

*Andris Banka***Christina Stremming****Margit Bussmann****

Policy Commentary

Allies That Matter: Elite versus Public Opinion in Latvia

Introduction

The role of security alliances on NATO's eastern flank has become ever more pertinent due to the return of large-scale war to Europe. Latvia, similar to other Baltic nations, has traditionally viewed the United States as the key actor shouldering regional military burdens. But what happens when Washington (and Canada as a lead nation of the eFP) is removed from the equation? More concretely, which European actors does the Latvian population place its faith in? To answer these questions, we devised an original face-to-face omnibus survey in Latvia that included 1002 respondents, interviewed in all regions of the country (Figure 1)¹. In the text that follows, we seek to compare and contrast the views of Latvia's governing elites with that of ordinary Latvian citizens.

Our polling results yield some rather surprising findings – despite recurrent criticism of Germany at the political elites' level in Latvia, Berlin,

* *Dr. Andris Banka*; postdoctoral researcher at the Interdisciplinary Centre for Baltic Sea Region Research (IFZO), University of Greifswald. Address: Bahnhofstrasse 51, 17489 Greifswald, Germany; e-mail: andris.banka@uni-greifswald.de

** *Christina Stremming*; PhD student at the University of Greifswald. Address: Bahnhofstrasse 51, 17489 Greifswald, Germany; e-mail: christina.stremming@uni-greifswald.de

*** *Professor Margit Bussmann*; Chair of International Relations and Regional Studies at the University of Greifswald. Address: Bahnhofstrasse 51, 17489 Greifswald, Germany; e-mail: bussmann@uni-greifswald.de

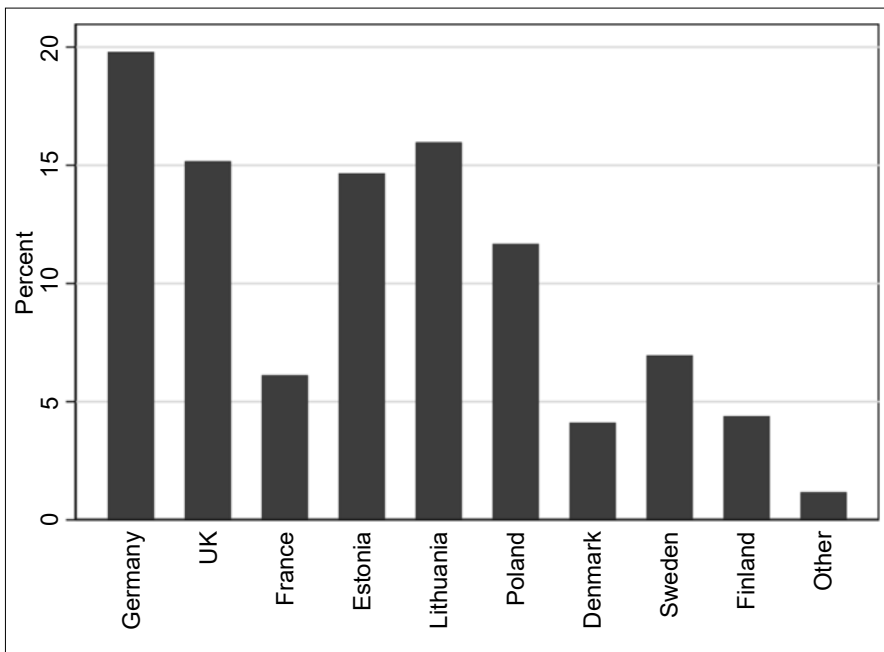
<https://doi.org/10.47459/lasr.2023.21.7>

© Andris Banka, Christina Stremming, Margit Bussmann, 2023

© Military Academy of Lithuania, 2023

against the backdrop of the *Zeitenwende*, is doing quite well in the eyes of the wider Latvian society. On the other hand, France – a major EU actor with pronounced leadership ambitions in the continent, is evaluated rather poorly by the Latvian people. As a European security ally, Paris, our polling indicates, trails behind mid- size powers such as Poland and Sweden. While one survey does not allow us to make far- reaching conclusions, the poll does provide a useful snapshot of the current mood of Latvian society regarding Europe’s alliance alignments. This empirical material also suggests that there may be some divisions between the political elites and the wider Latvian society that have gone largely unnoticed in the scholarly literature.

Figure 1. **Public Opinion on the Importance of European Allies**



Note. N=1002. Respondents were asked to rank Latvia’s 3 most important security allies in Europe out of the provided options.

Germany: Doing Better than its Reputation

Since 2016, Germany has considerably intensified its involvement in the Baltic Sea region security affairs, most notably through its eFP lead framework nation status in Lithuania. Since Russia’s February 2022 war in Ukraine, Berlin

has further committed to strengthening its military footprint in the region by pledging the deployment of a German brigade to Lithuania. On its part, the German political leadership has constantly signaled its willingness to defend NATO's frontline states. During the Berlin Foreign Policy Forum in 2022, for instance, Germany's Foreign Minister, Annalena Baerbock, underscored: "We stand by you. The security of the Baltic states and the security of Eastern Europe is Germany's security. And when the going gets tough we are going to defend every inch of the territory of our alliance" (Baerbock, 2022). Similarly, in his 2022 keynote speech on the future of the European Union in Prague, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz discussed the recent geopolitical trends and emphasized that "the centre of Europe is moving eastwards" (Scholz, 2022). Berlin's adopted policies as well as rhetorical assurances have clearly gained some political capital across the Baltic republics.

That said, while Germany has stepped up its presence in the region, some governmental- level disagreements between Berlin and Riga can still be identified. For instance, German-Latvian policy views diverge regarding the need to arm Ukraine with heavy weaponry that could reach military targets deep inside the Russian Federation. What is more, Riga is much more outspoken regarding the necessity of putting Ukraine on a NATO membership fast track. Thus, despite the fact that Germany in recent years has undergone a major strategic course correction, it still attracts a fair share of criticism from Latvian lawmakers. Critical assessments of Germany's security role are a common feature in Latvian elites' political discourse. For example, shortly after the initial outbreak of the war in Ukraine, a senior Latvian diplomat expressed doubts concerning Germany: "I am not so sure, if the Baltic states would be attacked, what would the German position be", she publicly pondered (Kalniete, 2022).

Others have similarly pointed the finger at the German government by declaring that its played role is not commensurate with its size and place in Europe. In this regard, one of the most outspoken critics has been Latvia's Defence Minister, Artis Pabriks, who served in this position until December 2022. He repeatedly and publicly expressed discontent with Germany's adopted policy line. "Can we trust the Germans? Because one thing is what the Germans are telling, that we are with you and your border is our border and we will assist. But we have been asking for decades actually, when Berlin was telling us we are here for you, how exactly will you do this?", Pabriks posed the question in a public forum (Pabriks, 2022). He proceeded to criticize Germany's seeming inability to back its promises with required material forces. Similar criticism has also been regularly coming out of Latvia's Foreign Ministry, led by long-serving Minister Edgars Rinkēvičs. In 2023, for instance, he publicly

decried Berlin for its hesitation to provide Ukraine with Leopard tanks (Rinkēvičs, 2023). While the public debate in Latvia concerning Germany's security policies is by no means one-sided, with different evaluations to be found in the Latvian political spectrum, utterances of criticism by political classes have been a rather regular feature.

Contrary to the views expressed by political elites in Latvia, our representative survey, however, attests that at the societal level, Berlin is highly valued and appreciated as a security actor. Whereas lawmakers in Riga have exhibited doubts regarding Germany's security policy trajectory, the public sentiment paints a starkly different picture. Latvians, based on our survey, rank Germany as the most important European security partner, ahead of the UK and close neighbors Estonia and Lithuania.

Briefly, it is also worth touching upon the UK's perceived security role in Latvia. London and Riga are bound by historical links dating back to the birth of Latvia's statehood (Bukovskis & Kasekamp, 2022). After Latvia's accession to NATO in 2004, the British have persistently contributed to Baltic regional security through the Baltic Air Policing mission and participation in common military exercises. The United Kingdom's exit from the European Union, however, initially cast a shadow over its future ties with continental Europe, Latvia included. While all three Baltic states opposed Brexit, since the completion of that process, the UK has demonstrated a willingness to retain and reinforce its security partnership with Latvia (UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, 2021). Latvian political classes have certainly been appreciative of this stance (Latvia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022). Our polling, generally speaking, puts the political elites' views on a par with that of ordinary citizens. Even outside the EU, London remains an essential security partner to Latvia.

France: Ambitions do not Match Perceptions

While in the case of Germany, the public sentiment in Latvia appears to be notably more positive than elite discourse suggests, in the case of France this logic does not apply at all. Latvia's citizens rank six other European countries before France in its importance as a security partner. These include: Germany, Lithuania, the UK, Estonia, Poland, and Sweden. Paris, in our poll, has barely managed to surpass Finland and Denmark. While French President Emmanuel Macron often talks about French leadership ambitions and willingness to shape a new European security framework, the eastern part of the continent, Latvia included, does not share this vision. To be fair, France has not been a passive

observer. It has assumed a greater military role in the Baltic Sea region. Since 2017, it has deployed over 300 soldiers together with Leclerc tanks to the UK-led eFP battle group in Estonia. French Rafales have been regularly deployed to the region as part of NATO's Air Policing missions over the Baltics and Poland. In fact, Paris has been the "second largest contributor to Air Policing missions with seven deployments since 2007" (Guitton, 2019: 5). In 2023, Macron's close policy advisor assured that Paris is "totally committed to the security of this part of Europe" (Chatel, 2023). Still, at the governmental level - and as our poll indicates at the societal level alike - France has not managed to win over this part of Europe.

Latvia, similar to the other two Baltic nations, historically has had deep reservations regarding the willingness and ability of France to assume a leadership role in Eastern European affairs. Part of this may simply have to do with basic geography – Baltic lawmakers are well aware that Paris is preoccupied with other regions such as North Africa and the Mediterranean, thus having less political capital for other parts of Europe. Equally though, it also stems from the French historical vision of Russia and its place in Europe. Latvia has regularly expressed frustration with French diplomatic overtures to Moscow in times of crisis. Recounting her interactions with the Former President of France, Jacques Chirac, President of Latvia (from 1999 to 2007) Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga lamented that he held a "very romantic vision of Russia" (Vīķe-Freiberga, 2023). Such assessment of the French leadership has generally stayed the same under the Presidency of Emmanuel Macron. After Russia's full-scale war in Ukraine in February 2022, Latvian politicians protested loudly regarding Macron's launched dialogue with the Kremlin and his insistence that Russia ought to be provided with some kind of security guarantees in the future (Abboud et al., 2022).

Another considerable fault line between Paris and Riga concerns the push for European strategic autonomy. Over the years, the Latvian government has grown uneasy about Macron's declarations regarding the need for Europe to reduce its dependency on the United States. In an interview in 2020, President Emmanuel Macron hinted that countries like Estonia have been "won over by this concept of strategic autonomy" (Macron, 2020). However, Latvia, similar to Estonia and Lithuania, has been the most ardent opponent of this type of vision that foresees a diminished role of the United States in the European continent (Banka, 2021). While the Latvian government has repeatedly supported European capacity-building as such, it has nonetheless expressed profound dissatisfaction regarding claims of Europe's overreliance on Washington. Latvian political elites remain fiercely Atlanticist in their strategic orientation and view attempts by the Elysée Palace to redesign the alliance networks as too

disruptive or even radical. Our conducted poll similarly attests that Latvian society harbors reservations concerning France as a European security ally in the region. The population does not consider Paris an important security ally in the region.

Conclusion

Our polling of Latvian society offers two key take aways. For one, Germany is fairing much better than anticipated. There appears to be some daylight between how Berlin is talked about among Latvian political classes and what the wider society thinks of Germany as a security actor. France, on the other hand, is judged by the Latvian population as being in no position to assume leadership reigns in the region, a view that by and large matches that of the Latvian government.

Are Latvian political elites bound to follow the publics' stance regarding Germany? Equally, under what conditions, can France improve its allied status in the eyes of the Latvian population? More generally, to what extent does public opinion guide Latvian foreign policy-making? In this short commentary, we cannot provide conclusive answers to these questions.

Briefly, it is worth noting that scholarly literature offers starkly different takes on the leader's responsiveness to public sentiments concerning alliances. Some have made the argument that public opinion does little in terms of moving the needle on important foreign policy matters, while others insist that public sentiments have the ability to constrain the foreign policy choices of elites in significant ways (Canes-Wrone, 2006; Kreps, 2010; Kertzer & Zeitsoff, 2017).

Our limited ambition here has been to promote this particular research agenda and draw attention to the fact that there are some curious gaps between societal preferences and lawmakers' views in Latvia. Previously discussed material provides further grounds for studying security alliances not only at the political elite's level but also from the vantage point of ordinary citizens. With the dramatically shifting regional security landscape, our staked-out position here is that extending public opinion research into this particular field can yield interesting scholarly insights.

References

Abboud, I. et.al (2022, December 4). Kyiv and Baltics hit out at Emmanuel Macron's stance on Russia. *Financial Times*. <https://www.ft.com/content/d170a8f9-2392-49f8-a59c-14a7dba18c68>

Baerbock, A. (2022, October 20). The Price of Peace: Rethinking Security for Germany and Europe. *Berlin Foreign Policy Forum 2022*. <https://koerberstiftung.de/en/projects/berlin-foreign-policy-forum/2022/>

Banka, A. (2021). Reclaiming a good ally status: Baltic coping strategies in the America First world. *European Security*, 30(2), 159-177. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2020.1840361>

Bukovskis, K., & Kasekamp, A. (2022). Brexit coping strategies of the Baltic states.

Journal of Contemporary European Studies. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2022.2110044>

Canes-Wrone, B. (2006). *Who Leads Whom? Presidents, Policy, and the Public*. University of Chicago Press.

Chatel, X. (2023, May 13). They Rise or Sink Together: NATO on the Road to Vilnius. Lennart Meri Conference. <https://lmc.icds.ee/agenda/nato-the-road-to-vilnius/>

Guitton, A. (2019, January 20). France and the security challenges in the Baltic Sea region. Directorate General for International Relations and Strategy. [https://franceintheus.org/IMG/pdf/France_and_the_security_challenges_in_the_Baltic_Sea_r egion.pdf](https://franceintheus.org/IMG/pdf/France_and_the_security_challenges_in_the_Baltic_Sea_region.pdf)

Kalniete, S. (2022, February 5). How do you solve a problem like Russia? *Monocle: The Foreign Desk*. <https://monocle.com/radio/shows/the-foreign-desk/423/>

Kertzer, J. D., & Zeitzoff, T. (2017). A Bottom-Up Theory of Public Opinion About Foreign Policy. *American Journal of Political Science*, 61(3): 543-558. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12314>

Kreps, S. (2010). Elite Consensus as a Determinant of Alliance Cohesion: Why Public Opinion Hardly Matters for NATO-led Operations in Afghanistan. *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 6(3), 191-215. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1743-8594.2010.00108.x>

Macron, E. (2020, November 15). The Macron Doctrine A Conversation with the French President. Le Groupe d'études géopolitiques. <https://geopolitique.eu/en/macron-grand-continent/>

Latvia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2022, August 24). The Foreign

Minister: The United Kingdom retains a major role in Europe' security and defence also after Brexit. <https://www.mfa.gov.lv/en/article/foreign-minister-united-kingdom-retains-major-role-europe-security-and-defence-also-after-brexit>

Pabriks, A. (2022, October 20). The Price of Peace: Rethinking Security for Germany and Europe. *Berlin Foreign Policy Forum 2022*. <https://koerberstiftung.de/en/projects/berlin-foreign-policy-forum/2022/>

Rinkēvičs, E. [@edgardsrinkevics]. (2023, January 21). *We, Latvian, Estonian, Lithuanian Foreign Ministers, call on Germany to Leopard tanks to Ukraine now* [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://apastyle.apa.org/style-grammar-guidelines/references/examples/twitter-references>

Scholz, O. (2022, August 29). Speech by Federal Chancellor Olaf Scholz at the Charles University in Prague. The Federal Government of Germany. <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/news/scholz-speech-prague-charles-university-2080752>

UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (2021, December 6). Joint Declaration of cooperation between the UK and Latvia". <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-latvia-joint-declaration-of-cooperation/joint-declaration-of-cooperation-between-the-uk-and-latvia>

Viķe-Freiberga, V. (2023, March 14). Panic in the Baltic. *ARTE*, <https://www.arte.tv/en/videos/106708-000-A/panic-in-the-baltic/>

Notes

1 Our designed survey was carried out in December 2022 by the research centre *SKDS*, which is widely considered to be the lead polling agency in Latvia.