

November 2023

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Do Europeans (still) support arms control talks with Russia?

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Note: This is an extended version of a policy brief published by the [Institute of International Relations Prague](#) in connection with the 2023 Czech Security Forum.

Nuclear arms control architecture is experiencing an existential crisis. After the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty collapsed in 2019, only the New START Treaty remained in place to limit the U.S. and Russian nuclear stockpiles. However, the New START eventually ended up being suspended by Moscow in February 2023, one year after Russia invaded Ukraine and caused the most severe crisis in East-West relations since the Cold War's darkest days. At a time when the Russian Duma approved revoking ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, there are serious concerns about whether the two sides will be able to find a way out of a treacherous arms race spiral.

As a result of these developments, most experts on military strategy agree that the risk of nuclear war is possibly higher today than at any time after the end of the Cold War. Many experts would also subscribe to the idea that arms control remains critically important to limiting nuclear dangers. Yet, can we expect that the Western public will, once again, come forward to support arms control talks between nuclear superpowers?

On the one hand, the return of nuclear weapons to mainstream media reporting and the renewed debates about the threat of nuclear use in Europe could make the public particularly anxious about the dangers of nuclear war. To this end, new agreements and initiatives that would limit U.S. and Russian nuclear arsenals could be seen as a prudent policy to avert the most dangerous outcomes of the current crisis.

On the other hand, some citizens in the West could see new negotiations with Moscow as conciliatory steps that reward Russia for its bad behavior. Many supporters of Ukraine's struggle against the more powerful neighbor could be concerned that diplomatic engagement would legitimize Russian

About the author

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aggression and that Moscow could (mis)use the negotiations for propaganda purposes. As Camille Grand, former NATO Assistant Secretary General, proposed in his recent report, “(t)he conditions to engage in a meaningful arms-control dialogue with Russia are simply not present today.”¹

Views from Europe: A survey evidence

Would the European public support new arms control negotiations with Moscow in the current international security environment? Recent evidence suggests that despite Russia’s aggression against Ukraine and generally hostile foreign policy directed toward the collective West, engaging Russia in arms control talks would be met with broad societal approval.

The first piece of such evidence comes from our recent surveys of public attitudes towards the NATO practice of “nuclear sharing” in Germany and the Netherlands. Together with my two co-authors, we recently replicated our original surveys from 2020² to investigate how public attitudes in this area changed after Russia’s 2022 invasion. Our results show a clear pattern of increased “nuclear hawkishness” among the general population: our respondents were now more likely to express their belief in the effectiveness of nuclear deterrence, less willing to support the withdrawal of U.S. nuclear weapons from their countries, and more likely to embrace the legitimacy of nuclear weapon use.³

However, there was one aspect of our surveys where we saw little change. When it comes to nuclear weapons deployed in Germany and the Netherlands,

the option that received the most support in both 2020 and 2022 was to withdraw them as a part of new arms control negotiations between the United States and Russia. In contrast to other policy options provided in the questionnaire, the overall support for the arms control option decreased only slightly, from 65% to 61% in the case of Germany and from 72% to 68% in the case of the Netherlands.

To investigate European public attitudes toward nuclear arms control with Russia further, we worked with a polling company IPSOS to field additional surveys on representative samples of the adult population in Germany, France, Poland, and the United Kingdom in September and October 2023.⁴ Our main aim was to examine whether citizens in these four countries support high-level talks between the United States and Russia on a new arms control agreement that would replace the New START treaty when it expires in February 2026.

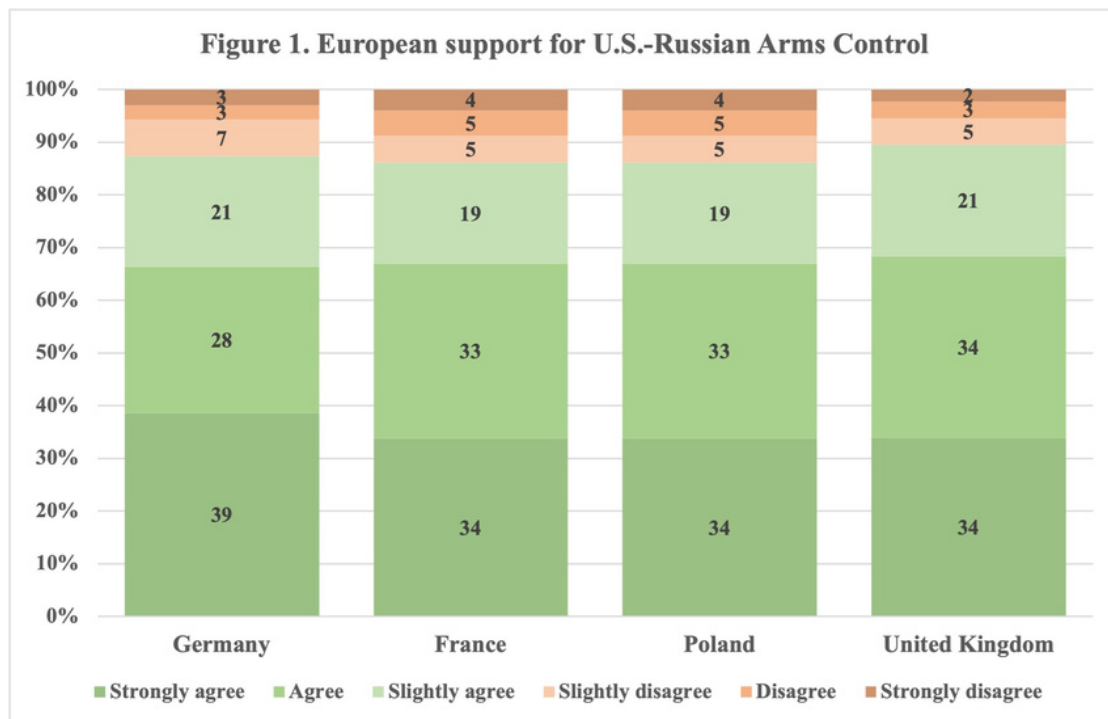
The findings of this research are displayed in Figure 1. In each country, a clear majority of respondents favored the new U.S.–Russia arms control agreement. The results were remarkably similar cross-nationally; the support for U.S.-Russia arms control ranged from 86% in Poland and France and 87% in Germany to 90% in the United Kingdom. The most common response in each country was to “strongly agree” with the policy of negotiating with Russia on a new nuclear arms control treaty.

¹ Camille Grand, *Missiles, Deterrence and Arms Control: Options for a New Era in Europe* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2023), 21.

² Michal Smetana, Michal Onderco, and Tom Etienne, “Do Germany and the Netherlands Want to Say Goodbye to US Nuclear Weapons?,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 77, no. 4 (July 4, 2021): 215–21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.2021.1941603>; Michal Onderco, Tom W Etienne, and Michal Smetana, “Ideology and the Red Button: How Ideology Shapes Nuclear Weapons’ Use Preferences in Europe,” *Foreign Policy Analysis* 18, no. 4 (October 1, 2022): orac022, <https://doi.org/10.1093/fpa/orac022>.

³ Michal Onderco, Michal Smetana, and Tom W. Etienne, “Hawks in the Making? European Public Views on Nuclear Weapons Post-Ukraine,” *Global Policy* 14, no. 2 (2023): 305–17, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1758-5899.13179>.

⁴ See the Appendix to this policy brief for more details about our study.



Note: % agreement with the question “How much do you agree or disagree that the United States should negotiate with Russia on a new nuclear arms control treaty that would replace the current New START treaty?” after the respondents received information about the content and aims of the New START Treaty. Each country N = 1,000. See the Appendix for more details about the study.

Implications

The evidence from these cross-national surveys suggests that the European public continues to embrace nuclear arms control with Russia as a meaningful policy option in today’s international security climate. Interestingly, we can observe very similar support for arms control talks in Germany and Poland, countries with different historical experiences, geographical positions, and, in many ways, different foreign policy approaches vis-à-vis Russia.

Although we need more evidence to unpack the reasoning of the respondents behind their attitudes, our findings could imply that the public does not see prospective arms control negotiations as a “reward” for Russia’s transgressive behavior, as some European policymakers do. Instead, they likely see it as a prudent policy aiming to limit the risks of escalation that could, in the extreme, lead to an all-out nuclear war between the adversaries.

Overall, such a high level of approval suggests that if the U.S. administration manages to engage Russia in new nuclear arms control talks, this approach will not meet with widespread public opposition in European countries. That said, a relatively recent experience with the U.S. domestic debate over the withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action—commonly known as the “Iran Deal”—shows that arms control agreements can easily be hijacked by domestic actors and their parochial interests. As such, we need more evidence to see how different framings and partisan cues affect public support for nuclear arms control, particularly today when the level of political polarization reaches new heights in many European countries.

Acknowledgements

I gratefully acknowledge funding from the NATO Public Diplomacy Division's Co- Sponsorship Grant "Nuclear Weapons and the Future of European Security after the War in Ukraine" at the Institute of International Relations Prague, Stanton Foundation's Nuclear Security Grant "Public Support for Nuclear Arms Control: An Experimental Survey Approach," UNCE grant "Peace Research Center Prague" (UNCE/HUM/28), and PRIMUS Grant "Experimental Lab for International Security Studies" (PRIMUS/22/HUM/005) at the Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University.

Appendix: Report for the study on European public attitudes

Study name: Public Support for Nuclear Arms Control: An Experimental Survey Approach

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Members of the research team: Marek Vranka (marek.vranka@fsv.cuni.cz), Ondrej Rosendorf (ondrej.rosendorf@fsv.cuni.cz)

Institution: Experimental Lab for International Security Studies (ELISS) & Peace Research Center Prague (PRCP) / Institute of International Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University

Funding: Stanton Foundation, 2022 Nuclear Security Grant

Data collection company: IPSOS

Data collection method: Computer Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI)

Data collection timeframe: September 25 to October 5, 2023

Countries: United Kingdom, Germany, France, Poland

Sample size: N = 4,001 (approx. 1,000 per country)

Representative quotas: gender, age, region

Below find selected survey results for questions about public support for nuclear arms control with Russia in the United Kingdom, Germany, France, and Poland. In addition to the questions about views on U.S.-Russian arms control, our survey also contained questions concerning hypothetical nuclear arms control between the United States and China. Furthermore, our survey included an embedded experiment investigating cross-national attitudes toward nuclear and chemical weapon use. In addition to these four European countries, we also fielded a corresponding survey to a representative sample of the population in the United States. These additional results will be reported in the forthcoming publications of the research team. For early access to these results, please contact Dr. Michal Smetana, the principal investigator of the project, at smetana@fsv.cuni.cz.

Results on attitudes towards arms control with Russia (United Kingdom)

| | | | | |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------|--------|-------|
| A1. How much do you agree or disagree that the United States should negotiate with Russia on a new nuclear arms control treaty that would replace the current New START treaty? | Strongly agree | % | 33,866 | |
| | Agree | % | 34,466 | |
| | Slightly agree | % | 21,179 | |
| | Slightly disagree | % | 4,995 | |
| | Disagree | % | 3,197 | |
| | Strongly Disagree | % | 2,298 | |
| | Total | Count | | 1001 |
| | | Mean | | 2,161 |
| | | Standard Deviation | | 1,175 |
| | Boxes | T3B | | 89,51 |
| B3B | | | 10,49 | |
| | | | | |
| A3. What do you believe is the most compelling reason for the United States to negotiate with Russia for a new nuclear arms control treaty? | Less nuclear weapons mean a lower risk of a nuclear war between the United States and Russia. | % | 38,362 | |
| | Less nuclear weapons mean the United States will save money that can be used for other purposes. | % | 8,492 | |

| | | | |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|--------|
| | Less nuclear weapons mean less damage should a nuclear war occur between the United States and Russia. | % | 20,779 |
| | Negotiating and implementing the treaty will improve the relationship between the United States and Russia. | % | 18,182 |
| | None of these reasons I find compelling. | % | 14,186 |
| | Total | Count | 1001 |
| | | | |
| A4. What do you believe is the most compelling reason for the United States not to negotiate with Russia for a new nuclear arms control treaty? | Russia does not deserve this treaty because of its behavior towards Ukraine. | % | 13,287 |
| | Russia does not deserve this treaty because of its behavior towards NATO countries, including my country. | % | 6,993 |
| | Russia will likely not comply with the treaty (Russia will cheat). | % | 34,865 |
| | The current U.S. administration will not be able to negotiate a good deal with Russia. | % | 14,685 |
| | There should be no restrictions on the U.S. nuclear arsenal. | % | 4,595 |
| | None of these reasons I find compelling. | % | 25,574 |

| | | | |
|--|-------|-------|------|
| | Total | Count | 1001 |
| | | | |

Results on attitudes towards arms control with Russia (Germany)

| | | | | |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------|------|-------|
| A1. How much do you agree or disagree that the United States should negotiate with Russia on a new nuclear arms control treaty that would replace the current New START treaty? | Strongly agree | % | 38,6 | |
| | Agree | % | 27,7 | |
| | Slightly agree | % | 21 | |
| | Slightly disagree | % | 7 | |
| | Disagree | % | 2,7 | |
| | Strongly Disagree | % | 3 | |
| | Total | Count | | 1000 |
| | | Mean | | 2,165 |
| | | Standard Deviation | | 1,254 |
| | Boxes | T3B | | 87,3 |
| B3B | | | 12,7 | |
| | | | | |
| A3. What do you believe is the most compelling reason for the United States to negotiate with Russia for a new nuclear arms control treaty? | Less nuclear weapons mean a lower risk of a nuclear war between the United States and Russia. | % | 38,5 | |

| | | | |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|------|
| | Less nuclear weapons mean the United States will save money that can be used for other purposes. | % | 7,7 |
| | Less nuclear weapons mean less damage should a nuclear war occur between the United States and Russia. | % | 16,2 |
| | Negotiating and implementing the treaty will improve the relationship between the United States and Russia. | % | 18,3 |
| | None of these reasons I find compelling. | % | 19,3 |
| | Total | Count | 1000 |
| | | | |
| A4. What do you believe is the most compelling reason for the United States not to negotiate with Russia for a new nuclear arms control treaty? | Russia does not deserve this treaty because of its behavior towards Ukraine. | % | 10,1 |
| | Russia does not deserve this treaty because of its behavior towards NATO countries, including my country. | % | 5,8 |
| | Russia will likely not comply with the treaty (Russia will cheat). | % | 33,2 |
| | The current U.S. administration will not be able to negotiate a good deal with Russia. | % | 19,6 |
| | There should be no restrictions on the U.S. nuclear arsenal. | % | 4 |

| | | | |
|--|------------------------------------------|-------|------|
| | None of these reasons I find compelling. | % | 27,3 |
| | Total | Count | 1000 |
| | | | |

Results on attitudes towards arms control with Russia (France)

| | | | | |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|--------------------|------|-------|
| A1. How much do you agree or disagree that the United States should negotiate with Russia on a new nuclear arms control treaty that would replace the current New START treaty? | Strongly agree | % | 33,8 | |
| | Agree | % | 33,1 | |
| | Slightly agree | % | 19,2 | |
| | Slightly disagree | % | 5,1 | |
| | Disagree | % | 4,8 | |
| | Strongly Disagree | % | 4 | |
| | Total | Count | | 1000 |
| | | Mean | | 2,26 |
| | | Standard Deviation | | 1,319 |
| | Boxes | T3B | | 86,1 |
| B3B | | | 13,9 | |

| | | | |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|------|
| A3. What do you believe is the most compelling reason for the United States to negotiate with Russia for a new nuclear arms control treaty? | Less nuclear weapons mean a lower risk of a nuclear war between the United States and Russia. | % | 32,6 |
| | Less nuclear weapons mean the United States will save money that can be used for other purposes. | % | 8,9 |
| | Less nuclear weapons mean less damage should a nuclear war occur between the United States and Russia. | % | 21,1 |
| | Negotiating and implementing the treaty will improve the relationship between the United States and Russia. | % | 15,5 |
| | None of these reasons I find compelling. | % | 21,9 |
| | Total | Count | 1000 |
| | | | |
| A4. What do you believe is the most compelling reason for the United States not to negotiate with Russia for a new nuclear arms control treaty? | Russia does not deserve this treaty because of its behavior towards Ukraine. | % | 13,6 |
| | Russia does not deserve this treaty because of its behavior towards NATO countries, including my country. | % | 7,9 |
| | Russia will likely not comply with the treaty (Russia will cheat). | % | 36,3 |

| | | | |
|--|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|------|
| | The current U.S. administration will not be able to negotiate a good deal with Russia. | % | 15,7 |
| | There should be no restrictions on the U.S. nuclear arsenal. | % | 3,3 |
| | None of these reasons I find compelling. | % | 23,2 |
| | Total | Count | 1000 |
| | | | |

Results on attitudes towards arms control with Russia (Poland)

| | | | | |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|--------------------|------|-------|
| A1. How much do you agree or disagree that the United States should negotiate with Russia on a new nuclear arms control treaty that would replace the current New START treaty? | Strongly agree | % | 25,7 | |
| | Agree | % | 40,8 | |
| | Slightly agree | % | 18,1 | |
| | Slightly disagree | % | 5,2 | |
| | Disagree | % | 5,9 | |
| | Strongly Disagree | % | 4,3 | |
| | Total | Count | | 1000 |
| | | Mean | | 2,377 |
| | | Standard Deviation | | 1,313 |
| | Boxes | T3B | | 84,6 |
| B3B | | | 15,4 | |

| | | | |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|------|
| A3. What do you believe is the most compelling reason for the United States to negotiate with Russia for a new nuclear arms control treaty? | Less nuclear weapons mean a lower risk of a nuclear war between the United States and Russia. | % | 41,5 |
| | Less nuclear weapons mean the United States will save money that can be used for other purposes. | % | 7,6 |
| | Less nuclear weapons mean less damage should a nuclear war occur between the United States and Russia. | % | 21,7 |
| | Negotiating and implementing the treaty will improve the relationship between the United States and Russia. | % | 10,9 |
| | None of these reasons I find compelling. | % | 18,3 |
| | Total | Count | 1000 |
| | | | |
| A4. What do you believe is the most compelling reason for the United States not to negotiate with Russia for a new nuclear arms control treaty? | Russia does not deserve this treaty because of its behavior towards Ukraine. | % | 11,3 |
| | Russia does not deserve this treaty because of its behavior towards NATO countries, including my country. | % | 9,2 |
| | Russia will likely not comply with the treaty (Russia will cheat). | % | 40,3 |

| | | | |
|--|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|------|
| | The current U.S. administration will not be able to negotiate a good deal with Russia. | % | 11,8 |
| | There should be no restrictions on the U.S. nuclear arsenal. | % | 3,3 |
| | None of these reasons I find compelling. | % | 24,1 |
| | Total | Count | 1000 |
| | | | |