

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

The Wall Street Journal – 15.04.2014

By Anton Troianovski (anton.troianovski@wsj.com)

Ukraine Crisis Sparks Debate in Germany Over Russia Actions
Government Blames Moscow but Many in Public Favor Neutral Stance

*Українська криза породила дебати в німецькому суспільстві про дії
Росії*

*Уряд звинувачує Москву, але багато хто має нейтральну позицію
Українська криза викликав в німецькому суспільстві запеклі дебати про те, наскільки
твердо країна повинна дотримуватися позиції Заходу в цьому питанні. Дані опитувань,
надані Wall Street Journal провідним дослідницьким центром, демонструють, що
більшість молодих, освічених людей і тих, хто живе в колишній Східній Німеччині,
вважають, що їх країна повинна зайняти нейтральну позицію між Росією і Заходом -
замість того, щоб повністю підтримувати західний альянс. А російська
пропагандистська машина використовує цей спір як свідчення того, що жорстким
висловлюванням канцлера Ангели Меркель насправді не вистачає рішучості.*

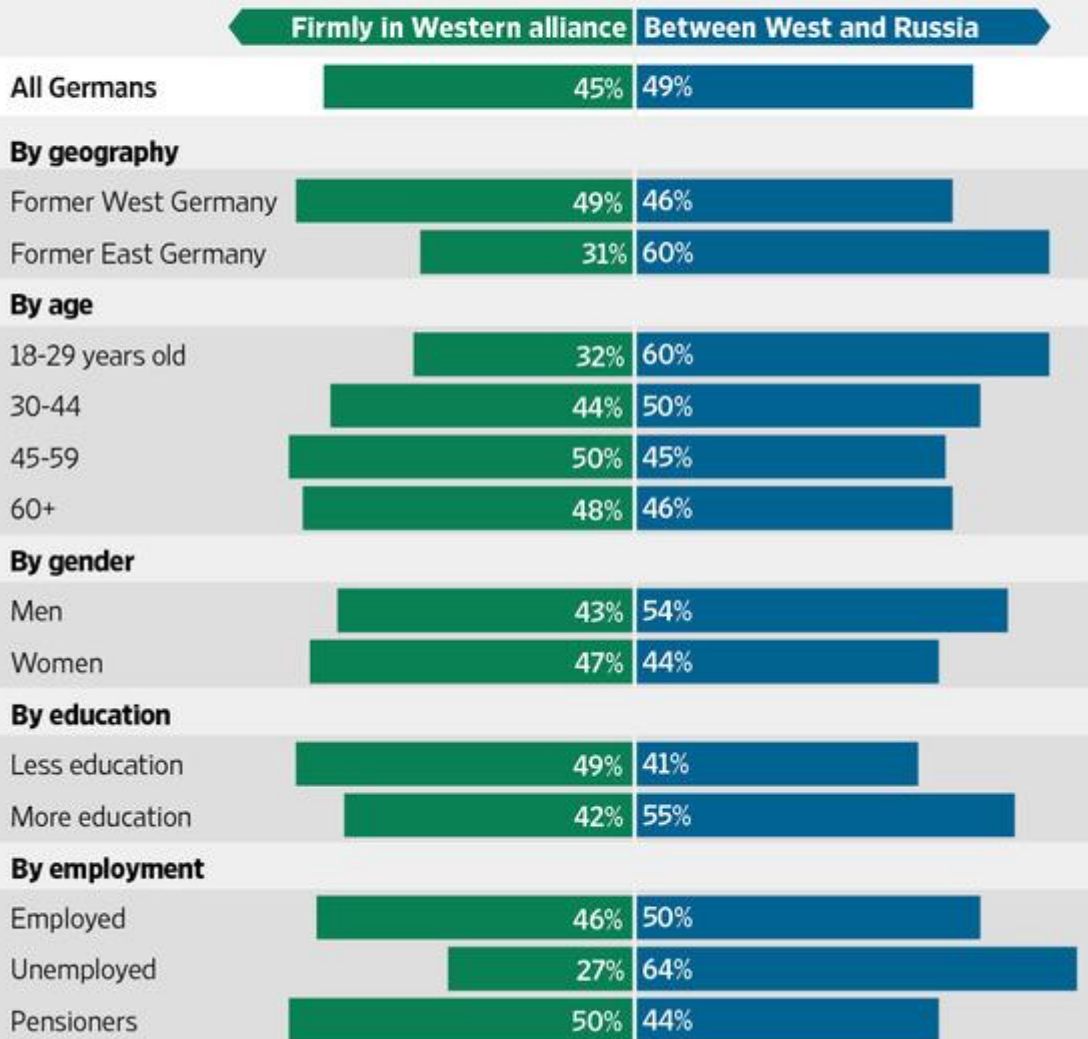
<http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702303663604579503122399051390>

BERLIN—Germany's government has sharply criticized the Kremlin over its actions in Ukraine. But Uwe Murek, a 57-year-old music teacher who grew up in Communist East Germany, says Berlin should mind its own business.

Split Identity

A recent poll found that big swaths of the German public—including younger people and those in the former East Germany—are skeptical that their country should stand with the West in facing down Russia.

What should Germany's position be in the conflict between Russia and NATO and the EU?



Source: Infratest dimap telephone poll of 1,006 eligible voters conducted March 31 to April 1, margin of error: +/- 3.1 percentage points

The Wall Street Journal

"Germany should stay out of it," he said. "This is an obligation that stems from our history."

The Ukraine crisis has sparked a divisive debate in German society about how firmly the country should side with the West in this conflict.

Survey data provided to The Wall Street Journal by a top German pollster show that a majority of the young, the well-educated, and those living in the former East Germany believe their country should play a neutral role between Russia and the West rather than stick firmly within the Western alliance.

The German government said late Tuesday that Chancellor Angela Merkel had talked to Russian President Vladimir Putin and that the two had "a different assessment of events in Ukraine."

Yet while its diplomacy has put Berlin firmly in the Western camp, survey data provided to The Wall Street Journal by a top German pollster show that a majority of the young, the well-educated, and those living in the former East Germany believe their country should play a neutral role between Russia and the West.

Russia's propaganda machine is highlighting the debate as evidence that there is little resolve behind Chancellor Angela Merkel's tough talk.

In a survey conducted March 31 and April 1, pollster infratest dimap asked Germans what position they would like their country to take in the new "East-West conflict." Only 45% said they believed Germany should stick firmly with the Western alliance, while 49% said it should occupy a "middle position" between Russia and the West.

A breakdown of those numbers, which hasn't been made publicly available, shows skepticism about aligning with the West runs strong among younger Germans, people at higher education levels, and those living in the former East Germany. Among those under 30 years old, 60% said they preferred that their country occupy a more neutral position.

Polls also show fewer Germans are in favor of economic sanctions against Russia than people in other European countries, and that many Germans are willing to accept Russia's annexation of Crimea.

Though German views of Russia have grown more negative in recent years, skepticism toward the U.S. has also increased, fueled last year by the National Security Agency surveillance scandal. With the Ukraine crisis increasingly taking on Cold War-style overtones, many Germans are wary of getting drawn into a fight alongside an ally they distrust.

"I don't understand why they are getting involved in this at all," Ronald Markgraf, a 34-year-old cook in Berlin, said of the U.S. role in the crisis.

Mr. Markgraf says that while he is no Putin fan, he believes the Russian president had little choice but to send troops into Crimea to protect the Russian navy's key base on the Ukrainian peninsula.

German commentators have tried to explain the public's acceptance of Russia's actions by pointing to a longtime fascination with Russian culture as well as lingering guilt from World War II, in which more than 20 million Soviet soldiers and civilians died.

Some pollsters cite more direct causes: a distrust of the U.S. and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, particularly in East Germany; and a desire among people who are living comfortably to protect Germany's economic well-being by staying neutral. Germany has deep economic ties with Russia, with some \$100 billion in imports and exports last year.

"This crisis in Ukraine is taking place in a situation in which Germans are as conscious as they've been in a long time that we are doing better than other Western countries," said infratest dimap chief Richard Hilmer. "That's of course a good reason to try to remain open and not let this crisis deteriorate into a real conflict."

Ms. Merkel and her foreign minister, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, continue to enjoy approval ratings of over 70%. They have both publicly blamed Russia for the unrest in Ukraine and threatened stronger sanctions, but have appeared careful to avoid provoking Russia.

Ms. Merkel, on vacation in Italy, didn't make any public statements on Ukraine as tensions rose Sunday. Mr. Steinmeier, appearing on German television Sunday evening after violent protests across eastern Ukraine, questioned whether the situation had in fact worsened in some key cities.

Other members of the German government have been more blunt. Economics Minister Sigmar Gabriel said Monday that Russia appeared "prepared to let tanks roll across European borders." Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble earlier unleashed a political firestorm in Germany by comparing Mr. Putin's annexation of Crimea to Hitler's seizure of the Sudetenland, then part of Czechoslovakia, in 1938.

Bernd Ulrich, a deputy editor of weekly newspaper Die Zeit, posited in a widely cited column last week that the German government is already opposing Russia more starkly than most Germans would like.

"In these weeks, world views have been clashing that have not clashed for some time," Mr. Ulrich wrote. "Putin has divided Germany."

On Russian television, Mr. Ulrich's piece became part of a narrative in recent days about the German government ignoring the views of its people. Last week, a report on Russian state television network Rossiya about a Berlin conference on doing business in Eastern Europe concluded that the event had "only confirmed the feeling that German business and German politicians talk about Russia in different languages."

The Russian state media has seized on Mr. Ulrich's column to show the apparent lack of determination in Western Europe's biggest country to respond to the events in Ukraine.

"Germans as a nation have no need for escapades," anchor Dmitry Kiselyov said Sunday on his Rossiya show, which cited Mr. Ulrich's piece at least twice. "But the German political class, the very top of it, may paradoxically be drawn into an adventure."

Write to Anton Troianovski at anton.troianovski@wsj.com