

Norwegian public's attitudes to foreign policy in 2024:

a status quo nation in a time of global turmoil

Øyvind Svendsen

Acknowledgements



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Introduction

What is the Norwegian public's opinion on the state of the world? And what foreign policy does it want the Norwegian government to pursue? In this report, we present the findings from an opinion poll conducted by Sentio for NUPI in the period 18 to 24 April 2024.

The global landscape is deeply unsettled, and we find ourselves in an era marked by considerable uncertainty about future developments in world politics. The great power rivalry between the United States and China is intensifying, the war in Ukraine continues to rage, the war in Gaza is causing immense human suffering and having major ramifications for the Middle East, and the effects of global warming are becoming increasingly apparent. The Norwegian government has warned through, for example, its intelligence service's annual report on security threats, that Norway is facing its most serious security situation in decades.¹ However, a key finding in our report is that the Norwegian public is somewhat measured in its assessments and considers the general threat level for Norway to be moderate, i.e. at a normal level. This suggests that the government's actions have minimal impact on public opinion on world politics. The public's failure to grasp the severity of the security situation is both surprising and alarming, as is its disregard for official communications about the geopolitical threats facing Norway.

Against the backdrop of limited crisis comprehension, we see a relatively stable development in the Norwegian public's attitudes to foreign policy since 2021, with the notable exception of attitudes to Russia, which have clearly hardened. NUPI conducted similar studies in 2020 and in connection with the general election in 2021,² and in this report, we have asked many of the same questions as previously, in addition to some new ones. We therefore take this opportunity to compare our findings with the previous studies where appropriate, to gauge the extent of change in public opinion.

We posed a range of questions, and present and discuss the responses to these in this report. We highlight below what we consider to be the most important findings:

- The war in Ukraine does not appear to have changed the Norwegian public's assessment of the overall security threat to Norway, but views on Russia have hardened.
- Support is still strong for Ukraine among the Norwegian public, but young people appear to be significantly more sceptical about general support as well as military aid for Ukraine.
- There is little public appetite to change Norway's international cooperation formats. Support for the UN and NATO remains high, and established European partners are preferred over new countries or alliances.
- A clear majority support the Palestinian authorities in the war in Gaza, while considerably fewer support Israel.

This latest opinion poll was conducted online and the sample consists of 1000 respondents. All respondents are over the age of 18, and the sample is representative as the informants were selected based on age, sex and place of residence. For questions where the findings represent the entire

1 https://www.etterretningstjenesten.no/publikasjoner/fokus/Fokus24_innhold.

2 Svendsen and Weltzien, 2020: <https://www.nupi.no/publikasjoner/cristin-pub/norwegians-adapting-to-a-changing-world>; Svendsen, 2021: <https://www.nupi.no/publikasjoner/cristin-pub/utenriks-og-sikkerhetspolitiske-holdninger-i-valgaaret-2021>.

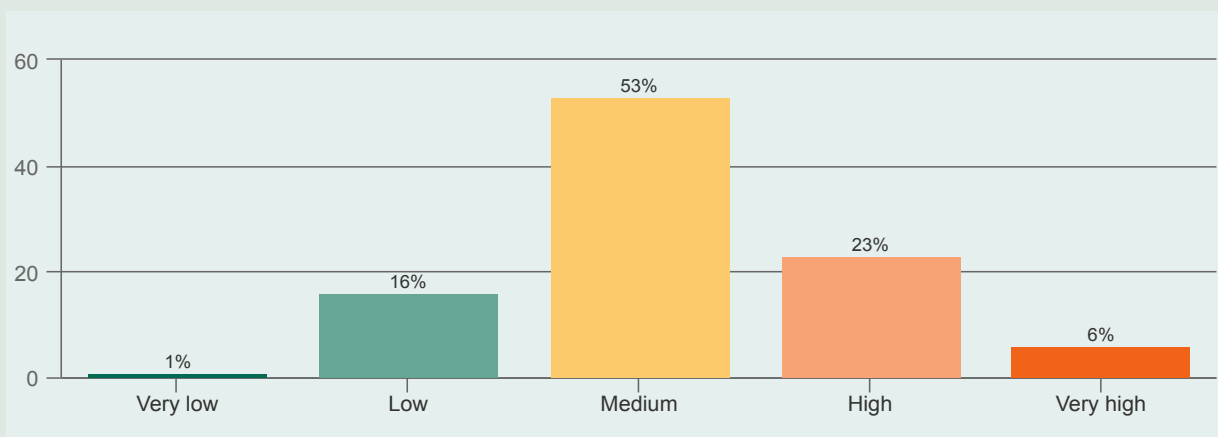
population, the margin of error in the poll is between 1.9 and 3.1 percentage points. We mostly avoid breaking down the responses into subgroups (e.g. age, political party preference, income) because this would increase the margin of error considerably.

The report is structured according to the different themes in the questionnaire, covering the following themes: threats, international cooperation, climate policy, EU affiliation, the war in Ukraine, the war in Gaza and China.

Threats: Russia poses the greatest threat, but overall there is little concern

Despite the outbreak of war in Ukraine and the resulting icy Norway-Russia relations, the Norwegian public does not seem to perceive the security threat to Norway as particularly high. Fifty-three per cent consider the threat to be moderate, 17% think it is low to very low, while 23% and 6%, respectively, perceive the threat to be high or very high. There are also few variations in the responses to this question across place of residence, sex, age, education, income and political party preference. We interpret the 'moderate' response here to mean a normal situation of sorts, as indicated by more than half of the respondents. Meanwhile, the figures for a low and high threat were roughly the same.

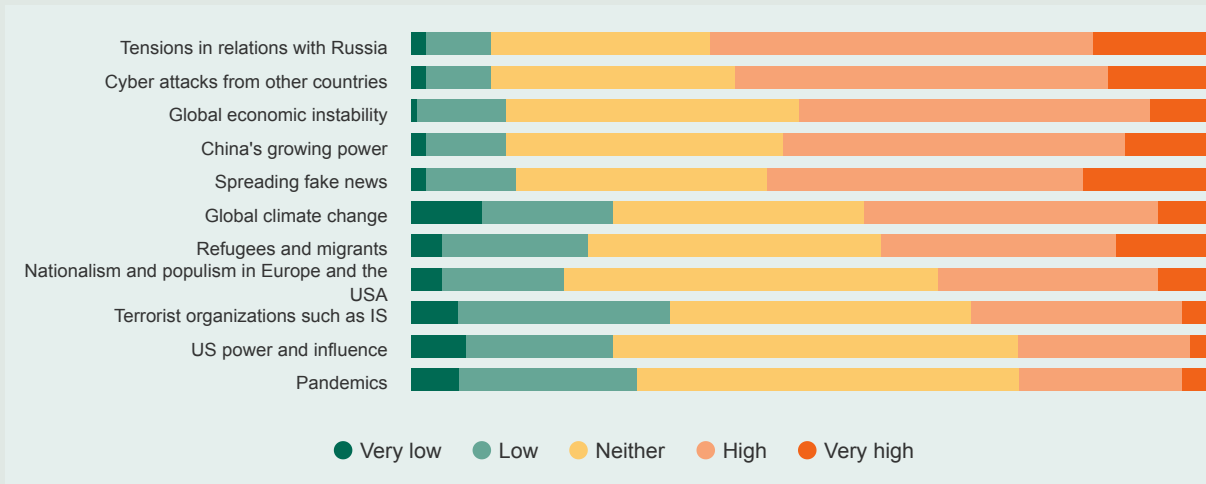
Figure 1: The security threat



In the previous NUPI poll in May 2021, more than a year before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, opinions were virtually the same. This also applies to the NUPI poll from 2020. The lack of change in the Norwegian public's assessment of the security threat to Norway is surprising, especially considering that the Norwegian authorities have informed the public about developments and the full-scale war that is raging in Europe.

Nevertheless, the table below shows that tensions in Norway-Russia relations are regarded as the greatest threat to Norway, based on the highest percentage of respondents who perceive the threat as high. The public also considers many other threats to be relatively high. A notable exception here is pandemics, which rank lowest, indicating a fairly radical shift in public opinion on this issue: in our 2021 poll, epidemics (the term used in that poll) were ranked highest among the threats considered the most significant for Norway. The COVID-19 pandemic is now over, and the population does not seem concerned about a potential new pandemic of a similar magnitude in the near future.

Figure 2: Various security threats

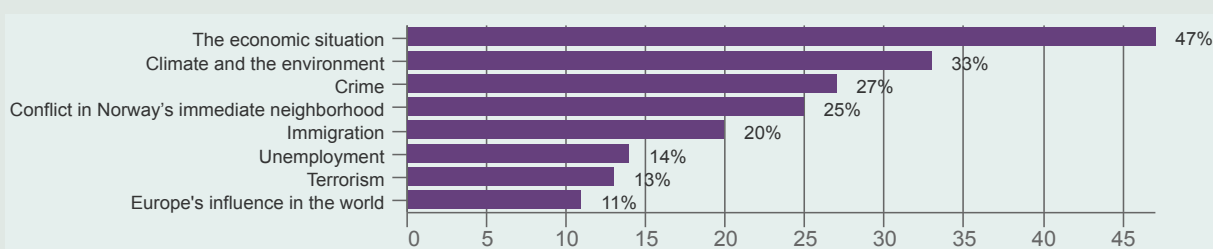


We also asked the public what they consider to be the main challenges for Norway at the moment, with the option to choose two of the given alternatives. The economic situation stands out here with 47%, followed by climate and the environment (33%), crime (27%) and the risk of conflict in neighbouring regions (25%). Further down the list are immigration (20%), unemployment (14%), terrorism (13%) and Europe’s influence in the world (11%).

The large percentage who fear conflict in neighbouring regions and the perceived high threat level from Russia help to nuance the relatively low percentage who believe that the security threat to Norway is high or very high. In comparison, only 7% considered the risk of military conflict in neighbouring regions to be one of Norway’s main challenges in the NUPI poll from 2021.

In the 2021 poll conducted during the pandemic, unemployment was the foremost concern, with 41% of the public regarding this as Norway’s main challenge. In the latest poll, however, the public is much less concerned about unemployment – only 14%, which is a dramatic fall from 2021. Based on this figure, we can infer that the Norwegian public’s concerns about the economic situation no longer centre on the risk of higher unemployment. The decline here likely reflects the lower ranking of pandemics as a threat to Norway: the COVID-19 pandemic is no longer a global public health crisis, which has lessened concerns about the economic ramifications that were initially feared.

Figure 3: Various security challenges

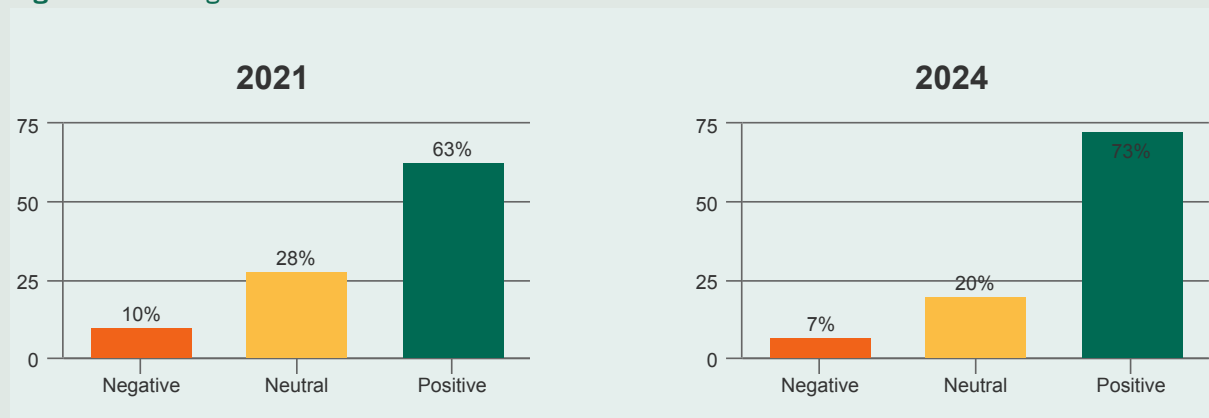


International cooperation: stable and strong support for Norway's cooperation mechanisms

The Norwegian public's views on international cooperation remain stable compared to NUPI's previous polls. Eighty-one per cent of respondents think that Norway should continue its current alliances, while 19% believe that Norway should seek new alliance partners.

A total of 73% have a positive view of NATO, 7% have a negative view of the alliance and 20% indicate a neutral stance. The proportion with a positive view has increased from 63% in the 2021 poll.

Figure 4: Norwegians' view of NATO



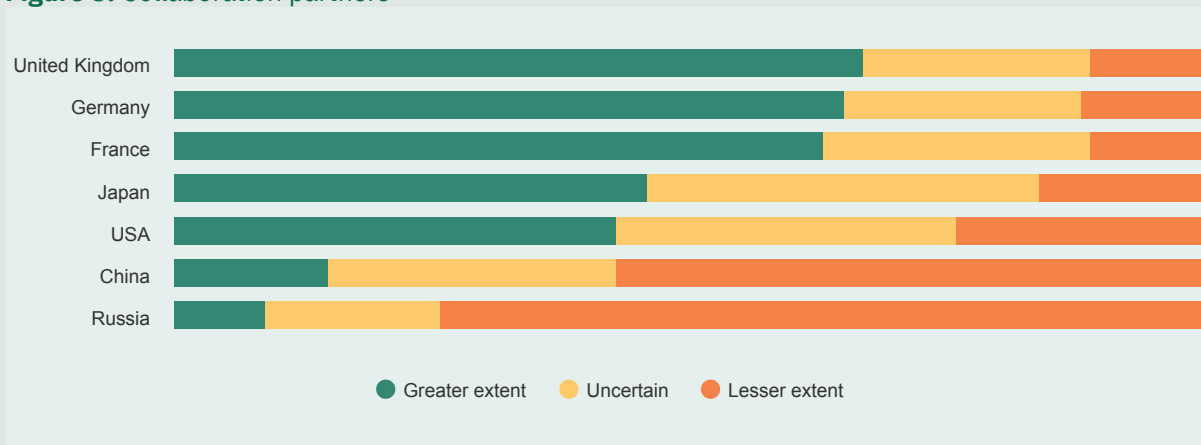
We also asked about attitudes to Norway potentially advocating for NATO to become more independent from the United States, even if it means substantially higher defence budgets for the other member states. Sixty-six per cent were in favour, while 34% were against, which indicates a relatively large appetite for increasing defence budgets.

Public support for the UN is also strong, which is consistent with findings from previous NUPI polls. Eighty-one per cent indicate that Norway should continue to support the UN in order to promote a common set of rules in world politics, compared to 19% who think that Norway should consider alternative international cooperation frameworks.

However, opinions are more divided on the extent to which Norway should pursue an activist foreign policy. Fifty-three per cent state that Norway should be driven by national interests even if allies protest, while 47% think that Norway should take allies' interests into account even if it means having to make compromises. This is a perpetual dilemma in the practice of foreign policy, and the figures here reflect the complexity of the issue.

We also asked whether Norway should cooperate with various countries to a greater or lesser extent in the future. The table shows the public's responses, broken down by country.

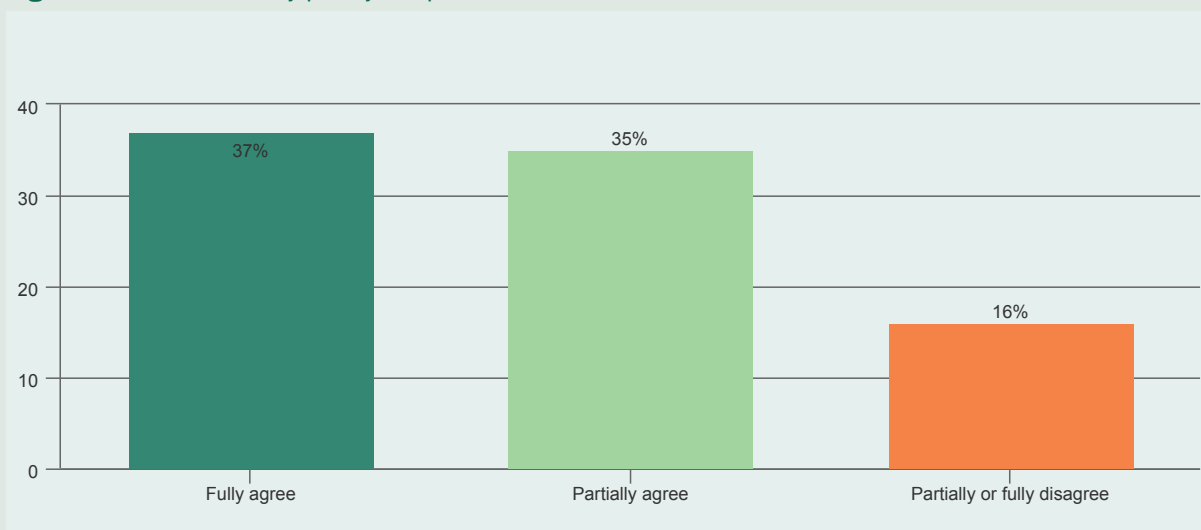
Figure 5: Collaboration partners



The figures show clear support for cooperation with European countries, and compared to the 2021 poll, the UK, Germany and France have gained more support, particularly France, which has increased from 53%. In the 2021 poll, just under 50% of the public thought that Norway should reduce its cooperation with Russia, a figure that has increased considerably, to 74% in this poll.

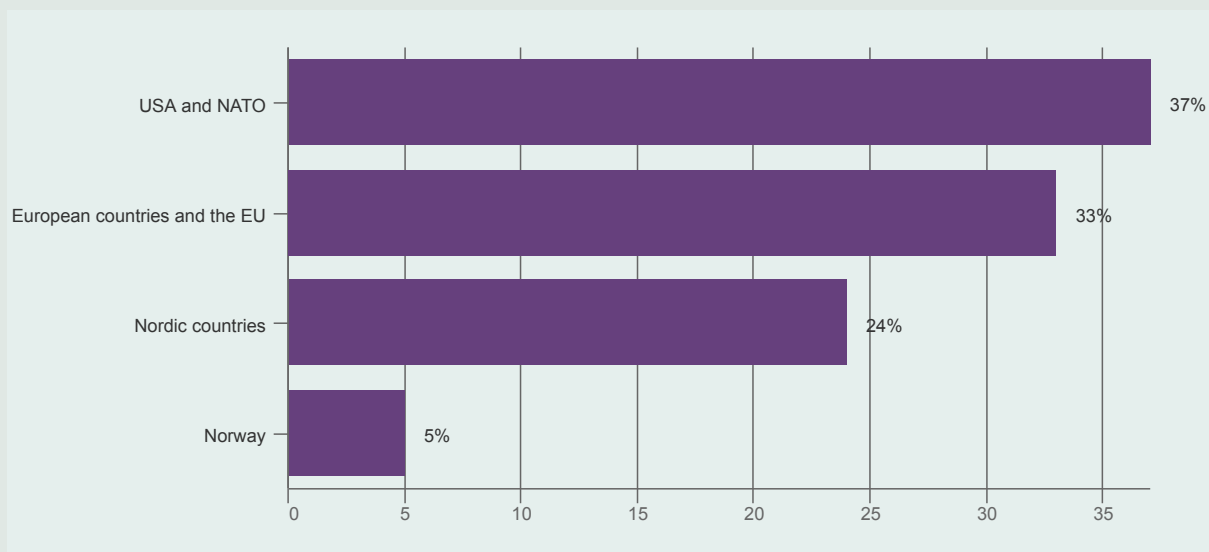
In line with the support for increased international cooperation, the public also expresses support for security policy cooperation with the EU. Thirty-seven per cent strongly agree that Norway should work more closely with the EU on security policy issues, and 35% somewhat agree. Only 16% somewhat or strongly disagree that Norway should increase cooperation with the EU on security policy issues.

Figure 6: Closer security policy cooperation with the EU



But where should Norway really focus its efforts to address security threats? On the question of what Norway should give the highest priority to in combatting security threats, 37% think that Norway should work more closely with the United States and NATO, 33% indicate that Norway should work more closely with European countries and the EU, and 24% think that Norway should focus on cooperation with the other Nordic countries. Five per cent would like Norway to address the issue on its own. Norway is actually involved in bi-, tri- and multilateral cooperation agreements covering all these areas, perhaps even in the same priority as ranked by our respondents. The categories are also not mutually exclusive, as several NATO countries are European and/or EU member states, but we can at least infer that there is little support among our respondents for a protectionist security policy in Norway. Furthermore, these figures do not indicate any great appetite for change in Norway's security policy cooperation mechanisms.

Figure 7: Security policy cooperation



Climate policy: divided opinions on the climate target and its feasibility

Public opinion on Norwegian climate policy has changed since the NUPI poll in 2021. Almost 70% of respondents believed that Norway was a pioneer in climate policy in 2021, but this has now dropped to 63%. However, 67% think that Norway's climate target should be at least as high as that of the EU, compared to 33% who think it should be lower. An overwhelming 90% also indicate that Norway should work with traditional alliance partners within climate policy, while 10% think Norway should work with China on climate issues.

But how important is it to the public that Norway achieves its climate target to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 55% from 1990 levels by 2030? The public is divided on this issue, with 54% responding that Norway should do everything in its power to meet the target, while 46% think that Norway should reduce the ambitions in order to ensure sustained economic growth and prosperity. Although many believe that global climate change poses a threat and is one of the main challenges facing Norway, the public is divided on how much priority Norway should give to meeting the target given the other challenges.

The above may be related to the public's belief in the feasibility of the ambitious climate target that is driving Norwegian climate policy. Only 31% think that Norway will meet the target, while 69% do not think it will.

Figure 8: The view on Norway's climate goals

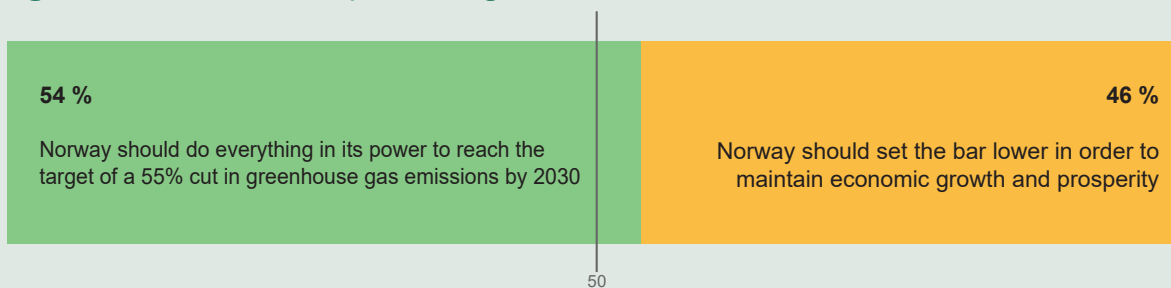
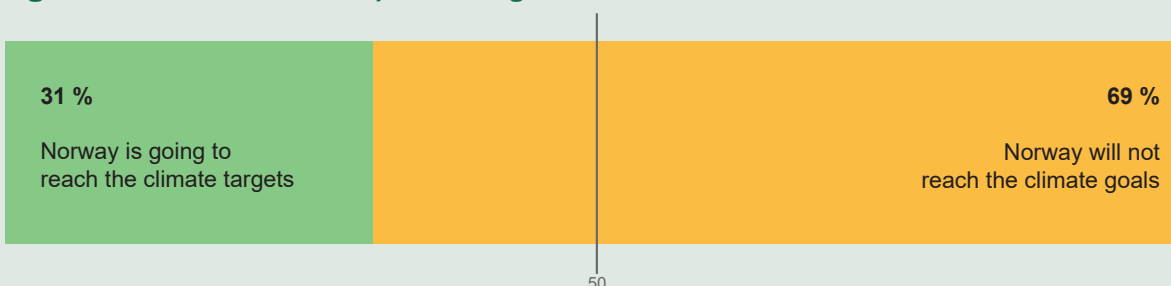


Figure 9: The realism in Norway's climate goals

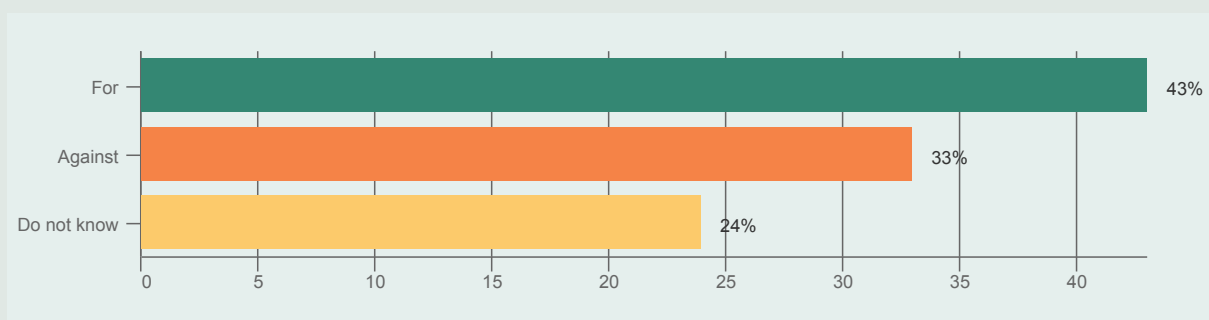


EU affiliation: familiar dividing lines and little change

We asked the public whether they think that Norway's agreements with the EU protect the country's most important economic interests. Thirty-eight per cent somewhat agree, 25% strongly agree, while 25% somewhat or strongly disagree.

Our survey is in line with the recent trend of relatively low support for the EEA Agreement compared to previous years. When asked about a possible referendum on the EEA Agreement, 43% indicate that they would vote in favour, 33% would vote against, while 24% don't know. The number who are uncertain is quite large – a quarter of the population. It is therefore likely that a referendum would still result in a majority in favour of the EEA Agreement.

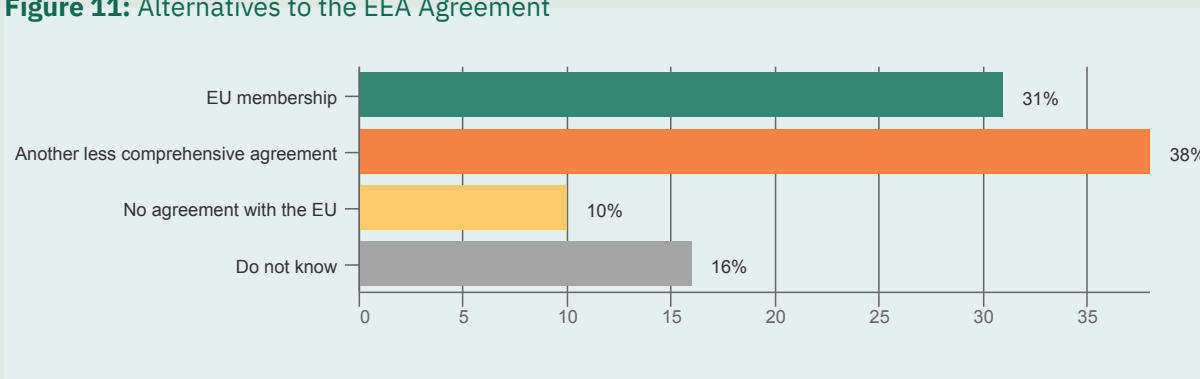
Figure 10: Referendum on the EEA Agreement



It is reasonable to assume that the as yet undetermined support for the EEA Agreement is linked to the high electricity prices and the debates on the EU's energy agency ACER, along with the numerous directives that are mandated by the EEA Agreement to be incorporated into Norwegian law. Several background variables paint precisely this picture. Those in favour of the EEA Agreement are overrepresented by well-educated, high earners living in Oslo, while clear opposition is seen among those who would vote for the Progress Party (FrP) or the Industry and Business Party (INP) in a general election. An interesting observation that is not easily explained is the statistically significant gender disparity. Fifty per cent of men indicate that they would vote for the EEA Agreement, compared to 36% of women, who appear to be much more uncertain, with 32% of the women being undecided about how they would vote, compared to 16% of the men.

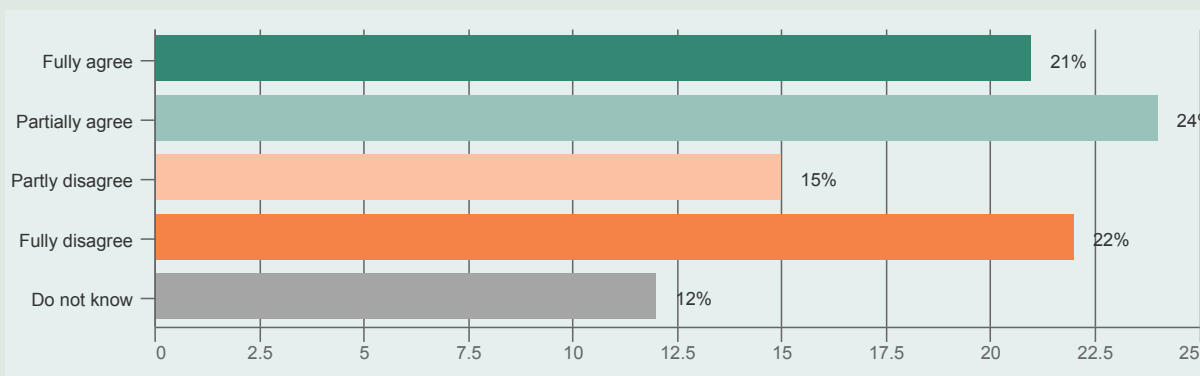
There is also uncertainty about what type of agreement Norway should have with the EU if the EEA Agreement were to end. Thirty-one per cent think that such a scenario should result in Norwegian EU membership, 38% think it should lead to a different and less comprehensive agreement, 10% think Norway should not have any agreement with the EU in such a scenario, while 16% don't know. Compared to our 2021 poll, support for EU membership is slightly up, but there are large margins of error here: in 2021, 25% favoured EU membership compared to 31% today, and those preferring a less comprehensive agreement make up 38% in this survey, down from 41% in 2021.

Figure 11: Alternatives to the EEA Agreement



Finally, we also asked whether the war in Ukraine has made Norwegian EU membership more relevant. Twenty-one per cent strongly agree, 24% somewhat agree, 15% somewhat disagree and 22% strongly disagree. The remaining 12% don't know. Thus, the public is split here as well, with responses following classic dividing lines in relation to education, income and political party preference.

Figure 12: Norwegian EU membership after the outbreak of war in Ukraine

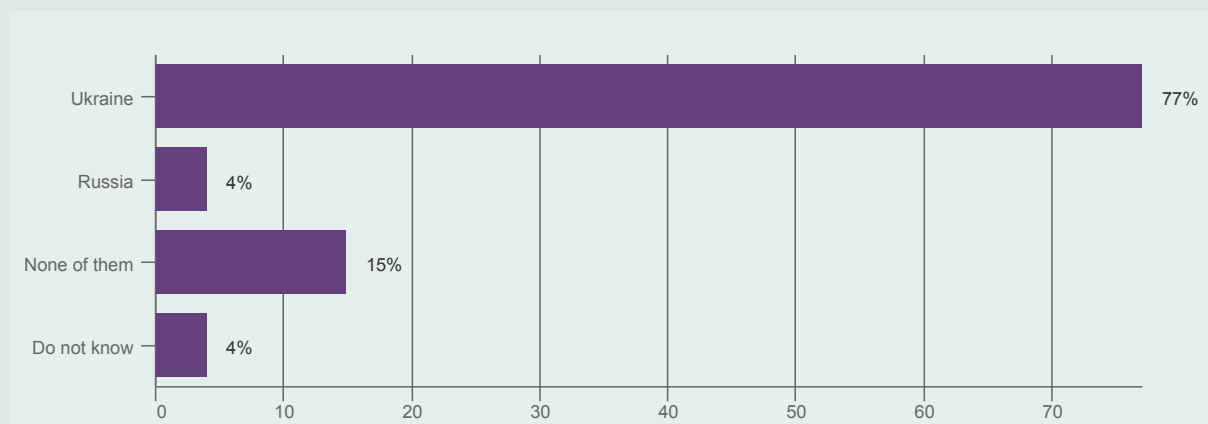


The war in Ukraine: strong support for Ukraine, but the younger generation are more measured

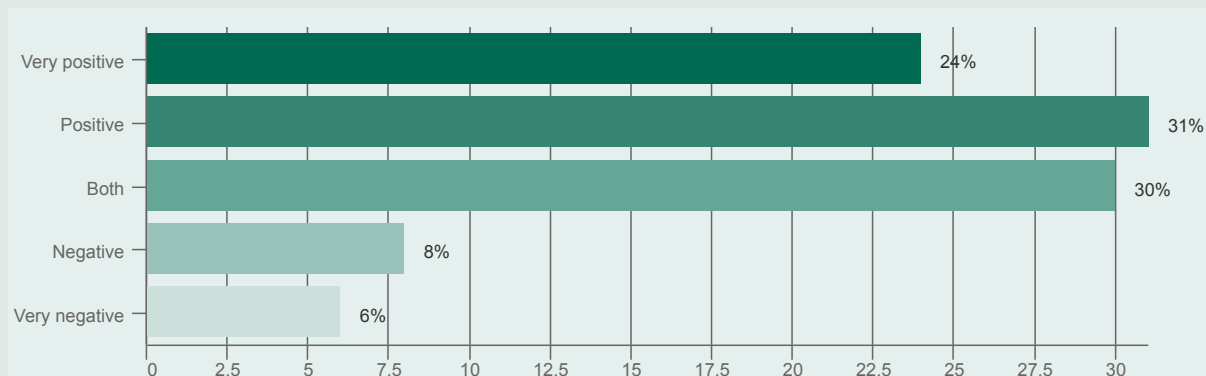
Our poll shows almost unanimous support for Ukraine amidst the Russian war of aggression against the country. This is consistent with other polls conducted since the outbreak of the war.

When asked whom Norway should support in the war, 77% of respondents state that Norway should support Ukraine, 4% said Norway should support Russia, 15% indicate that Norway should not support either of them, while 4% don't know. The proportion who think Norway should support Ukraine is high in all groups, but the strongest support tends to be among the over 60s, the highest earners and those with a higher education. Fewer of the young respondents appear to think that Norway should support Ukraine in the Russian war of aggression. The lowest support for Ukraine is found in the age groups 18-29 and 30-39 years, with 64% and 69%, respectively, which is well below the average that is pulled up by the older age groups.

Figure 13: Who should Norway support?



A majority of the Norwegian public is also in favour of sending military aid to Ukraine. Twenty-four per cent are very positive to providing military aid, 31% are positive, while 30% take a neutral stance. Only 8% are negative to providing military support, while 6% are very negative. Support for military aid for Ukraine is weakest in the youngest age groups: 34% of respondents in the age group 50–59 years are very positive to military aid for Ukraine, compared to 12% in the age group 18–29 years.

Figure 14: Military aid to Ukraine

Thus, statistically significant disparities are seen across the different age groups regarding both general support and military aid for Ukraine. We can therefore infer with confidence that the findings are representative of the entire Norwegian population, and that there is significantly less support for Ukraine among the younger generation compared to older generations. We can only speculate on the reasons for this, but it likely stems from the fact that young people were not around to experience the Cold War. In their eyes, today's Russia does not represent the same level of threat as the Soviet Union did in its time. Given the public's low ranking of the security threat to Norway, and with young people also perceiving a lower risk of conflict in our neighbouring regions compared to older age groups, consideration should also be given to what extent the media landscape and young people's exposure to news through new platforms influence their views on the war in Ukraine. A final possible explanation for the younger generation's significantly weaker support for Ukraine may be related to their fears about the future and a potential conflict. Taking a stance may be regarded by young people as inflammatory, leading more in this age group to position themselves in 'the middle'.

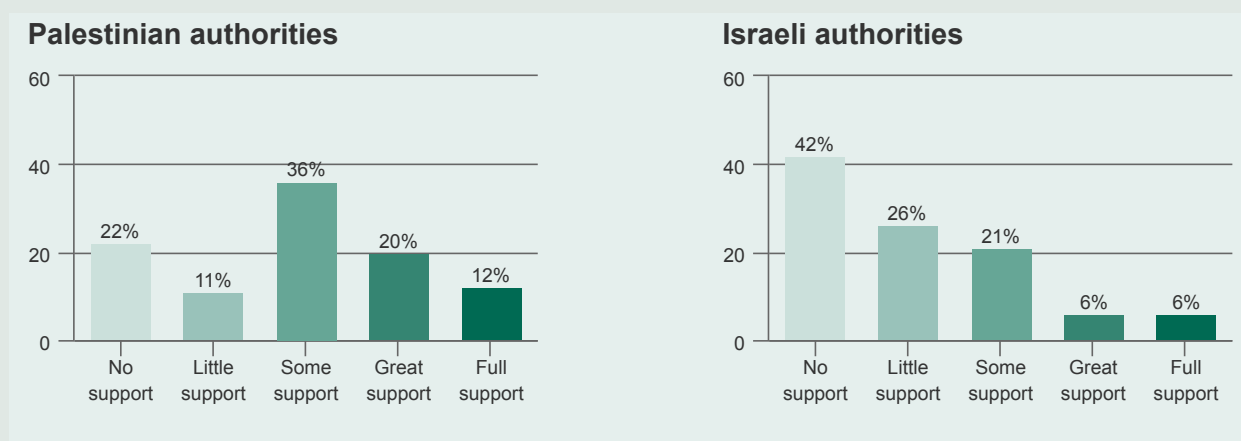
The public is also somewhat divided on the question of who will win the war in Ukraine: 18% think it will be Russia, 28% think it will be Ukraine, 28% think neither will win, while 26% don't know.

Alongside the support for Ukraine, a marked shift has taken place in public opinion on Russia. When asked about future Norway-Russia relations, 80% think that adopting a hard-line foreign policy with regard to Russia is the most important measure, compared to 20% who prioritise good economic relations with Russia. Despite some minor variations, we can conclude that there is broad support among the Norwegian public for Ukraine. However, the most interesting finding, which warrants further exploration, is that those under the age of 29 are much more measured about supporting Ukraine in general and providing military aid to the country.

The war in Gaza

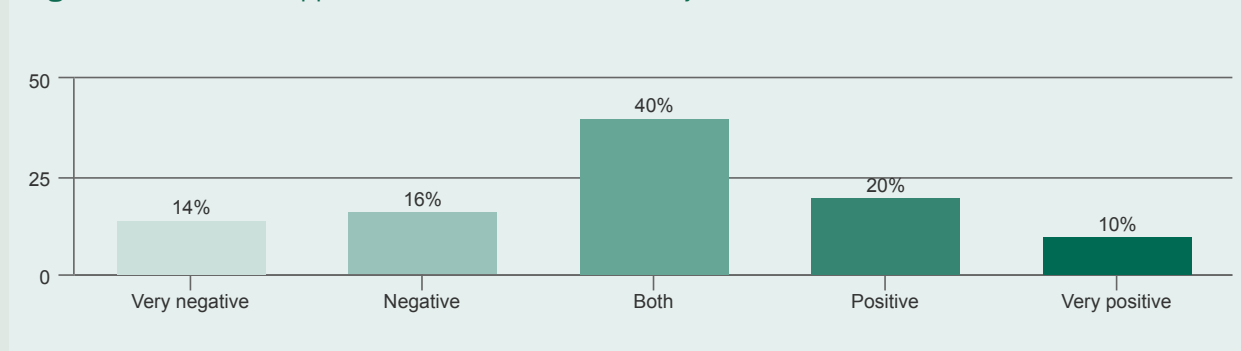
In this poll, we added questions about attitudes related to the war that broke out in Gaza in October 2023 following Hamas' terror attack on Israel. We observe a similar trend in public opinion on the war in Gaza as in Ukraine, namely that there is fairly broad support for one side. Sixty-eight per cent of respondents think that the Palestinian authorities should be given some, substantial or full support, compared to 33% who hold this view about Israel. While 11% and 22% of respondents, respectively, think that Norway should give little or no support to the Palestinian authorities, 26% think Norway should give little support to Israel, and as many as 42% state that Israel should not be given any support at all.

Figure 15: Norwegian support for Palestine and Israel



We also asked the public how positive they are about Norway providing financial support to the Palestinian authorities after the outbreak of war between Hamas and Israel: 40% are both positive and negative, 20% and 10%, respectively, are positive or very positive, 16% are negative, while 14% are very negative. On this specific question, which dominated public discourse in the autumn and winter of 2023/24, the population is more divided than on the more general question of whom Norway should support in the war.

Figure 16: Financial support to the Palestinian Authority



Finally, we examined the public's attitudes to various actors' response to the war in Gaza. Here there is a normal distribution for almost all options, suggesting that many respondents are uncertain. We also note that Norway and the other Nordic countries' response appears to be marginally more favoured than that of other actors.

Table 1: Attitudes to various actors' response to the war in Gaza

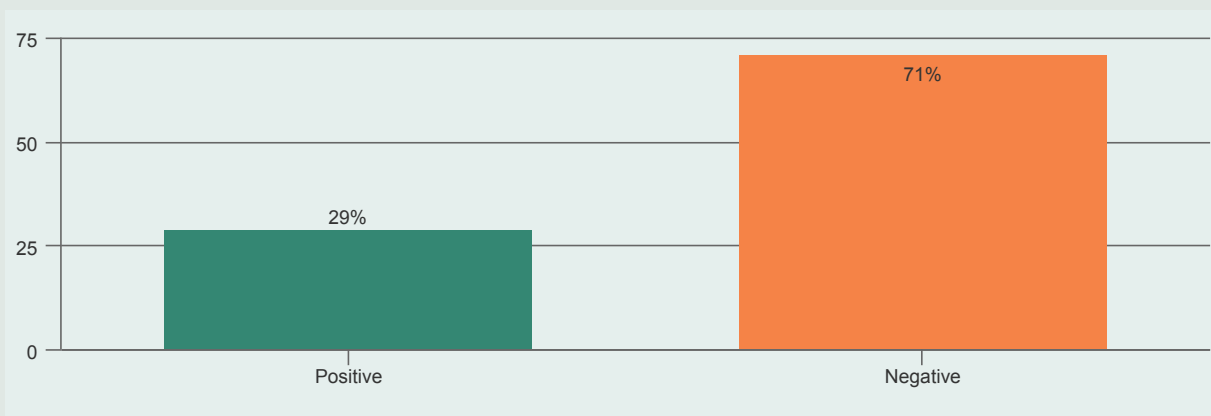
	Very negative	Negative	Neither positive nor negative	Positive	Very positive
Norway	7 %	17 %	49 %	20 %	7 %
Other Nordic countries	7 %	16 %	51 %	20 %	6 %
EU	6 %	16 %	55 %	17 %	6 %
NATO	6 %	15 %	54 %	19 %	5 %
Germany	6 %	14 %	59 %	17 %	5 %
United States	13 %	22 %	45 %	16 %	4 %
China	12 %	24 %	59 %	4 %	2 %

China: stable scepticism in three-quarters of the population

In the poll from 2021, we highlighted the public's strong scepticism of China's growth and its role in world politics. This same scepticism is also seen in the latest poll. Seventy-eight per cent of respondents perceive China's increased influence in the world as negative, while only 22% consider it to be positive

Twenty-nine per cent of respondents regard China's influence in international forums as positive, compared to 71% who perceive it as negative. Similarly, only 24% think that Norway should welcome Chinese investment, while 76% think that the Norwegian economy should be protected from Chinese investment.

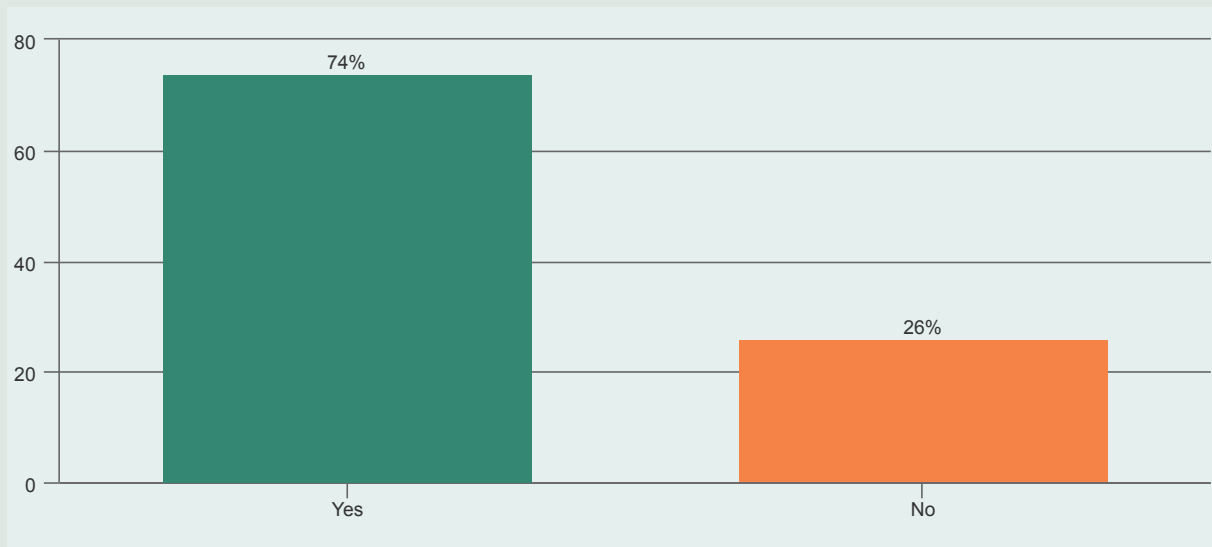
Figure 17: China's influence in international forums



But to what extent does the public think that Norway should pursue an offensive foreign policy in relation to China? We also asked whether Norway should take a tougher stance with China, similar to that of the United States: 57% agreed that it should, while 33% were against the idea. The public was also asked whether Norway should defend its own political positions in its relations with China, even if this might be at the expense of its economic interests: 74% agreed that it should, compared to 26% who opposed the idea. In light of these responses, we can infer that there is some public support for a more hard-line foreign policy with regard to China. As shown in the international cooperation table above, only 15% of respondents thought that Norway should increase its cooperation with China in the future, and more than half perceive the threat from China's growing power as high or very high.

Overall, the responses to questions about China indicate that approximately three-quarters of the population are sceptical about China's role in world politics. As in the previous NUPI poll, there are consistent disparities between respondents under the age of 30 and the broader population. Young people tend to be less sceptical of China; they are more positive about China's growing power and contribution to world politics, and more sceptical about Norway putting an end to Chinese investment.

Figure 18: Should Norway defend its own political positions in its relations with China, even if this might be at the expense of its economic interests?



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