

BETWEEN VISION AND REALITY

**The Perception of the Zeitenwende
in the German Population**

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This study on German foreign policy in the context of the „Zeitenwende“ (turning point) provides a comprehensive overview of public perception in Germany. It highlights the differences between the general public and a more engaged public that is often professionally involved in foreign and security policy matters or has a strong interest in them.

This brief summarizes the study design and key findings. The full study in German is available on our website: www.dpart.org

STUDY DESIGN

Twelve focus groups conducted in eight cities across Germany between March 1 and April 30, 2024:

- Six groups from the general population in Stuttgart, Hamburg, Munich, Magdeburg, Berlin (outskirts), and Düsseldorf. These groups were mixed in terms of age, gender, education, and party preference and were recruited by d|part.
- Six groups from a more engaged public focused on foreign and security policy in Stuttgart, Hamburg, Munich, Berlin, and Düsseldorf. Participants were self-selected.

Six participatory observations of the public discussion series „Zeitenwende vor deiner Haustür“ by the „Zeitenwende Action Workshop“ of DGAP in Stuttgart, Neumünster, Munich, Magdeburg, Waren (Müritz), and Düsseldorf between March 1 and April 30, 2024.

A representative survey of the general population in eight EU member states, conducted between April 10 and May 2, 2024, covering Germany, France, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Poland, Romania, and Sweden, with a total of 10,644 respondents. In Germany, 2,344 people were surveyed.

KEY FINDINGS

High Levels of Unfamiliarity and Vague Notions of the „Zeitenwende“

For many people, foreign and security policy generally appears abstract and very distant from their daily realities.

There is significant unfamiliarity among the population regarding the „Zeitenwende,“ announced by Olaf Scholz in February 2022, and often only vague ideas about what the term specifically entails.

Many participants from the engaged public attribute this lack of understanding to what they perceive as inadequate communication regarding the „Zeitenwende.“ This includes both the explanation of strategic goals and the involvement of the public in this process.

Pessimism, Crisis Fatigue, and Political Distrust as Barriers to Communicating the „Zeitenwende“

An overall pessimistic mood characterizes the perception of geopolitical challenges in the context of the „Zeitenwende,“ shaped by wars, insecurity, and especially economic concerns. Central to this are worries about peace and security, along with the sentiment expressed by many participants that Germany is increasingly taking on a less relevant role on the international stage, both politically and economically.

For the general population, the term „Zeitenwende“ is often understood more as a general description of the various crises of recent years.

There is widespread distrust in the government’s ability to implement such a profound shift effectively. This distrust is exacerbated by general crisis fatigue and dissatisfaction with previous crisis management.

Due to past multiple crises and the generally negative assessments of crisis management, many people are skeptical about whether Germany can successfully navigate the „Zeitenwende“ and regain a more significant role internationally.

Engaged Public Calls for a More Active and Strategic Foreign Policy

In contrast, the vast majority of the engaged public demands a more strategic and clearer stance from Germany on major foreign and security policy issues.

Specifically, they criticize the lack of action capability and willingness from Germany and the EU. Concrete concerns include insufficient structural and military capacities, as well as the unclear and poorly united position of the EU on foreign policy matters.

They advocate for a significantly more active role for Germany on the international stage, viewing the intended realignment of the Bundeswehr and a more vigorous and stronger foreign policy as overdue, particularly in dealing with Ukraine, Russia, and the People's Republic of China.

Low Consensus on Key Foreign and Security Policy Issues Among the General Population

Regarding central questions of German foreign and security policy, there is less consensus among the general population compared to the engaged public groups due to the broad range of opinions.

For instance, both groups agree that Germany should pursue close cooperation with international partners, particularly in Europe. However, the idea of Germany following a unique foreign policy path was predominantly rejected only in the engaged public groups.

Both groups also acknowledge the importance of protecting democracy and freedom in German foreign policy.

When it comes to the direction of German foreign policy, only the engaged public groups predominantly called for a more active role for Germany, especially regarding stronger support for Ukraine.

While the general population largely rejected a passive foreign policy, active support for Ukraine elicited mixed reactions, with fears of military escalation being a prominent concern.

This ambivalence in the views of the general population is also evident in the example of trade relations with authoritarian states like China and Russia. Some favored the economic benefits or necessity of such relationships, while others warned against the risks of excessive dependency.

In the engaged public groups, there was a strong emphasis on several geo-economic risks and the necessity of „de-risking“ Germany's and Europe's trade relations.

The Public Perceives Foreign Policy Challenges Not in Isolation from Domestic Politics and Issues in Germany

There is a clear difference between the general population and the engaged public regarding the *Zeitenwende*, especially in how they view the connection between domestic and foreign policy, particularly related to existing concerns and fears.

Participants in the engaged public groups prioritized foreign and security policy issues and repeatedly called for more investments in German foreign and security policy, contrasting with the general population's views. They explicitly criticized the widespread conflation of domestic and foreign policy issues among the broader public, suggesting that the new geopolitical reality has not yet adequately resonated with the population.

For many participants in the general population groups, there was indeed no clear distinction between foreign and domestic policy. Given the frequently perceived shortcomings and domestic issues in Germany, a more active and financially demanding foreign policy was repeatedly questioned and viewed as less of a priority compared to direct investments in education or public infrastructure in Germany.

Reasons for the Limited Resonance of the *Zeitenwende* Among the Public

The reasons why Chancellor Scholz's declaration of the *Zeitenwende* has either found little resonance among many people in Germany or why many remain critical or skeptical of a far-reaching shift in German foreign and security policy are multifaceted.

On one hand, these reasons stem from a combination of widespread concerns, significant uncertainty, and diverse crisis experiences within the population, coupled with strong mistrust toward political decision-makers, who are often not believed capable of implementing substantial and comprehensive changes.

On the other hand, the communication of the *Zeitenwende* has missed its mark in conveying its significance, partly because the majority of people do not solely think about the *Zeitenwende* in a strictly foreign policy context.

Therefore, the established connections between domestic and foreign policy in public discourse must be seriously considered and addressed more effectively in communications.

Simply explaining and justifying why certain foreign policy measures and steps need to be taken is insufficient to convince many people of their necessity or priority.

Representatives of the engaged public and political decision-makers should, therefore, question whether they need to make greater efforts to understand the views of the broader population, enabling a more constructive dialogue.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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About

d|part is a non-profit, independent, and non-partisan think tank based in Berlin. Our work focuses on research and the promotion of various forms of political participation.

Through our research, we aim to contribute to a democratic society where all individuals can express their opinions and actively participate in and shape political processes. Therefore, our goal is to better understand, strengthen, and promote political engagement. A fundamental understanding of how public opinion positions itself on socio-political issues and what underpins these positions is particularly important.

We employ evidence-based research and scientific expertise to generate new insights that inform political and societal debates and actively communicate them to diverse target groups. These groups include government institutions, politicians, and political parties, as well as civil society organizations, the media, and public administration. We place special importance on engaging with social groups that are often less frequently or more challenging to reach through traditional political channels.

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