



## POLICY BRIEF

# Germany's role in the world

Young people's perspectives on German foreign policy in 2025

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# INTRODUCTION

Key questions surrounding Germany's foreign and security policy are currently the subject of public debate in the context of global developments. The situation in the Middle East, Russia's ongoing war of aggression against Ukraine, and the protectionist trade policies of the United States of America are forcing the German government to take a clear international stance. Contested issues include a potential reinstatement of compulsory military service and Germany's role in global conflicts. While political decision-makers are setting the course and establishing facts, young people up to the age of 18 are rarely consulted – despite the fact that they, too, will be significantly affected by the consequences of these decisions.

The Liz Mohn Foundation is committed to ensuring that the voices of these young people are heard in current debates. To this end, it commissioned the polling institute Ipsos to conduct a representative survey of 800 children and adolescents aged 12 to 18 living in Germany, asking for their views on foreign and security policy.

One issue that stands out as especially relevant for respondents is the possible reintroduction of conscription. In light of today's international security threats and conflicts, a statutory obligation to serve – whether in the German armed forces or in other socially relevant institutions – would directly affect 12- to 18-year-olds. Their position on this matter is striking: these young people support a universal mandatory service requirement that applies to all genders and is not limited to the military. They weigh the societal benefits of such a policy against the personal drawbacks with notable thoughtfulness. In practical terms, however, the question arises as to how a new military service can be designed in such a way that it meets the expectations of young people. This is where politics and administration come into play, because young people themselves often have no idea what military service was like in the past, which can lead to misunderstandings. Against this backdrop, it is particularly advisable to actively involve young people in the practical design of the new military service.

The survey also reveals how young people in Germany view individual countries and international alliances. The European Union receives the highest ratings, followed by Germany, with the United States trailing far behind. Russia's war on Ukraine is clearly

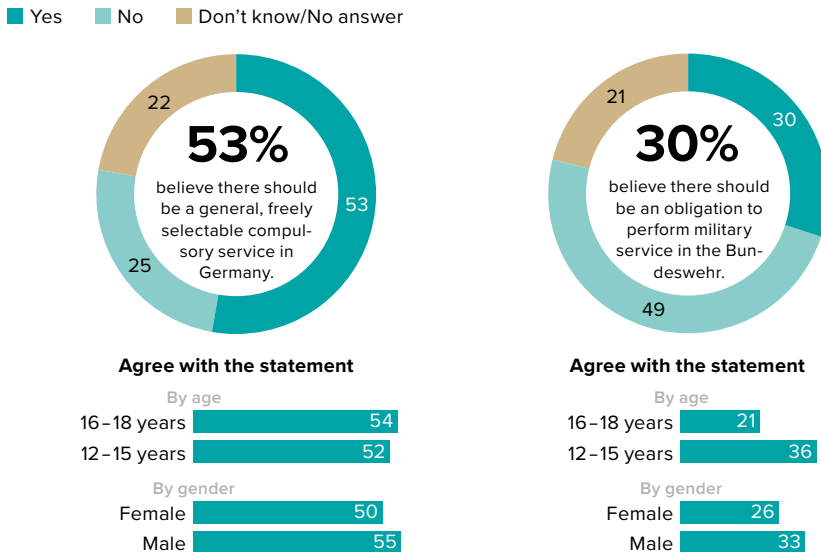
reflected in these perceptions: young respondents rate the role of Russia in the world extremely negatively. At the same time, the results point to another interesting insight: young people have a strong desire for fundamental change to create a better future – in Germany, in Europe, and worldwide.

Various initiatives supported by the Liz Mohn Foundation give young people a collective voice on current social and political issues. One such initiative is the *Zeitenwende* on tour townhall discussion series, which the Foundation once again co-organised this year with the Munich Security Conference – this time in Gütersloh. There, students engaged in dialogue on equal footing with foreign and domestic policy experts. Selected speakers from the event are also featured in this publication: young people comment on the quantitative findings of the survey, enriching the results with their personal perspectives on Germany's foreign policy in 2025.

# 1. MANDATORY SERVICE OVER MILITARY CONSCRIPTION

In recent years, the debate around reintroducing conscription – which was suspended in 2011 – has gained further traction. This resurgence has largely been driven by foreign and security policy events, most notably Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. The outbreak of war in Europe has brought questions of Germany's defence capabilities and the Bundeswehr's personnel and financial resources back to the political agenda. The controversy surrounding different approaches to conscription is also evident within the governing coalition: the positions of the CDU, CSU, and SPD differ

**Figure 1 | Less Than One-Third in Favour of Mandatory Military Service**



*Displayed in percent.*

*Question: To what extent do you agree with the following statements on compulsory service?*

*Basis: 800 children and adolescents between the ages of 12 and 18 in Germany, June 2025*

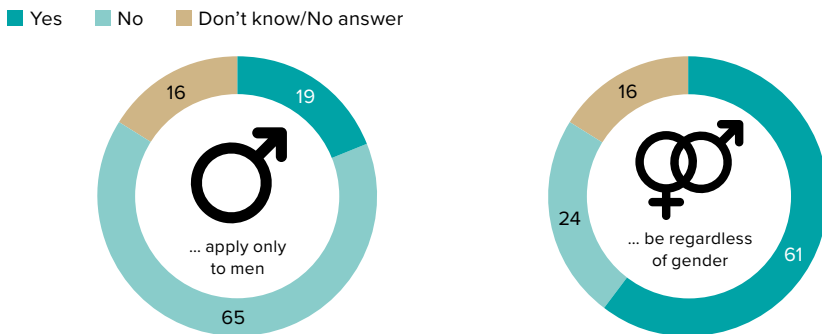
Source: Ipsos on behalf of the Liz Mohn Foundation 2025

significantly in some cases. In summer 2025, Federal Defence Minister Boris Pistorius presented a draft bill outlining his plans for a voluntary military service with compulsory elements and a gradual transition toward a reformed model of conscription. Just a few days later, Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier publicly endorsed the idea of introducing a new form of compulsory military service in Germany.

The children and adolescents we surveyed have a clear opinion on this matter: a majority (53 percent) support a general, freely selectable mandatory service, but 49 percent are opposed to compulsory military conscription. This is a noteworthy position given the importance of personal freedom to this age group. Respondents also express a consistent view on how such a service should be designed: it should be gender-inclusive and take place directly after completing school, vocational training or university studies, for a period of up to twelve months.

In public debate and within the federal government, there is ongoing discussion about the possibility of extending conscription to women in the future. Among the 12- to 18-year-olds surveyed, there is strong support for a mandatory service that applies to all genders (61 percent). Interestingly, both male and female respondents share this view: only 19 percent in each group support restricting the obligation to men. A clear majority rejects this idea – 66 percent of boys and 64 percent of girls. As it currently

**Figure 2 | Such a Service Obligation (Military/Civic Contribution) Should ...**



*Displayed in percent.*

*Question: Such a Service Obligation (Military/Civic Contribution) should ...*

*The deviation of 100 percent can be attributed to rounding differences.*

*Basis: 800 children and adolescents between the ages of 12 and 18 in Germany, June 2025*

Source: Ipsos on behalf of the Liz Mohn Foundation 2025



stands, a gender-neutral mandatory service would require an amendment to the German Basic Law. Article 12a currently only allows for the conscription of men. Amending it would require a two-thirds majority in both the Bundestag and the Bundesrat – an outcome that seems highly unlikely given the current parliamentary make-up.

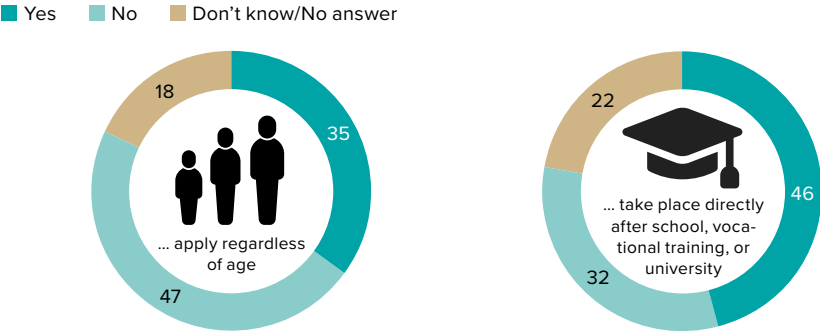
**“There’s no doubt that reinstating compulsory military service would be a significant and deeply personal event for young people. But the world we live in today is no longer the one it once was. Every day, we wake up to reports of war and destruction – it surrounds us and has become part of our daily lives. Even if the places where these conflicts unfold seem geographically distant, we no longer feel any real separation from them. The young / Our generation is already living in a new reality. That means the question of how Germany might defend itself is now on the table – and can no longer be ignored. It is essential that young people be included in that discussion if we want our country to remain capable of defending itself. Of course, this isn’t an easy or pleasant conversation to have. But I truly believe none of us ever wants to face the moment when we realise we’re powerless to protect ourselves. Naturally, everyone should still have the right to refuse military service and choose civilian service instead.”**



**Johanna Ernst**  
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In political discourse, it is often argued that introducing a youth-based service obligation would unfairly burden younger generations, and that all age groups should instead be required to serve. President Steinmeier has repeatedly spoken out in favour of a mandatory service independent of age, as a means of strengthening democracy and social cohesion. However, the young people who would be directly affected are more open-minded about the age question.: A relative majority (46 percent) are in favour of a service requirement that begins after completing school, training, or university. By contrast, respondents reject the idea of an age-independent mandatory service (47 percent).

Figure 3 | Such a Service Obligation (Military/Civilian Service) Should ...



Displayed in percent.

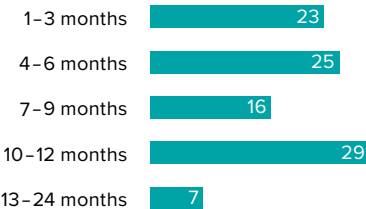
Question: Such a Service Obligation (Military/Civic Contribution) should ...

Basis: 800 children and adolescents between the ages of 12 and 18 in Germany, June 2025.

Source: Ipsos on behalf of the Liz Mohn Foundation 2025

In the 1960s and 70s, compulsory military service in the Bundeswehr was set at 18 months. By the time conscription was suspended in 2011, the length of service had been reduced to just six months. When asked about the appropriate duration of a possible future service requirement, respondents offered varied views. Just under a third consider a period of ten to twelve months suitable (29 percent), while nearly half favour a shorter service: 23 percent advocate for one to three months, and 25 percent for four to six months.

Figure 4 | A Period of Compulsory Service in Germany Should Last ...



Displayed in percent.

Question: A period of compulsory service in Germany should last ... Select a timespan.

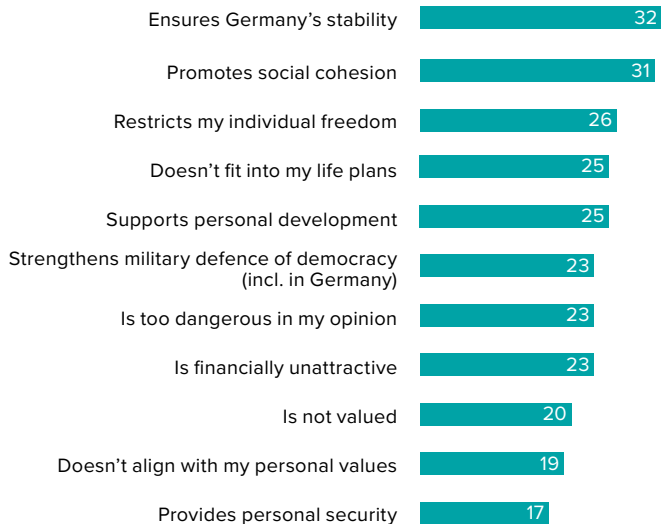
Basis: 800 children and adolescents between the ages of 12 and 18 in Germany, June 2025

Source: Ipsos on behalf of the Liz Mohn Foundation 2025

The consequences of mandatory service can be divided into positive and negative effects. For the children and adolescents surveyed, the focus is primarily on the benefits to society, but also on the personally unwelcome consequences: “Safeguards Germany’s stability” (32 percent); “Strengthens social cohesion” (31 percent); “Restricts my individual freedom” (26 percent); “Doesn’t fit into my life plans” (25 percent).

These results align with the findings of the Youth Study 2025 conducted by the Liz Mohn Foundation: it found that for 93 percent of 12- to 18-year-olds, personal freedom is the most important aspect of their lives. A mandatory service period runs counter to this priority in their life planning. Against this backdrop, the generally positive attitude towards a service requirement that limits personal freedom is all the more remarkable. The respondents have given critical thought to both the wider social benefits and the individual drawbacks.

**Figure 5 | Compulsory service ...?**



*Displayed in percent. Values not shown: Don't know; No answer*

*Question: To what extent do you agree with the following statements on compulsory service? Please select the three most important statements.*

*Basis: 800 children and adolescents between the ages of 12 and 18 in Germany, June 2025*

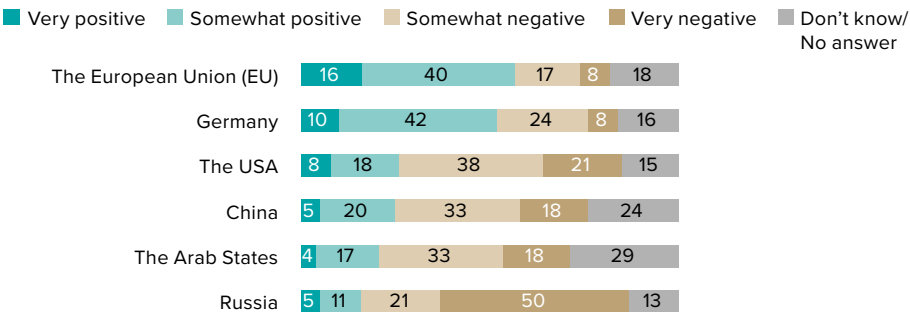
Source: Ipsos on behalf of the Liz Mohn Foundation 2025

## 2. GERMANY AND EU OVER RUSSIA AND USA

When evaluating countries and international alliances, a clear pattern emerges: the majority of children and adolescents surveyed have a positive view of the European Union and Germany; by contrast, they view the United States, China, the Arab states, and – by a significant margin – Russia negatively. Similar attitudes can be observed with regard to a greater international leadership role for the countries and alliances in question. The young people identify security and defence policy as well as trade and economic policy as the key areas of action for strengthening Germany's global position. They also favour a neutral role for Germany in international crises and conflicts. In everyday life, their place of residence occupies the most prominent position as a geographical point of reference.

The results in detail: As part of the survey, respondents were asked how they perceive the role of Germany, Europe, and other countries in the world. The image that children and adolescents have of Germany's global influence plays a key role in shaping the

**Figure 6 | How do you rate the role in the world of ...?**



*Displayed in percent.*

*Question: How do you rate the role in the world of ...?*

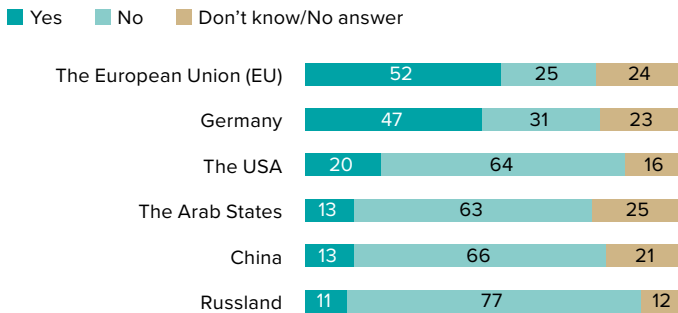
*Basis: 800 children and adolescents between the ages of 12 and 18 in Germany, June 2025*

Source: Ipsos on behalf of the Liz Mohn Foundation 2025

younger generation's national self-understanding. The findings are clear: the European Union and Germany top the lists and are viewed mostly positively (56 percent and 52 percent, respectively). In contrast, the United States, China, the Arab states, and Russia are seen in a predominantly negative light (59 percent, 51 percent, 51 percent, and 71 percent, respectively). This may be due to their values-based perspective on authoritarian politics, their strong sense of democracy and ongoing conflicts such as Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine.

With regard to the future balance of power worldwide, it becomes clear that: Young people wish for the EU and Germany to take on a greater leadership role in the world (52 percent and 47 percent, respectively). However, nearly one-third reject such a role for Germany (31 percent). By contrast, respondents are clearly opposed to greater international leadership by the United States, the Arab states, China, and Russia (64 percent, 63 percent, 66 percent, and 77 percent, respectively). Particularly striking in this connection is their strong rejection of a larger global role for the United States, which may be linked to the policies and media coverage surrounding the current U.S. administration (64 percent).

**Figure 7 | Should a greater leadership role in the world be taken on by ...?**



*Displayed in percent.*

*Question: Should a greater leadership role in the world be taken on by ...?*

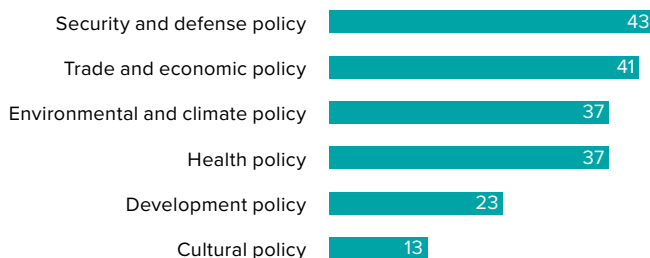
*Basis: 800 children and adolescents between the ages of 12 and 18 in Germany, June 2025*

Source: Ipsos on behalf of the Liz Mohn Foundation 2025

Current debates about Germany's defence capabilities and its positioning in global trade conflicts – fuelled in the media particularly by the controversial tariff policies of the United States of America – are also reflected in how respondents view German foreign policy. When it comes to strengthening Germany's global standing and influence, young people see the greatest need for action in the areas of security and defence (43 percent) and trade and economic policy (41 percent).

**Figure 8 | In which political areas should Germany do more internationally to strengthen its global position and influence?**

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*Displayed in percent.*

*Question: In which political areas should Germany do more internationally to strengthen its global position and influence? Select up to three answers. Values not shown: Don't know; No answer*

*Basis: 800 children and adolescents between the ages of 12 and 18 in Germany, June 2025*

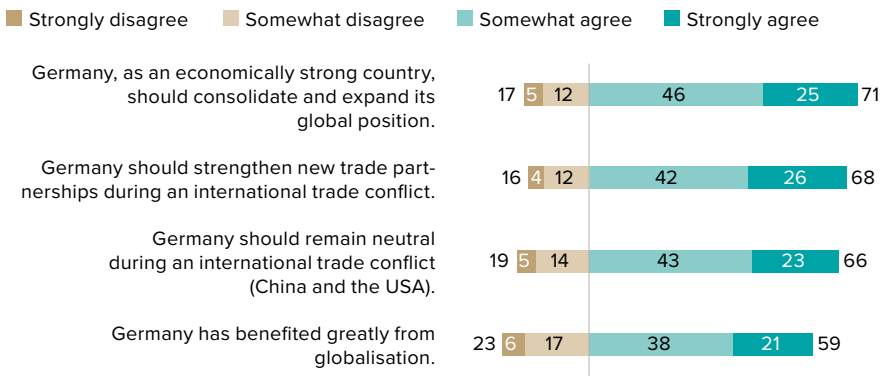
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Source: Ipsos on behalf of the Liz Mohn Foundation 2025

The findings on cooperation with other countries and Germany's global position are particularly noteworthy. On the one hand, a majority of the surveyed young people agree that Germany can only address global problems in cooperation with other countries (69 percent), that it should consolidate and expand its global standing (71 percent), and that it should seek to strengthen new partnerships in times of trade conflict (68 percent). On the other hand, they express a strong preference for neutrality: 66 percent support a neutral stance in trade disputes between China and the US, and 59 percent believe Germany should stay out of international problems, crises, and conflicts. The desire to stay out of the world's conflicts and problems also came through clearly in the comments made by pupils at this year's "Zeitenwende on Tour" townhall event in Gütersloh. This debate format, organised by the Liz Mohn Foundation in

cooperation with the Munich Security Conference, involved young people engaging in discussions on foreign and security policy. But many adults in Germany share this controversial stance as well. In an increasingly interconnected world, disengagement from international affairs is not a sustainable option for a country like Germany. The Liz Mohn Foundation therefore sees these findings as a call to action: to support young people in developing a more reflective understanding of global issues and international interdependencies.

**Figure 9 | To what extent do you agree with the following statements on globalisation?**



*Darstellung in Prozent.*

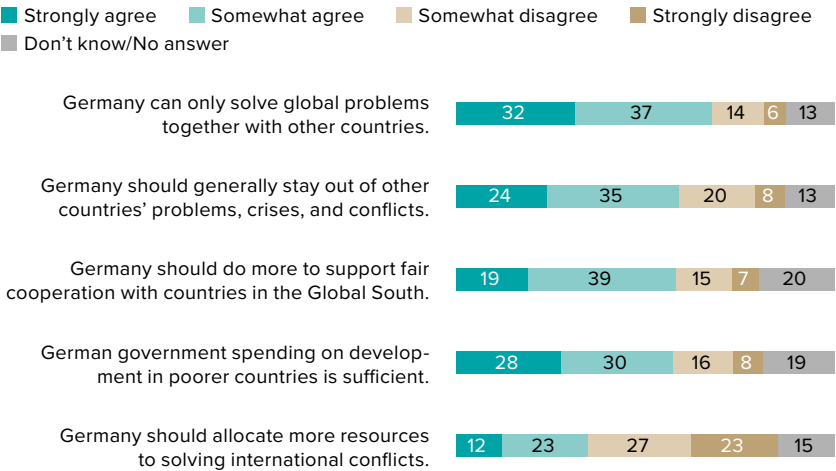
*Question: To what extent do you agree with the following statements on globalisation?*

*Deviations from 100% are due to "Don't know"/"No answer" (not shown).*

*Basis: 800 children and adolescents between the ages of 12 and 18 in Germany, June 2025*

Source: Ipsos on behalf of the Liz Mohn Foundation 2025

Figure 10 | To what extent do you agree with the following statements on international cooperation?



Displayed in percent.

Question: To what extent do you agree with the following statements on international cooperation?

Basis: 800 children and adolescents between the ages of 12 and 18 in Germany, June 2025

Source: Ipsos on behalf of the Liz Mohn Foundation 2025

“I think it's good that so many young people have a positive view of Germany and the EU. It shows they have trust in our democracy and in European cooperation. I believe Germany should take on international responsibility – but with care. In times of crisis, I think it's especially important that we act as mediators and stay neutral rather than taking sides. At the same time, we need to remain strong in areas like security and the economy so we can stand up for our values and share them with the world. But what matters most to me is what happens in my immediate surroundings – in my town or region. That's why politics shouldn't only think globally, but act locally too.”



Arash Azimi

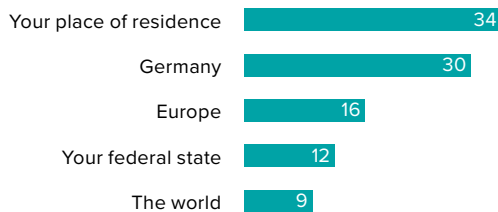
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In the everyday lives of children and adolescents, their place of residence and Germany as a whole serve as their most important geographical reference points. Their local and national orientation can also shape how they engage with and consume news about international affairs. This stronger sense of connection to one's immediate surroundings stems from proximity, everyday relevance, social relationships, and direct participation in community life. In contrast, federal states, Europe, or the wider world often appear too abstract, remote, or politically out of reach for many young people.

The data underscores this: 34 percent – more than a third of respondents – feel most strongly connected to their local community.

**Figure 11 | The following is about your sense of connection to different geographic and political entities. Which do you feel most closely connected to?**



*Displayed in percent.*

*Question: The following is about your sense of connection to different geographic and political entities. Which do you feel most closely connected to? Values not shown: Don't know; No answer*  
*Basis: 800 children and adolescents between the ages of 12 and 18 in Germany, June 2025*

Source: Ipsos on behalf of the Liz Mohn Foundation 2025

### 3. DISRUPTION OVER EVOLUTION

Young people express a surprisingly strong desire for fundamental change in order to shape a better future. Support for such a shift is highest in relation to Germany, but approval also remains high for Europe and the wider world, with at least 70 percent of respondents in favour. This generational desire for disruption can be driven by a mix of dissatisfaction and anxiety about the future.

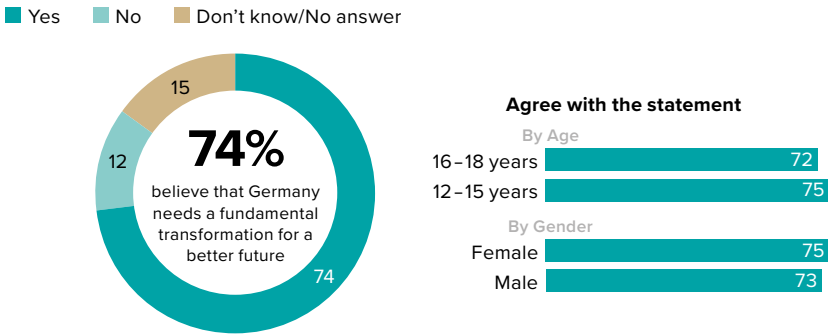
In public discourse, fundamental and far-reaching changes to society, politics, or the economy are repeatedly being demanded – not least due to the rise of populist tendencies in politics. This leads to the perception of a divided society. For those in favour, such radical changes represent a corrective to perceived policy failures and

**“In my opinion, it’s absolutely right that we young people are calling for a fundamental shift – whether in politics or society. Personally, I’d like to see a shift in the way we think. It shouldn’t matter where someone comes from, what they look like, where and under what circumstances they were raised, what colour their skin is, what religion they follow, or who they love. Every person should be respected for who they are. We need a fundamental shift in order to improve how we live together as a society and to build a more peaceful, respectful, and fulfilling future. Even if that shift doesn’t come without difficulties, resistance, or setbacks, it’s still something worth striving for – because it gives us young people real hope for the future. I think it’s great that my generation is demanding fundamental change. Every generation before us has done the same. And the more of us want that real transformation, the more of us will be willing to help shape the future.”**



**Amalia Merschmann**

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**Figure 12 | A transformation in Germany is considered necessary**

*Displayed in percent.*

*Question: Do we need fundamental change in Germany for a better future/ to shape our future positively?*

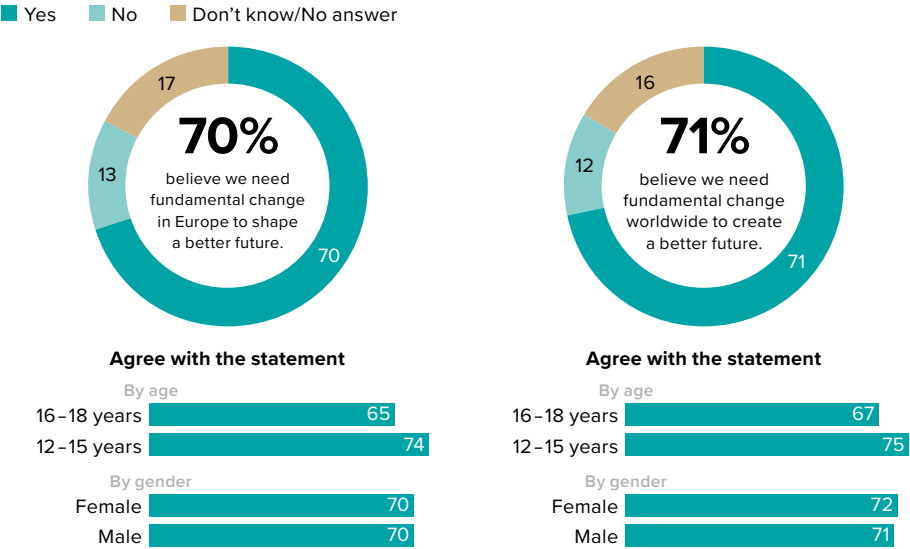
*Basis: 800 children and adolescents between the ages of 12 and 18 in Germany, June 2025*

Source: Ipsos on behalf of the Liz Mohn Foundation 2025

their consequences. The results here are striking: nearly three quarters of the young people surveyed – across all ages and genders – clearly support the idea of fundamental change to secure a better future in Germany.

Clear majorities of respondents also support fundamental change in Europe and globally (70 percent and 71 percent, respectively). This call for transformation is particularly strong among children and adolescents up to the age of 15. They often attribute current challenges to structural causes and therefore favour sweeping reforms, believing incremental improvements are no longer sufficient. This desire for radical change may also be driven by personal or societal experiences. For future empirical research, it would be valuable to explore in more detail what young people envision when they call for such transformation – and what concrete outcomes they hope these changes will achieve.

Figure 13 | A transformation – in Europe and worldwide



Displayed in percent.

Question: Do we need fundamental change in Europe in order to shape our future positively? / Do we need fundamental change worldwide for a better future?

Basis: 800 children and adolescents between the ages of 12 and 18 in Germany, June 2025

Source: Ipsos on behalf of the Liz Mohn Foundation 2025

## CONCLUSION/SUMMARY

The debate about reintroducing compulsory military service is also reflected in the everyday reality of children and adolescents. The 12- to 18-year-old respondents are at an age when political decisions on mandatory service in the Bundeswehr or in other socially relevant institutions would affect them directly after completing school or vocational training.

The responses from young people reveal a clear pattern. The majority support:

- A mandatory service, but not military conscription
- A gender-inclusive model
- To be completed after finishing school, vocational training or university
- For a duration of up to twelve months

Interestingly, young people seem to be ahead of the current political debate on certain points – particularly when it comes to who should serve and when. However, implementing these preferences and broader ideas faces constitutional challenges and political hurdles, especially in light of the current majority in the German Bundestag. Below the constitutional level, though, the question remains: how can a new model of compulsory service be designed to reflect the expectations of young people? This is where policymakers and administrators must step in – not least because many young people have no first-hand experience or clear image of past conscription models, which can easily lead to misunderstandings. Actively involving young people in shaping a new service model is therefore especially advisable.

In their assessment of countries and international alliances, a majority of the surveyed children and adolescents have a positive view of the European Union and Germany. They take a negative view of the United States, China, the Arab states, and – by a significant margin – Russia. Their attitudes toward a greater international leadership role for these countries and alliances follow a similar pattern. Regarding German foreign policy, the respondents identify security and defence policy, along with trade and

economic policy, as the most important areas for strengthening Germany's global position. They also express support for a neutral stance in international crises and conflicts. In their everyday lives, their place of residence serves as the most important geographical point of reference.

Surprisingly, a strong majority of the young people surveyed are in favour of fundamental change as a way to improve the future. Support is highest for such transformation in Germany, but approval rates for Europe and the wider world also exceed 70 percent.

The children and adolescents surveyed responded to politically relevant questions with striking thoughtfulness. They show a clear ability to distinguish between the personal and societal consequences of political decisions – and are not afraid to express views that could come with trade-offs for their own life plans. The quotes included in this study further highlight their capacity to engage critically with issues of social importance. These survey results make it unmistakably clear that this generation – which will be living with the consequences of today's politics for a long time to come – must have a stronger voice in public debate. Specifically, this means that political decision-makers should create more spaces for discussion for young people, communicate decision-making processes and their consequences more transparently, and incorporate the perspective of the younger generation more strongly into negotiation processes.

# APPENDIX

## Methodology

The data was collected by the IPSOS research institute on behalf of the Liz Mohn Foundation. The online survey (CAWI – Computer Assisted Web interviews) was conducted from May 26 to June 3, 2025. The sample size was 800 participants. This is a representative sample of the German resident population aged 12 to 18 with internet access, quota-adjusted and weighted according to age, gender, region, and education. Education was monitored during the field phase.

The age groups are represented as follows: 12 years old 12 percent, 13 to 16 years old 14 percent each, 17 and 18 years old 16 percent each. 50 percent of respondents identified as female, 50 percent as male. 75 percent were school students, 10 percent were trainees, 6 percent were employed, 4 percent were students, 2 percent were unemployed, and 2 percent were participating in support programs. In terms of (targeted) educational attainment, 6 percent were in a technical secondary school/secondary modern school, 22 percent in a secondary school, 56 percent in a grammar school, 13 percent in a comprehensive school, 1 percent in a special/remedial school, and 3 percent in a vocational school/technical college. The respondents stated their place of residence as follows: North Rhine-Westphalia 24 percent, Bavaria 15 percent, Baden-Württemberg 11 percent, Lower Saxony 10 percent, Hessen 8 percent, Berlin 5 percent, Rhineland-Palatinate 5 percent, Saxony 5 percent, Schleswig-Holstein 4 percent, Saxony-Anhalt 3 percent, Thuringia 3 percent, Brandenburg 2 percent, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania 2 percent, Bremen 1 percent, Saarland 1 percent.

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### Liz Mohn Foundation

The non-profit Liz Mohn Foundation continues the activities of Liz Mohn Center gGmbH and the Liz Mohn Culture and Music Foundation as an independent institution. The Liz Mohn Foundation has four areas of focus: "International Relations," "Creating Leadership Cultures," "Power of Culture," and "Global Talents."

A particular concern of Liz Mohn and the foundation is to build bridges of understanding across languages and borders, thereby bringing people from different nations and cultures, with different professions and positions, and from different generations into dialogue and giving young people a voice.

Further information: [www.liz-mohn-stiftung.de/en](http://www.liz-mohn-stiftung.de/en)

### Ipsos

Ipsos is the world's third largest market research company, with more than 20,000 employees and a strong presence in 90 countries.

Its research experts, analysts, and scientists have the broad expertise of multi-specialists, enabling deep insights into the actions, opinions, and motivations of citizens, consumers, patients, buyers, and employees. Ipsos has combined its wide range of solutions into 18 service lines, supporting over 5,000 clients worldwide.

Founded in Paris in 1975, Ipsos is still run by researchers today. In Germany, it has around 600 employees at five locations: Hamburg, Berlin, Frankfurt, Nuremberg, and Munich.

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