the first months of 2023. The broad timeframe helped to capture long-term and most significant trends “from a bird's perspective” and to get a comprehensive picture of the transformation of European public opinion.

All studies are published on the official websites of the organizations and sociological agencies that conducted and/or commissioned the respective surveys. The analyzed studies are quantitative surveys that were conducted either by face-to-face interviews or through CAWI (online surveys).

Situation assessment

The results of the IPSOS Global Trends Survey show that a vast majority of respondents in Ukraine's key European allies continue to closely monitor Russia's full-scale aggression against our country. 76% of the Dutch, 75% of the Spanish, 71% of the Italians, 68% of the Germans, and 64% of the French declare that they are following the Russian invasion of Ukraine either somewhat or very closely.

It is worth noting that compared to the spring of 2022, the share of those who closely follow the Ukrainian-Russian war in France and Germany has decreased by 5%. In the other countries listed above, the indicator changed slightly, within the statistical error (i.e., no significant changes in the level of attention were recorded).

In November-December 2022, the Euroskopia research network conducted a cross-national survey among residents of 9 European countries (Portugal, Austria, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, France, Germany, Italy, and Greece).

The data shows that almost half of the respondents in these 9 countries favor “peace at the cost of territories”. On the other hand, 32% of respondents oppose territorial compromises by Ukraine in order to achieve a “quick peace”.

The results of the Euroskopia poll show that 56% of residents of nine EU countries support the supply of weapons to Ukraine from European countries. Regarding the possibility of returning to purchasing Russian gas after the war, 35% of participants are ready to consider this option if a peace agreement is reached between Ukraine and Russia, while 46% oppose the resumption of energy partnership with Russia. In addition, 60% of respondents support Ukraine's accession to the European Union.

54% of Europeans who have been seriously affected by rising energy prices are in favor of ending the Ukrainian-Russian war as soon as possible, even if Ukraine has to give up all of its territories. Only 44% of those who have not felt the impact of the energy crisis on their financial situation support the option of “peace at the cost of territories”.

EU residents, who are the most sensitive to the effects of energy inflation, are more likely to be in favor of a “quick peace”, even if it means territorial concessions by Ukraine. Such respondents probably believe that a quick settlement based on the status quo will open the possibility of importing cheap Russian gas again, which will ease the financial pressure on

their households.

A September poll by the Eupinions research agency among the 27 EU countries shows a gradual decline in willingness to continue military support for Ukraine. However, in most areas, the pro-Ukrainian consensus (50% or more approve of certain measures to support our country) remains.

50% of respondents believe that their country should support Ukraine by providing weapons. Compared to March, this figure has decreased by 6%. At the same time, 55% of Europeans share the view that the EU should support Ukraine by arming it (-7% compared to March 2022). 77% of respondents approve of accepting refugees from Ukraine (-9%).

The share of Europeans who believe that the EU should accept Ukraine as a member in the coming years has decreased by 6%. In September 2022, this figure was 63%.

49% of Europeans are most concerned about rising prices, 13% about poor health, and 8% about personal losses. According to 67% of respondents, the EU should strive for greater energy independence, even if it leads to further price increases (-7% compared to March).

According to a IPSOS global survey, in European countries, approval of accepting Ukrainian refugees is declining most rapidly. In the spring of 2022, more than 80% of Europeans supported granting asylum to Ukrainians seeking refuge due to Russia's full-scale aggression.

Today, this figure remains generally high (68-80% of Europeans, depending on the country, approve of granting asylum to Ukrainian refugees), yet it is dropping much faster than other indicators of support.

80% of the Dutch (-6% compared to spring 2022), 78% of Spanish (-7%), 75% of Italians (-7%), 69% of French (-10%), 68% of Germans (-14%) believe that their country should accept Ukrainian refugees "from the current conflict".

69% of the Spanish people agree with the statement that inaction in Ukraine will encourage Russia to further military actions in other countries of Europe and Asia. In France, 68% of residents agree with this opinion, in Germany—63%, in the Netherlands—62%, and in Italy—59%. In Germany, the share of respondents who consider the Russian threat to other countries to be relevant has decreased from 74% to 63%, in the Netherlands—from 69% to 62%, in Spain—from 73% to 69%, and in France, fluctuations are within the statistical error.

For comparison, in the United States, the share of respondents who agreed that inaction in Ukraine would lead to Russia's attacks on other countries decreased by 9% (from 77% to 68%). **Thus, the perception of an immediate military threat from Russia is gradually eroding among the Euro-Atlantic community.**

The de-emphasis of Russian security challenges in the European public consciousness and public discourse, as well as the reorientation to internal problems, may reduce interest in further support for Ukraine and increase the number of supporters of “the earliest possible peace at the cost of territorial compromises”.

59% of the Dutch (-6% compared to spring 2022), 52% of the French (-1%), 49% of the Spanish (+3%), 48% of the Germans (-7%), 30% of the Italians (-2%) support the provision of weapons and/or air defense systems to the Ukrainian military.

62% of Spanish, 61% of Dutch, 57% of French, 50% of Germans and 42% of Italians approve of the introduction of the most stringent economic sanctions against Russia. Only the Spanish population showed a 6% increase in the share of those who support retaliatory measures against Moscow. Among Germans, the number of supporters of the toughest sanctions regime against Russia has fallen by 12% compared to the spring of 2022, among the Dutch—by 11%, among Italians—by 8%, and among the French—by 5%.

At the same time, only in the Netherlands more than half of the population (53%) support restricting or banning imports of Russian oil and gas, even if this would lead to a sharp rise in energy and food prices. In France, the number is 45% (-8% compared to the spring of 2022), in Spain—45% (-1%), in Italy—43% (-3%), and in Germany—42% (+3%).

The recorded trends in public opinion indicate a gradual weakening of the strategic endurance of European societies in deterring Russian aggression against Ukraine due to mounting socio-economic problems, energy and food inflation, and shifting focus to internal challenges.

According to the Eurobarometer survey (January-February 2023), 32% of Europeans consider inflation, price increases, and the cost of living to be the biggest problem for the EU, 28%—the international situation, 26%—energy, 20%—the environment and climate change, 18%—the economic situation, and 17%—immigration.

Probably, some EU residents associate the tightening of the sanctions regime and the expansion of sanctions against Russian energy with further growth in prices and the cost of living. Also, a proactive sanctions policy may be viewed by the European public as an escalating step, while a large proportion of EU residents want Ukraine to compromise with Russia to achieve a ceasefire as soon as possible.

Hypothetically, “skeptics” and “pragmatists” among European citizens link the growing support for Ukraine (and pressure on Russia) to the prolongation of the Ukrainian-Russian full-scale war, which, in their opinion:

a) absorbs budgetary funds that could be used to support their own citizens, economy and overcome internal problems; b) increases financial expenses of their households; c)

contributes to the fact that a large number of Ukrainian refugees remain in European countries.

Scepticism about the need for further support for Ukraine is likely to be reinforced by two factors. The first is that Russia is gradually ceasing to be perceived as a direct security threat to European countries and sovereign Europe as a whole. The second is that because Moscow has failed to achieve even minimal strategic goals in a full-scale war against Ukraine, Russia is increasingly seen as weak and incapable of further aggression against the EU.

According to two IFOP surveys conducted in France in February 2023, 64% of French people have a favorable opinion of Ukraine (-18% compared to March 2022), 16% (-5%) have a favorable opinion of Russia. 67% of respondents approve of economic and financial sanctions against Moscow (-5%), 17% disapprove.

In the context of military support, 60% of the French approve of the supply of military weapons to Ukraine by European countries (-5%), while 27% disapprove (+7%).

There is a steady decline in support for Ukraine's European perspective. The share of French people who favor Ukraine's accession to the EU has decreased from 63% to 55% (by 8%). At the same time, the number of sceptics of Ukraine's European integration increased by 8% to 45%.

71% of respondents agree with the statement that France and the EU should primarily seek to reach a negotiated solution between Ukraine and Russia, while continuing to provide significant military assistance.

Only 29% believe that France and the EU should primarily continue to provide extensive military support to Ukraine to help our country defeat Russia militarily.

The international company IFOP records more pessimistic trends (in dynamics) in Germany. From March 2022 to February 2023, the share of Germans who have a good opinion of Ukraine decreased by 25% to 61%. At the same time, 21% have a positive attitude toward Russia. 62% of respondents approve of the economic and financial sanctions imposed by European countries against Russia (-18%), 30% disapprove (+15%).

The share of Germans who support the supply of military weapons to Ukraine has decreased by 14%, to 52%. At the same time, 41% of German residents do not support the transfer of weapons to our country (+14%). Negative dynamics are also observed with regard to support for Ukraine's accession to the EU. In February 2023, 52% of Germans supported Ukraine's accession to the EU (-16%), while 48% opposed our country's European integration (+16%).

In February-March, according to the ZDF-Politbarometer, 41% of Germans believed that the West should urge Ukraine to accept territorial losses in exchange for peace. According to 41% of respondents, the West should support Ukraine to return all the territories occupied by Russia. Almost half of the Germans (49%) agree with the thesis that the supply of heavy weapons to Ukraine raises the risk of a Russian attack on the West, while 45% of respondents disagree with this statement.

Another ZFD-Politbarometer study (February 2023) showed that 46% of German residents do not believe in Ukraine's victory over Russia (+6% compared to November 2022), 38% believe that Ukraine will win the war, and 18% chose the "difficult to answer" option. 60% of Germans support Ukraine's accession to the EU in the coming years, 34% do not.

45% of Germans believe that the West should maintain military support for Ukraine at the current level (+11% compared to January 2023), 25% think that military support should be stepped up (-14%), and 22%—that it should be reduced (+1%). This is according to a ZDF-Politbarometer survey conducted in April 2023.

Conclusions

About half or more of the respondents in most of the countries analyzed are in favor of continuing military support for Ukraine. However, there is a negative shift in European public opinion regarding the further provision of military assistance to our country.

60% (-5%) of the French population believe that their country should support Ukraine by providing weapons. Similarly, 52% (-14%) of Germans approve of the supply of combat weapons to Ukraine by European countries. At the same time, 59% (-6%) of the Dutch believe that their country should continue to arm Ukrainian defenders.

Both globally and at the level of individual countries, there has been a sharp reduction in the share of respondents who approve of accepting and accommodating Ukrainian refugees in their own country.

On average, 80-90% of Europeans support strengthening European leadership on the world stage and are in favor of developing autonomous European defense capabilities.

However, as commodity and energy prices rise, Europeans are gradually becoming less strategically stable, less willing to endure economic hardship and lower living standards to support Ukraine and gain long-term security benefits. The desire to achieve a decisive victory over Russia and preserve Euro-Atlantic solidarity (in a broader sense) is diminishing under the pressure of inflation and the energy crisis.

Less than 50% of the French, Germans, Italians, and Spanish support limiting or completely stopping Russian oil and gas imports if it leads to higher food and energy prices. Since March 2022, the share of French people who approve of the energy blockade of Russia has decreased by 8% due to a certain deterioration in living standards.

Support for maintaining or strengthening the sanctions regime against Russia is declining, especially in countries such as Germany, France, and Italy, where approval of sanctions is falling the fastest and most intensely.

Respondents are less and less willing to put up with higher prices, even for the sake of ensuring EU energy independence, which is in the long-term national interest of their countries. 42% of Germans, 41% of Italians, and 35% of the Dutch are ready to return to purchasing Russian gas if the war ends with an agreement between the parties.

One of the key problems is the weakening of the perception of a direct military threat from Russia. No more than 40% of respondents in the Netherlands, France, Germany, Italy, and Spain agree that the world will become much more dangerous if Russia wins and achieves its declared goals in the war against Ukraine. As a result, “everyday” problems and financial losses of European households have rendered national and personal risks from Russian revanchism and the less urgent consequences of the Ukrainian-Russian war less relevant.

Western, especially European, public opinion is undergoing a threatening transformation. There is a gradual shift from idealistic pro-Ukrainian positions (in general, support in various areas exceeds 50%, but long-term trends seem pessimistic) to “peace and quiet at any cost”.

As a result, the gap between European governments’ policies and public expectations is likely to widen, and the gap between the external pro-Ukrainian consensus and the real underlying sentiment will grow.

European governments and the Biden administration in the United States may face major political risks due to the course of increased support for Ukraine, the aforementioned “gap”, negative public opinion trends, and the growing popularity of the “soonest resolution”. In a pessimistic scenario, this could lead to political crises, a new wave of populism, and anti-systemic movements in Europe.

Due to these trends, pro-Ukrainian governments on the continent may lose power in the fall and winter of 2023. In another scenario, EU leaders will have to rebuild their policies and rhetoric toward Ukraine to respond to the gradual shift in public opinion and to “defuse” criticism from the opposition in advance.

There is a risk of sceptical political forces in European countries coming to power. They will criticize the dominant parties for their excessive support of Ukraine, which, in their opinion, has harmed national interests and citizens.

“Pragmatists” are likely to use a socially oriented agenda, focusing on issues such as prices, tariffs, the energy crisis, and the “decline” of European economies and industries.

Anti-Ukrainian politicians are likely to attack the dominant political and media consensus in Europe, the “anti-patriotic” elites who they claim are working for their own selfish interests or those of the United States. Sceptics will argue that these are the motives that drive current European governments to support Ukraine until the final victory, seemingly contrary to their countries’ national interests. In addition, “pragmatists” can capitalize on anti-American sentiment in Germany, France, and Italy.

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