



POLICY BRIEF

Germany's Role in the World

Young People's Perspectives on
German Foreign Policy in 2026

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INTRODUCTION

Children and teens in Germany between the ages of 12 and 18 have already lived through a great deal since 2020: the Covid-19 pandemic and its health, social, and economic consequences; Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and its far-reaching repercussions; and three different federal governments. More recently, Donald Trump's re-election as President of the United States and the consequences of his policies – including the war with Iran that began in February 2026 – have further shaped the international environment. The survey was conducted in April 2026, against the backdrop of these developments.

Events of this magnitude leave a lasting mark on a generation. Many of them also have global implications. Beyond these developments, however, broader societal trends are shaping today's young people:

1. Digital Connectivity and Global Communication

Through smartphones, social media, and digital platforms, young people are connected with their peers around the world almost constantly. Trends, music, games, and public debates – increasingly shaped by AI-generated content – spread across the globe in real time. As a result, many young people feel part of a global youth culture that transcends national borders.

2. Awareness of Global Challenges

Climate change, human rights, migration, and social justice are among the issues that matter most to this generation. Movements such as Fridays for Future, protests against compulsory military service, and demonstrations calling for peace in Gaza and Ukraine demonstrate that young people in Germany advocate for their future not only at the national level, but increasingly across borders as part of international movements.

3. Cultural Diversity in Everyday Life

Germany has been a country of immigration for decades. Many young people grow up in multicultural environments, have a migration background themselves, or maintain

culturally diverse circles of friends – as the findings of this study also show. This environment fosters openness, multilingualism, and the expectation that navigating an increasingly globalized world is simply a normal part of life.

Today's young people are growing up in a more globalized, interconnected world than almost any generation before them. International developments shape their childhood and adolescence, influencing how they view global affairs and Germany's place in an increasingly complex and rapidly changing world order.

The political decisions made today – whether in Germany, Europe, or elsewhere – will affect the lives of children and teens for many decades to come, often far longer than those of the policy-makers themselves. Yet the perspectives of this generation still receive too little attention in public discourse. For this reason, the Liz Mohn Stiftung is committed to amplifying the voices of young people. In cooperation with the polling firm Ipsos, the foundation has once again surveyed 800 children and teens between the ages of 12 and 18 living in Germany. The findings show that young people often hold remarkably balanced views on foreign policy issues and frequently look beyond the immediate personal advantages and disadvantages of political decisions.

The Liz Mohn Stiftung also gives young people a platform through many of its other activities. One example is the “Generation Global – *We Shape the World*” project, which supports 15 motivated and politically engaged young people over a two-year period in developing both their professional and interpersonal (hard and soft) skills, enabling them to present their views effectively to a wider public. Five participants in the program contribute personal reflections on the survey findings presented in this report, enriching the quantitative results with their own perspectives.

SUMMARY

The findings of this study show that young people in Germany take a thoughtful and nuanced view of foreign policy and international developments. In 2026, children and teens between the ages of 12 and 18 primarily rely on social media for political information, where they are regularly exposed to AI-generated disinformation (fake news). Political issues are discussed mainly within families and among friends, although young people would like to see such topics addressed more frequently in the classroom.

The New Military Service remains a highly visible issue among respondents. Compared with last year, support for a compulsory service program that applies regardless of gender and age has grown even stronger. At the same time, young people continue to favor a model that extends beyond military service alone. Calls for equal treatment of young men and women remain particularly prominent. Interest in voluntary military service presents a mixed picture: Nearly half of respondents cannot imagine serving as a soldier, while just under one-quarter express a clear interest in doing so. Interest in completing a Voluntary Social Year (German: *Freiwilliges Soziales Jahr* / FSJ) or Voluntary Ecological Year (German: *Freiwilliges Ökologisches Jahr* / FÖJ) is higher overall. Male respondents show greater interest in the *Bundeswehr*, while female respondents are more likely to consider an FSJ or FÖJ.

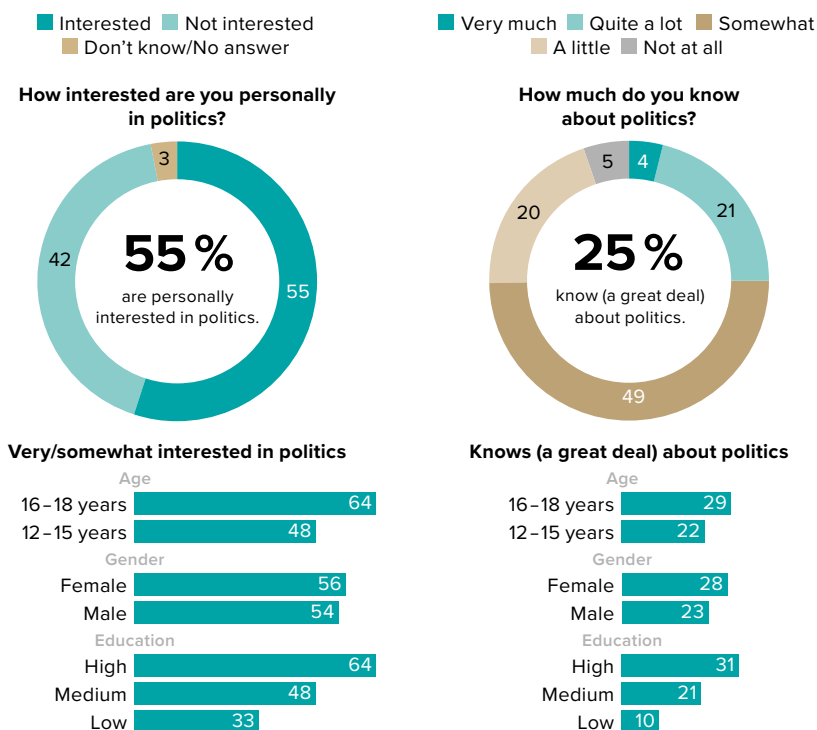
Young people view Germany's role in the world with ambivalence. Among the international actors surveyed, only the European Union (EU) is viewed positively by a majority of respondents. Overall, support for a larger international leadership role has declined compared with the previous year across all countries and alliances included in the survey. In particular, the United States has experienced a significant decline in its image among children and teens. Nevertheless, young people continue to recognize the importance of the German-American partnership. They also understand that Germany can only address global challenges in cooperation with other countries. From their perspective, France remains Germany's most important partner, followed by the United States and China.

The many crises and conflicts around the world also shape young people's outlook. Respondents are deeply concerned by current developments and see a clear need to strengthen Germany's defense capabilities. NATO membership is viewed as particularly important for Germany's security. At the same time, only a minority would rely on the United States as a key ally in the event of a conflict. Young people reject both greater German involvement in the war in Ukraine and the idea of Germany leaving the European Union.

1. GENERATION TIKTOK: INTERESTED IN POLITICS, INFORMED VIA SOCIAL MEDIA, CONFRONTED WITH FAKE NEWS

Young people in Germany are growing up in a global context and are confronted every day with new – and above all negative – news from Germany and around the world. The findings show that children and teens between the ages of 12 and 18 are interested in politics. They understand that political decisions affect their everyday lives, often

Figure 1 | Political Interest and Knowledge Among Young People



Shown in percent

Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding

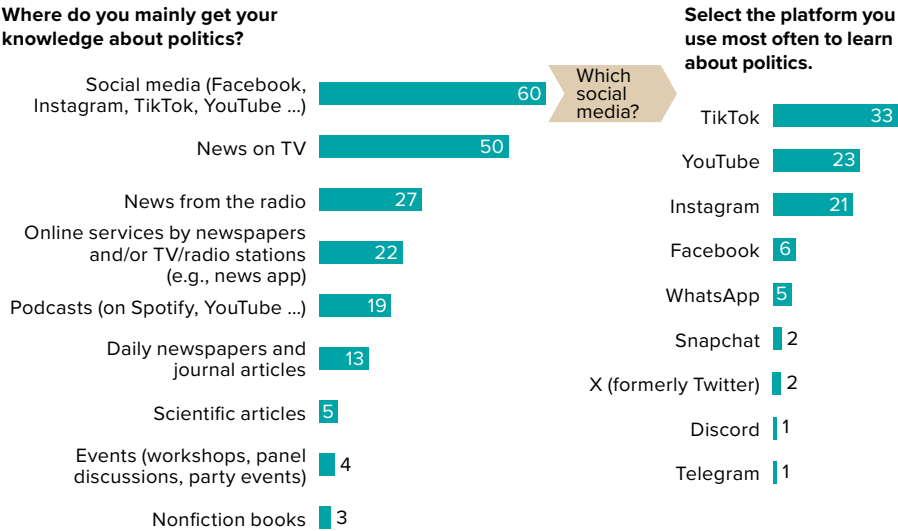
Base: 800 German-speaking young people aged 12 to 18, April 2026

more directly than might be apparent at first glance. Those who understand political processes are better able to participate in discussions, critically assess the news, understand their rights, and actively bring about change.

The survey results show that while more than half of respondents are interested in politics, only one in four say they know a lot or a great deal about political issues (see Figure 1). Just one in eight takes action based on this: Only 12 percent of young people are politically engaged.

The question, then, is how young people obtain their political information. The findings make one thing clear: Social media is the number one source of political information for children and teens between the ages of 12 and 18 (see Figure 2). At first glance, content appears to be available without limit, and political decision-makers can communicate with their followers in a direct and contemporary way.

Figure 2 | Sources of Political Knowledge



Shown in percent

Multiple answers possible; "Don't know/No answer" and items with 0% are not shown

Base: 800 German-speaking young people aged 12 to 18, April 2026

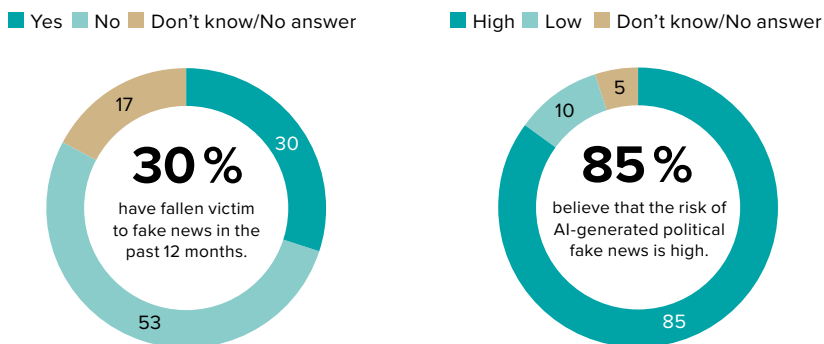
Source: Liz Mohn Stiftung 2026

However, platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and similar networks should be approached with caution as sources of information. One-sided perspectives, the manipulative use of emotions, and the difficulty of verifying sources, combined with the rapid spread of content, create a dangerous mix that can have consequences for both political discourse and young people themselves.

Offline, conversations with trusted people remain of central importance. Regardless of age, young people discuss political issues most frequently with family members (75 percent of respondents aged 12 to 15 and 68 percent of respondents aged 16 to 18). Friends are the next most common discussion partners (35 percent and 51 percent, respectively), followed by classmates (33 percent and 36 percent) and teachers (30 percent and 26 percent).

Close family members also play an important role in helping young people identify AI-generated misinformation – one of the main risks associated with political content on social media. Through conversations with their parents, the majority of respondents are able to determine whether a piece of content is fake news (see Figure 4).

Figure 3 | Impact and Risk of Fake News



Shown in percent

Question (left): Have you fallen for fake news in the past 12 months? In other words, did you initially believe a piece of information to be true, only to later discover that it was false?

Question (right): How would you assess the overall risk posed by AI-generated fake news?

Base: 800 German-speaking young people aged 12 to 18, April 2026.

Source: Liz Mohn Stiftung 2026

Figure 4 | Dealing with Disinformation

How do you figure out that a piece of information is false?



Shown in percent

Question: How do you figure out that a piece of information is false? Multiple answers were possible; "Don't know/No answer" not shown.

Base: 800 German adolescents aged 12 to 18, April 2026

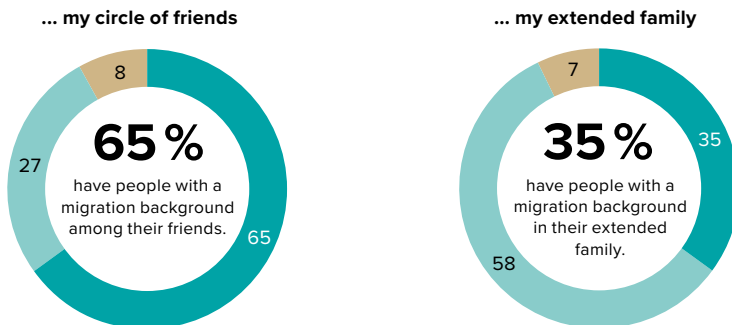
Source: Liz Mohn Stiftung 2026

A look at the realities of young people's lives shows that people with a migration background are an integral part of society. People with roots in different countries live, work, and learn together here. Two-thirds of the children and teens surveyed have friends with a migration background, and one-third have relatives with a migration background in their extended family (see Figure 5).

Figure 5 | Personal Social Environment with a Migration Background

■ Yes ■ No ■ Don't know/No answer

I have people with a migration background in ...



Shown in percent

Question: Do you agree with the following statements about your personal social environment?

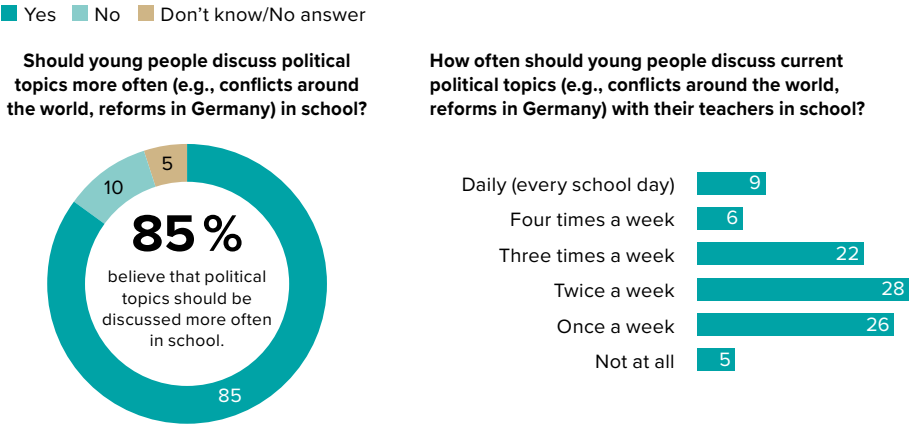
Base: 800 German-speaking young people aged 12 to 18, April 2026

Source: Liz Mohn Stiftung 2026

When it comes to age restrictions on social media, most young people do not support broad bans on access. While 38 percent favor restricting access for those under the age of 16, only 22 percent support a ban for all children and teens under 18. At the same time, respondents are aware of the limitations and potential risks associated with social media as a source of information.

A large majority would like to see political issues discussed more frequently in school, with most favoring discussions one to three times per week (see Figure 6). From the perspective of the young people surveyed, current political issues are not yet receiving sufficient attention in the classroom. This may be due to rigid curricula, but it may also reflect a reluctance on the part of educators to address controversial topics such as the wars in Iran and Ukraine or Israel's actions in the Gaza Strip.

Figure 6 | Political Debates at School



Shown in percent

"Don't know/No answer" not shown

Base: 800 German-speaking young people aged 12 to 18, April 2026

Source: Liz Mohn Stiftung 2026

Young people primarily obtain political information via social media and are aware of the risks posed by AI-generated fake news. To determine whether online content is trustworthy, they often rely on conversations with family members and friends. At the same time, they would like to see current political issues discussed more frequently in school, regardless of the curriculum. Politics and schools should therefore bring current societal debates back from the internet into the classroom, giving students the opportunity to engage critically with contemporary issues in a familiar environment.

Marta Isabel Alonso Gonzalez

16 years old



How do you stay informed about politics?

Mostly through podcasts, because they let me learn while doing other things. If I just want to catch up on the news, there is always a reputable broadcaster that makes its programs available as audio. If I am interested in a particular topic, there is usually a podcast that explores it in greater depth. There are also interview and discussion formats that look at issues from different perspectives.

Have you ever fallen for fake news?

Since I listen to podcasts online, I often ask myself: Is what I am hearing right now actually true – or could it be fake news? That can be difficult to judge, especially when the topic is new to me. There have certainly been times when I became suspicious or looked for a more detailed explanation to verify the information. But once I compare it with official sources, it usually becomes clear quite quickly whether it is fake news or not.

Do you talk enough about current political issues in class?

I would like to see more discussion of politics in schools in the future. Of course, we already talk about these topics, and there have been several projects at my school that focused on topics such as democracy. What I still feel is missing, however, is a daily opportunity to be brought up to date on current events. Five minutes at the start of the school day would be enough to provide every student with the three most important news stories of the day. I think that would help to get more students interested in politics. It would lead to more fact-based discussions among friends, better general knowledge, and a greater ability to recognize fake news. Depending on the subject, these issues could then be incorporated into lessons, so that students might one day debate conscription in English class instead of school uniforms.

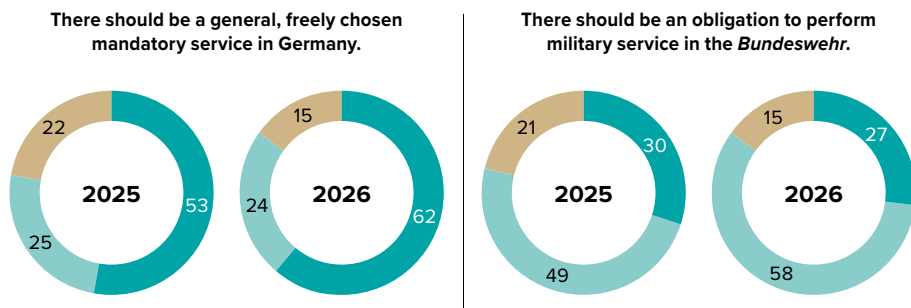
2. YOUNG PEOPLE'S CIVIC PARTICIPATION: MANDATORY SERVICE – YES, MILITARY SERVICE – NO

Young people in Germany have many opportunities to contribute to society. Through volunteer work, they not only develop a sense of responsibility and valuable skills but also gain firsthand experience of how society functions. In recent years, the German Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier has repeatedly spoken out in favor of introducing a compulsory national service program.

One aim of this study is to identify changes in attitudes over time. Compared with the 2025 survey, one finding stands out clearly: When it comes to making a mandatory contribution to society, children and teens hold even stronger views in 2026 than they did a year earlier. Young people aged 12 to 18 support a compulsory service program that applies equally regardless of age or gender, but they do not support mandatory military service in the *Bundeswehr* (armed forces of Germany) (see Figures 7 and 8).

Figure 7 | Assessment of a Possible Mandatory Service in Germany

■ Yes ■ No ■ Don't know/No answer



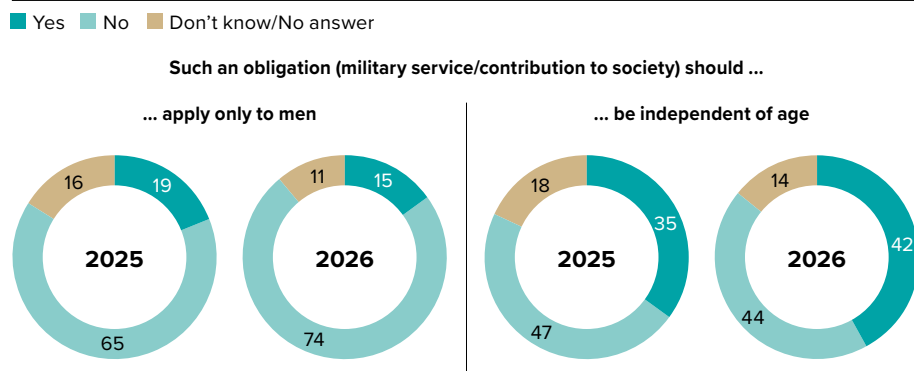
Shown in percent

Question: To what extent do you agree with the following statements regarding mandatory service?

Base: 800 German-speaking young people aged 12 to 18, April 2026 and June 2025

Source: Liz Mohn Stiftung 2026

Figure 8 | Gender and Age in Potential Service



Shown in percent

Statement: Such an obligation (military service/contribution to society) should ...

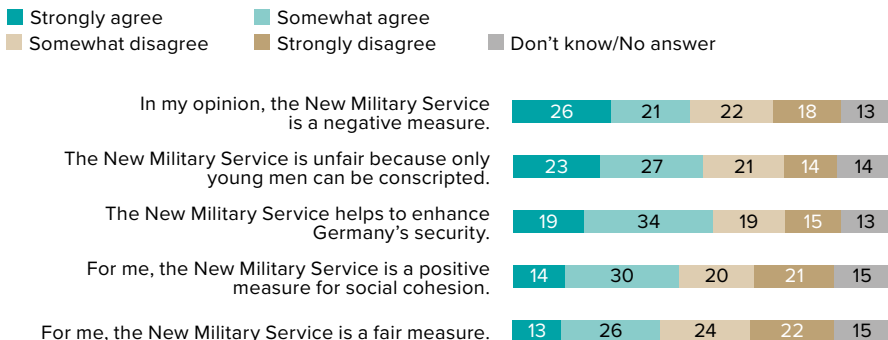
Base: 800 German-speaking young people aged 12 to 18, April 2026 and June 2025

Source: Liz Mohn Stiftung 2026

Few policy decisions in recent years have had as direct an impact on the future plans of young people as the new regulations regarding military service. The topic also features prominently in many of the Liz Mohn Stiftung's youth programs and discussion formats. Since January 2026, all young people reaching the age of 18 have received a letter as part of the *Bundeswehr's* recruitment effort. While responding is voluntary for young women, young men are legally required to do so.

Not surprisingly, the debate surrounding the New Military Service program is reflected in the views of respondents. They view the current legal situation as unfair and regard the gender distinction as no longer appropriate (see Figure 9).

There are alternatives to military service for contributing to society. In this study, young people aged 12 to 18 who had not yet completed a Voluntary Social Year (FSJ) or Voluntary Ecological Year (FÖJ) were asked whether they could imagine including an FSJ, an FÖJ, or military service in their future plans. As in the *Bundeswehr* survey, they rated their interest on a scale from zero ("No interest") to ten ("Definitely interested").

Figure 9 | Assessment of the New Military Service

Shown in percent

Question: To what extent do you agree with the statements about the New Military Service?

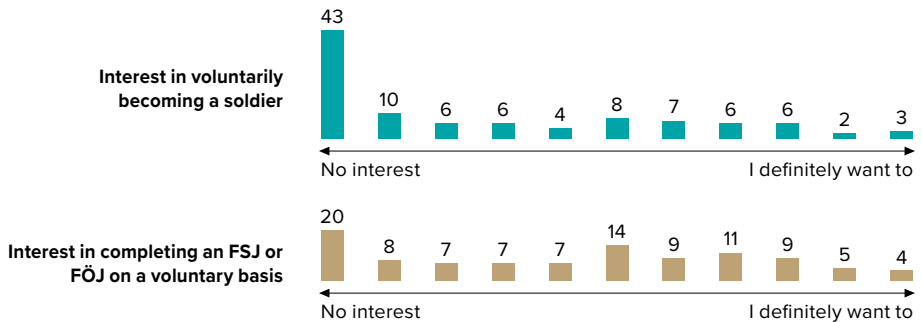
Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding.

Base: 800 German-speaking young people aged 12 to 18, April 2026

Source: Liz Mohn Stiftung 2026

The results reveal clear differences. Nearly half of respondents (43 percent) have no interest in becoming a soldier on a voluntary basis, while only one in five completely rules out completing an FSJ or FÖJ. Responses for all three options are otherwise spread across the scale. At the same time, almost one-quarter of respondents (24 percent with scores of six or higher) express a clear interest in voluntary military service (see Figure 10).

The findings also reveal notable differences between female and male respondents. Male respondents show considerably greater interest in becoming a soldier on a voluntary basis (scores of six to ten: 32 percent among males compared with 17 percent among females). Female respondents are more clearly opposed to this idea ("No interest": 49 percent versus 37 percent of males). At the same time, female respondents express greater interest in completing a Voluntary Social Year or Voluntary Ecological Year (see Figure 11).

Figure 10 | Interest in a Voluntary Social Year (FSJ) and Service in the *Bundeswehr*

Shown in percent

Question: In general, how interested would you be in voluntarily serving as a soldier or completing a Voluntary Social Year (FSJ) or Voluntary Ecological Year (FÖJ)?

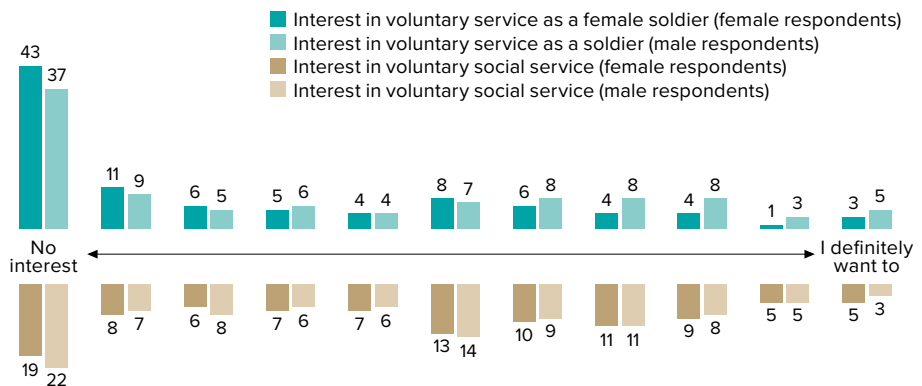
Question context: The next question asks about your level of interest in completing a period of (mandatory) service in a specific field after finishing school or vocational training at age 18.

Scale from 0 to 10: 0 = No interest; from 1 ("I could imagine doing this") to 10 ("I definitely want to do this")

Percentages may not total 100 due to "Don't know/No answer" responses, which are not shown.

Base: 767 German-speaking young people aged 12 to 18 who have not yet completed a Voluntary Social Year (FSJ) or a comparable program, April 2026

Source: Liz Mohn Stiftung 2026

Figure 11 | Gender Comparison of Interest in Military Service and Social Service

Shown in percent

For the question, contextual information, and scale, see Figure 10.

Base: 767 German-speaking young people aged 12 to 18 who had not yet completed a Voluntary Social Year (FSJ) or a comparable program, including 382 female respondents and 385 male respondents, April 2026

Source: Liz Mohn Stiftung 2026

The findings suggest that there is genuine interest among young people – particularly among male respondents – in voluntary military service. They demonstrate a willingness to contribute but prefer to make that decision themselves rather than be compelled to serve through conscription. The recruitment potential of a voluntary model therefore appears not yet to have been fully tapped.

According to the 2025 Defense Report, the Federal Ministry of Defense is expected to have more than 220,000 military positions available in 2026, including 20,000 positions under the New Military Service program. Compared with 2022, the first year of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, this represents an increase of 22 percent. Over the next decade, the number of active service members is projected to rise to around 260,000. Including reservists, the total force could grow to approximately 460,000 personnel. To support this expansion, military service has been made more attractive through higher pay, subsidies for driver's licenses, and improved career prospects. The coming years will show whether these measures are sufficient to meet the *Bundeswehr's* personnel targets.

A closer look at the survey data shows that politically engaged young people – particularly those who believe Germany must become significantly more capable of defending itself – are more likely to express interest in military service as well as in a Voluntary Social Year or Voluntary Ecological Year. This indicates that they draw concrete conclusions for their personal lives from an abstract threat scenario (see Appendix for further information).

Interest in completing an FSJ or FÖJ after finishing school is significantly higher than interest in joining the *Bundeswehr*, especially among female respondents. Possible reasons include the wider range of opportunities offered by FSJ and FÖJ programs, the personal attitudes of young people, and differing levels of social acceptance associated with civilian and military organizations.

Policy-makers should therefore take up the proposal put forward by the young people surveyed and engage in an open-ended debate on the introduction of a compulsory service program that applies regardless of age and gender. Such a measure could have positive consequences for society as a whole, regardless of the institution in which the service is performed.

Mathilda Brün

17 years old



What contribution do you make to society?

Personally, I'm mainly involved in cultural and social activities, including giving flute lessons to younger students, serving on the student council, and taking part in exchange programs. It's especially important to me to challenge prejudices, encourage openness toward different ways of life and perspectives, and set an example through respectful dialogue.

Do you think the new system of military service is fair?

I think the idea of a mandatory contribution to society by the younger generation is fundamentally a good one. But I don't think the way it's currently being implemented is fair. In my view, the law focuses too much on military service – even though that is important right now – and not enough on other forms of civic participation, such as civilian service. Young people should have more freedom to decide how they want to contribute to society. I also don't think it's fair that women and men are treated differently in this regard.

Would you prefer compulsory service for both men and women?

I believe individual abilities should matter more than outdated gender roles. If society imposes obligations, they should apply equally to everyone. That's why I would support a compulsory service program for all genders, where people could choose between different areas of service, whether in the *Bundeswehr*, in the care sector, or elsewhere. Given the shortage of care workers and demographic change, I think that would make a lot of sense for society.

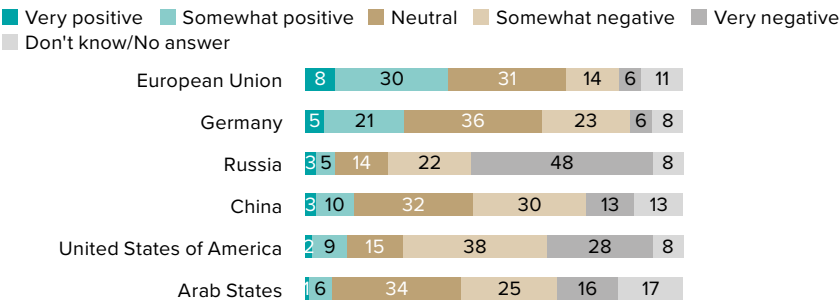
3. A MATURE PERSPECTIVE ON GERMANY'S ROLE IN EUROPE AND THE WORLD

In politically turbulent times, countries and international organizations that shape global developments play a central role. The findings show that young people take a differentiated view of both old and new centers of power in international politics.

As in the previous year, respondents view the European Union (38 percent) and Germany (26 percent) most positively when assessing their role in the world. At the same time, however, 29 percent of young people view Germany's role negatively. This reflects an ambivalent self-image among respondents.

Only a small minority of respondents view China (13 percent), Russia (8 percent), or the Arab states (7 percent) positively. The most significant change in recent months concerns perceptions of the United States. While 26 percent of respondents viewed the U.S. role in the world positively in 2025, that figure has fallen by 15 percentage points to just 11 percent in 2026 – a decline of almost 60 percent. Current U.S. policies and media coverage of them are likely to be largely responsible for this shift in perception (see Figure 12).

Figure 12 | Assessment of Various Global Actors



Shown in percent

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

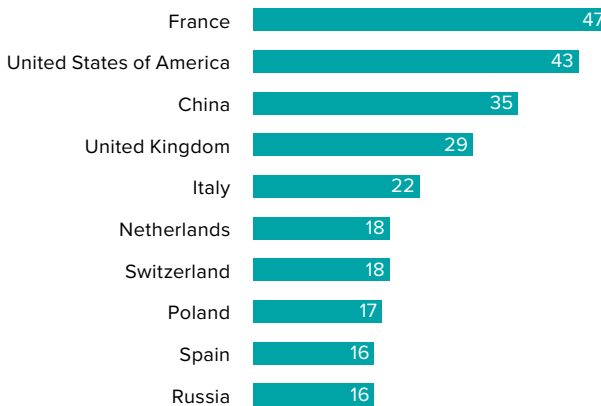
Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding of figures.

Base: 800 German-speaking young people aged 12 to 18, April 2026

Source: Liz Mohn Stiftung 2026

Respondents recognize the continued importance of Germany's close relationship with the United States. When asked to identify Germany's most important political and economic partners, France ranks first at 47 percent, followed closely by the United States at 43 percent. China (35 percent) and the United Kingdom (29 percent) follow (see Figure 13).

Figure 13 | Germany's Partners Around the World



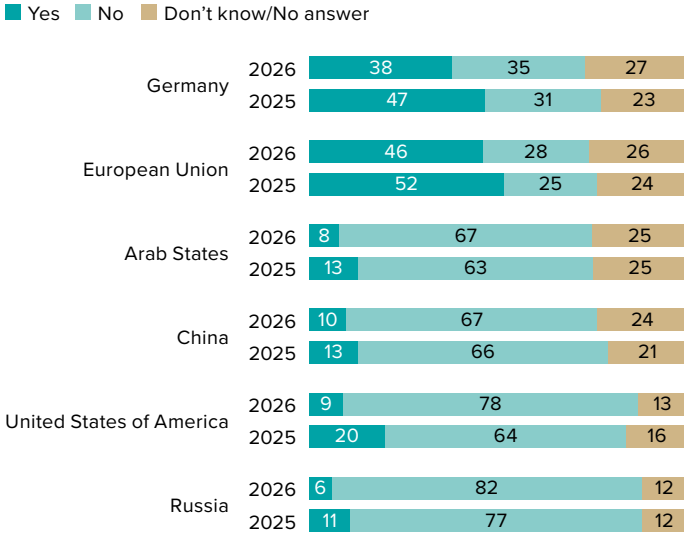
Shown in percent

Select five countries from the following list that you consider to be Germany's most important political and economic partners at the moment. Multiple answers possible; only the top 10 countries were listed. Base: 800 German-speaking youth aged 12 to 18, April 2026

Source: Liz Mohn Stiftung 2026

It is also interesting to examine how young people view the future: Which countries and regional organizations should play a greater leadership role in the world? The findings reveal a general preference among respondents for less influence on the part of the international actors included in the survey. Compared with 2025, support for a stronger leadership role has declined across the board, even though the European Union and Germany continue to receive the highest levels of support (see Figure 14).

Figure 14 | Regions and Countries and Their Leadership Roles in the World



Shown in percent

Question: Should ... take on a greater leadership role in the world?

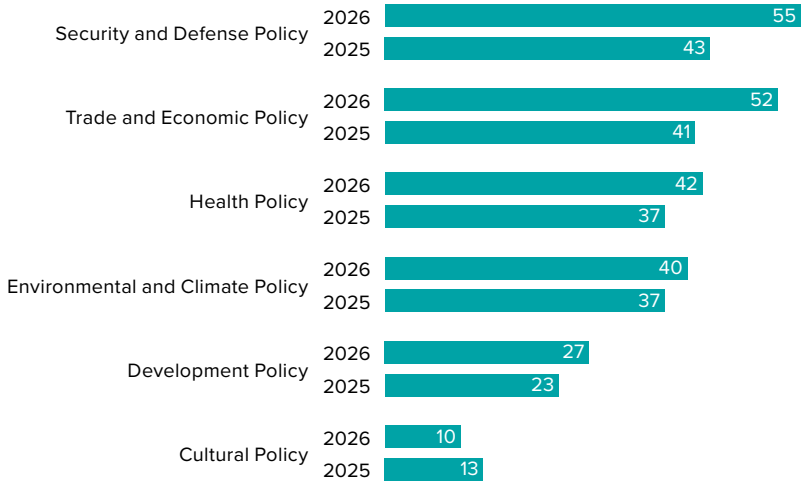
Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding of figures

Base: 800 German-speaking young people aged 12 to 18, April 2026 and June 2025

Source: Liz Mohn Stiftung 2026

The discussion of the roles of individual countries in the international community leads to the question of the goals of German foreign policy. Here, respondents express the strongest support for strengthening Germany's security (91 percent) and promoting world peace (88 percent).

Compared with 2025, significantly more children and teens believe that Germany should do more to strengthen its position in the world, particularly in the areas of security and defense policy (up 12 percentage points) and trade and economic policy (up 11 percentage points). The desire for greater engagement can be seen across all policy areas surveyed. Only international cultural policy is regarded as less important (see Figure 15).

Figure 15 | Assessment of Policy Areas Related to Germany's Role in the World

Shown in percent

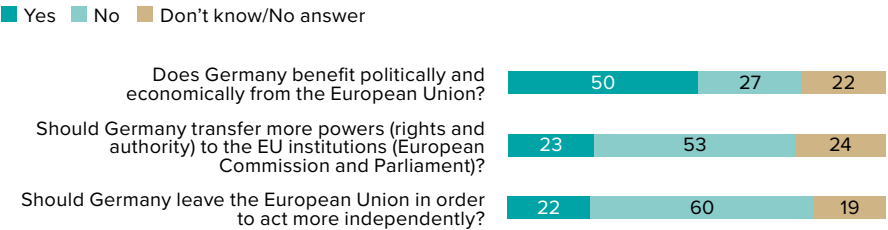
Question: In which policy areas should Germany do more internationally to strengthen its global position and influence? Multiple answers possible; "Don't know/No answer" not shown

Base: 800 German young people aged 12 to 18, April 2026 and June 2025

Source: Liz Mohn Stiftung 2026

Membership in the European Union is of central importance to Germany. Young people's views on Germany's role within the EU paint an interesting picture: The children and teens surveyed recognize the benefits of Germany's membership in the EU, but they are clearly opposed to transferring additional powers from Berlin to Brussels. Despite anti-European propaganda and populist voices at home and abroad, young people clearly reject the idea of Germany leaving the EU (see Figure 16).

Figure 16 | Germany's Role within the EU



Shown in percent

Question: Please answer the following questions about Germany's role within the EU.

Base: 800 German-speaking young people aged 12 to 18, April 2026

Source: Liz Mohn Stiftung 2026

The respondents' level-headed view of the United States is perhaps the clearest indication of their mature view. Compared with a year ago, they are significantly less likely to support a greater leadership role for the U.S. and view its role in the world more negatively. At the same time, they recognize that, despite current tensions, the U.S. remains one of Germany's most important partners. Their view of the European Union is equally clear: Germany benefits from EU membership and should remain part of the Union, but it should not transfer additional powers to Brussels.

Denis Randov
16 years old



How do you view Germany's current role in the world?

It has changed significantly, especially over the past two years. Germany is taking on more of a leadership role, particularly in Europe, and increasingly sees itself as a driving force there. You can see that, for example, in Germany's recent military ambitions. At the same time, though, Germany still does not play a decisive role on many issues, as the Iran conflict has shown. It often lacks a clear position, and there also seems to be a concern about how the United States might react.

What should the German government consider in shaping its foreign policy?

Despite its economic strength, Germany often fails to make full use of its political influence. Yet Ramstein Air Base – arguably the most important U.S. military base in Europe – is located here and plays a key role in many U.S. operations in the Middle East. On this and many other current and future issues, I would like to see Germany take a clearer position. In the case of the Iran conflict, for example, Germany could close its airspace to U.S. military aircraft, just as Austria has already done in a somewhat different form.

How should the European Union continue to evolve?

I hope Germany will continue to play an important role in Europe and, together with countries such as France and Italy, help strengthen Europe's sovereignty and influence in the world. Even though Europe is often divided and can sometimes seem somewhat fragile, it is by no means weak. Europe is prosperous, and economic strength is an important foundation of power – especially in a globalized world.

4. GERMAN SECURITY POLICY AS A RESPONSE TO A CHANGED WORLD ORDER

The discussion surrounding the New Military Service and the possible reintroduction of conscription in Germany (see Chapter 2) fits into the broader picture of a fundamentally changed global balance of power. The liberal order of states and international alliances, which for decades provided security and stability for many countries and regions, now exerts only limited influence. In this changed world order, marked by shifting power dynamics and new conflicts, Germany – as a country with strong political and economic ties around the world – finds itself at a critical juncture. How should German foreign policy position itself in this context?

In general, children and teens support cooperation between Germany and other countries in order to solve global problems together. Financially, however, they take a different view. Respondents believe that Germany already provides sufficient funds for

Figure 17 | International Cooperation and Germany's Development Policy



Shown in percent

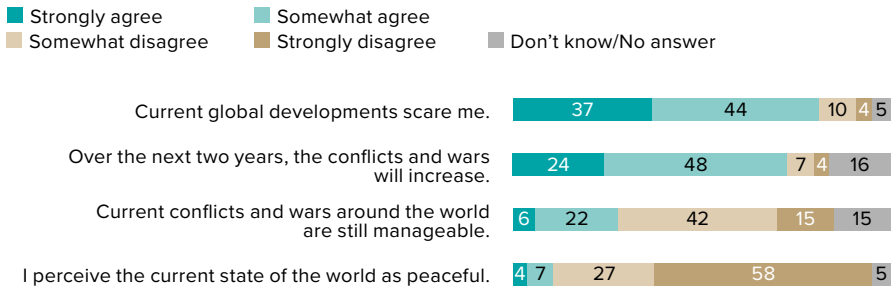
Question: To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

Base: 800 German-speaking young people aged 12 to 18, April 2026

Source: Liz Mohn Stiftung 2026

the development of poorer countries. Nor do they believe that Germany should increase its spending on resolving international conflicts (see Figure 17).

Figure 18 | Wars, Crises, and Global Developments



Shown in percent

Question: To what extent do you agree with the following statements on the topics of wars, conflicts, and global developments?

Base: 800 German-speaking young people aged 12 to 18, April 2026

Source: Liz Mohn Stiftung 2026

Respondents also have a clear view of the European Union's security interests. Fewer than half (42 percent) believe that the EU effectively advances its security interests. According to two-thirds of the children and teens surveyed (67 percent), the EU is too dependent on others when it comes to security, and only one-third (33 percent) believe that the EU acts as a strong player vis-à-vis Russia. A majority of respondents (58 percent) believe that the EU should establish its own military intervention force.

Germany's membership in NATO is of particular importance to children and teens when it comes to the country's security (63 percent), but only a small minority would rely on the United States in the event of a conflict (17 percent). Nearly three-quarters of respondents agree that Germany must become significantly more capable of defending itself (see Figure 19).



Mustafa Has
16 years old

What changes have you observed in the world order?

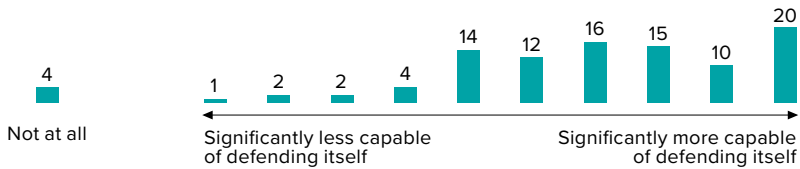
Right now, I'm seeing autocratic states in particular gaining influence, and authoritarian ideas getting more support even in democratic countries. I've also noticed that the period of reconciliation following the Cold War is turning into growing tensions again in many parts of the world.

What opportunities and risks does this present for Germany?

China's rapid rise is putting particular pressure on Germany's automotive industry, as Chinese companies become more and more competitive in the electric vehicle sector, in terms of both their technology and their price. At the same time, international conflicts and the threat of war in Europe are increasing the importance of the *Bundeswehr* and European cooperation on security issues. One opportunity for Germany would be to take on a more central leadership role within the European Union and, together with other EU member states, project greater economic, political, and military strength.

What do you expect from the future world order?

I expect that several countries will compete for political influence. However, I also believe that international cooperation in areas such as climate protection and the economy will remain possible in order to prevent larger conflicts. After all, large-scale armed conflict would do more harm than good in our globalized world.

Figure 19 | The Need for Strengthened German Defense Capabilities

Shown in percent

Question: In your opinion, how capable of defending itself does Germany need to become?

Base: 800 German-speaking youths aged 12 to 18, April 2026

Source: Liz Mohn Stiftung 2026

Closely connected to this is Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, which began in 2022 and remains an issue that concerns young people. Nearly half of respondents (42 percent) feel that the war poses a threat to themselves and their families. At the same time, however, children and teens clearly reject the deployment of German troops or greater involvement in the conflict. Respondents therefore have a clear view of the global conflict situation and see a need to strengthen Germany's defense capabilities.

Only 17 percent of young people believe that Germany can rely on the United States in the event of a conflict. Nearly six in ten respondents (57 percent) believe that U.S.-led peace negotiations between Ukraine and Russia will not lead to a peaceful resolution. The U.S. is therefore no longer seen as a reliable partner capable of helping to end Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. At the same time, 48 percent believe that Germany should take on more responsibility within NATO, while 70 percent reject greater involvement in the war in Ukraine.

Yaroslav Rozhko

17 years old



Does Germany need to become more capable of defending itself?

Absolutely – but the question is how. In my opinion, Germany should play an important role in European security, but not by sending people to the front lines. Instead, it should support other countries with equipment and continue developing new technologies. That way, Germany could assume an important strategic role without alienating neighboring countries or younger people.

Are you worried about security in the country?

There are several reasons I'm not particularly worried about security in Germany. First, its geographic location: Our country is surrounded by friendly nations. The strength and reputation of Germany's security institutions also give me little reason to worry about my personal safety. The only risk I see is the possibility of social and ethnic tensions. At the moment, public debate in Germany remains objective and civil, so I don't see any reason for concern there either.

Should Germany intervene more actively in international crises and wars?

In my opinion, Germany should only intervene in crises and wars when German interests are directly affected. Any crisis or war can affect Germany in one way or another. However, there are regions such as Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa where German involvement – whether through investment, military support, or diplomatic mediation – may be more meaningful and important than in regions such as Southeast Asia or Central Africa. Focusing on these regions could make it possible to achieve greater success in a smaller number of strategically important areas while preserving resources for Germany's domestic challenges.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the survey findings and the interpretation of the results, a number of recommendations can be derived that may help political and societal decision-makers take key insights from this study into account in their actions and areas of responsibility.

- Nearly two-thirds (62 percent) of 12- to 18-year-olds in Germany support a compulsory service program that is independent of age and gender. A majority (58 percent) opposes compulsory military service, and half consider the New Military Service regulations to be unfair. Young people want a form of service to society, but the implementation of a universal, gender-neutral compulsory service program currently faces constitutional obstacles.

Nearly one-quarter (24 percent) of young respondents have a strong interest in voluntarily serving as soldiers after leaving school, and 38 percent are very interested in completing a Voluntary Social Year (FSJ). In the context of these service opportunities, strengthening Germany's defense capabilities is particularly important to interested young people.

Policy-makers should take these views into account because they should have an interest in ensuring that young people are as motivated as possible in both voluntary and compulsory forms of service. Even within the current political and constitutional framework, the ideas and expectations of young people can and should be reflected in the design of a new service program. In particular, the principle of “free choice within a duty” received even stronger support from young people when it was asked about again this year.

- Young people want to contribute, participate in political debates, and be involved in decision-making processes. They have clear views of their own that deserve a place in politics. The survey results show a high level of political interest among young people and an understanding of changes in security policy and of the domestic and personal consequences that may affect them directly, such as those

arising from the New Military Service or from a universal compulsory service program with freedom of choice.

The comments provided by participants in the Liz Mohn Stiftung's "Generation Global – *We Shape the World*" support network broaden the "mature" perspective that young people in Germany take on international politics, wars, crises, and Germany's role in the world. Through the Generation Global project, politically engaged young people from East Westphalia and their voices are already being actively supported. The annual Generation Global LIVE conference reaches several hundred students each year, giving them the opportunity to engage in discussions with experts and policy-makers.

Based on the Liz Mohn Stiftung's project work, as well as the survey findings and comments provided by the young participants, it is recommended that young people be given a stronger voice in decision-making processes and their views be taken more fully into account. The Liz Mohn Stiftung is, of course, available to discuss these recommendations, the study findings, and its project work further with young people and societal and political decision-makers.

- An overwhelming majority – nearly nine out of ten young people – would like to see more discussions of current political issues in school. Educational institutions should provide young people with opportunities to learn about and participate in current political debates. Based on these findings and analyses, the study recommends expanding and strengthening concrete programs for students in schools.

Organizations such as nonprofit associations and foundations can carry out joint initiatives with public educational institutions, including schools and state centers for civic education. **These could include long-term programs for students as well as classroom discussions addressing current political and social issues. Given the differing responsibilities and workloads of educational institutions, collaborative approaches involving both schools and external partners are recommended.**

METHODOLOGY

The public opinion research organization Ipsos collected the data on behalf of the Liz Mohn Stiftung. The 17-minute online survey (CAWI – Computer-Assisted Web Interviews) was conducted from April 1 to April 21, 2026. For the survey, Ipsos drew a sample from the Ipsos iSay panel. The sample size was 800 participants. It is a representative sample of the German resident population aged 12 to 18 with internet access, quota-adjusted and weighted by age, gender, region (federal state), and education level. Educational attainment was monitored during the fieldwork phase. Any distortions resulting from quota openings were weighted accordingly. The weighting efficiency for correcting these distortions in the sample was 94.9 percent.

In accordance with participation requirements and legal regulations, Ipsos obtained consent from the legal guardians of participants under the age of 16 before conducting the survey. The young people completed the survey independently.

The survey participants were distributed as follows: Each of the age groups from 12 to 15 accounted for 14 percent of the sample, while each of the age groups from 16 to 18 accounted for 15 percent. Fifty percent of respondents identified as female and 50 percent as male. Eighty-one percent were school students, 8 percent were apprentices, 3 percent were employed (not in training), 3 percent were university students, 1 percent were unemployed, 2 percent were participating in support programs, and a further 2 percent selected “Other.”

With regard to their current or intended educational qualification, 6 percent attended a *Werkrealschule* or *Hauptschule* (lower secondary school), 25 percent a *Realschule* (intermediate secondary school), 53 percent a *Gymnasium* (academic-track secondary school), 12 percent a *Gemeinschaftsschule* or *Gesamtschule* (comprehensive secondary school), and 2 percent a special-education school.

Twenty-two percent of respondents lived in North Rhine-Westphalia, 15 percent in Bavaria, 14 percent in Baden-Württemberg, 10 percent in Lower Saxony, 8 percent in Hesse, 5 percent each in Rhineland-Palatinate and Saxony, 4 percent each in Berlin and Schleswig-Holstein, 3 percent in Brandenburg, 2 percent each in Saxony-Anhalt,

Thuringia, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, and Hamburg, and 1 percent each in Bremen and Saarland.

For the first time, respondents were also asked about a possible migration background. Thirty-six percent stated that they themselves, or at least one of their parents, had been born without German citizenship.

To ensure the highest possible quality of responses, the survey included introductory texts and definitions of technical terms. Respondents could access individual definitions using a scroll-over function, for example for terms such as globalization or international cooperation. Care was also taken to ensure that survey questions were formulated in age-appropriate and easily understandable language.

To complement the quantitative survey data, comments were collected from five participants in the Liz Mohn Stiftung's "Generation Global – *We Shape the World*" support network. The survey findings and topics were discussed in advance both within the network and with representatives of the foundation. The specific questions addressed in the comments were developed by the foundation's representatives.

Methodology of the Regression Analyses:

For a more in-depth analysis of selected variables from the survey "Germany's Role in the World 2026", the polling firm Ipsos conducted regression analyses on behalf of the Liz Mohn Stiftung. The aim of these analyses was to complement the descriptive statistics and frequency analyses with additional insights, thereby providing added value for the public discussion.

Two hypotheses were formulated as the basis for the analyses.

Hypothesis 1: *Individual factors such as political interest, political engagement, intended educational attainment, gender, place of residence (eastern/western Germany), concern about current developments, social distance from people with a migration background, having a migration background, age, and young people's need for security in Germany have a significant influence on interest in voluntary social service.*

Hypothesis 2: *Individual factors such as political interest, political engagement, intended educational attainment, gender, place of residence (eastern/western Germany),*

concern about current developments, social distance from people with a migration background, having a migration background, age, and young people's need for security in Germany have a significant influence on interest in voluntary military service.

The regressions, as well as the calculation of correlation coefficients and confidence intervals, were carried out using the Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) method. The analysis was conducted using the SPSS statistical software package.

The OLS method is a classic approach to estimating the coefficients of a multiple regression model. In this approach, the regression coefficients are determined in such a way that the sum of the squared deviations between the observed values and the values predicted by the model is minimized. In multiple OLS regression, several selected independent variables are regressed on a specific dependent variable. The aim of this method is to identify predictors that have a statistically significant influence on the target variable.

To enable the inclusion of categorical variables in the regression models, ordinal variables were treated as continuous variables (representing values along an interval scale). For categorical variables measured in three categories, dummy variables were created.

To allow for a direct comparison of the different variables and their effect sizes, all variables were standardized, i.e. transformed according to a common scale to make them comparable. In addition, a listwise deletion procedure was applied, meaning that respondents were excluded from the analysis if a value was missing for any variable. As a result, only respondents with complete data were included in the analyses, yielding a final sample size of $n = 690$.

Several assumption tests were conducted to validate the statistical approach. The relationships between the independent and dependent variables (see Hypotheses and Figures 20 and 21) were approximately linear. Accordingly, changes in the independent variables were associated with proportional changes in the dependent variable.

There were no strong correlations among the independent variables and therefore no evidence of multicollinearity that could have biased the estimates. The error terms (residuals) were also examined and found to be approximately normally distributed

(see bell-shaped distribution). In addition, there was no evidence of heteroscedasticity, meaning that the variance of the residuals remained approximately constant across all values of the independent variables.

The results of these assumption tests confirm that the regression findings are statistically valid and reliable.

APPENDIX

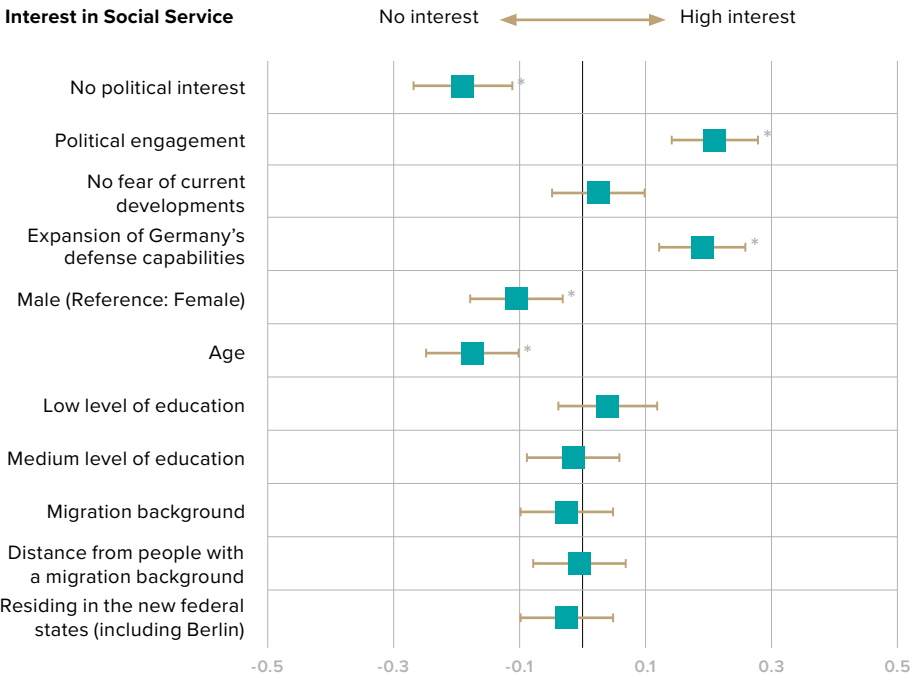
Regression Analyses of Interest in Social Service and Military Service

Regression analyses were conducted to provide a more in-depth examination of young respondents' interest in voluntary social service and in the "new" voluntary military service. The results of the regressions are intended to complement the descriptive findings and survey data and to highlight further relationships between individual characteristics and young people's interest in social service and the New Military Service in Germany.

Based on the regression analysis of the relationship between young people's personal characteristics and their interest in completing a Voluntary Social Year (FSJ) or Voluntary Ecological Year (FÖJ) after leaving school, the following can be observed: Higher levels of political interest, political engagement, and support for strengthening Germany's defense capabilities are associated with greater interest in social service among female and younger respondents.

At the same time, the analysis shows that educational attainment, having a migration background, greater social distance toward young people with a migration background, and place of residence in eastern or western Germany do not have a significant effect on the level of interest in social service among respondents aged 12 to 18 in Germany.

Figure 20 | Relationship between Interest in Social Service and Selected Characteristics of Young People

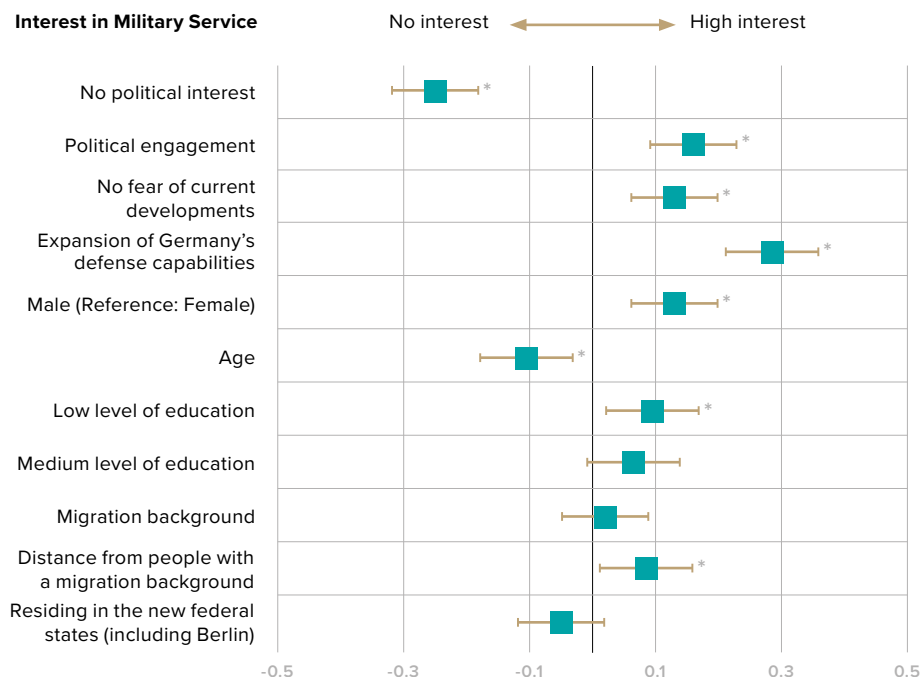


Notes:
* significant at the 5 percent level. Multivariate regression results with confidence intervals. Interest in voluntary social service was measured on an 11-point scale. Bottom axis of the graph: value ranges for the standardized coefficients of the independent variables
Interpretation example: Adolescents who are less interested in politics show less interest in social service.

Base: 690 German-speaking young people aged 12 to 18, April 2026

Source: Liz Mohn Stiftung 2026

Figure 21 | Relationship between Interest in Military Service and Selected Characteristics of Young People



Notes:

* significant at the 5 percent level. Multivariate regression results with confidence intervals. Interest in voluntary military service was measured on an 11-point scale.

Lower axis of the graph: value ranges for the standardized coefficients of the independent variables
 Interpretation example: Adolescents who are less interested in politics are less interested in military service.

Base: 690 German-speaking young people aged 12 to 18, April 2026

Source: Liz Mohn Stiftung 2026

The regression analysis examining the effect of individual characteristics on young people's interest in volunteering for military service after leaving school further shows that a stronger interest in politics, support for strengthening Germany's defense capabilities, political engagement, lower levels of concern about current global developments, and being male are characteristics that lead to a greater interest in voluntary military service.

Lower educational attainment, greater social distance from people with a migration background, having a migration background, and living in the eastern federal states also have a significant effect, although a smaller one than the personal characteristics already mentioned, such as political interest and support for strengthening Germany's defense capabilities.

- The first regression analysis shows that political interest, political engagement, support for strengthening Germany's defense capabilities, gender, and age influence interest in Voluntary Social Service (FSJ/FÖJ).
 - ➔ Young people in Germany who are interested in politics, who are politically engaged, who believe that Germany needs to become more capable of defending itself, and who are female and relatively younger, are more likely to be interested in voluntary social service.
- The second regression analysis shows that political interest, political engagement, concern about current global developments, support for strengthening Germany's defense capabilities, gender, and age influence interest in the New Military Service.
 - ➔ Young people in Germany who are interested in politics, who are politically engaged, who are less concerned about current global developments, who believe that Germany needs to become more capable of defending itself, and who are male and relatively younger, are more likely to be interested in voluntary military service.

The factors most strongly associated with interest in either form of service are gender and age, the level of political interest, the extent of young people's political engagement, and psychological factors such as concern about current global developments and support for strengthening Germany's defense capabilities.

Interestingly, place of residence (eastern or western Germany), educational attainment, and a possible migration background play only a minor role in shaping young people's interest in voluntary military service and voluntary social service (FSJ/FÖJ).

The regression model used can only identify correlations between individual characteristics of young people in Germany and their interest in voluntarily performing social service or serving as a soldier in the *Bundeswehr* (see Figures 10, 20, and 21).

Within the context of this expanded analysis of the survey findings, the regression results do not permit causal conclusions. In the future, causal relationships could be examined. This would require a comprehensive dataset collected over several years. Such data could help analyze the relationship between young people's personal characteristics and their interest in socially relevant forms of service, and support evidence-based conclusions for policy-making processes.

Based on the available regression results, conclusions can already be drawn for society and policy-makers. The analysis of the relationships between personal characteristics and the levels of interest among young people provides an explanatory framework for understanding the factors that influence respondents' interest in socially relevant forms of service and in the security policy-relevant "New Military Service" in Germany.

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Liz Mohn Stiftung

The nonprofit Liz Mohn Stiftung is active in the fields of International Relations, Creating Leadership Cultures, Power of Culture, and Global Talents. A particular focus of Liz Mohn and the Stiftung is to build bridges of understanding across languages and borders, bringing together people from different countries and cultures, from different professions and positions, and from different generations in dialogue.

Further information: www.liz-mohn-stiftung.de

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Further information: www.ipsos.com

A Digital Look at the Survey

If you are interested in the digital version of this policy paper in English or German, as well as additional information, please visit the following website of the Liz Mohn Stiftung:



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