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Audience Understanding: Communicating Defence Across a Divided Europe



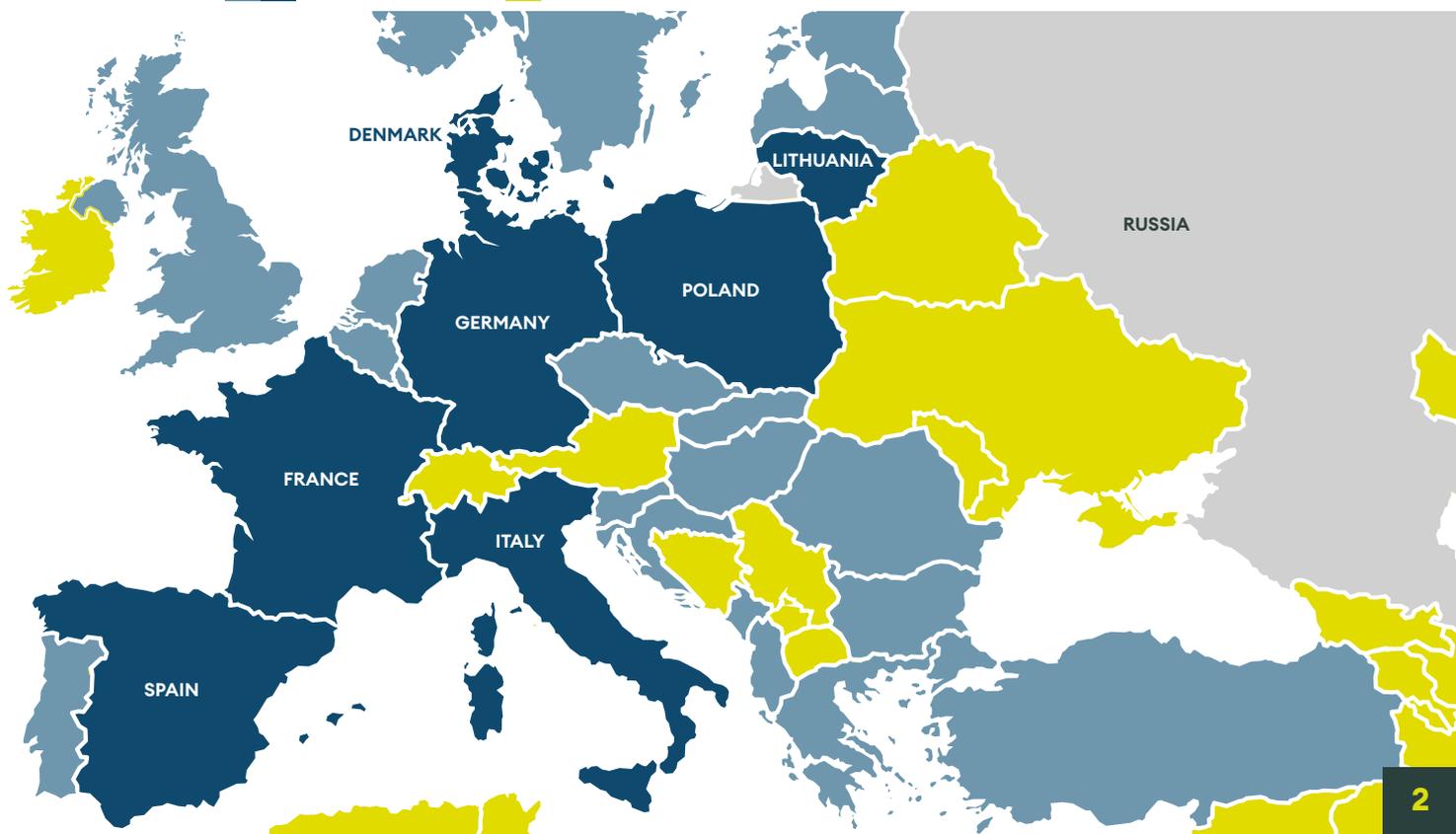
Executive Summary

European defence communication stands at a critical juncture. As security threats multiply and transatlantic cooperation faces scrutiny, the ability to build public support for NATO and defence investment across Europe has become a strategic necessity. Yet governments and defence organisations continue to deploy communications strategies that treat ‘Europe’ as a unified audience, an approach destined to fail in a landscape defined by profound audience fragmentation.

This report provides a strategic framework for audience centred defence communications grounded in the latest YouGov survey data from seven European nations: Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Lithuania, Poland, and Spain. The findings reveal a continent divided not along simple geographic lines, but through complex fault lines of threat perception, institutional trust, political ideology, and historical experience.

These are not marginal differences and represent fundamentally different strategic cultures demanding differentiated communication approaches. A single message broadcast across Europe will not persuade Italian sceptics, will bore Danish champions, and will alienate French audiences concerned about sovereignty.

NATO MEMBER STATES  NON NATO STATES 

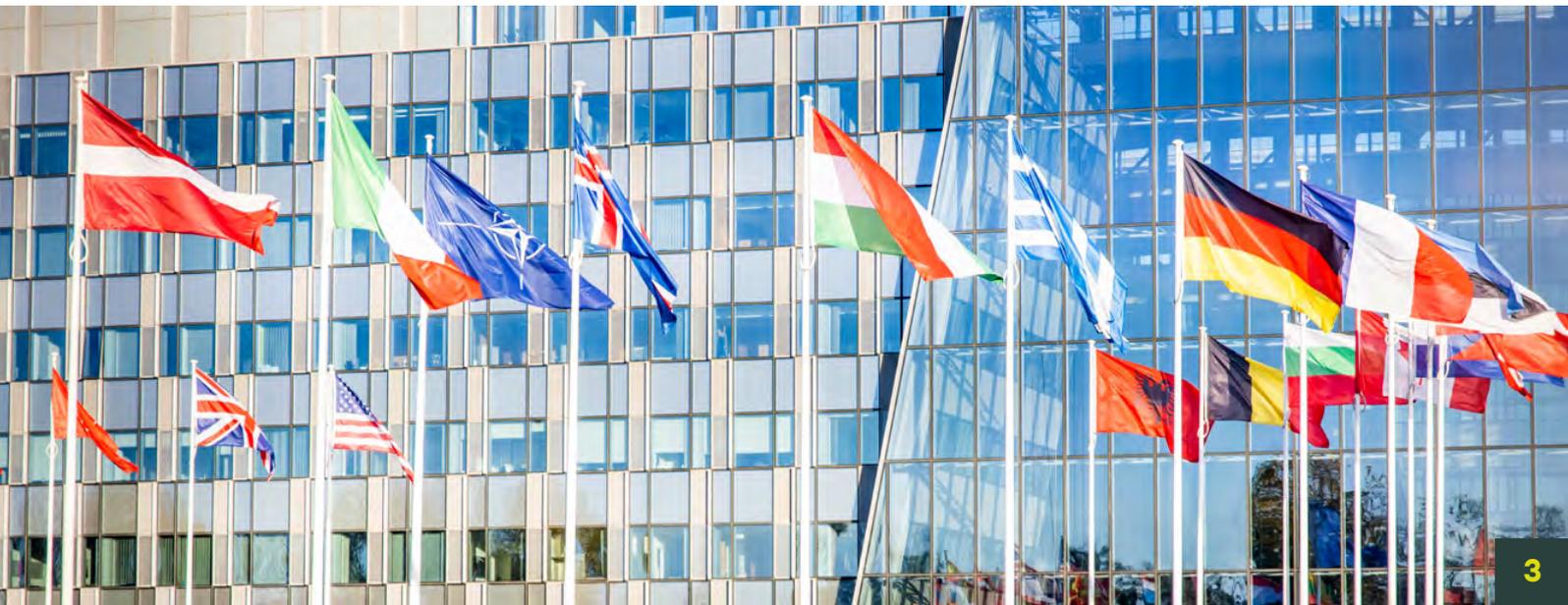


Audience understanding is not just a ‘nice to have’ for effective defence communication, it is foundational. Without it, even well-resourced campaigns risk ineffectiveness or counterproductivity. The path forward requires sophisticated, differentiated strategies calibrated to each audience’s priorities, fears and behaviours. Establishing diverse messengers calibrated to audience trust patterns, and continuous investment in audience intelligence as a strategic capability as important as military hardware or diplomatic negotiation. In an era where hostile actors conduct patient, multi-year information operations to erode transatlantic cohesion, democratic institutions cannot afford sporadic, ill-targeted communications. This report provides the audience intelligence and strategic frameworks necessary to compete effectively in Europe’s contested information environment.

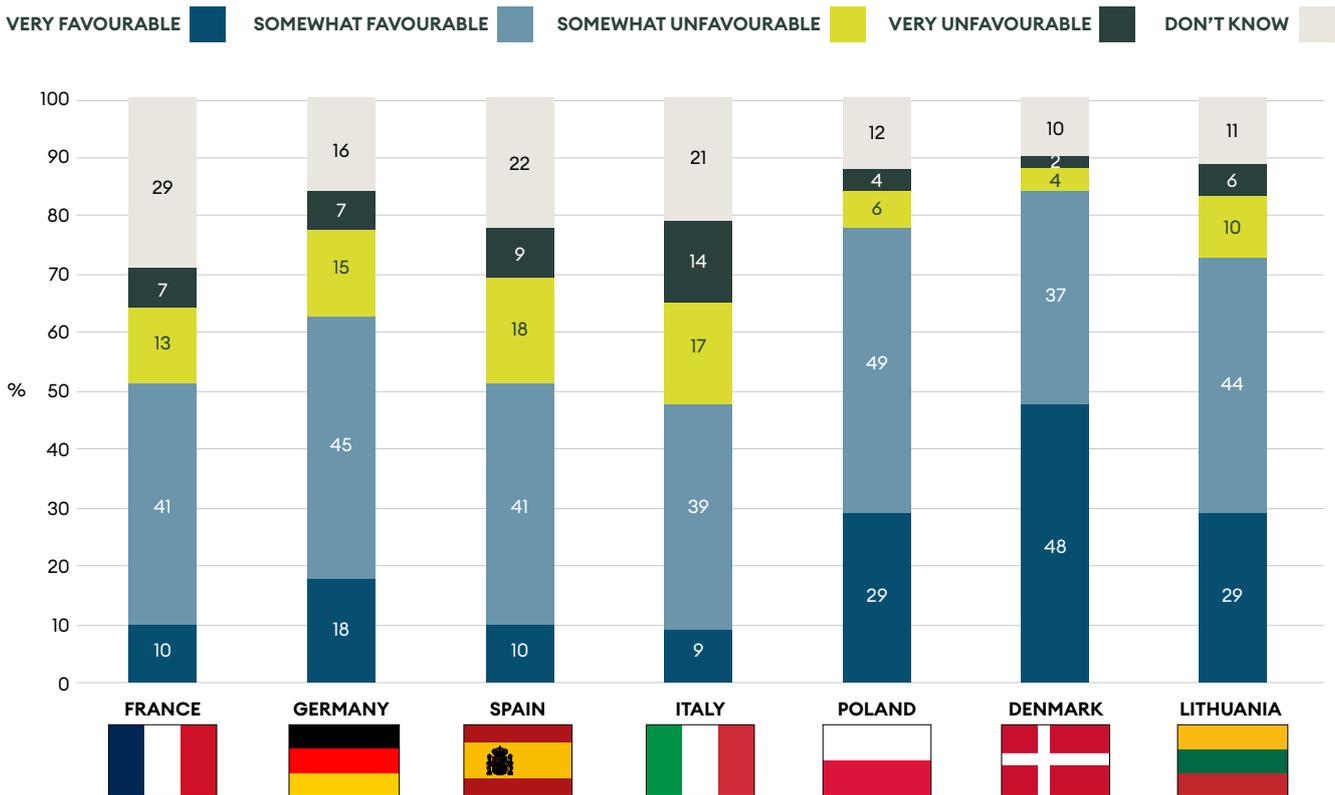
I. The Strategic Imperative: Why Audience Understanding Matters

The Fragmentation Challenge

It has been long established that for large scale communications to be effective and persuasive it is essential to have a deep understanding of audience segments. Messages that fail to account for audience characteristics, prior beliefs, and cognitive frameworks are destined to fail. In the European defence context, this means recognising that ‘Europe’ is not a monolith with uniform attitudes toward NATO, threat perception, or burden-sharing.

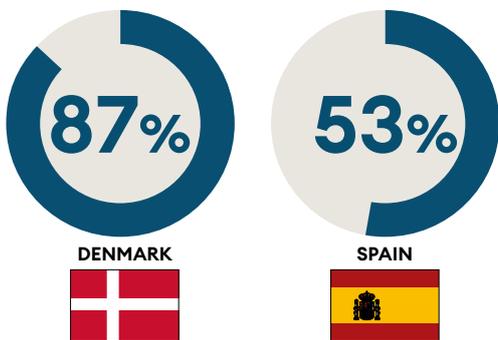


Do you have a favourable or unfavourable view of NATO?

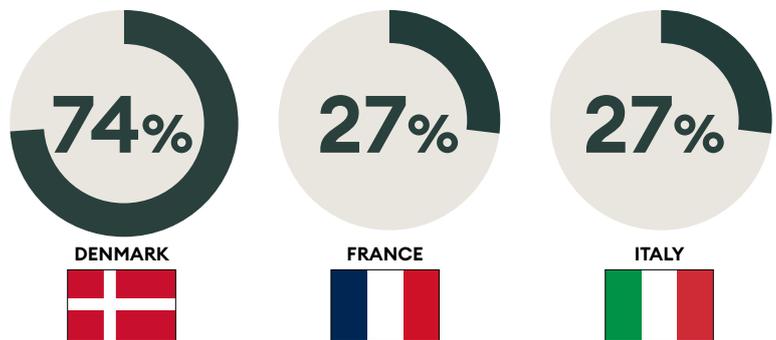


YouGov's data demonstrates this perfectly. NATO membership enjoys 87% support in Denmark but only 53% in Spain. While 74% of Danes back increased financial contributions to NATO, just 27% of French and Italians agree.

Support NATO membership



Support for increased NATO spending



These are not marginal differences, they represent fundamentally different strategic cultures, historical experiences, and political economies. A single communications strategy speaking to 'Europe' as a unified audience is not only ineffective; it risks alienating key constituencies whose support is critical to achieving policy objectives.



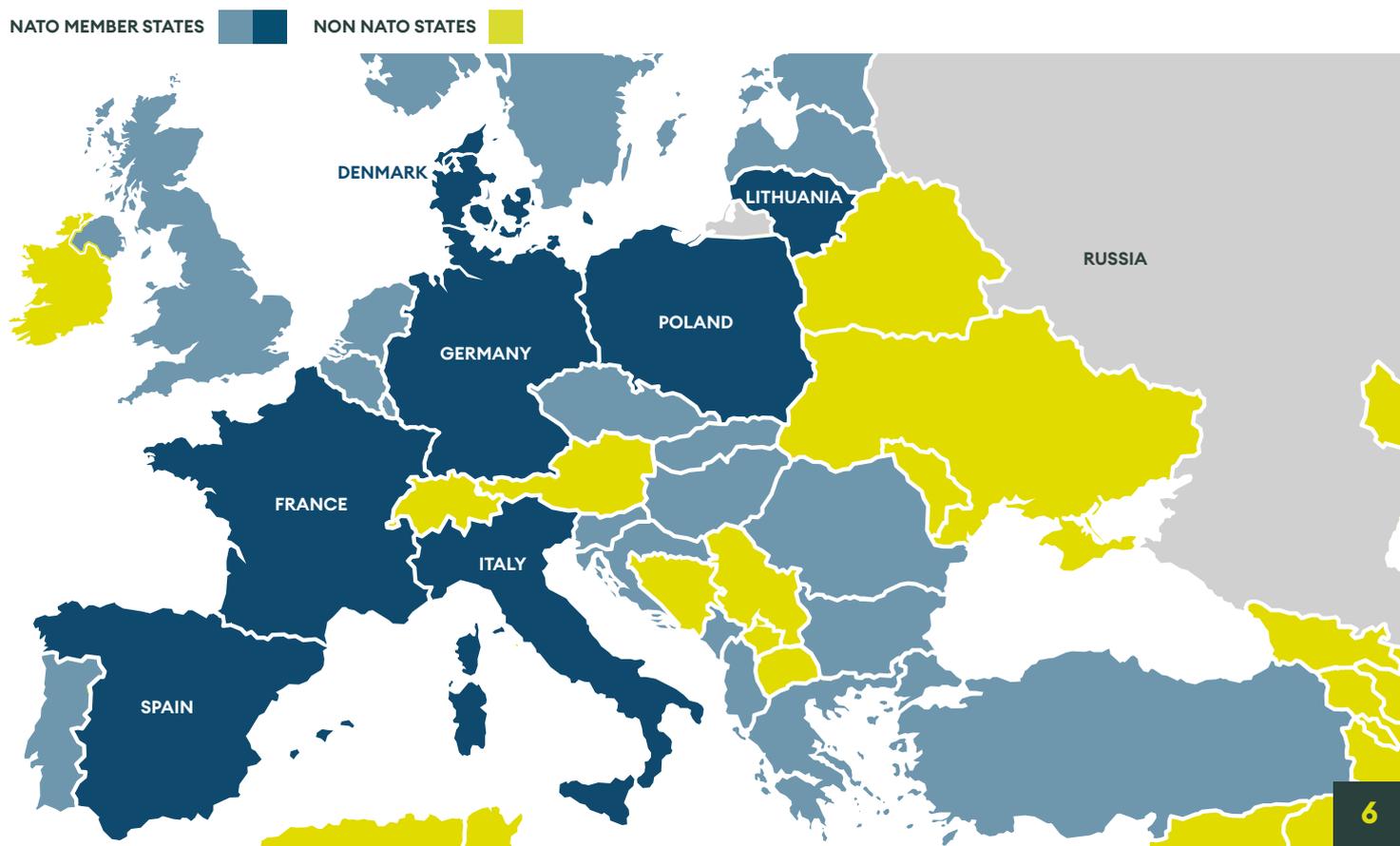
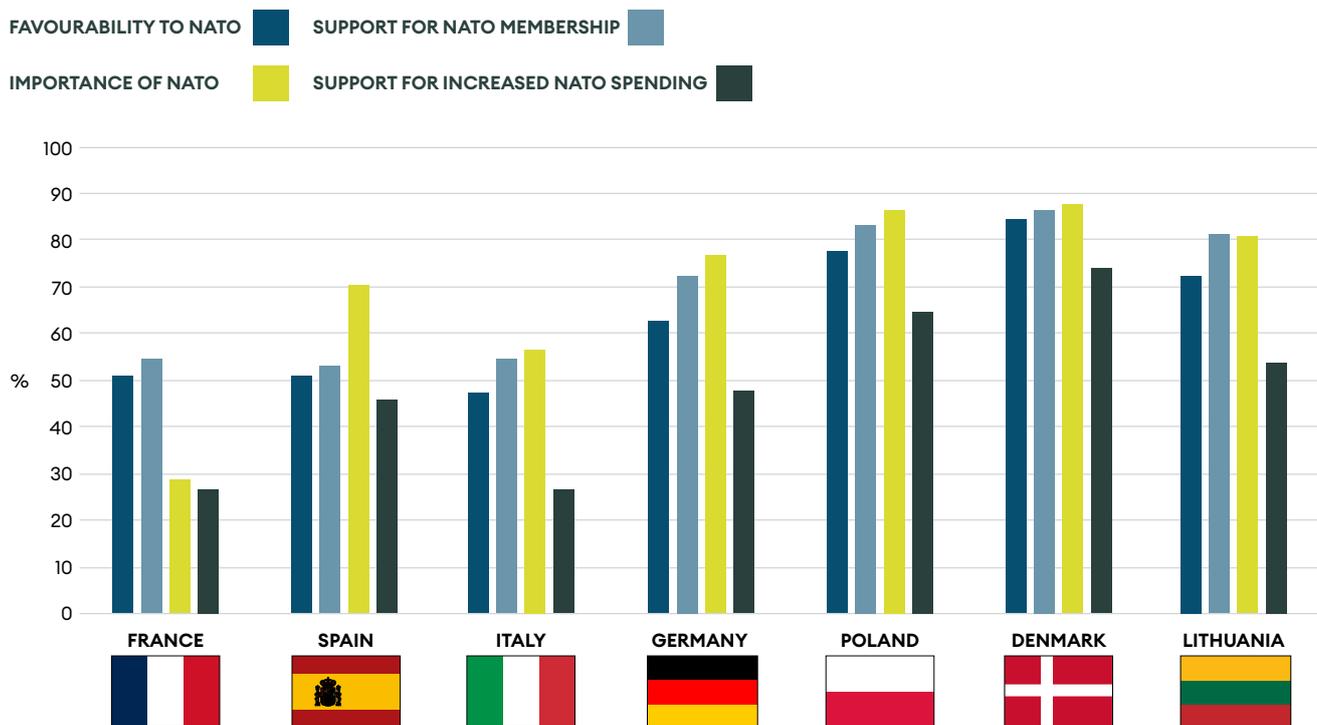
The Stakes for UK and Ukrainian Diplomacy

For the United Kingdom, maintaining European defence cooperation post-Brexit requires recalibrating relationships built not on institutional membership but on shared security interests. British ambassadors must navigate a landscape where the UK is simultaneously viewed as a close ally in some capitals and with greater ambivalence in others with Spain and Germany more likely to see the UK as a rival to the EU.

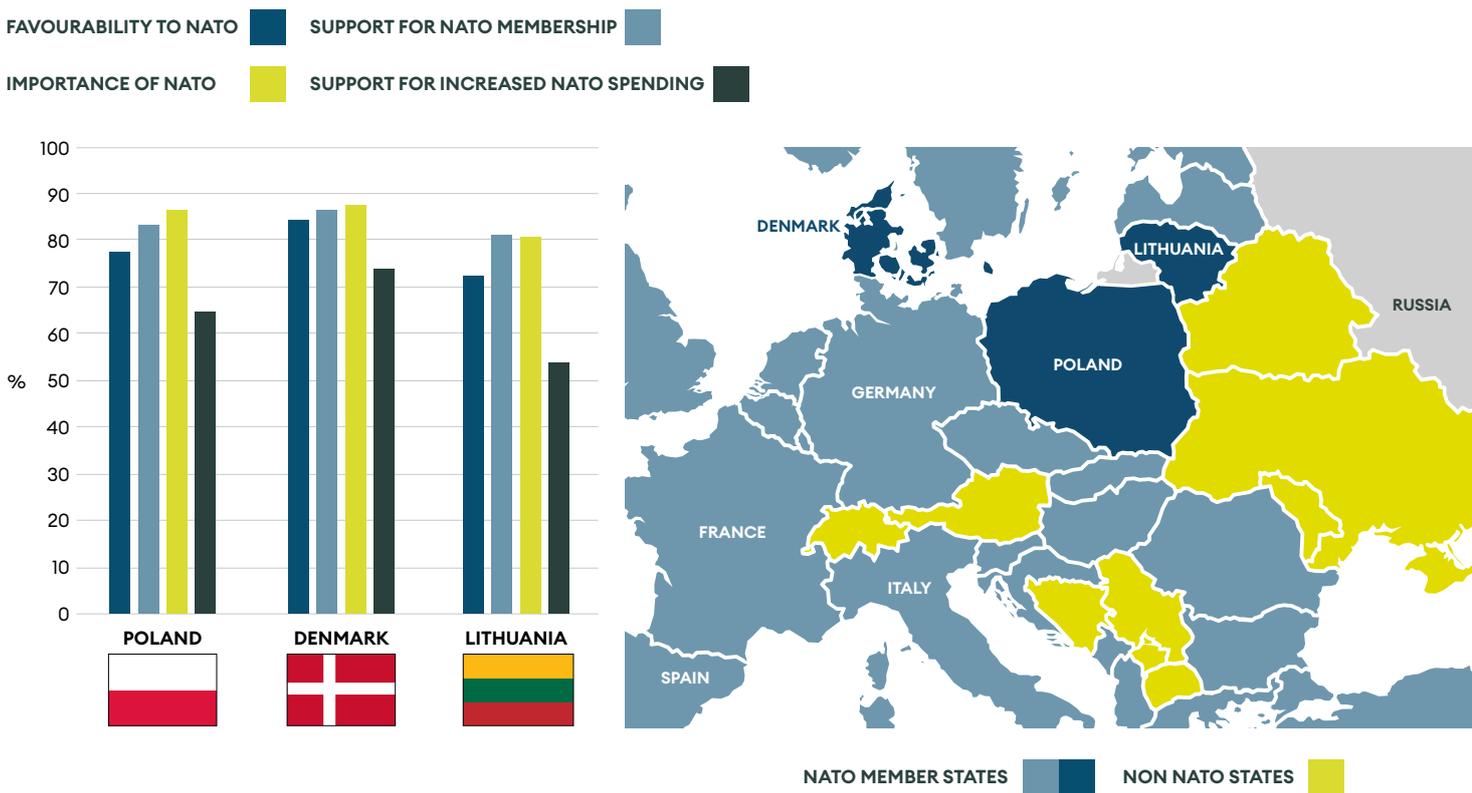
For Ukraine, the challenge is even more acute. Ukrainian diplomacy must sustain European support for military assistance, humanitarian aid, and eventual reconstruction, all while competing for attention and resources in a complex information environment. The survey data shows that while Russian aggression tops threat perceptions in Germany, Poland, Denmark, and Lithuania, it ranks only fifth in Spain and sixth in Italy, where immigration dominate concerns. Ukrainian diplomats cannot assume a shared understanding of the threat landscape and must adapt their approach based on audience-specific messaging.

II. Decoding the European Audience: Key Segmentation Insights

Geographic and Strategic Culture Clusters



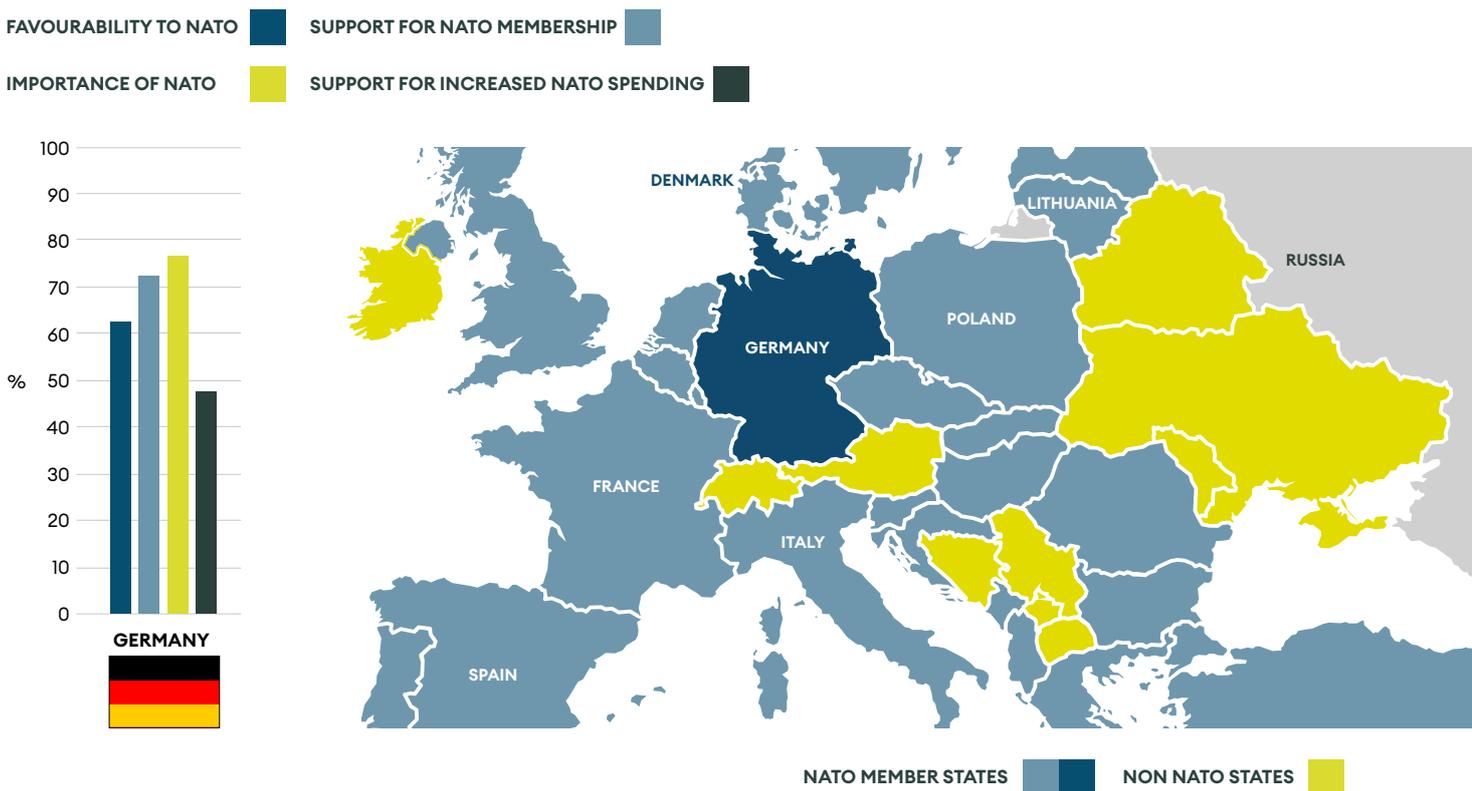
The North-Eastern Anchor: Denmark, Lithuania, and Poland



These nations form what might be termed the ‘strategic consensus’ cluster. NATO favourability, membership support, and willingness to increase contributions are all exceptionally high. Denmark posts 85% favourability, 87% membership support, and 74% backing for increased contributions. Poland and Lithuania show similarly robust numbers. Critically, these publics perceive Russia as an immediate, major threat and view US-EU defence cooperation as essential (Lithuania leads at 81% support, compared to only 53% in Italy and 57% in France).

For communicators, these audiences are strategic assets rather than targets requiring persuasion. The communications task here is *maintenance and activation*: keeping salience high, reinforcing deterrence narratives, and ensuring these countries serve as vocal champions within broader European forums. Messages emphasising Article 5 commitments, forward defence, and allied solidarity resonate deeply. Communications strategy should position these nations as coalition anchors, amplifying their voices in multilateral settings.

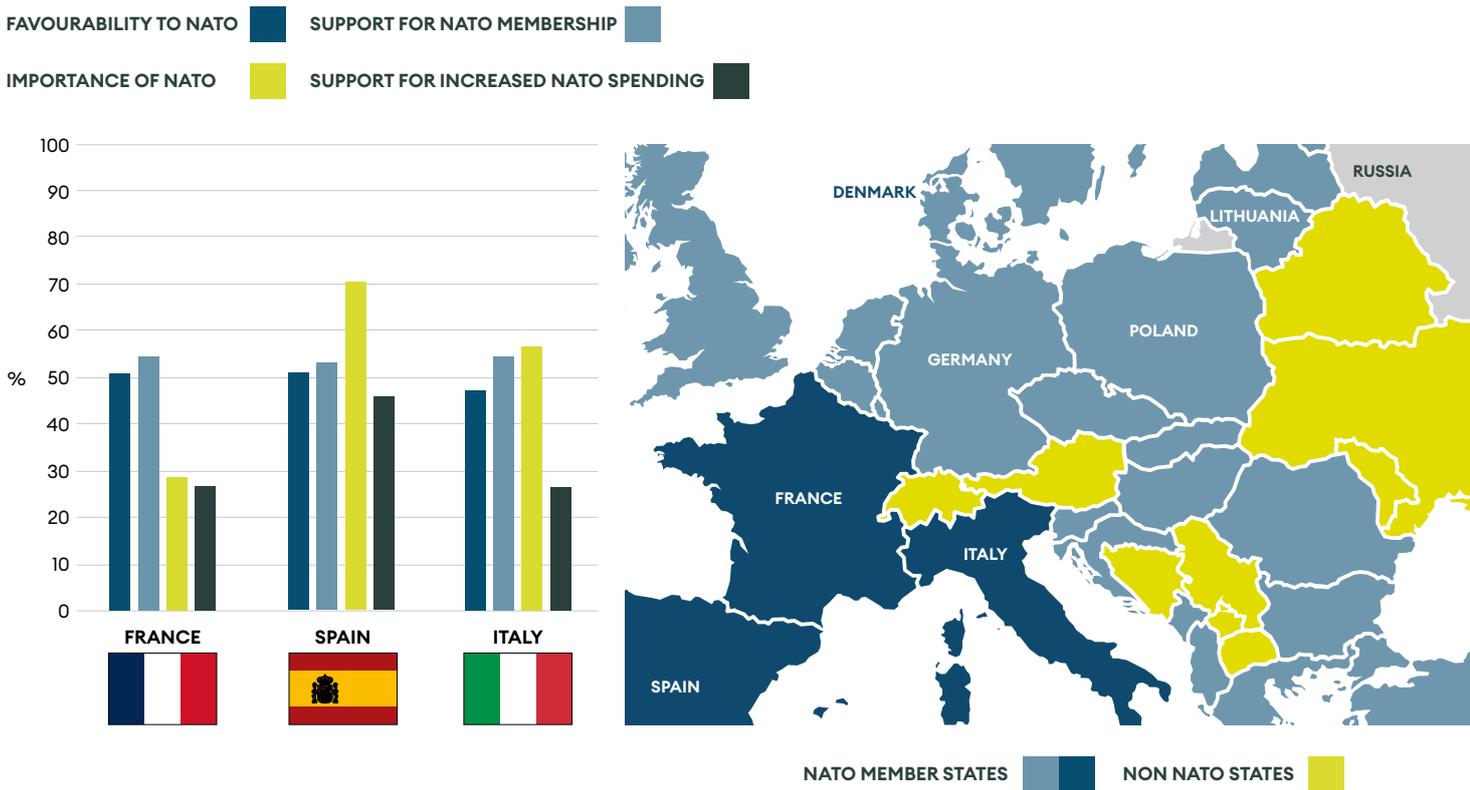
The Conflicted Centre: Germany



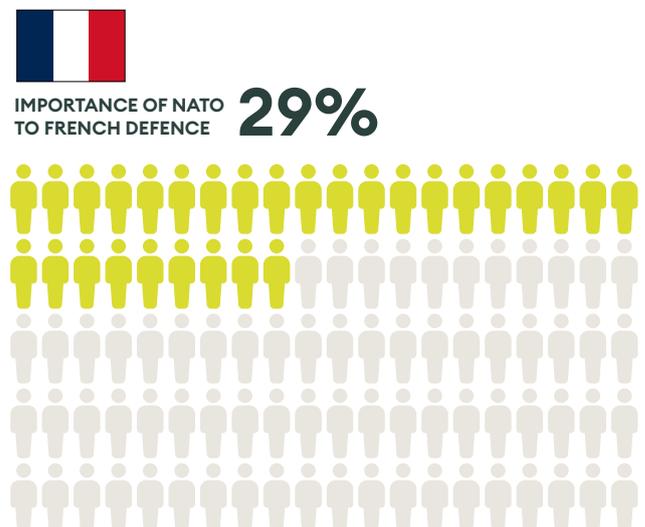
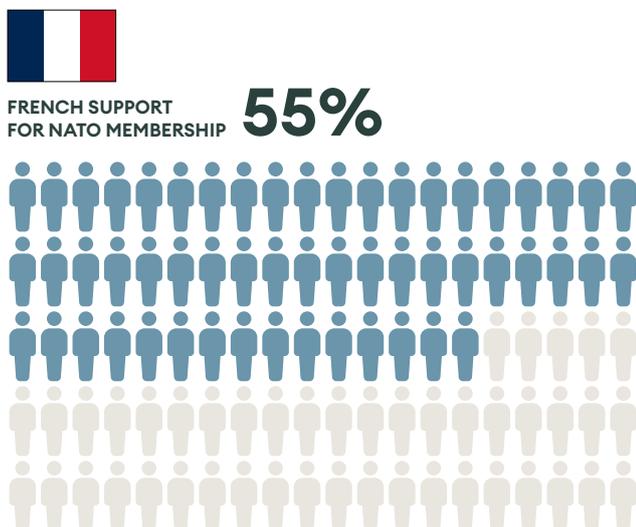
Germany occupies a unique position, high NATO support (73% membership backing, 77% see it as important) but with internal political fragmentation that creates both opportunities and constraints. People who voted for Greens, CDU/CSU, and SPD form a pro-NATO consensus, but those who voted for the AfD represent a significant outlier, with only 41% favourability and 21% supporting increased contributions. This internal division limits the opportunities for defence spending increases despite broad public concern about Russian threats (73% of the population see Russia as a threat, though AfD voters are significantly lower at 44%).

Strategic messaging for Germany should emphasise *capability*, *interoperability*, and *value-for-money*, rather than blunt ‘spend more’, or moral appeals. Communicators should frame defence investment through a lens of European strategic autonomy, technological edge, and collective resilience with a German leadership slant. Highlighting the industrial benefits, dual-use technologies, and Germany’s leadership role within a ‘European pillar of NATO’ appeals to mainstream voters while neutralising narratives of wasteful military spending.

The 'Sovereignty-Conscious South': France, Spain, and Italy



France presents perhaps the most paradoxical profile. While 55% support NATO membership, only 29% deem it important to French defence. This represents a significant disconnect within the population where membership and importance are not seen in the same way. This has knock on impacts on the support for increased NATO spending which sits at just 27%.



France simultaneously supports EU-level defence cooperation (66%) and European army creation (55%), reflecting a strategic culture that prizes sovereignty and European autonomy over transatlantic dependence. Tellingly, support increases when the European army is explicitly framed to include French forces, revealing that the public supports European defence integration on the condition of French membership and leadership, not as abstract multilateralism that might marginalise France's role.

Spain and Italy share some characteristics of middling NATO support (Spain 53%, Italy 55% support membership) and resistance to spending increases (Spain 46% and significantly lower for Italy at 27%). However, Spain uniquely favours EU-level defence decisions (57%, highest of any nation) and European army creation (58%), suggesting greater comfort with multinational defence integration. Italy, by contrast, leans toward national control and shows the lowest threat perception of Russia (only 64% see Russia as a threat, compared to 73-84% elsewhere).

For these audiences, effective communication requires reframing the defence conversation away from *burden-sharing as obligation* toward *strategic investment in national and European interests*. Messages should emphasise operational effectiveness, Mediterranean and southern security concerns (migration, terrorism, energy security), tangible economic returns (industrial partnerships, R&D investment, workforce development), and European defence integration as complementary to, not substitutive of, NATO. For France specifically, positioning defence cooperation as an avenue for European strategic autonomy rather than American dependency is crucial.



Demographic and Ideological Drivers

Gender Dynamics

Gender gaps in defence attitudes are pronounced and consistent. Men are more favourable toward NATO and more willing to support spending increases in every country surveyed. The gaps are particularly stark in France, Spain, and Italy. In Spain, for example, 56% of men support increased contributions compared to just 37% of women, a 19 point chasm. Similar gaps, though not as severe, appear in NATO favourability (Spain: men 56%, women 47%) and membership support (Spain: men 59%, women 48%).

Behavioural theory suggests that such gaps often reflect different value hierarchies and threat prioritisations. Wider research on gender and security attitudes indicates that women often prioritise non-military responses to threats and exhibit greater concern about humanitarian consequences. Effective messaging to female audiences should therefore emphasise *protection, prevention, and partnership* rather than deterrence and escalation. Frames highlighting cyber resilience, economic security, humanitarian assistance, conflict prevention, and multilateral cooperation may prove more resonant than traditional hard-power narratives.

Age: Challenging the ‘Disengaged Youth’ Stereotype

Conventional wisdom often assumes younger people are uniformly sceptical of NATO and defence spending. The data however reveals a more nuanced picture. In Germany and France, 18-24-year-olds are often more favourable toward NATO than older cohorts, contradicting generational stereotypes. Lithuania and Poland show high support across all age groups. The ‘youth problem’ in defence communication is overstated, the real challenge lies in *political ideology*, not generation.

That said, younger audiences do consume information differently. Social media, influencer-driven content, and short-form video dominate youth information ecosystems. For communications seeking youth engagement, traditional press conferences and op-eds in legacy media will underperform. Instead, digital-first strategies, LinkedIn thought leadership, Instagram Stories, TikTok explainers on NATO’s role, partnerships with

credible micro-influencers, and interactive Q&As are essential. This must be done in combination with messages that speak to youth concerns: climate security linkages, technological innovation in defence, career opportunities, and values-based cooperation.

Political Affiliation: The True Fault Lines

Party affiliation is the single strongest predictor of defence attitudes across Europe. In France, those who voted for Macron in 2022 anchor pro-NATO sentiment (70% favourable) while Le Pen voters present a destabilising opinion (33% favourable). Across Western and Southern European nations, a similar pattern emerges. Mainstream centre-right parties (PP in Spain, Fratelli d'Italia in Italy, CDU/CSU in Germany) anchor pro-NATO sentiment, while parties at both populist extremes, far-right nationalists (AfD in Germany, M5S in Italy) and far-left coalitions (SUMAR in Spain), pull against it, particularly on spending increases. This creates polarised environments where NATO support becomes entangled with broader ideological divisions. As with many political debates we've seen across Europe the difficulty is to present the status quo of NATO membership with a positive message to demonstrate its value, particularly in a time where the status quo is not felt to be working.

This political segmentation creates both constraints and opportunities. In contrast to their Western and Southern counterparts Poland, Lithuania, and Denmark manage to avoid significant partisan differences on NATO, allowing for broad, national-level messaging. In more polarised environments like France, Germany, Spain, and Italy, effective communications must pursue *coalition-building strategies* that speak to centre-right and centre-left electorates while not ceding the narrative to nationalist or populist critics. This requires a sophisticated, nuanced approach that acknowledges legitimate concerns about sovereignty, burden-sharing, and accountability while reframing defence cooperation as serving national interests rather than external threat.

III. Strategic Communications Recommendations

Audience-Centric Message Design

For high-engagement audiences (political elites, security professionals, engaged citizens) communication strategy should provide data-driven arguments, deploy technical expertise, and present evidence of allied commitment.

For broader publics with lower issue salience, particularly in countries like Italy and Spain where NATO importance ranks lower, more emotive, personal strategies will be more effective. This includes leveraging credible messengers (military veterans, respected academics, trusted local officials), emotional resonance (personal stories, human impact), visual communication (infographics, compelling imagery), and social proof (highlighting popular support, international consensus). The goal is not to bombard citizens with technical details but to build trust in defence cooperation as aligned with their values and interests.

For all audiences there should be a concerted effort to demonstrate tangible benefits to individuals. This can vary based on the audience in question but there is often a real difficulty to demonstrate how membership to large scale organisations such as NATO provide direct value to people beyond a slightly intangible, at least for Western and Southern European nations, security argument. Show how membership provides social and economic benefits to member states that people can understand.

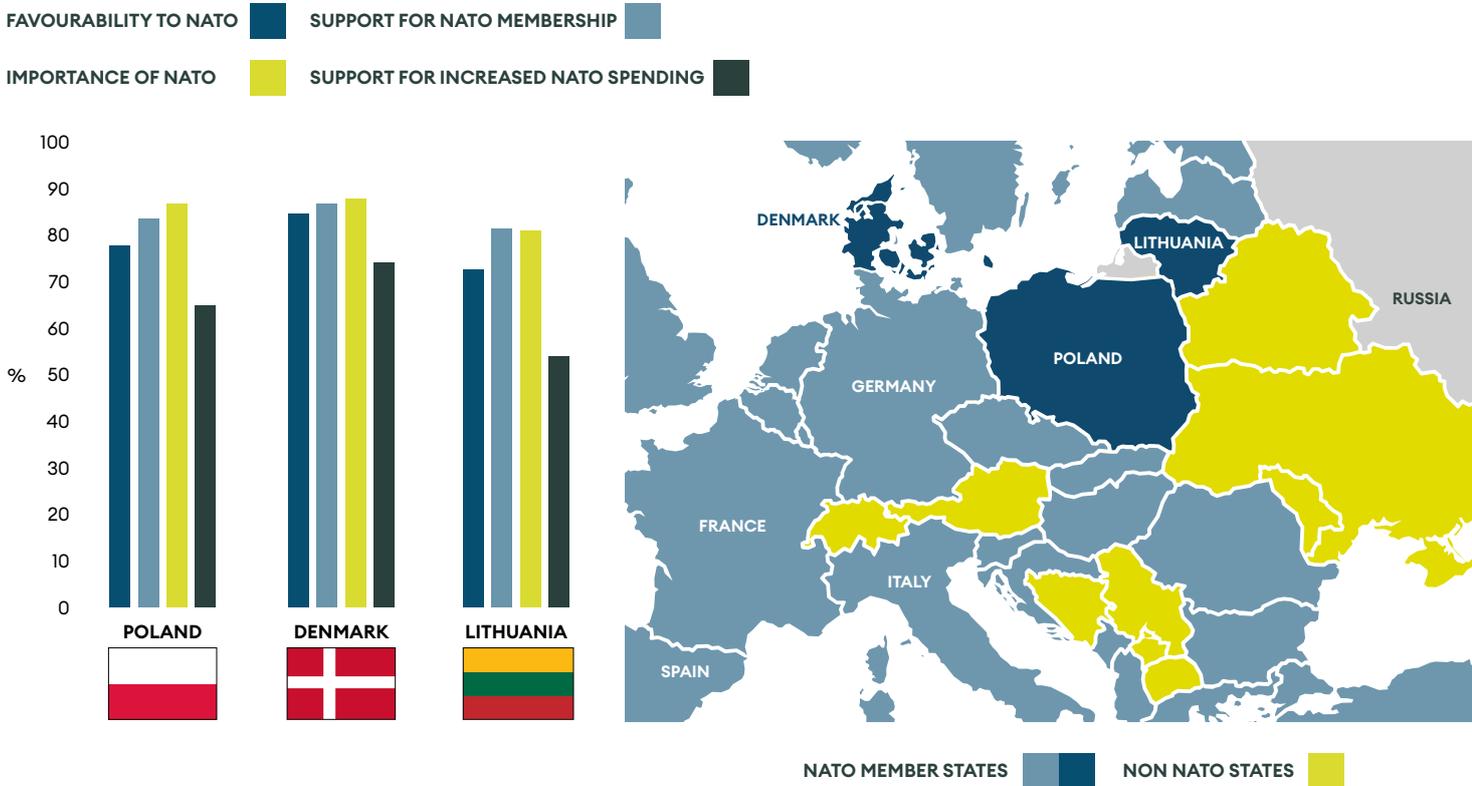
Framing and Narrative Strategy

How an issue is framed fundamentally shapes how it is understood. The same policy can be framed as ‘burden-sharing obligation’ or ‘strategic investment’; as ‘American dependency’ or ‘transatlantic partnership’; as ‘military spending’ or ‘resilience infrastructure’.

Understanding the audience can help to refine your framing strategies to ensure maximum impact of your communications and will help frame

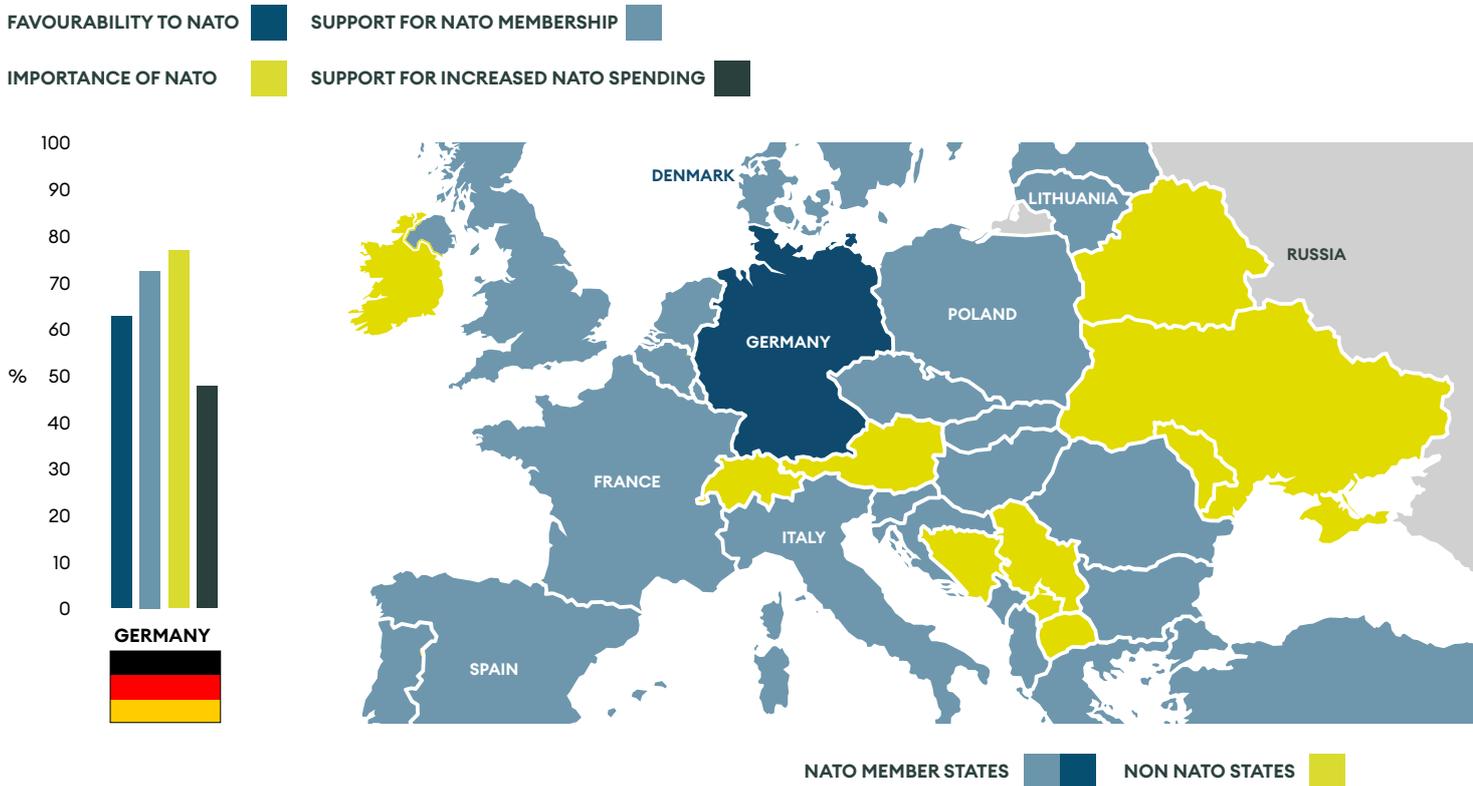
the conversation rather than allowing this to be set by more negative, sometimes hostile actors.

Strategic Pro NATO Framing Recommendations:



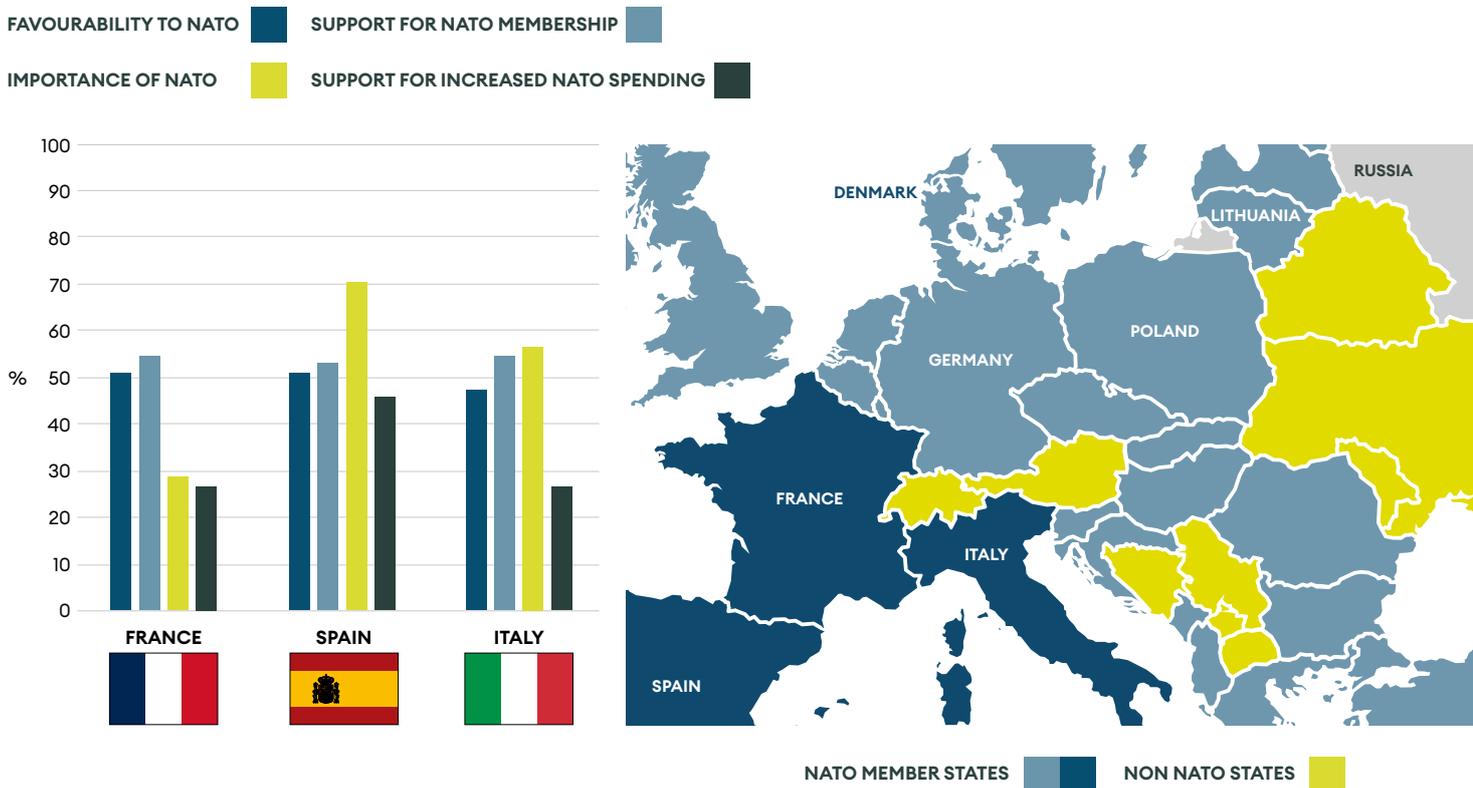
Denmark, Lithuania, Poland: Frame around collective defence, forward deterrence, Article 5 commitments, and burden-sharing as solidarity. Emphasise allied unity and readiness. These audiences respond to security framing.

Why: These nations combine the highest NATO favourability (Denmark 85%, Poland 78%, Lithuania 73%) with acute threat perception (viewing Russia as major threat at 84%, 82%, and 77% respectively) and geographic proximity to potential conflict. Their publics demonstrate cross-party consensus on NATO and strong willingness to increase contributions (Denmark 74%, Poland 65%, Lithuania 54%). Security messaging resonates because the threat feels immediate and existential and not abstract. Burden-sharing framed as solidarity rather than obligation appeals to their self-image as reliable allies pulling their weight. These audiences don't need convincing of NATO's value; they need reassurance of collective commitment and readiness to defend them.



Germany: Frame around European strategic autonomy, technological leadership, interoperability, and ROI. Avoid pure ‘spend more’ messaging; instead, emphasise innovation, dual-use technologies, and smart defence. Position Germany as a pivotal actor in European security architecture.

Why: Germany shows high NATO support (73% membership) but faces internal political fragmentation with AfD voters strongly resistant to spending increases (only 21% support) despite mainstream parties backing NATO. Germans exhibit the highest awareness that EU defence spending is too little (42%), combined with the highest support for increased NATO spending by their country (48%) of all but the Eastern cluster, demonstrating an opportunity for message framing. However, “just spend more” messaging should be avoided in case they trigger narratives about wasteful militarism. Germany’s strong industrial base and technological prowess make innovation and efficiency frames credible. The emphasis on “European pillar” and strategic autonomy appeals to desires for European self-sufficiency without abandoning Atlanticism. Value-for-money and smart defence messaging neutralizes cost objections by positioning investment as strategic and efficient rather than open-ended commitment.



France: Frame around European strategic sovereignty, autonomy from external dependencies, and French leadership in European defence. Acknowledge France’s unique role while highlighting the benefits of both European capability and transatlantic partnership. Emphasise multilateral frameworks and French influence in particular.

Why: France presents a striking paradox with 55% supporting NATO membership but only 29% consider it important to French defence, and just 27% backing increased contributions. This reflects France’s tradition of strategic autonomy and resistance to perceived US dependency, amplified by anti-NATO framing within certain political narratives. The French public supports European army creation (55%) more enthusiastically than NATO spending increases, revealing preference for European, particularly French, led frameworks. Messaging requires significant nuance as it must navigate French exceptionalism and pride in independent strategic culture, whilst positioning France as a leader shaping European defence. Any depiction of France or Europe as a junior partner following US direction will undermine support across audiences. Acknowledging where there is compatibility between European capability and transatlantic ties allows pro-NATO arguments without triggering sovereignty anxieties that drive resistance.

Spain and Italy: Frame around tangible national benefits; Mediterranean security, migration control, economic returns, industrial partnerships, and R&D investment. Emphasise operational effectiveness and visible outcomes rather than abstract commitments. Link defence cooperation to job creation and technological advancement.

Why: These nations show the lowest NATO favourability (Spain 51%, Italy 48%), while Italy also shows the joint lowest spending appetite (27%). Critically, their threat perceptions differ fundamentally from northern/eastern Europe on the issue of Russia as a threat. Russian aggression ranks only 5th in Spain and 6th in Italy, while immigration, economic downturn, inflation and even US foreign policy are seen as more or at least equal threats facing Europe. Abstract appeals to collective defence or burden-sharing obligations will likely fall flat because the threats NATO traditionally addresses feel distant. These audiences need to see direct, concrete returns on defence investment tied to their actual security and economic priorities: Mediterranean stability, migration management and economic development. Emphasising industrial partnerships, R&D investment, and job creation transforms defence spending from abstract obligation into tangible national benefit. Operational effectiveness messaging such as “what does this actually do for Spain/Italy?”, addresses scepticism about whether NATO serves their specific interests versus broader Alliance priorities.

Source Credibility and Messenger Strategy

As with all communications source credibility matters as much as message content. For effective communications there must be a strategic deployment of diverse messengers tailored to different audiences. Military officials carry authority with security professionals but may be viewed sceptically by anti-militarist constituencies. Former government officials from centre-left parties can reach audiences resistant to conservative or military voices. Civil society leaders, academics, and business figures offer non-governmental credibility.

Third-party validators are particularly valuable. Having politicians or ambassadors from member states directly advocate for increased defence spending could risk triggering nationalist or sovereignty concerns as these

communications may be seen as self-serving. Instead, the consideration should be to empower local thought leaders, retired generals, respected think tank scholars, or trusted journalists to make the case. This strategy leans into the echo chambers that audiences already consume content through but harness it as a form of effective amplification through credible local voices enhancing message legitimacy and reducing perceptions of foreign pressure.

IV. Tactical Recommendations for Effective Pro NATO Communications

Differentiate Messaging by Market

Develop country-specific communication plans that acknowledge local political contexts, threat perceptions, historical experiences, and cultural sensitivities. What works in Warsaw will not work in Rome; what resonates in Copenhagen may fall flat in Madrid.

Practically, this means, tailoring talking points for media interviews in each country, localised social media content reflecting host nation priorities, partnerships with local influencers and thought leaders who understand domestic political dynamics, and messaging that connects to specific national concerns.

Leverage Coalition Champions

Denmark, Poland, and Lithuania are not just high-support countries, they are potential force multipliers. These nations can serve as vocal advocates within EU and NATO forums, lending credibility and building momentum for policy initiatives that other members might view more sceptically when presented by larger powers alone.

Address Scepticism Through Dialogue

In countries with significant defence scepticism, particularly France, Italy, and segments of Germany and Spain, the instinct may be to bypass resistant audiences and focus on the already converted. This is strategically shortsighted. Ignoring or dismissing sceptics allows counter-narratives to frame the national discussion and win over the undecideds. Instead, engage directly with concerns about sovereignty, burden-sharing equity, accountability, and the risks of militarisation.

This requires a two-way exchange that acknowledges legitimate critiques, provides robust, responsive answers, and demonstrates genuine willingness to listen. The goal is not to ‘win’ every argument but to establish credibility recognition of concerns and effective answering where possible.

For example, when faced with French concerns about strategic autonomy, acknowledge France’s legitimate interest in reducing dependency, then reframe defence cooperation as empowering European capability. When Italians question spending priorities, validate concerns about economic pressures, then make the case for defence as economic investment rather than pure cost.

Counter Disinformation Proactively

European publics are targeted by sophisticated disinformation campaigns seeking to undermine transatlantic cohesion, discredit NATO, and sow division. Russian state-backed media and proxies actively push narratives portraying NATO as aggressive, the US as unreliable, and European defence cooperation as wasteful. Countering these efforts requires proactive strategic communication, not reactive firefighting.

Best practices include pre-bunking (anticipating and pre-emptively refuting false narratives), fact-checking partnerships with independent media and civil society, and transparent communication about threats and challenges. Importantly, research shows that simply labelling something as ‘disinformation’ is insufficient. The only way to effectively counter these narratives is to provide clear, evidence-based alternatives that fill the narrative vacuum.

Build Sustained Communications Programs, Not One-Off Campaigns

Effective pro-NATO communications require sustained messaging over years, not sporadic crisis-driven campaigns. Hostile actors, particularly Russia, maintain continuous presence across platforms and languages, patiently building narratives that erode trust and normalise anti-NATO sentiment. These efforts exploit vacuums left by pro NATO communications.

Reactive, campaign-based communications cannot counter sustained, multi-year information operations. When messaging appears sporadically, audiences encounter it against continuous counter-narratives shaping perceptions for months or years. This strategic asymmetry of adversaries investing in long-term narrative construction while democratic institutions default to short-term campaigns, demands a more effective approach to continuous strategic communications. This means maintaining narrative presence, building credibility, investing in year-round stakeholder relationships, and measuring success over quarters and years rather than campaign cycles.



V. Conclusion: Audience Understanding is Essential to Effective Communication

The answer should be clear. Invest in audience understanding, differentiate messaging by context, leverage coalition partners, engage sceptics with respect, counter disinformation proactively, and build narratives for the long term. The fragmented European opinion landscape is not an obstacle to overcome but a reality to navigate.

In an era of information abundance and attention scarcity, the ability to communicate effectively across diverse audiences is a strategic capability as important as military hardware or economic leverage. When navigating Europe's fragmented opinion landscape, success depends on abandoning simplistic, monolithic conceptions of 'European public opinion' in favour of sophisticated audience intelligence and differentiated messaging strategies.

The data reveals profound variation in threat perception, institutional trust, and defence attitudes across European nations. These differences are not merely statistical noise, they reflect fundamental divergences in strategic culture, historical memory, political economy, and domestic political dynamics. Communicators who ignore these nuances risk not only ineffectiveness but active counterproductivity, reinforcing stereotypes of tone-deaf interference.

Yet the same data also reveals opportunities. High-support countries can serve as coalition champions. Centre-ground majorities exist in most nations, even where overall attitudes seem lukewarm. Younger generations are not uniformly hostile to defence cooperation; in some countries, they are more favourable than their elders. Gender gaps, while significant, point to untapped opportunities for messages emphasising protection, partnership, and non-military dimensions of security.

The path forward requires integrating audience intelligence into every aspect of communication. This means investing in research to understand not just aggregate opinion but the demographic, ideological, and

psychological drivers of those opinions. It means developing differentiated strategies that speak to Danish concerns about cyber threats, French aspirations for strategic autonomy, and Italian scepticism about burden-sharing. It means leveraging multiple messengers, diverse communication channels, and both rational and emotional appeals.

Ultimately, strategic communication is not about manipulation or propaganda. It is about clarity, empathy, and persuasion grounded in genuine understanding of audience needs, concerns, and values. In a continent where the security landscape is rapidly shifting, where historical certainties are dissolving, and where publics are anxious about future threats, communicators who can speak to those anxieties with intelligence, authenticity, and strategic sophistication will shape outcomes in ways that communiqués and formal statements never can.



Sources

- YouGov European Political Monthly Survey (September 2025) covering Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Lithuania, Poland, and Spain, [Link](#)
- YouGov International: ‘European Political Monthly: Europeans on Defence and NATO’ (October 2025), [Link](#)

