

Policy brief

# Promote foreign and security policy knowledge in Germany

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September 2021



## Summary and problem description

This brief highlights the widespread lack of knowledge or genuine misinformation among the German public on critical topics in the foreign and security policy sphere, discusses the dangers the present situation represents and proposes possible policy interventions for the new German government. Our research shows that the German public's security risk perceptions are severely skewed. For example, German citizens have vastly overestimated the risk of terrorist attacks on German soil over the past twenty years.

In addition, the German public feels insecure when assessing policy options in the international security realm. When faced with a crisis scenario involving Russia and the Baltic states, more than 1/3 of the respondents could not identify a preferred policy response. This number stands in stark contrast to other policy areas (e.g., education or economic policy), where "don't know answers" are significantly less frequent.

Both dynamics are worrying and need to be addressed by a new German government. An ill-informed or ignorant German public is easy prey for populist political actors trying to manipulate German public opinion for their political gain. Moreover, a disconnect between the German government and the German population during a security crisis can paralyze not only German domestic political decision-making but may also hamper coordination at the EU or NATO levels, thereby stifling any effective European and/or transatlantic response.

## Key figures

**1.05**

Germans have been killed in terrorist attacks perpetrated or inspired by foreign actors on average per year since 2001 in Germany\*.

**48%**

of Germans were afraid of terrorism during that period.

**55%**

of Germans only know that the Russian annexation of Crimea has been illegal.

**39%**

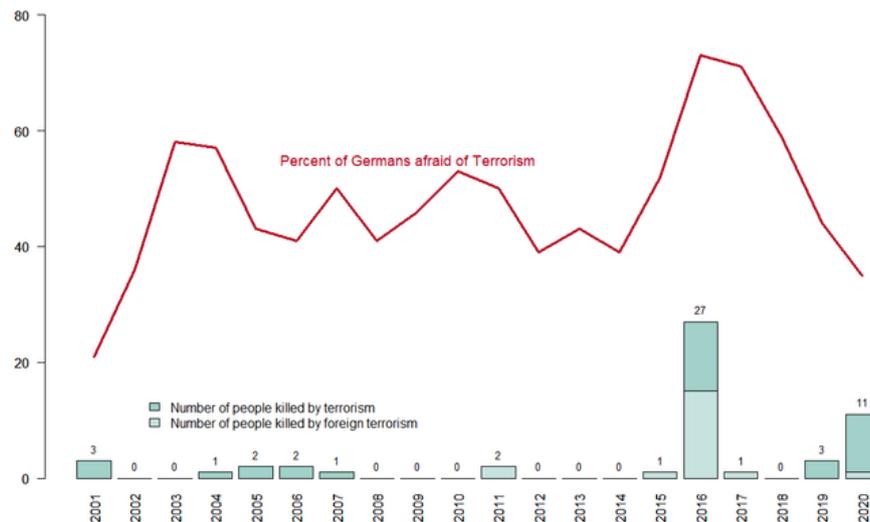
of Germans would not know what to do in case of a Russian attack on Latvia.

\*Source: author's own coding based on the [Global Terrorism Database](#).

# Foreign and security policy knowledge among the German Public

## Case Study I: Risk perception with regards to foreign terrorist attacks on German soil

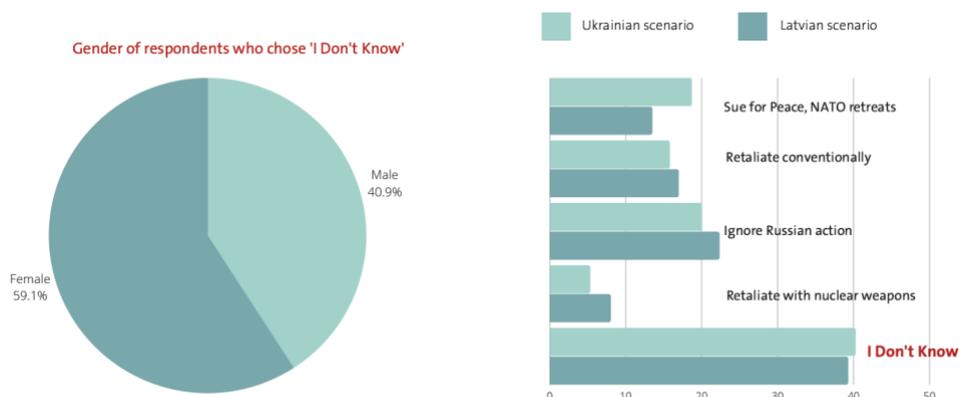
Since 9/11, foreign terrorists have been responsible for the death of, on average, one person per year in Germany. Yet, while numbers over the last twenty years have varied, nearly half of the German population is deeply afraid of terrorism. Similar patterns are found in many Western countries. These concerns go hand-in-hand with the widespread belief that refugees and migrants systematically “import” terrorism, despite systematic and robust evidence contradicting such claims.<sup>1</sup>



Data partially based on: „[Die Ängste der Deutschen](#)“ im Langzeitvergleich“, R+V Versicherung, 2020 and [Global Terrorism Database](#).

## Case Study II: 39% of the German population would not know what to do in case of a Russian attack on Latvia

We conducted a representative survey in Germany to examine policy preferences in reaction to a Russian hybrid attack on Ukraine; or alternatively on Latvia, an EU and NATO member state. Possible response options included (1) immediate peace negotiations with Russia; (2) ignoring Russian actions; (3) the use of conventional military force; or (4) the use of nuclear military force as a retaliatory measure. In both scenarios the most frequent response to which action an individual would prefer was “I Don't Know.” In the Ukraine scenario, 40% of Germans chose this option; in the Latvia scenario 39%. Female survey participants were even more indecisive than male respondents. At the same time, we detected that emotions ran high among respondents when confronted with both scenarios: 59% of Germans signaled they were afraid; 60% were angry.



<sup>1</sup> See Polo, Sara M.T. and Julian Wucherpfennig. Forthcoming. “Trojan Horse, Copycat, or Scapegoat? Unpacking the Refugees-Terrorism Nexus.” *The Journal of Politics*. [www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/714926](http://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/714926)

## Implications of a lack of security policy knowledge

- Misinformation or a genuine lack of information on critical topics in foreign and security policy is dangerous. It opens the door for **populist political actors on the fringes of the political spectrum to manipulate public opinion for their political gain**. Exaggerations about the security risks of immigration have long been part of the populist playbook. In the worst case, such scapegoating will foster terrorism by domestic actors.
- **An uninformed populace will also be more vulnerable to disinformation campaigns** orchestrated by foreign adversaries. In peacetime, such campaigns might lead to more polarization within Germany. In crisis situations, such propaganda campaigns could paralyze political decision-making and stifle EU and NATO responses.
- **Political decision-making might be driven by emotions instead of rational thought**. Crises are more likely to escalate if driven by emotions. Emotions can lead to overly risk accepting or overly risk-avoiding behavior resulting in feedback loops with at a minimum inefficient and at a maximum very dangerous results.

## Recommendation and way forward

The global security situation is once again in flux. Forced migration is expected to rise again, which undoubtedly will stir renewed debate about relevant security risks for host countries like Germany. Nuclear arsenals across the world are expanding and decades-old arms control treaties have faltered. Rapidly evolving technologies present new dangers. Great Power Politics seem to have made a return.

We argue that it is of utmost importance to increase public knowledge on critical foreign and security topics across the German population. This would diminish the risk of disinformation swaying the German public – both in peacetime and in times of crises. German leadership can no longer shy away from these discussions. Otherwise, the void will be filled by other actors with potentially malignant intentions.



### Promote public literacy on security and defense policies

The German Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the German Ministry of Defense need to engage in or help finance public information and education on critical topics in the security and defense field.



### Foster awareness and engagement in academic training

Moreover, there needs to be a greater emphasis on security and defense policy in German high schools and universities. Measures could include funding new professorial positions in the field and/or creating scholarships and essay competitions to attract more students to specialise in security politics or related fields.

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**Addressing Germany's  
governance challenges**

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