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EUROPE'S CALL FOR GREATER INDEPENDENCE

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BertelsmannStiftung

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Europe's Call for Greater Independence

Florian Kommer
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EUROPEAN TRUST IN THE US FALLS AS SCEPTICISM TOWARD CHINA PERSISTS

In a world increasingly shaped by war, confrontation and great-power rivalry, public opinion across the European Union points in one direction: greater independence. Nearly three in four Europeans now say the EU should "go its own way" after decades of close cooperation with the United States. While the US remains the EU's top ally, a "Trump effect" has sharply weakened its standing since 2024, and trust in Washington remains low.

Nearly three in four Europeans now say the EU should "go its own way" after decades of close cooperation with the United States.

China, however, is not the beneficiary of that decline. Europeans are deeply skeptical of China's global role and want to reduce their dependence — even at an economic cost. Instead, the UK and Canada are gaining ground as key partners, while NATO membership continues to be seen as a key safeguard against threats to peace. The picture that emerges is of a Europe that seeks greater independence while remaining committed to cooperation and collective security.

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

Across three Bertelsmann Stiftung surveys conducted in September 2024, September 2025 and March 2026, a clear set of trends emerges.

- Support for greater European independence is growing.
  Across the EU, 73% say the Union should "go its own way" after decades of close cooperation with the United States — up from 63% in 2024.
- The push for independence has broadened across society.
  Support for a more independent EU is now high across all demographic groups, with particularly sharp gains among older Europeans: among those aged 56–69, it rose from 60% in 2024 to 75% in 2026.
- A majority of Europeans do not see the US as a trustworthy partner.
  58% of EU citizens mistrust the US, up from 54% in 2025.
- The US remains Europe's most important ally, but its standing has fallen dramatically.
  In 2026, a plurality of 31% still name the United States as the EU's most important ally, but this is down a striking 20 percentage points from 51% in 2024.
- China is not emerging as an alternative pole of attraction.
  Only 9% of Europeans see China as the EU's most valuable ally in 2026, while 61% view China's global influence negatively.
- Europeans want to reduce dependence on China — even at a cost.
  67% say their country is dependent on China, and among them 77% support reducing that dependence even at economic cost.

- European views of the EU's most valuable allies are being redistributed within the transatlantic camp.
  As the US stock has declined, the UK's share has risen from 13% in 2024 to 24% in 2026, while Canada's has increased from 7% to 13%.
- Support for European independence does not mean rejection of NATO.
  A majority of 63% continue to believe NATO membership provides protection against threats to peace. Furthermore, 57% consider the 5% NATO spending target reasonable.
- Europeans want the EU to play a stronger global role.
  A large majority of 71% say the EU should be more active in world affairs.
- Europeans continue to prefer international cooperation over confrontation.
  Even in a period marked by war and geopolitical tension, 78% say international relations thrive on cooperation rather than competition.

EUROPE'S TURN TOWARD GREATER INDEPENDENCE

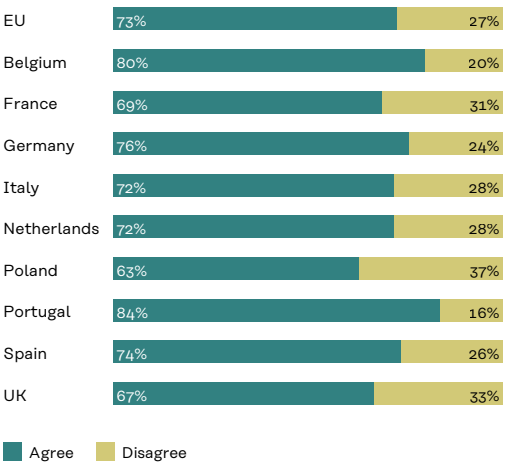
Since Donald Trump was re-elected president of the United States in November 2024, he has imposed sweeping tariffs on the EU, questioned US commitments to Ukraine and NATO, threatened to annex Greenland and initiated a war with Iran. These developments have left deep scars on the transatlantic relationship.

While the European Union and the United States have cooperated closely for decades, a growing majority of Europeans now believe the EU should chart an independent course. Nearly three in four European citizens (73%) say the EU should "go its own way", up from 63% in 2024. Support for greater independence is highest in Portugal (84%) and lowest in Poland (63%). At the same time, Poland records the sharpest increase since 2024, rising by 23 percentage points.

While the European Union and the United States have cooperated closely for decades, a growing majority of Europeans now believe the EU should chart an independent course.

Figure 1 In the last half century, Europe and the United States have often cooperated closely.

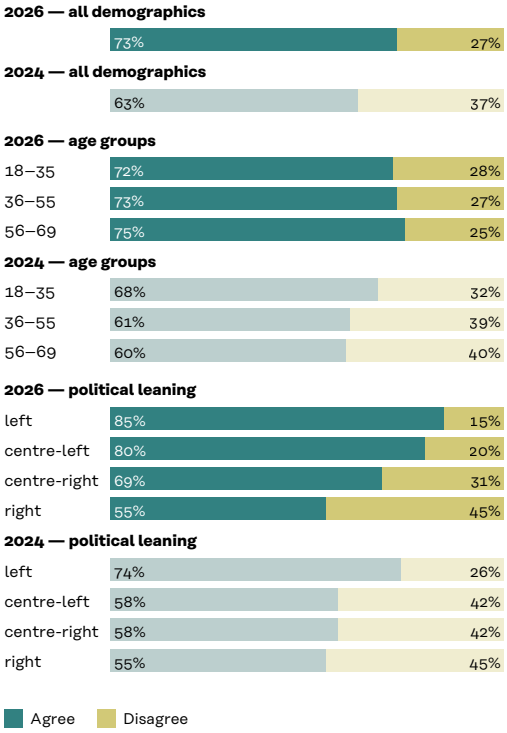
Do you think that it is time for Europe to go its own way?



March 2026 eupinions | what do you think?

Figure 2 EU: In the last half century, Europe and the United States have often cooperated closely.

Do you think that it is time for the EU to go its own way?



Sept. 2024 – March 2026 eupinions | what do you think?

The view that it is time for Europe to go its own way is broadly shared across society. Support remains high regardless of gender, education level or whether respondents live in urban or rural areas.

The modest generational divide visible in earlier waves has largely disappeared. Indeed, the strongest gains are found among older Europeans: among those aged 56 to 69, support rose from 60% in 2024 to 75% in 2026.

The clearest divide is political. Support for a more independent Europe is strongest on the left and centre-left, at 85% and 80% respectively in 2026, and remains solid among the centre-right at 69%. On the right, it falls to 55%. In Germany, more than 80% of supporters of every political party represented in parliament favour greater EU independence — with the exception of supporters of Alternative for Germany (58%). Thus, support for greater EU independence commands majority backing across parties and countries in almost all cases. Poland stands out as the main exception: among supporters of Law and Justice (PiS), only 39% agree that the EU should go its own way.

This desire for greater independence is closely linked to how Europeans are reassessing their relationship with the United States two years into the second Trump administration. The findings point to a relationship under growing strain.

EUROPE'S SHIFTING RELATIONSHIP WITH THE UNITED STATES

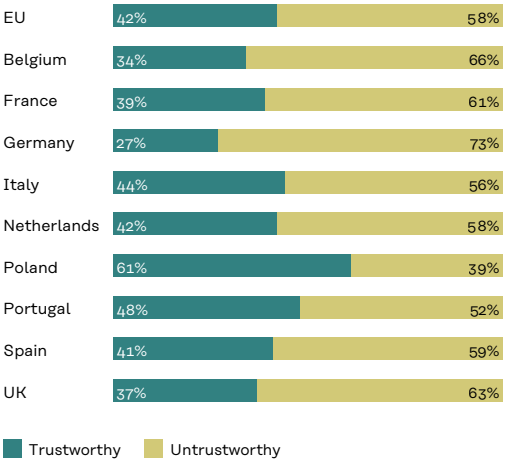
A majority of Europeans (58%) do not see the US as a trustworthy partner, up slightly from 54% in 2025. Distrust is highest in Germany, where 73% hold this view. Poland stands out as the only country in which a majority (61%) still considers the United States trustworthy.

Across all demographic and social groups, the United States is viewed as largely untrustworthy. Regarding respondents' political leaning from left to right across the EU, no majority considers the US trustworthy.

In Germany, trust is lowest among supporters of Die Linke (23%) and the Social Democratic Party (SPD) (21%), and highest among supporters of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) / Christian Social Union (CSU) (39%).

Between 2024 and 2026, the share of respondents identifying the United States as the EU's most valuable ally falls sharply by 20 percentage points, from 51% to 31% — a decline we refer to as the "Trump effect". The steepest drops are recorded in the Netherlands (from 50% to 25%), Germany (from 54% to 31%), and Poland (from 65% to 42%).

Figure 3 How trustworthy of a partner is the United States for Europe?



To reduce complexity, the figures for "Trustworthy" and "Untrustworthy" combine "very" and "somewhat" responses.

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In no European country does an absolute majority of respondents view the US as the EU's most valuable partner. Even so, the United States remains the top choice for a plurality of respondents across Europe.

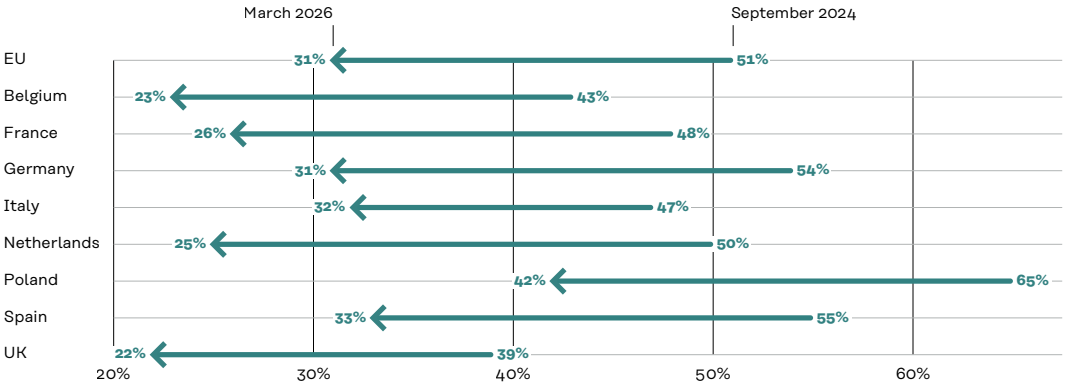
At the same time, Europeans remain open to working with the United States where interests align. A clear majority (57%) supports cooperation with the United States on China, although this too marks a decline from 64% half a year earlier.

At the same time, Europeans remain open to working with the United States where interests align.

Taken together, these findings point to a relationship under significant strain. While many politicians remain hesitant, European citizens are increasingly in favour of greater independence from the United States and express declining trust. Yet many still see the US as a valuable partner for the EU and support cooperation on shared strategic challenges such as China.

Figure 4 Who's the European Union's most valuable ally?

Results for the United States



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EUROPEAN VIEWS OF CHINA

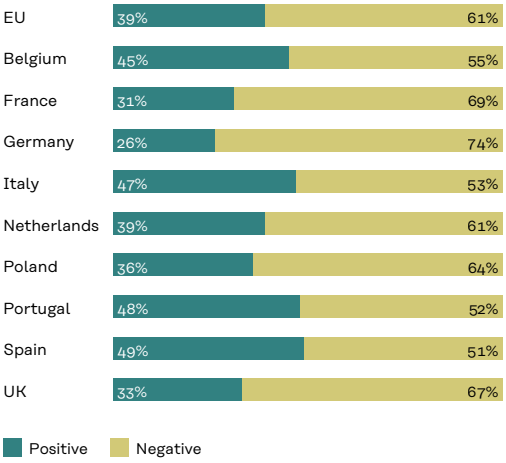
Even though trust in the US is low, China is not emerging as an alternative pole of attraction. A stable share of 9% of Europeans see China as the EU's most important ally. Spain is the only country where China ranks among the top three allies, at 12%.

Furthermore, 61% of Europeans view China's global influence negatively. Respondents in Germany (74%), France (69%) and the United Kingdom (67%) hold the most negative views of China's role, while those in Spain (49%), Portugal (48%) and Italy (47%) are comparatively more positive.

From a generational perspective, younger Europeans (18–35) tend to view China's role more positively (45%) than their older peers (aged 56–69, 34%). Finally, respondents on the political right and centre-right are more sceptical of China (67%) than those on the left (43%).

In a period of geoeconomic confrontation, Europeans acknowledge their dependence on China. Some 67% describe their country's economic relationship with China as one of dependence — rising to a striking 80% in Germany.

Figure 5 How do you feel about China's influence in global affairs?



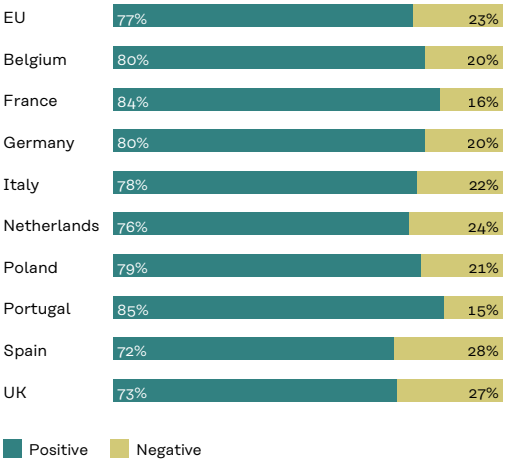
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Among those who consider their country dependent, 77% support reducing that dependence even if it harms their economy in the short term. This share is even higher in countries such as Germany (80%), France (84%) and Portugal (85%). Respondents on the political left are more willing to reduce dependence on China (82%) than those on the right (68%). In Germany, around 90% of almost all political parties favour reducing dependence on China — with the exception of supporters of Alternative for Germany (59%).

China has not benefited from declining trust in the United States; instead, other partners are gaining in importance.

Overall, Europeans take a largely negative view of China's role in the world and appear willing to bear economic costs to reduce their dependence. China has not benefited from declining trust in the United States; instead, other partners are gaining in importance.

Figure 6 How do you feel about reducing your country's dependency on China even if it hurt your economy in the short term?



Follow-up question for respondents describing their country's economic relationship with China as dependent (67% within the EU).

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Follow-up question for respondents describing their country's economic relationship with China as dependent (67% within the EU).

EUROPEANS REMAIN ROOTED IN THE TRANSATLANTIC CAMP

As support for the United States as the EU's most valuable ally has declined, it has largely been redistributed within the broader transatlantic camp. The United Kingdom's standing has risen from 13% in 2024 to 24% in 2026, while Canada's has increased from 7% to 13% over the same period.

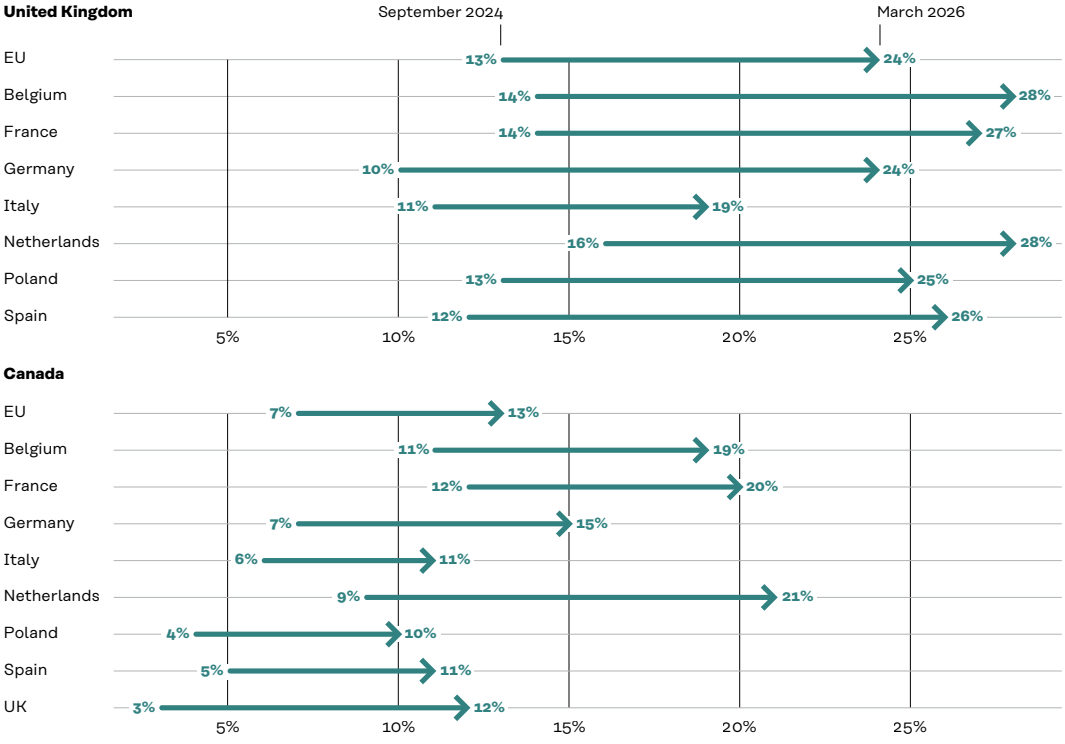
In Belgium (28%), France (27%) and the Netherlands (28%), slight pluralities now name the UK rather than the US as the EU's most valuable ally.

At the same time, support for greater European independence does not amount to a rejection of NATO. A majority of Europeans — 63% in 2026, virtually unchanged from 64% in 2024 — believe that NATO membership provides protection against threats to peace. Support is highest in Poland at 78%, followed by the United Kingdom and Portugal (both 67%) and lowest in France (52%) and Italy (57%).

Support remains strong across most demographic and social groups, though somewhat lower among younger Europeans (59% among those aged 18–35, compared with 68% among those aged 56–69) and among respondents on the political right (48%).

Figure 7 Who's the European Union's most valuable ally?

Results for the United Kingdom/Canada



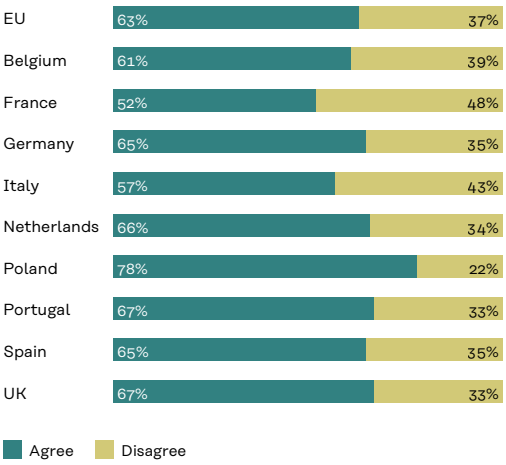
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In Germany, support is particularly low on the political right, with only 37% of supporters of Alternative for Germany viewing NATO as protective, compared with much stronger backing among supporters of the CDU/CSU (87%), SPD (77%) and Alliance 90/The Greens (83%).

This continued attachment to NATO is also reflected in attitudes towards defence spending. Across the EU, 57% consider the 5% NATO spending target to be reasonable. There is majority support in almost all countries surveyed, with the highest support in Poland (81%). Italy is the main exception, where support is lowest at 44%.

Taken together, these findings suggest that Europeans do not view greater independence as a clean break with existing partnerships. Rather, they point to a continued preference for cooperation — even as Europe seeks to define a more independent role on the global stage.

Figure 8 Do you think your country's membership in NATO protects against threats to peace?



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THE EU'S ROLE ON THE GLOBAL STAGE

Europeans want the EU to take on a stronger global role. Over the past ten years, more than 70% have consistently said they would like the EU to play a more active part in world affairs. This trend continues in 2026, with 71% holding this view. Support is especially high in Portugal (85%) and Spain (79%), while respondents in Germany (66%) and France (63%) are somewhat less enthusiastic.

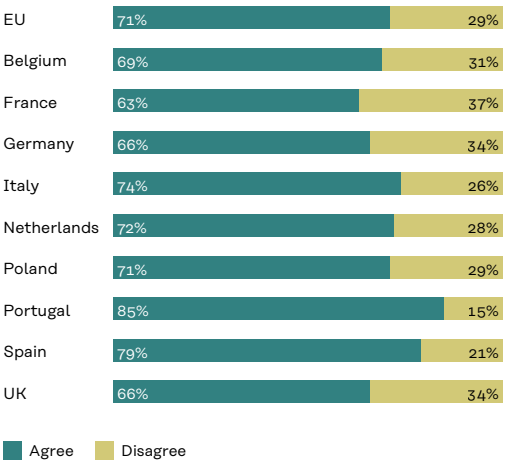
Support is especially high in Portugal (85%) and Spain (79%), while respondents in Germany (66%) and France (63%) are somewhat less enthusiastic.

The main divide here is political. While respondents on the left (81%) and centre-left (80%) favour a more active EU, those on the right (49%) and centre-right (68%) are more sceptical.

Even though recent months have been marked by geopolitical tension and war, Europeans continue to believe that international affairs are driven by cooperation. Across Europe, 78% of respondents say international relations thrive on cooperation rather than competition. This view is particularly widespread in Germany (86%), the Netherlands (85%) and Poland (83%), while less pronounced in Portugal (68%), Italy (68%) and France (70%).

Furthermore, older Europeans (aged 56–69) are more likely to believe in international cooperation (85%) than younger Europeans (aged 18–35, 71%).

Figure 9 The European Union should play a more active role in world affairs



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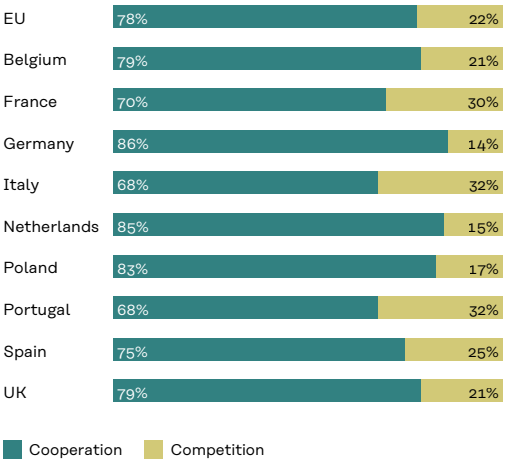
Europeans want their Union to become more independent and to step up on the global stage. Yet, in

a world characterised by conflict and confrontation, they continue to place their faith in cooperation.

All in all, the Bertelsmann Stiftung's data point to an uncomfortable truth: two years into the second Trump presidency, the transatlantic relationship has suffered significant damage. The U.S remains Europe's most important ally, but its standing has declined sharply over the past 18 months. At the same time, China does not represent a viable alternative. Where many politicians remain cautious, public opinion is more clear-cut: Europeans want the EU to become more independent of the US They want to reduce dependence on China — even at a cost. And they want the EU to step up its role in world affairs.

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Figure 10 International relations thrive on: ...



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METHODOLOGY NOTE

The samples analysed in this report were drawn by Nira Data (formerly Latana and Dalia Research) across all 27 EU member states as well as the United Kingdom in September 2024 (EU: n=26,454; UK: n=2,974), September 2025 (EU: n=17,288; UK: n=1,834), and March 2026 (EU: n=18,097; UK: n=2,050). The samples reflect current population distributions in terms of age (18–69 years), gender, and region/country. To obtain census-representative results, the data were weighted using the most recent Eurostat statistics.

Any references to cross-country differences in this report are limited to those countries with sufficiently large sample sizes: Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal (since 2025) and Spain, as well as the United Kingdom.

Considering the sample size and the estimated overall design effect (2.17 for September 2024, 2.11 for September 2025, and 2.18 for March 2026), the effective margin of error for EU-wide estimates is ±0.8% for September 2024 and ±1.0% for September 2025 and March 2026, calculated at a confidence level of 95%.

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Florian Kommer is Senior Expert for European Strategic Issues at the Bertelsmann Stiftung. He previously worked as a diplomat at the German Federal Foreign Office, where he served as Deputy Chief of Staff to the Minister of State for Europe and Climate. Prior to that, he headed the parliamentary office of a Member of the German Bundestag. He also worked for several years at the Heinrich Böll Foundation as Senior Adviser to the President and in the EU/North America and Middle East/North Africa divisions. He completed a traineeship at the European Commission. Florian Kommer studied Politics, Economics and Philosophy in Hamburg, Istanbul and Passau.

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Brandon Bohrn serves as Senior Expert for Transatlantic Relations in the Bertelsmann Stiftung's Europe Programme. His work focuses on US foreign and security policy, US domestic politics and society, and EU–US relations. Previously, he was with the Bertelsmann Foundation in Washington, DC, where he co-authored the annual *Transatlantic Trends* report for three years. As a Fulbright and DAAD scholar, he has gained academic and professional experience on both sides of the Atlantic, including work with the foreign policy staff of a US senator and the political sections of the US Consulate in Düsseldorf and the US Embassy in Berlin. He completed the TransAtlantic Masters Program (TAM) in Political Science at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, and is also a graduate of The Citadel, The Military College of South Carolina.

Daniela Schmidt
Daniela Schmidt is a specialist in the implementation of data-based publications within the Bertelsmann Stiftung's project "eupinions", an independent platform for European public opinion founded in 2015. She oversees data analysis, project management and strategic technical development. By transforming complex data into accessible and meaningful insights, she bridges the gap between empirical research and public communication. Daniela Schmidt ensures that data-driven findings are not only accurate but also engaging and relevant to the current public debate.



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