# Russia's invasion of Ukraine:
# A watershed for European public opinion?

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## Introduction

Before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the geopolitical struggle over territory seemed like something of the past in Europe. Many European countries were keen on cashing in a "peace dividend." They decreased their armed forces as they considered weapons and deterrence no longer necessary. Instead, diplomacy and economic interdependence were considered key instruments in the international arena. Against this backdrop, many Western leaders, experts and pundits consider Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, as a watershed moment for European security, forcing Europe back into the harsher logic of the past. Accordingly, Russia is (again) an existential threat and the West has to stand together and prepare—also militarily—for a prolonged confrontation.

There have already been clear political responses across Europe. Finland and Sweden formally submitted a joint application for membership in NATO (The Guardian 2022). Germany announced that it would spend more than two percent of its gross domestic product on defense in the future (SIPRI 2022) and supplied arms to Ukraine, breaking with a key postwar foreign policy principle (namely, not to supply weapons to crisis areas). When Chancellor Scholz announced these measures to the German Bundestag just days after the invasion began, he described the invasion as a watershed, a *Zeitenwende*. "And that means," Scholz said, "that the world afterwards will no longer be the same as the world before" (Bundesregierung 2022).

Here, we take up this claim and apply it to European public opinion. Is it after the invasion no longer the same as before? This is an important question to answer. The central normative principle of representative democracy dictates that policy changes should reflect the preferences of the population, especially when these changes are fundamental in nature. Moreover, without public support, there are strong political incentives to roll back policies that seemed reasonable and opportune under the immediate impact of a dramatic event. A

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match between shifts in policy and public opinion, in contrast, increases the likelihood that the new policy will endure. So how has the European public reacted to Russia's invasion of Ukraine? Are there signs that they, too, see this event as a turning point?

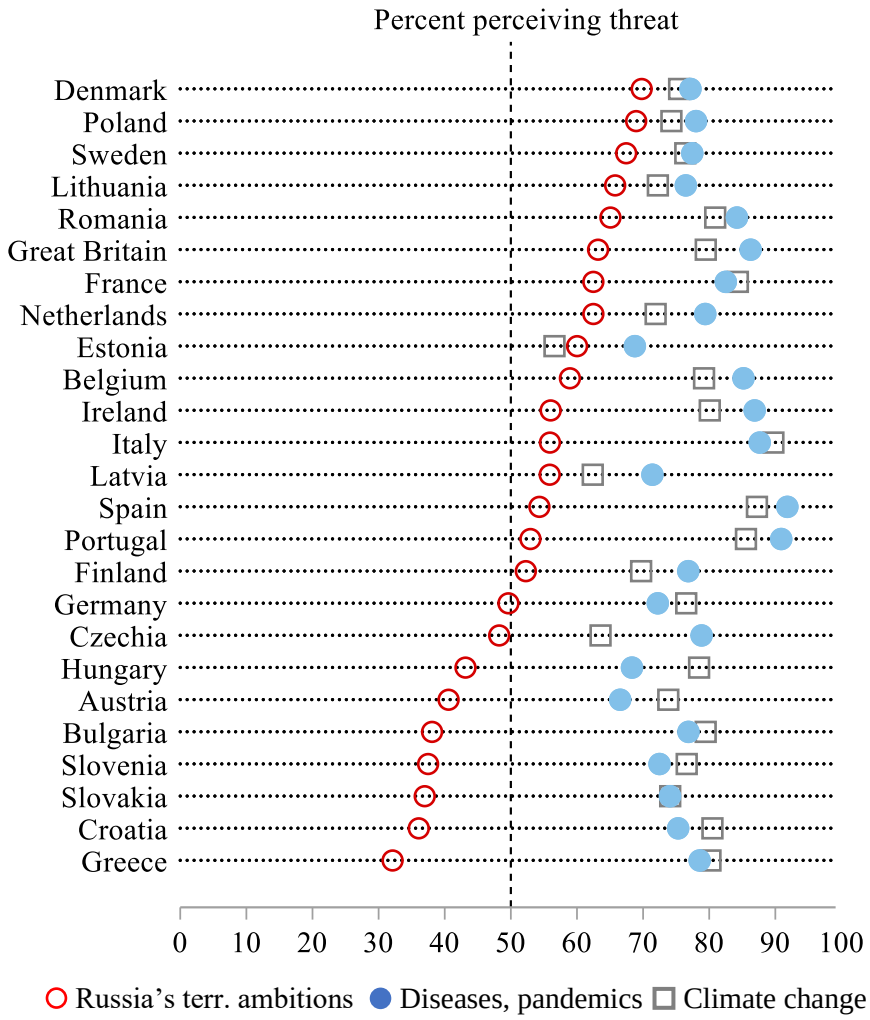
In what follows, we will review the available evidence. We will examine average public opinion in a number of European countries before and after the invasion. The picture we can currently draw is incomplete, however, because data availability leaves much to be desired. For this reason, and due to space constraints, we have to limit ourselves to analyzing a few worldviews and political attitudes in different subgroups of countries, and we report only on country averages rather than examining relevant subgroups as well. Moreover, at the time of writing—May 2022—the war in Ukraine has not yet ended and it is unclear how it will end. Therefore, at this point, we can only provide a snapshot of the current state of affairs. Below, we first present this snapshot, followed by a more general discussion of what we can currently say about the more difficult question of whether this is a turning point for public opinion in Europe.

## The status quo ante

Before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, European publics did not consider Russia's territorial ambitions harmless, but it was also not at the top of their list of international threats. **Figure 1** shows that in October 2020, Europeans were more concerned with the COVID-19 pandemic. Perhaps more significantly, climate change was also considered as more threatening than Russian ambitions. Another message of **Figure 1** is that perceptions of threat from Russia varied across Europe. Importantly, there was not a simple East-West divide in these perceptions, with West Europeans being less concerned than East Europeans. We observe groups of East European publics at the top and the bottom of the distribution. While Lithuanians, Poles, and Romanians were among the most worried according to these data, the publics in Croatia, Slovenia, and Hungary were among the countries with the least worried publics.[2] The former apparently considered Russia an ally rather than an opponent, broadly reflecting their governments' Russia strategy of accommodation. Several Western European citizens also rank near the bottom, presumably because they are too geographically distant and lack the historical experience of being in Russia's sphere of influence to have considered Russia a critical threat. In general, threat perceptions tend to fluctuate with events that focus public awareness on a given issue. Between the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the buildup of troops around Ukraine in 2021, no sufficiently dire news from Russia reached the (Western) European public to make Russia's territorial ambitions salient. Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that revisionist Russia was not high on most citizens' list of concerns.

[2] Given their geographic location and history, one might expect the other two Baltic countries, Latvia and Estonia, to also be at the top of such a distribution. However, these countries have large Russian minorities that feel less threatened by Russia than their compatriots. Therefore, on average, these countries have only a medium level of threat perception.

**Figure 1: Perception of international threats in 2020**




Data: SecEUrity Project. Technical details and question wording are reported in Appendix A1.

In addition to the pandemic, the election of U.S. President Biden - and the ouster of President Trump - was another important event that shaped many Europeans' views of international politics in the years leading up to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The European public's attitude toward the United States tends to depend on who is in the White House. If the U.S. president is popular, so is the U.S. as a country. President Biden received high trust ratings across Europe, much higher than his predecessor Trump [1] (Figures in square brackets refer to Appendix A2, which provides information on data sources). It is hard to overestimate how unpopular President Trump was in Western Europe. The 2019 PEW Global Attitudes Survey shows that Trump was as unpopular in many European countries as Russian President Putin. [2]. It also stands out that President Trump was not as unpopular in some Eastern European countries as he was in Western Europe, a difference that is likely due not only to differing assessments of Trump's foreign policy positions, but also to his cultural views. Overall, however, perceptions of friend and foe returned after Trump's impeachment to what they had been in previous years. Attitudes toward Biden and the United States were friendly, while attitudes toward Putin and Russia were unfriendly.

In terms of fundamental preferences regarding the European security order, for many years large segments of the publics wanted it "both ways," i.e. they supported both their country's membership in NATO and European collective defense efforts (Eichenberg 2003; Mader et al. 2021).[3] When asked how they would vote if they could vote for or against their country's membership in NATO, 71 percent of citizens in all NATO member states said they would vote in favor (lowest support in Slovakia with 51 percent, highest in Lithuania with 89 percent), according to a survey commissioned by NATO's Public Diplomacy Division in April/May 2021 [3]. Eurobarometer data from February/March 2021 show that across all EU member states, an average of 78 percent were in favor of a common defense and security policy among EU member states (lowest support in Austria with 57 percent, highest in Portugal with 96 percent) [4].

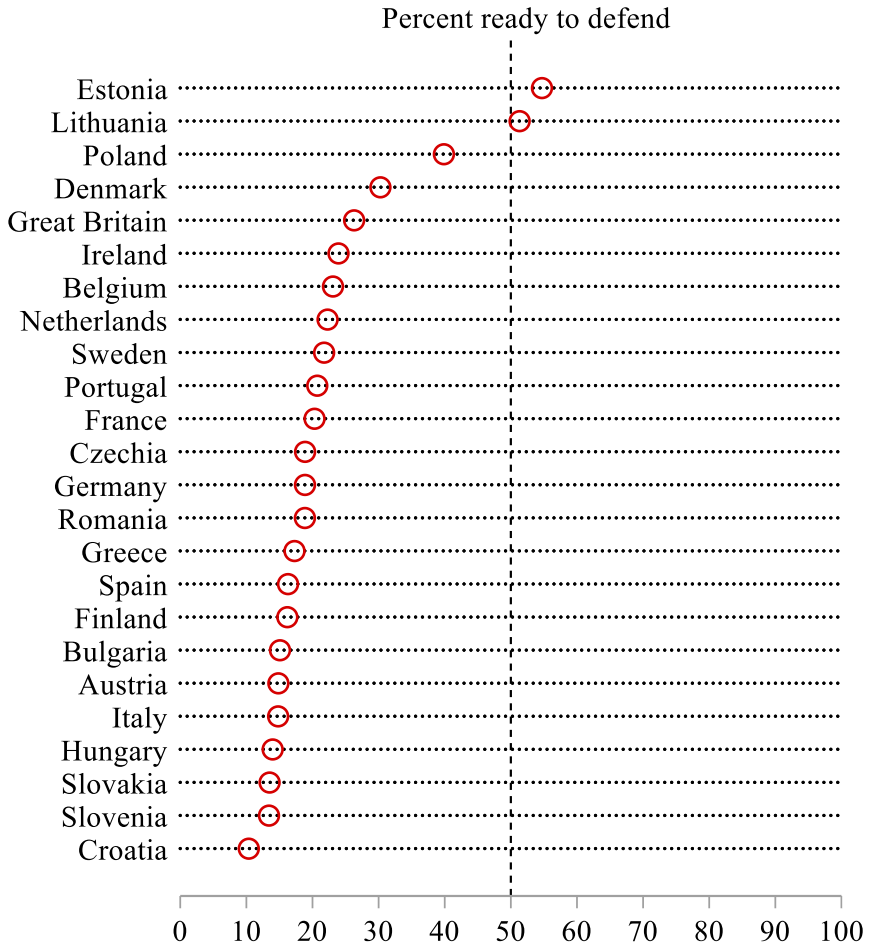
However, it is probably a mistake to interpret these opinion data as indicating a sophisticated, well-thought-out position on European security strategy. Public opinion on this complex issue has been and continues to be ambivalent. To some extent, positive views of NATO and EU security and defense integration seem to indicate symbolic support for the principles of multilateralism and collective defense in general. Many scholars view the strong public support for increasing European security and defense integration as superficial, incoherent, and likely to collapse in the face of financial, human, or sovereignty costs (Sinnott 2000; Brummer 2007; Peters 2014).

In this respect, it seems particularly instructive to look more closely at the resolve of European populations to stand together in the event of Russian aggression. Worryingly, prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, many Europeans showed little resolve when asked if their country should defend other European countries under attack by Russia. **Figure 2** shows the percentage of the public that supported using their country's military to secure the borders of a close ally in the event of a Russian attack. According to this data, collected in October 2020, majorities in only the other two Baltic countries were willing to defend Latvia. In Poland, about 40% supported such a policy, while in all other countries surveyed the percentages were even lower. In Europe's most powerful countries, fewer than 30 percent supported sending their own troops to defend a NATO and EU member (Germany: 22 percent; France: 26 percent; Britain: 29 percent). Data from other surveys show similar—or even lower—levels of willingness to defend other NATO and/or European allies [5].

Overall, then, it seems that the Russian invasion of Ukraine caught many Europeans quite unprepared. After the stressful Trump years (The Economist 2019, NYT 2017), it seemed as if difficult security policy decisions would no longer have to be grappled with for the foreseeable future, and geopolitical challenges seemed distant in time and space.

[3] Most European countries are members of both NATO and the EU. Exceptions include Norway and Turkey, which are not EU members, and Ireland, Austria, Sweden and Finland, which are not (yet) NATO members.

**Figure 2: Readiness to defend Latvia against Russian attack in 2020**

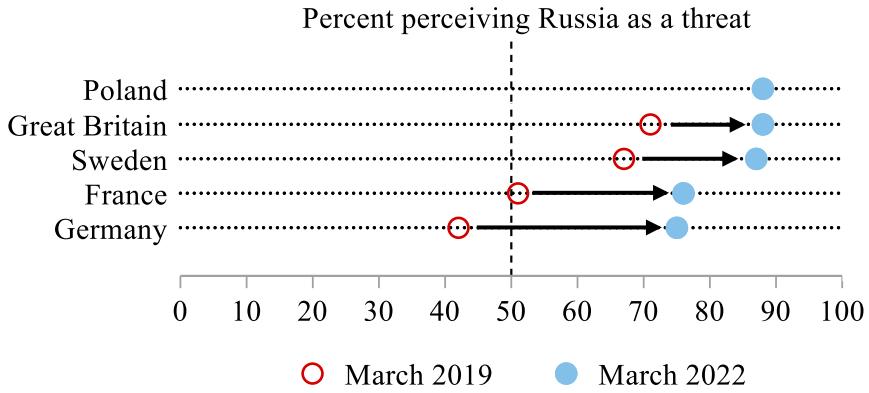



Data: SecEUrity Project. Technical details and question wording are reported in Appendix A1.

Changes in perceptions and attitudes

European publics showed marked reactions to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, both in terms of their perceptions and policy attitudes. Not surprisingly, Europeans were much more likely to view Russia as a serious threat than they were before the invasion (**Figure 3**). While data availability is still quite patchy, the available data also suggest that perceptions converged across countries, albeit not completely. Threat perceptions in countries that previously viewed the threat from Russia as relatively low (France and Germany) increased more than in countries where Russia was already previously viewed as a threat by a clear majority (the United Kingdom, Sweden). Accordingly, the greatest change in convictions can be seen in Germany, where the proportion rose by a whopping 33 percentage points from 42 to 75 percent.

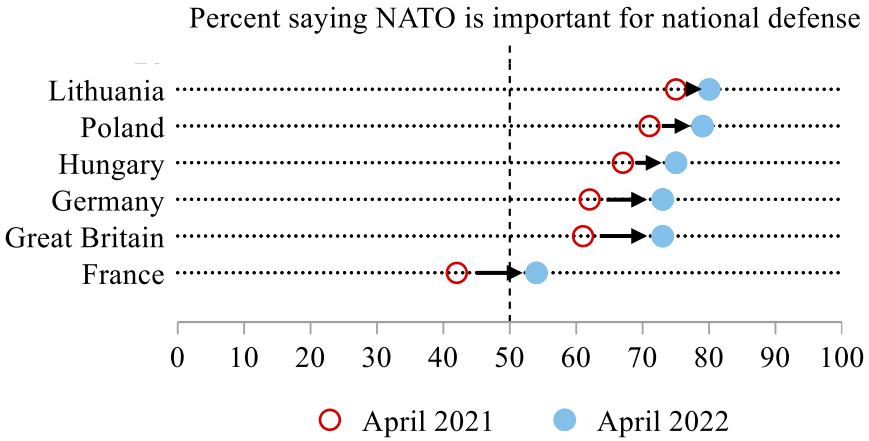
**Figure 3: Changes in the perception of threat from Russia**




Data: YouGov. Technical details and question wording are reported in Appendix A1.

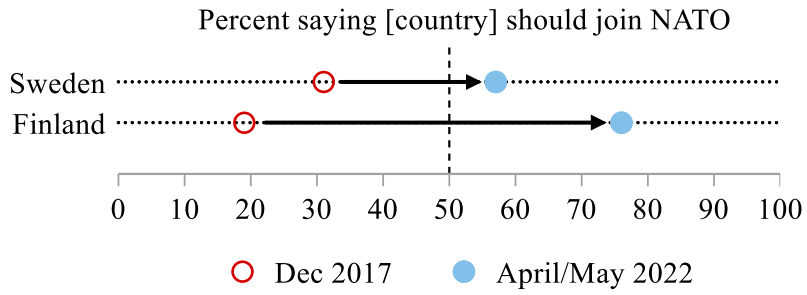
At the policy level, there were upwards shifts in favorability ratings of NATO in its member states (**Figure 4**). Compared to the changes in threat perceptions, these changes are smaller, although this could be due to a ceiling effect. Approval ratings were already high before the invasion, as described earlier. The values for France are instructive at this point, since public opinion in France has traditionally been relatively critical of NATO. An examination of the changes triggered by the invasion shows that the French moved the most in their assessment of NATO. Here, too, there are signs of rapprochement, without the French suddenly becoming NATO's most ardent supporters. Turning from European NATO members to non-members, there was a remarkable change of mind in Finland and Sweden. Traditionally non-aligned, at least in military matters, and with a public where the majority of the population had previously been critical of their country joining NATO, majorities were in favor after the invasion (**Figure *5***). The historic political decision of these countries to apply for membership was thus supported by a public mandate.

**Figure 4: Changes in the attitude toward NATO in member states**




Data: YouGov. Technical details and question wording are reported in Appendix A1.

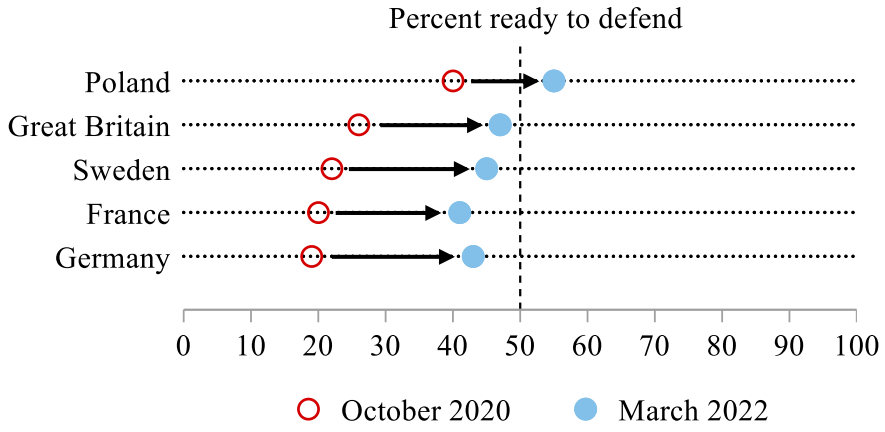
**Figure 5: Changes in attitudes toward NATO accession in non-member states**




Data: PEW, Aftonbladet, YLE, Taloustutkimus. Minor differences in the wording of the questions in Sweden. Technical details and question wording are reported in Appendix A1.

What about the readiness to defend allies? Above we saw that it was not pronounced before the invasion. However, on this issue, too, we see the familiar shift: After the invasion of Ukraine, the readiness increased significantly (**Figure 6**). However, the willingness to defend Latvia was still a minority position in all countries except Poland, according to these data. In Germany, for example, it was still only 43 percent after the invasion—that is, still quite far from being a majority position. Undoubtedly, it must be taken into account that this is a costly measure to take. But it is also the central issue at stake in NATO—and alliances in general. It is therefore unlikely that the increased approval ratings elicited a sigh of relief in countries under imminent threat of Russian aggression.

**Figure 6: Readiness to defend Latvia against Russian attack**




Data: SeEUrity project, YouGov. Minor differences in the wording of the questions in 2020 and 2022. Technical details and question wording are reported in Appendix A1.

In summary, so far available surveys suggest that the Russian invasion of Ukraine changed important beliefs and attitudes. We can describe the immediate reaction of the European public to the invasion as an awakening to the Russian threat. As Anthony Faiola aptly put it, large parts of Europe saw Putin for years… as "an intangible threat, worth serious debate, but not yet real or existential enough to warrant society-altering action" (WP 2022). While pre-invasion opinion data paint a picture of an appeased European public, in the immediate aftermath there were increased threat perceptions, increased support for NATO, and a greater readiness to use military force in defense of allies. Other polling data suggest that the willingness to increase defense budgets [6] and support for a European army [7] increased as well. But are these changes of a nature that justifies calling the invasion a watershed moment for European public opinion on security and defense attitudes? We take up this question in the next section.

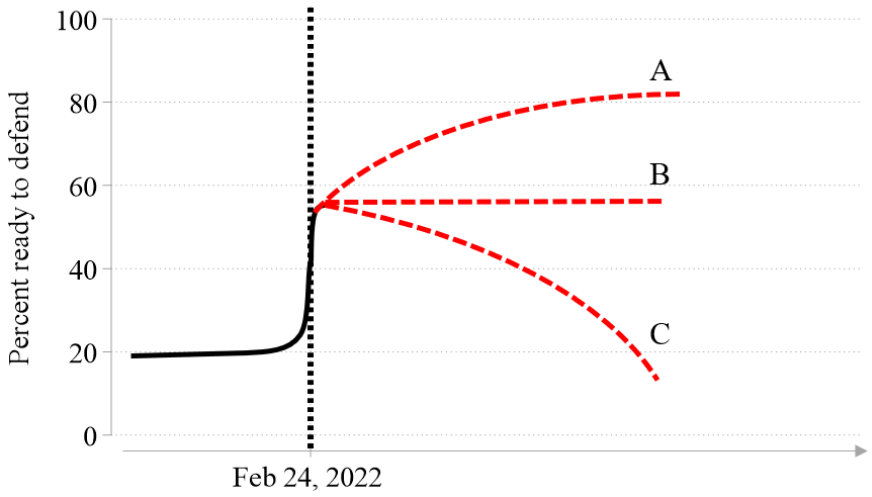
## What makes a *Zeitenwende* a *Zeitenwende*? Or: A look ahead

In the introduction, the German chancellor is quoted with his diagnosis that Russia's invasion of Ukraine is a *Zeitenwende* (officially translated as a "watershed") as well as with the definition he gave. The official translation misses the richness of the German original, though, which rather means a historical turning point or the dawn of a new era (Tausendfreund 2022). This richness is as least implied in the definition that the world afterwards will no longer be the same as the world before. To make it explicit, we might add two conditions: A historical turning point exists only when the world afterwards is *significantly* and *permanently* different from the world before.

Are the observed changes in average public opinion large enough to classify them as "significant"? It is not easy to answer this question. It depends, of course, on what criterion one applies in making the judgment. For example, one could argue that a significant change in resolve occurs only when the minority position of sending troops to defend an ally becomes a majority position. According to this criterion, we have not seen the dawn of a new era at the level of public opinion. One might also argue, however, that this is setting the bar too high, if there are in fact large percentage-point shifts in this and other important attitudes.

The second criterion adds complexity. It first raises the obvious question of how long the change must persist to be considered "permanent." What should at least be clear is that the answer is a longer time span than could be explored in this paper. In other words, at the moment it is too early to decide whether a turning point in time has occurred. Looking ahead, different trajectories of change in public opinion are conceivable. **Figure 7** shows three ideal-typical trajectories using the example of the readiness to defend an ally in case of a Russian attack. Trajectory A describes the case in which we are currently at an intermediate stage toward greater defense readiness that will occur in the future. More generally, the changes we described above could still continue. Alternatively, it could be that the effect that the Russian invasion has had has unfolded and there will be no further change in either direction (Trajectory B). Third, it is conceivable that public opinion will fall back to its initial level (Trajectory C).

**Figure 7: Ideal-typical trajectories of change (fictitious data)**




Which trajectory is most likely to describe the future development of public opinion in Europe? The 21st century has been humbling for experts (not) predicting political events and developments. Economists did not see the 2007/8 credit crisis coming, election forecasters were surprised by Donald Trump's election and the Brexit decision in 2016—and hardly any foreign policy experts expected Putin to actually pull the trigger on Ukraine. These examples are consistent with the results of systematic research on experts' forecasting ability (Tetlock 2005). Therefore, extreme caution is warranted.

Perhaps a historical analogy is instructive. After the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, public opinion towards Russia and Putin in particular reached a low point, but recovered in the following years [8]. This resurgence of opinion toward Russia (at a low level) may be what we can expect in the medium term after the Ukraine war. However, the difficulty in learning from history is that the case from which one wants to learn must be comparable in the relevant dimensions (Houghton 1996). Is this the case with public reactions to the annexation of Crimea in 2014? The 2022 invasion of Ukraine is certainly a more fundamental violation of international law and the norms of the liberal international order than the annexation of Crimea. Consequently, its impact on public opinion—as on everything else—is likely to be more fundamental and lasting.

Instead of trying to predict the future, it seems more promising to specify the conditions under which the various trajectories become more or less likely. This, in turn, requires an examination of theories of (foreign) policy attitude formation. It is beyond the scope of this paper to do so in detail, so we only briefly discuss two important explanatory factors: Events (Nincic 1992; Shapiro & Page 1988) and elite communication (Zaller 1992; Berinsky 2009).

A fairly intuitive idea is, first, that citizens form or update their attitudes in response to international events. This idea motivated the first half of this paper. It also implies, of course, that future events might shift public opinion again—in either direction. Events that likely send public opinion on trajectory A include prominent instances of Russian brutality and atrocities in Ukraine, the Russian use of weapons of mass destruction, and an extension of the war to

other countries. Analogously, certain events might shift attitudes back to where they were before—or at least back in that direction—although negativity bias would likely slow such change (Johnson & Tierney 2018). It is hard to imagine what Putin could do to counter completely the impressions the Ukraine war has created. Ending the war in Ukraine quickly and giving back captured territory might have such (perhaps cumulative) effects. Setting the sights farther, perhaps Russia unequivocally aligning with the West against China in a future conflict over Taiwan might shift attitudes toward Russia significantly. It surely is hard to imagine at this point that Putin would do any of these things.

Second, much will depend on elite communication. Immediately after Russia's invasion of Ukraine there was essentially an elite consensus in all European countries about the invasion (The Economist 2022). Granted, there was disagreement between and within states about how swift and far-reaching the help for Ukraine should be—but not about the fundamentals. There was essentially a consensus about who was to blame, what side to take in the conflict, and that there is a need for increased solidarity. Fringe political parties that had sought an alliance with Putin's authoritarian Russia came under pressure throughout Europe. During her run for the French presidency, for example, the far-right leader Marine Le Pen was forced to join the chorus of international voices condemning the Russian aggression despite a web of financial ties and a history of support she has with Putin. While she did not sever these ties nor seems to have suffered at the polls because of them (DW 2022; NYT 2022), the communicative reaction alone attests to the force of the mainstream elite consensus. According to theories that emphasize elite communication as a driver of public opinion, this consensus likely contributed to the changes in opinion described above. Induced by the re-positioning of trusted elites, politically aware, Russia-friendly citizens might have followed suit and were now echoing these messages. If the elite positioning on Russia became diverse again, we would expect the current "mainstream effect" (Zaller 1992: 98) to dissolve, moving average public opinion onto Trajectory C—i.e. back toward its initial position. The pressure on fringe parties to play down existing ties with Russia is likely to slacken in the future. But the more relevant question seems to be whether a modified, lasting consensus among mainstream parties emerges—put differently, whether the Ukraine war will trigger a significant shift in elite strategic culture. If so, Trajectories A and B become more likely.

We would be remiss without considering the question of variability in public opinion from yet another angle, one that cross-cuts the factors just discussed. One way to contrast trajectory C with A and B is to ask whether the changes in public opinion that we have observed to this point are driven by changes in underlying fundamental attitudes or whether they merely reflect superficial fluctuations in response behavior to (survey) questions citizens do not really care about. Only if the Ukraine war is perceived as truly dramatic and changes "real demands" can we expect lasting change (Zaller 2012: 573). Without such changes, we should expect average opinion to move back to its pre-invasion levels once the issue ceases to dominate media coverage. This, in turn, leads us inevitably to the traditional debate about whether there are genuine public attitudes toward foreign and security policy at all (e.g., Holsti 1992). Suffice it to say at this point that the currently available evidence suggests that citizens exhibit real demands in the form of basic attitudes toward the principles that should guide foreign policy decisions (Hurwitz & Peffley 1987; Gravelle et al. 2017). Accordingly, it will be particularly interesting to examine in future research whether the war in Ukraine has led to changes at the level of these foreign policy postures.

Summary

European public opinion showed clear reactions to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. While pre-invasion opinion data paint a picture of a mollified European public, polls conducted immediately after the invasion show heightened threat perceptions, increased support for NATO, and a greater willingness to use military force to defend allies. It is less certain that these responses represent a historic turning point. For this to be the case, the shift in opinion would have to be significant and lasting. It is too early to assess either criterion. The magnitude of change in some attitudes shown by the current polls is probably not large enough to cross the threshold of "significant" change. However, the public opinion shift may not yet be complete, and there are few data available on important attitudes. In short, the available data do not argue against evaluating the invasion as a historic turning point in European public opinion in the future, but it is not possible to confirm this at this time.

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Appendix A1

Data sources and question wording and of public opinion data shown in Figures

Figure 1: Perception of international threats, 2020

Data source: SecEUrity Project (www.seceurity.eu)
Question wording: "Below is a list of threats that some people consider as a critical threat to the security of [country] today while others do not consider it to be a threat at all. For each one, please select how critical a threat you think it is."
– Russia's territorial ambitions
– Diseases and pandemics
– Climate change
Original response scale: 1 "No threat at all" – 7 "Critical threat" + DK.
Reported are percent that chose options 5–7.

Figure 2: Readiness to defend Latvia against a Russian attack

Data source: SecEUrity Project (www.seceurity.eu)
Question wording: "Imagine Russian paramilitary forces appear in Latvia and attempt to disrupt critical infrastructure, similar to what happened in the early phases of the crises in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine in 2014. [Country] should deploy troops to secure Latvian borders. In this situation, [country] could take a range of actions, and there are good reasons to support and to oppose any one of them. We are interested in what you think. Please indicate whether you agree or disagree with the following actions." – "[Country] should deploy military troops to secure Latvian borders."
Original response scale: 1 "Strongly agree" – 7 "Strongly disagree" + DK.
Reported are percent that chose options 1–3.

Figure 3: Perception of threat from Russia, 2019 and 2022:

Data source: YouGov (https://yougov.co.uk/topics/international/articles-reports/2022/03/16/what-impact-has-russian-invasion-ukraine-had-europ)
Question wording: "How big a threat, if any, do you consider each of the following countries to be to [respondent country]?" – "Russia"
Original response scale: 0 "Not a threat at all" – 10 "A serious threat" + DK
Reported are percent that chose options 6–10.

Figure 4: Attitudes toward NATO in members states

Data source top panel: https://yougov.co.uk/topics/international/articles-reports/2022/05/05/support-eu-army-grows-across-europe-following-russ
Question wording: "How important, if at all, do you think NATO is to defense in [country]?"

Original response scale top panel: 1 “Very important” – 4 “Not important at all” + DK
Reported are percent that chose options 1 or 2.

Figure 5: Attitudes toward joining NATO

Data source: https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/security/2017/12/poll-only-fifth-finns-back-nato-membership, https://yle.fi/news/3-12437506 (Finland); https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2017/05/23/natos-image-improves-on-both-sides-of-atlantic/, https://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/a/1O90qq/kraftigt-okat-stod-for-nato-57-procent-vill-ga-med (Sweden)
Question wording: “Should Finland join the NATO military alliance?” (Finland); “Do you support or oppose Sweden becoming a member of NATO?” / “Should Sweden join NATO?” (Sweden).
Original response scale: 1 “Yes” , 2 “No” + DK; 1 “Support” , 2 “Oppose” + DK
Reported are percent that chose option 1.

Figure 6: Readiness to defend Latvia against Russian attack, 2020 and 2022

Data source 2020 data: SecEUrity Project (www.seceurity.eu)
Question wording 2020 data: “Imagine Russian paramilitary forces appear in Latvia and attempt to disrupt critical infrastructure, similar to what happened in the early phases of the crises in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine in 2014. [Country] should deploy troops to secure Latvian borders. In this situation, [country] could take a range of actions, and there are good reasons to support and to oppose any one of them. We are interested in what you think. Please indicate whether you agree or disagree with the following actions.” – “[Country] should deploy military troops to secure Latvian borders.”
Original response scale 2020 data: 1 “Strongly agree” – 7 “Strongly disagree” + DK.
Reported are percent that chose options 1–3.
Data source 2022 data: https://yougov.co.uk/topics/international/articles-reports/2022/03/16/what-impact-has-russian-invasion-ukraine-had-europ
Question wording 2022 data: “Should [country] be willing to use military force if Russia attacks any of the countries listed below?” – “Latvia”
Original response scale 2022 data: 1 “My country should be willing to use military force to help defend this country” – 2 “My country should not be willing to use military force to help defend this country” + DK.
Reported are percent that chose options 1.

Appendix A2

Sources of public opinion data referenced in the text

[1] Views on the U.S. and U.S. presidents
https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2021/06/10/americas-image-abroad-rebounds-with-transition-from-trump-to-biden/ (accessed May 2022).

[2] Confidence in Trump and Putin:
https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/01/08/trump-ratings-remain-low-around-globe-while-views-of-u-s-stay-mostly-favorable/ (accessed May 2022).

[3] Vote for NATO membership:
https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_184687.htm (accessed May 2022).

[4] Support for a common European defense and security policy:
Own calculations using Eurobarometer 94.3 data.
European Commission, Brussels (2021). Eurobarometer 94.3 (2021). *GESIS Datenarchiv, Köln. ZA7780 Datenfile Version 1.0.0, https://doi.org/10.4232/1.13793*.

[5] Commitment to defend other European countries / allies:
https://ecfr.eu/publication/the-crisis-of-european-security-what-europeans-think-about-the-war-in-ukraine/ (accessed May 2022);
https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2022/01/31/eurotrack-russian-invasion-ukraine-seen-likely-few (accessed May 2022).

[6] Support for increasing defense spending:
https://yougov.co.uk/topics/international/articles-reports/2022/05/05/support-eu-army-grows-across-europe-following-russ (accessed May 2022).

[7] Support for an integrated European army:
https://yougov.co.uk/topics/international/articles-reports/2022/05/05/support-eu-army-grows-across-europe-following-russ (accessed May 2022).

[8] Views on Russia:
https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/02/07/russia-and-putin-receive-low-ratings-globally/ (accessed May 2022).