

New Expectations: Generation Z and Changing Attitudes on German Foreign Policy

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Executive Summary

- According to new survey data, a trend emerged in recent years among the German voting-age population toward a **stronger preference for taking international responsibility for conflict resolution**. Since about 2016, the former majority favoring “restraint” has been declining. Some surveys from the summer/fall of 2019 even show a reversal: About half of adult Germans favor stronger engagement or the status quo, respectively, while only a small majority would like to see less engagement.
- **The demand for “stronger involvement in conflict resolution than to date” is most frequently heard among younger people** between the ages of 18 and 30, i.e. members of “Generation Z” (Gen-Z) or younger Millennials. Unlike the older age groups, this is true for both women and men in the same way and applies to East Germans even more so than to West Germans. The finding is more robust for young adults, across different surveys and regardless of the way in which survey questions were framed, than for the overall population. Over time, the younger people’s attitude has increasingly diverged from that of the other age groups. This holds among the supporters of most political parties, which makes for considerable potential for internal conflict over foreign policy matters.
- The data available to date does not allow for clear-cut conclusions about the causes of these differences between younger and older people. **Gen-Z and younger Millennials do not feel more threatened nor are they more naïve than older people**. Younger people do not estimate the risk of threatening events to be higher than older people: their trust in Germany’s security is, if anything, higher than that of older people. Asked about the most pressing issues, young adults mention the climate crisis, “peacekeeping/avoiding conflict”, and fighting terrorism. They prioritize “refugees and root causes of migration” less than older people do. Younger people are much less likely than older people to blame the intake of refugees for an increased risk of terrorism in Germany.
- **The data also provides few clues** as to how these Gen-Z and younger Millennials expect their government to **implement the vague notions of “responsibility” and “engagement.”** We know from previous surveys that increased diplomatic contributions are popular through all age groups. Younger adults are much more likely than older people to favor increased contributions to international development. The picture is much less clear, however, when it comes to the military: While the majority across age groups continues to oppose the use of military force, Gen-Z and younger Millennials are more likely than older people to support the use of force for explicitly identified purposes, such as fighting terrorism or opposing grave violations of human rights.

¹ The authors owe thanks to Alicja Polakiewicz for editorial support, her, Katharina Nachbar and Amanda Pridmore for the charts and translation as well as Julia Friedrich, Julian Lehmann and Janika Spannagel for their helpful comments.

Is the Old Consensus of “Restraint” Crumbling?

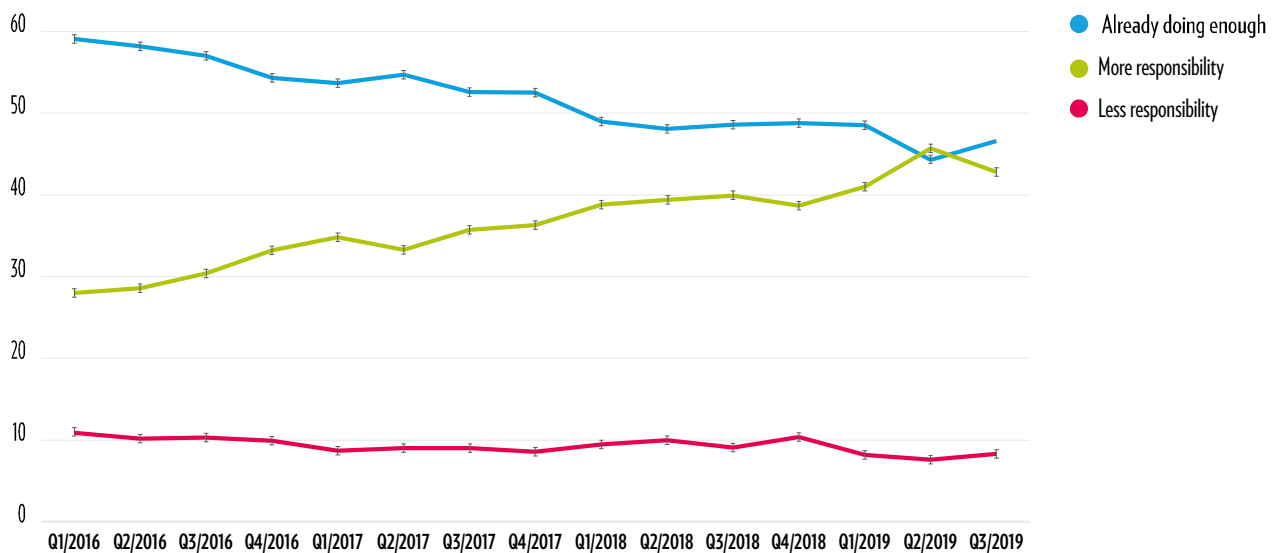
Global pandemics, crises and wars in the European neighborhood, tens of thousands of refugees right at Europe’s border, the decay of transatlantic relations, and shaken trust in European solidarity: never has it been clearer that Germany needs to do more to secure its values and interests. As early as six years ago, at the 2014 Munich Security Conference, Germany’s then president, foreign minister, and defense minister jointly called for taking “more international responsibility.”²

For a long time, these calls failed to resonate with the majority of Germans. Over the last couple of years, however, this appears to be changing. Our analysis of current survey data shows that the previous majority in favor of “foreign policy restraint” (“*außenpolitische Zurückhaltung*”) has substantively decreased. The assumption that a majority longs for a retreat to the nation state or a renunciation of the wider world is therefore unfounded, at least in the context of foreign policy.

The previous majority in favor of “foreign policy restraint” has substantively decreased.

In the fall of 2014, a good 60% of the voting-age population (18 years and above) still favored “continuing to practice restraint,” while just 37% wanted Germany to “take more responsibility.”³ Similarly overwhelming majorities against the so-called Munich Consensus continued to hold through the following years, leaving aside all the confusion around what this consensus would practically mean for different situations⁴ (more on that below). 2016 is the first year for which quarterly survey data is available from a weekly tracking poll conducted by Forsa on behalf of the Federal Press

The state of world politics: Are you of the opinion that Germany should take on more or less responsibility, or do you think that Germany is already doing enough? (agreement in percent)*



Source: Forsa/BPA trend (2016-2019) on “Germany’s responsibility in foreign policy” | * number of cases per quarter (N) between 6010 and 7534; margin of error between +/- 0.6% and +/- 1.3%

Figure 1: Germany’s responsibility in foreign policy, proportions of Satisfied and Ambitious over time

² Jochen Bittner/Matthias Nass, [Kurs auf die Welt](#), DIE ZEIT, February 6, 2014, last accessed March 11, 2020; Auswärtiges Amt, [Rede von Außenminister Frank-Walter Steinmeier anlässlich der 50. Münchner Sicherheitskonferenz](#), February 1, 2014, last accessed March 11, 2020; Der Bundespräsident, [Eröffnung der 50. Münchner Sicherheitskonferenz](#), January 31, 2014, last accessed March 11, 2020.

³ Körber-Stiftung, [Einmischen oder zurückhalten? Ergebnisse einer repräsentativen Umfrage von TNS Infratest Politikforschung zur Sicht der Deutschen auf die Außenpolitik](#), 2014, data on file with authors.

⁴ See also Thorsten Benner, [Gegen das Geschwurbel](#), Internationale Politik Jan/Feb 2019, last accessed March 11, 2020.

Office (Presse- und Informationsamt der Bundesregierung, BPA).⁵ In early 2016, Forsa found only a 28% approval for taking on “more responsibility,” while 59% of respondents said that Germany was “already doing enough.” Almost 11% would rather see Germany take less responsibility.

Within four years, the attitude of about 20% of the voting-age population changed.

Step by step, these numbers have been changing since (→ Figure 1). In the second quarter of 2019, almost half of respondents (46%) favored “more responsibility.” About the same share (44%) believed Germany was “doing enough already” and a small minority (8%) wanted their country to take “less responsibility.” In the third quarter of 2019, the last period for which the government has published data so far, the numbers were reversed (43% “more,” 47% “enough”). Zooming out to the bigger picture, we are seeing a trend toward an even split between “doing enough” and “taking more responsibility.” Thus, within the four years between 2016 and 2019, the attitude of about 20% of the German voting-age population changed.⁶ They are no longer satisfied with their government’s foreign policy engagement, but wish it did more.

The fact that the data is being collected every three weeks⁷ and aggregated per quarter means that the analysis is unaffected by possible short-term peaks due to people’s reactions to current events. The effect is also not cancelled out by statistical uncertainty, which is at about +/- 1% for these Forsa polls, as indicated in Figure 1.

They are no longer satisfied with their government’s foreign policy engagement, but wish it did more.

The annual surveys conducted by Kantar on behalf of the Körber Foundation show this same trend in a more modest fashion. The question asked by Körber, however, is less balanced than the one posed by BPA.⁸ While the BPA tracking poll offers not only “more” or “less” responsibility as answer options, but also explicitly includes the status quo, Körber only leaves room for the binary choice between “more engagement” and “continued comparative restraint” (emphasis added by GPPi). The annual Ipsos polls conducted for the Bundeswehr’s Center for Military History and Social Sciences (*Zentrum für Militärgeschichte und Sozialwissenschaften der Bundeswehr, ZMSBw*) also found majorities of up to 66% for “an active policy to help with the resolution of crises and conflicts” ever since 2014.⁹ While these majorities slightly decreased between 2015 and 2017, they steadied between 57% and 59% up to the latest data from 2019. However, because of the differently framed questions and methods of data collection (ZMSBw: door to door, BPA and Körber: telephone), the results found by Körber and BPA on the one hand and the Bundeswehr data on the other are not comparable.

⁵ Presse- und Informationsamt der Bundesregierung, [Gesellschaftliche und politische Einstellungen 2016](#) (Kumulierter Datensatz). GESIS Datenarchiv. ZA6629 Datenfile Version 1.0.0, 2017. All survey data from the Federal Press Office is available only in German, translations of questions and answers are the authors’.

⁶ Presse- und Informationsamt der Bundesregierung: [Gesellschaftliche und politische Einstellungen 2017](#) (Kumulierter Datensatz). GESIS Datenarchiv, Köln 2018. ZA6635 Datenfile Version 4.0.0, doi:10.4232/1.13034; [ibid.](#): [Gesellschaftliche und politische Einstellungen 2018](#) (Kumulierter Datensatz). GESIS Datenarchiv, Köln 2019. ZA6717 Datenfile Version 4.0.0, doi:10.4232/1.13309; [ibid.](#): [Gesellschaftliche und politische Einstellungen 2019](#) (Kumulierter Datensatz, 1. - 3. Quartal). GESIS Datenarchiv, Köln 2020. ZA6727 Datenfile Version 3.0.0, doi:10.4232/1.13443.

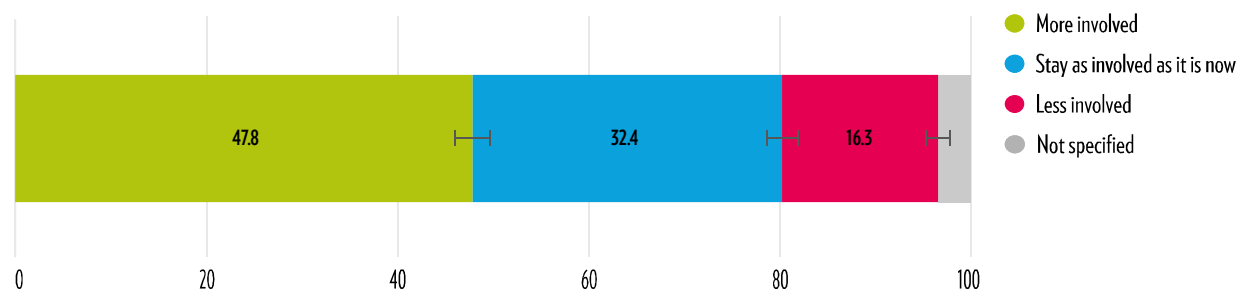
⁷ The Forsa poll on behalf of BPA is conducted weekly, but the foreign policy questions are only included every three weeks.

⁸ Körber-Stiftung, [Einmischen oder zurückhalten?](#), on file with authors; TNS Infratest, [„Körber-Stiftung ‘Deutsche Außenpolitik’ – KW 42/2015 Ergebnisse einer repräsentativen Erhebung – Tabellarische Übersichten“](#), (Oktober 2015); Kantar Public, [„Außenpolitik – Eine Studie von Kantar Public im Auftrag der Körber-Stiftung – Tabellenbericht“](#) (November 2016); ders., [„Deutsche Außenpolitik – Oktober 2017 – Eine Studie im Auftrag der Körber-Stiftung, Tabellenbericht“](#) (November 2017); ders., [„Deutsche Außenpolitik – September 2018 – Eine Studie von Kantar Public im Auftrag der Körber-Stiftung, Tabellenbericht“](#) (Oktober 2018); ders., [„Deutsche Außenpolitik – September 2019 – Eine Studie von Kantar im Auftrag der Körber-Stiftung, Tabellenbericht“](#) (Oktober 2019). The Körber Foundation publishes English summaries of their polls as part of their “Berlin Pulse”, available at <https://www.koerber-stiftung.de/en/the-berlin-pulse/>.

⁹ Zentrum für Militärgeschichte und Sozialwissenschaften der Bundeswehr, [Sicherheits- und verteidigungspolitisches Meinungsbild in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland](#), December 2019, last accessed March 11, 2020.

In addition to this, *Forschungsgruppe Wahlen* conducted a much more comprehensive phone survey on attitudes toward “crises and conflicts” for the BPA at the beginning of April 2019. The results were published in early 2020. The data provides detailed insights into attitudes on foreign and security policy held by the German voting-age population in spring 2019.¹⁰ Almost half (48%) favored “a stronger involvement in the resolution of conflicts in the future,” while almost a third (32%) were satisfied with the current level of engagement. 16% preferred less German engagement. While no comparable data from previous years is available, this survey shows how questions with a concrete link to conflict resolution can result in greater support than more open questions about “more responsibility” or “more engagement” do (→ Figure 2).

In the future, should Germany be more involved in conflict resolution than it is to date, should Germany be less involved in conflict resolution than to date, or should Germany stay as involved as it currently is? (agreement in percent, N=1026)*



Source: Forschungsgruppe Wahlen/BPA (April 2019) on “contribution to conflict resolution” | * margin of error between +/-1.1% and +/- 3.1%

Figure 2: Involvement in conflict resolution

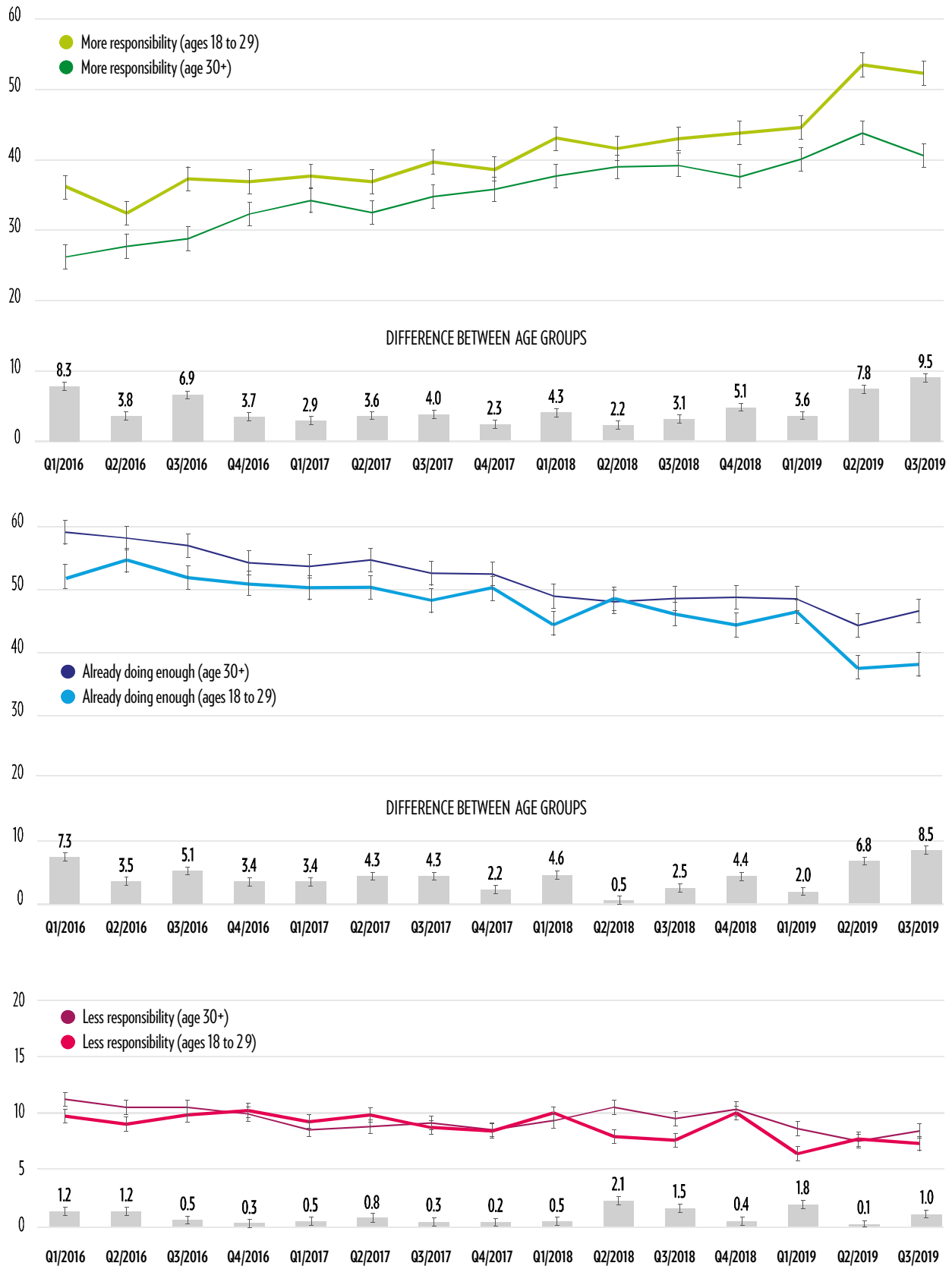
All in all, the results of the comprehensive BPA surveys hint toward a change in attitudes – away from the clear disapproval of the political call for more engagement in between 2014 and 2016, and toward a balance between “the Ambitious” and “the Satisfied” mid-2019. The number of those who wish for more German restraint is decreasing. As a snapshot, the April 2019 BPA survey on crises and conflicts paints a similar picture for that period. The Körber foundation data also includes a weak trend toward more engagement, but it lies within the margin of error and can therefore not be used as reliable proof for a change in attitudes. While the ZMSBw data is not comparable due to the difference in the data collection method, they show a clear (since 2014) and relatively consistent (since 2017) majority in favor of more foreign policy engagement.

New data from a survey conducted by the Körber Foundation in April 2020 indicates that the corona pandemic has so far not reversed this change in attitudes: A large majority polled thought Germany should maintain its “civilian and military engagement in the Middle East and Africa” at the same level as before (45%) or increase its engagement (16%).¹¹

¹⁰ Presse- und Informationsamt der Bundesregierung: Krisen und Konflikte. GESIS Datenarchiv, Köln 2019. ZA6733 Datenfile Version 1.0.0, doi:10.4232/1.13400.

¹¹ Körber-Stiftung, [Multilateralismus: Tabellenbericht: Eine Studie von Kantar im Auftrag der Körber-Stiftung](#), April 15, 2020, accessed May 20, 2020.

The state of world politics: Are you of the opinion that Germany should take on more or less responsibility, or do you think that Germany is already doing enough? (ages 18 to 29 vs. age 30+; agreement and difference in percent)*



Source: Forsa/BPA trend (2016-2019) | * number of cases per quarter (N) between 6010 und 7534

Figure 3: Germany's responsibility in foreign policy, differences between age groups

Generation Z: Breaking Out of the Consensus of Restraint

There are well-known differences between women and men in scholarship on German foreign policy attitudes (with men more likely to favor a more active foreign policy than women), and between East and West Germans (West Germans more often favor an active foreign policy). In comparison, the differences between the under-30s and older groups have not received much attention. The results of the above-mentioned survey, however, show conspicuously different foreign policy attitudes among the voting-age part of Generation Z (those that were between 18 and 22 years of age in 2019) and among the younger half of the Millennials, born between 1990 and 1996 (those that were between 23 and 29 years of age in 2019). The term “Millennials” is generally used to describe those born between 1982 and 1996 (aged between 23 and 37 years in 2019).¹²

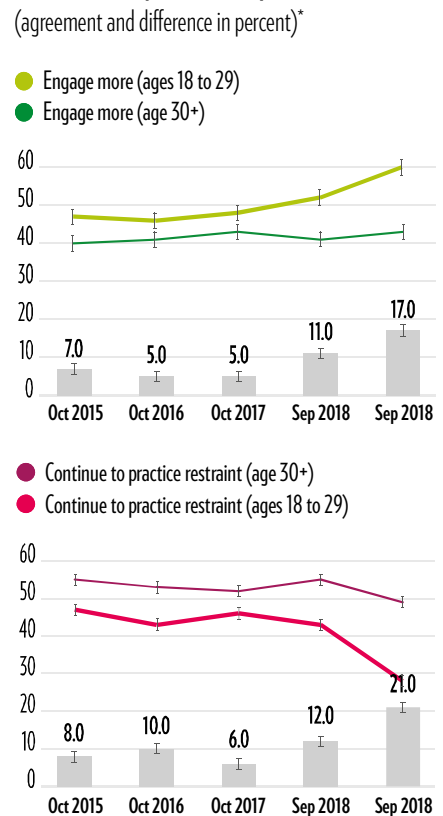
18- to 29-year-olds: from a satisfied majority 2016 to an ambitious majority in 2019.

Since at least 2016,¹³ 18- to 29-year-olds have been more strongly in favor of a foreign policy that “takes on more responsibility” than those older than 30 years of age. According to the Forsa tracking poll, the age gap in responses to this question increased to ten points by 2019 (→ Figure 3). In the second and third quarter of 2019, there were robust majorities among the 18- to 29-year-olds demanding a more active foreign policy, while the population as a whole was deadlocked between the Satisfied (“Germany is already doing enough”) and the Ambitious (“Germany should take on more responsibility”).

While the change among Germans of all ages shifted from the rock-solid majority of the Satisfied in 2016 toward deadlock with the Ambitious in 2019, the shift among younger Germans was much more dramatic. In that same period of time, attitudes among younger Germans reversed from a satisfied majority in 2016 toward a new ambitious majority in 2019.

The Körber data confirms BPA’s finding of an attitude shift among Gen-Z and Millennials, though Körber focused specifically on crisis management rather than foreign policy in general (→ Figure 4). Asked (in the fall of 2019) if Germany should “engage more” or “continue to practice comparative restraint” in international crises, 43% of respondents across all age groups favored stronger engagement, while 49% preferred continued comparative restraint. Among 18- to 34-year-olds (which differs slightly from the age breakdown of the BPA tracking poll), a clear majority (60%) favored more engagement, while only a quarter (28%) preferred continued restraint. In comparison to the BPA tracking

What do you think: in the future, should Germany engage more in solving international crises or should Germany continue to practice restraint? (agreement and difference in percent)*



Source: Kantar for Körber (2015-2019) | * age groups changed after 2018; case numbers between 1000 and 1021 (all age groups), of these between 156 and 234 in the younger age group

Figure 4: Engage more or continue to practice comparative restraint, age differences

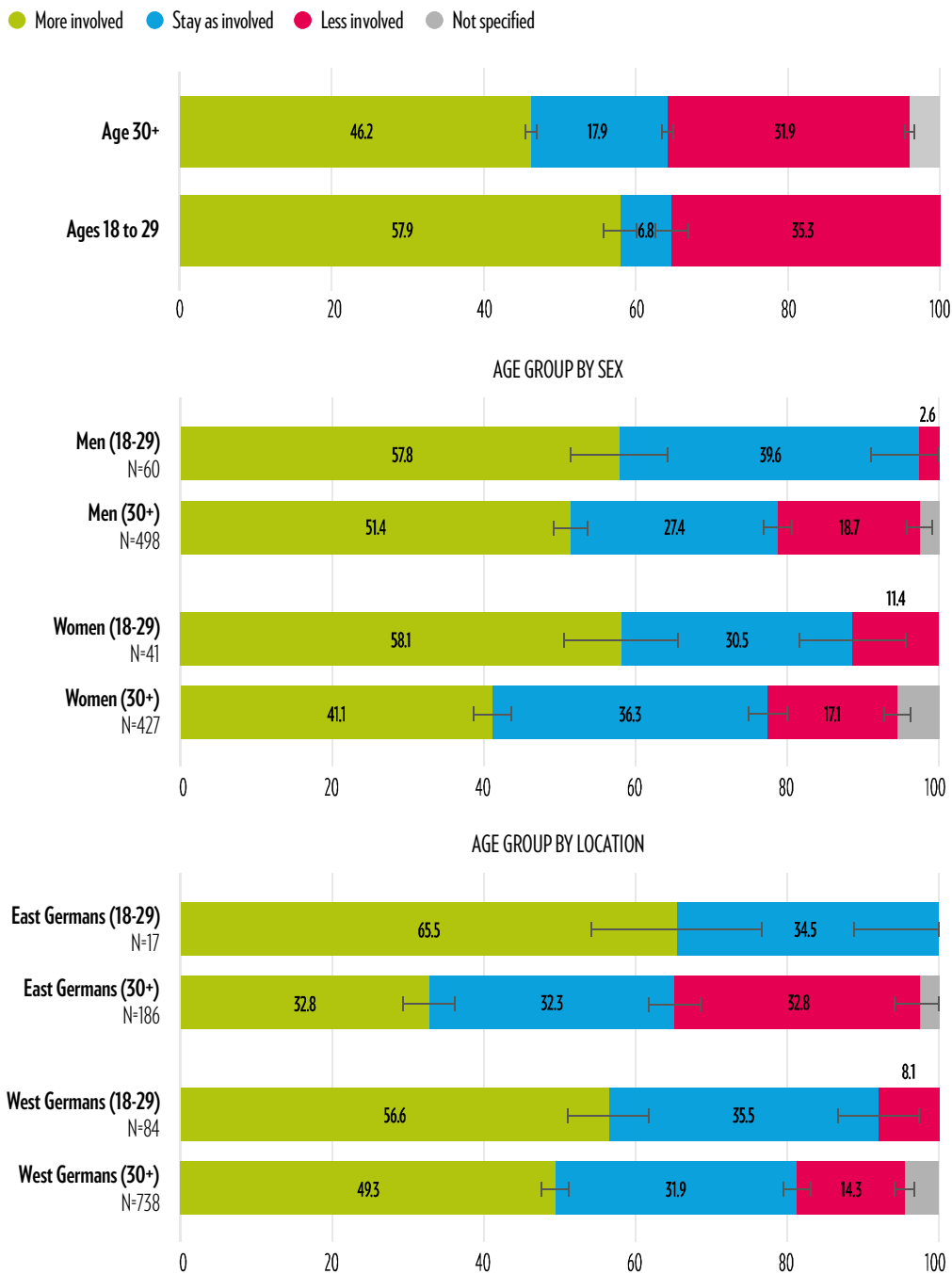
¹² Michael Dimock, [Defining generations: Where Millennials end and Generation Z begins](#), Pew Research Center, January 17, 2019, last accessed March 16, 2020.

¹³ The first and most comprehensive of the annual Körber surveys has come to the same conclusion in relation to the under 30-year-olds already in 2014, at a time when the overwhelming majority of the overall population favored restraint. See Körber-Stiftung, [Einmischen oder zurückhalten](#).

poll, the Körber survey sees a faster growing difference between the youngest respondents and the other age groups.

The comprehensive survey on crises and conflicts conducted by the *Forschungsgruppe Wahlen* for BPA in 2019 confirms the substantive approval for a more active foreign policy as well as the age gap. Here, a relative majority of the entire population (48%) favors “stronger involvement in conflict resolution” in the future, while almost a third (32%) is satisfied with the status quo. A small minority (16%) would rather see less German involvement. Among the 18- to 29-year-olds, this attitude is even more prominent: an absolute majority (58%) demands

In the future, should Germany be more involved in conflict resolution than to date, should Germany be less involved in conflict resolution than to date, or should Germany stay as involved as it currently is? (agreement in percent, N=1026)*



Source: Forschungsgruppe Wahlen/BPA (April 2019), by age group

Figure 5: Contributions to conflict resolution, differences by age group and sex

more engagement in the future, about a third (35%) believes Germany's role should stay unchanged, and only 7% would prefer more restraint.

Foreign policy differences between age groups are more pronounced among women and East Germans.

Differences by sex and between East and West Germans also played out differently among younger and older respondents. Among Gen-Z and younger Millennials, women and men (58%, respectively) were equally in favor of greater involvement, while among the older respondents, the same attitude is considerably more common among men (51%) than women (41%). Here, the difference between the age groups is most pronounced for women (58% of the younger age group in comparison to 41% of the older age group).

Younger East Germans (65%) are even more strongly in favor of greater involvement in conflict resolution than their West German peers (56%). Among older respondents, these proportions are reversed (East: 33%; West: 49%). These differences between the age groups are more pronounced in the East than in the West.¹⁴

The higher demand among Gen-Z and Millennials for a more active conflict management appears to hold across almost all German political party affiliations,¹⁵ apart from the supporters of the Social Democratic Party (SPD). However, the data in the BPA time series reveals considerable intergenerational conflict on foreign policy among the supporters of most parties (→ Figure 6).

There is considerable intergenerational conflict on foreign policy among most parties' supporters.

The largest cleavage is among supporters of the right-wing populist Alternative for Germany (AfD) party, the only group in which more than 20% demand for "less engagement". While almost half of those over 30 are of the opinion that "Germany is already doing enough," about a quarter of each group wants more or, respectively, less engagement. Among the younger generation, the situation has shifted considerably since 2019: 42% want more engagement and only 18% desire less – but here, too, the age divide among AfD supporters is stark. The two extreme positions are growing, especially among younger AfD supporters, and the proportion of those who are satisfied with the current level of foreign policy engagement is shrinking.

Among the supporters of Germany's Left Party, there is no comparable split between supporters of a "more" or "less" engaged foreign policy. The proportions are similar to those among the general population: just a little below half of the respondents, respectively, are satisfied or want more engagement, while only 10% want less. However, among the younger supporters, the Ambitious clearly have the upper hand: a full two-thirds (66%) of Left Party supporters under 30 would like a more active foreign policy. By this, they may not primarily refer to military engagement, but it is nevertheless remarkable how strongly the age groups differ – a development that came about only in the past one or two years (2018 to 2019).

Similarly, among supporters of the Greens, younger people (65%: more engagement) either have higher expectations for foreign policy engagement or associate significantly fewer worries with the term than older people do (56%). How these numbers have changed since 2016 shows that the attitudes of Green voters are generally moving toward stronger expectations for an active foreign policy. But while the gap between the Satisfied ("doing enough already") and the Ambitious among older Green voters has stabilized at around 56% vs. 39% (difference: 17%), it has more than doubled among younger voters, reaching 65% vs. 29% in the third quarter of 2019 (difference: 36%).

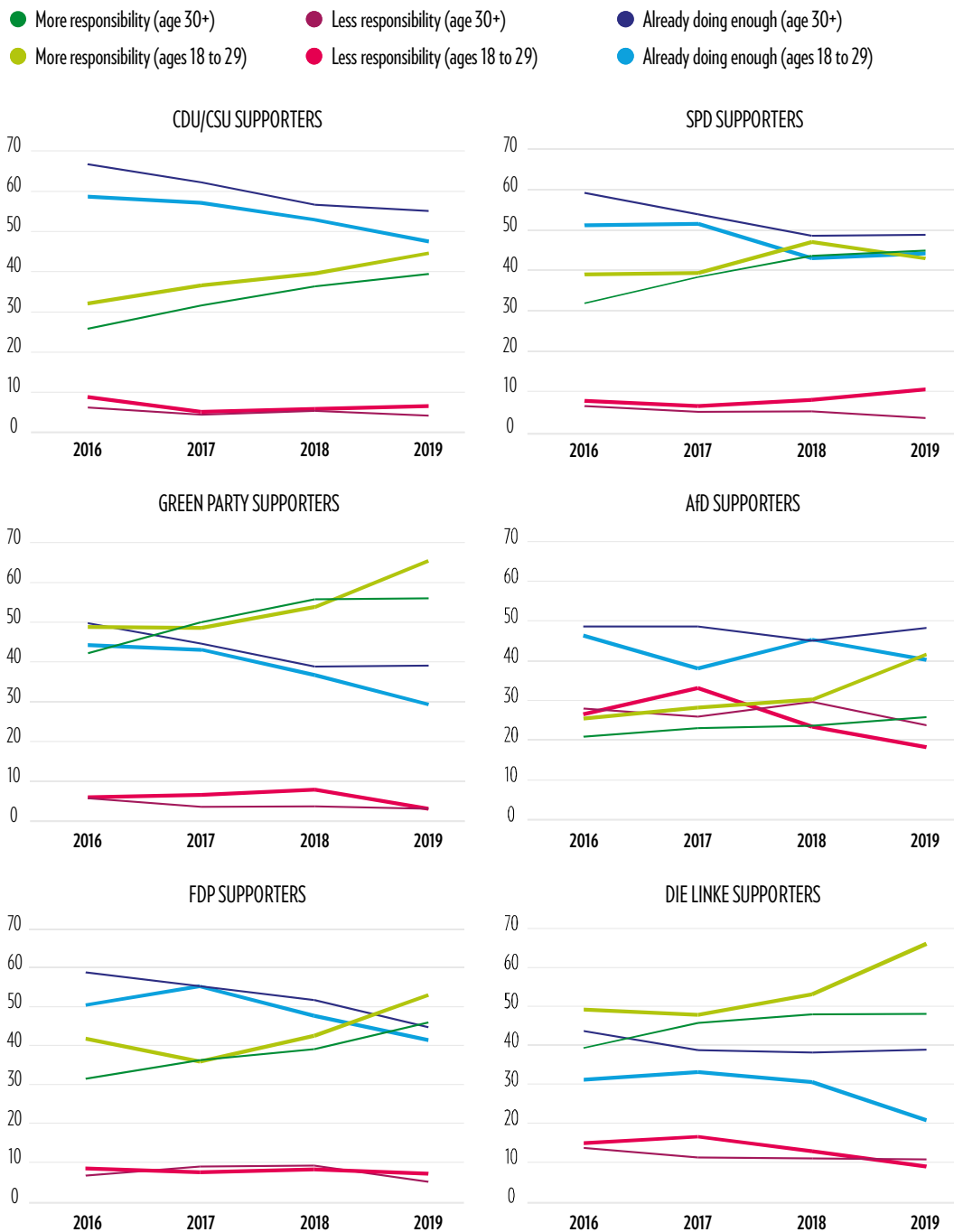
The smallest difference between the age groups in terms of foreign policy engagement can be found among the supporters of the SPD, followed by the supporters of the CDU/CSU and the FDP in the middle. The younger SPD voters are the only segment of those under 30 for whom

¹⁴ With only 17 East German respondents under 30, any interpretation of these results should be treated with caution.

¹⁵ The political party affiliation was determined in this survey by the voting intent in the next Bundestag elections.

The state of world politics: Are you of the opinion that Germany should take on more or less responsibility, or do you think that Germany is already doing enough?

(voter intention in the next German Federal Election by age group; agreement in percent)*



Source: Forsa/BPA trend (2016-2019) | * number of cases for ages 18 to 29: N=1799; number of cases for age 30+: N=17,221

Figure 6: Take responsibility, differences among age groups by voting intention

the desire for stronger engagement decreased last year (2018: 48%, 2019: 43%) and the want for less engagement has grown (2018: 8%, 2019: 11%). Among younger CDU/CSU supporters, the number of those who are satisfied with the current level of international engagement has shrunk below the 50% mark (2019: 48%). The proportion of supporters who welcome more engagement is growing (2018: 40%, 2019: 45%), and only a few want less.

A majority of younger supporters of Germany's Left Party (66%), Greens (65%), and FDP (53%) as well as older Green voters (56%) prefer more engagement, respectively. Whether the supporters of the various parties would be able to agree on a common type of foreign policy engagement is, however, far from determined by this – a core weakness of this survey question, which we will discuss in more detail in the following sections.

The more detailed BPA survey on crisis and conflict from April 2019 examined a number of additional issues. It should be noted, however, that the number of the participants in the BPA crises and conflicts survey is too low to draw reliable conclusions with regard to party affiliation.¹⁶

Gen-Z, Millennials and the World: More Optimistic, More Ambitious

The question whether the observed differences are linked more strongly to age or to generation – namely, whether the demands of the currently younger generation will diminish as this generation grows older, or whether they will remain unchanged with advancing age – must remain unanswered for now. The BPA time series data has not been available for a sufficiently long time to allow for robust conclusions. Nevertheless, the differences between younger and older respondents with regard to the key questions are so large that a first attempt at interpretation by generation appears reasonable.

In comparison to the entire population, the comprehensive survey on crises and conflicts conducted by the *Forschungsgruppe Wahlen* for BPA in 2019 includes a number of interesting findings on voting-age Generation Z and younger Millennials:

- While there were no age differences in people's expectations for future violent conflict (on the whole, increase: 62%, no change: 33%) or "refugee waves" (there will be more coming toward Germany: 58%), considerable differences do exist in the perception of economic and political insecurity as well as with regard to specific threats. 18- to 29-year-olds were considerably less likely to find themselves living "in insecure times" (39% vs. 61% among older people). They were more likely (81% vs. 69%) to believe that "Germany has a (very) secure future." Younger people considered the climate crisis (38% vs. 32% among older people), "peace keeping/conflict prevention" (31% vs. 36%), and fighting terrorism (31% vs. 26%) the most pressing global issues. In contrast, they found "refugees and root causes of displacement" less important than older respondents did (13% vs. 23% among first mentions, the reverse among second mentions).¹⁷ While 55% of older people agreed to the statement that "the risk of terrorist attacks at home is considerably higher because of the refugees," only 37% of Gen-Z and Millennials felt the same. The world economy and free trade are much less likely to be seen as a pressing issue among the younger age group.
- Especially interesting were the results based on several questions that touched upon the power of political instruments to shape world events. Almost 70% of all respondents thought that "fewer refugees would be coming to Europe if the EU would apply different economic and developmental policies." On this issue, younger people were a little more sober (63%) than older people (72%). Almost two thirds of the entire population think that Germany "can contribute to fighting the root causes of migration in Africa." This expectation, in turn, is more pronounced among younger people (74%) than older people (66%). Outsized majorities (84%) across all age groups would prefer "decisive action" for human rights – though the 18- to 29-year-olds are even clearer on this point (92%) than the older group (82%). Major differences exist in attitudes toward "democracy promotion

¹⁶ In the detailed survey conducted by Forschungsgruppe Wahlen for the BPA (April 2019) only 101 out of 1026 respondents were under the age of 30. Applying a breakdown along party affiliations, this results in lower single digit case numbers for some combinations of age group and party.

¹⁷ The question was: "What is, in your opinion, currently the most pressing problem worldwide?" (first mention) and "And what is an additional important problem worldwide?" (second mention).

in foreign countries.” Here, the older respondents prefer “comparable restraint” (56%), while there is a majority of younger people who would rather see “decisive action” (54%). The question did not clarify what “comparable restraint” or “decisive action” would mean in practice, or what costs and risks would be involved.¹⁸

- By no means are Gen-Z and younger Millennials naïve toward foreign policy: only 11% of the 18- to 29-year-olds (30+: 21%) expect the EU to exercise a common foreign policy, even though 90% would think it (very) important to do so, much like the older generations. Among younger people, 62% think that “Europe is too dependent on gas imports from Russia.” 30% disagree. Among older people, only 51% agree with this statement, while 42% do not. Asked if Western policy toward Russia or Putin was too hostile, people across all ages are deeply divided – almost half agree, while the same proportion disagrees.

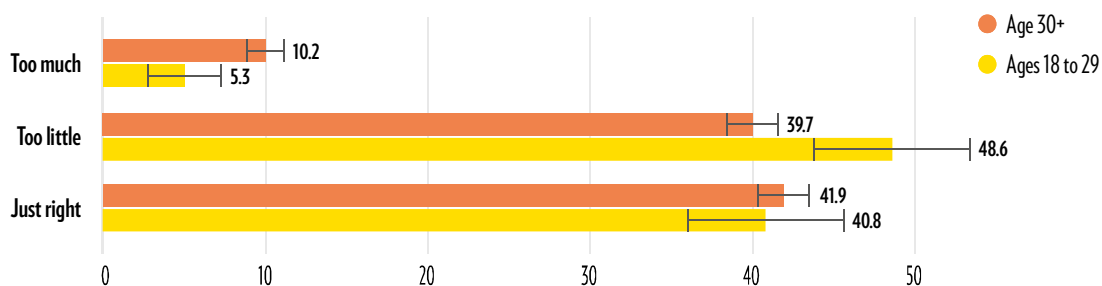
In comparison to 49% of people over 30, only 38% of the 18- to 29-year-olds reported a “strong or very strong” interest in foreign policy. Conversely, younger people were more likely to report “no or almost no” interest (25% vs. 14% of older people). However, this relative lack of interest in what they understand by the term “policy” is common for all policy fields and does not prevent younger people from positioning themselves in relation to political issues (as in the Fridays for Future movement, for example).¹⁹

What Exactly Does “More Involvement” Mean?

What exactly does the relative majority (48%) of all age groups, and particularly the solid majority of 18- to 29-year-olds (58%, both *Forschungsgruppe/ BPA*), expect when they express a preference for Germany to “be more involved in conflict resolution”?

While the Bundeswehr institute asks regularly about diplomatic means, the only time Körber Foundation posed such a question was in 2014. In that Körber poll, 85% approved of more diplomatic engagement, with no discernable differences by age. The Bundeswehr surveys have been showing growing approval of diplomatic means for years (85% in 2019), also without significant age differences.²⁰

When it comes to development aid, do you think that overall Germany does... (agreement in percent, N=1026)*



Source: Forschungsgruppe Wahlen/BPA (April 2019), by age group | * missing to one hundred: “not specified”; margin of error: between +/- 1.8% and +/-3.2% (age 30+), and between +/- 4.4% and +/- 9.7% (ages 18 to 29) respectively

Figure 7: Development aid, difference between age groups

¹⁸ The question was: “What do you think, should Germany decisively engage in democracy promotion in foreign countries, or should Germany practice comparative restraint?”

¹⁹ Bundesamt für Statistik, [Kapitel 9, Politische und gesellschaftliche Partizipation: Auszug aus dem Datenreport 2018](#), p. 351, last accessed March 16, 2020; Redaktion Internationale Politik, Interesse an Außenpolitik, IP-Forsa-Frage November/December 2012, last accessed May 16, 2020.

²⁰ Zentrum für Militärgeschichte und Sozialwissenschaften der Bundeswehr, „Sicherheits- und verteidigungspolitisches Meinungsbild in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland“.

Diplomatic means did not feature in the April 2019 BPA survey on crises and conflicts. Unfortunately, it also remains unclear if respondents considered development policy as a possible contribution to conflict resolution because of the way the question was framed. “All in all, Germany does not do enough in terms of development aid” is a view shared especially by younger people (49%), while among those over 30, the Ambitious (“too little”: 40%) and the Satisfied (“just right”: 42%) level off (→ Figure 7).

Military action is unpopular across all age groups: only 14% favored stronger military “involvement in conflict resolution in the world” compared to the current level. In this regard, there was no difference between 18- to 29-year-olds and the 30-plus group (→ Figure 8).

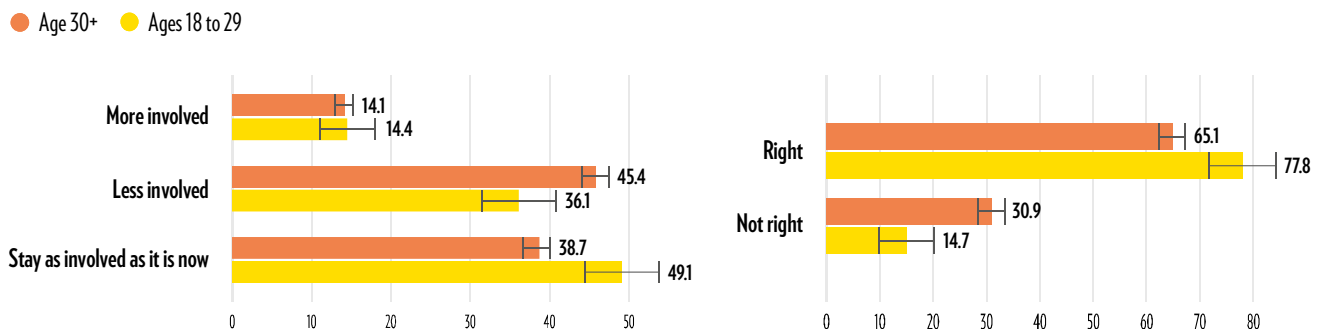
Military action is unpopular across age groups, but fundamental disapproval is less common among younger respondents.

Notably, however, the picture is different with regard to the opposite answer. The preference for “less involvement in military resolution of conflict” was less pronounced among the younger group (36%, emphasis added by GPPi) than among older respondents (45%). Thus, a fundamental disapproval of military

means appears to be less common among Gen-Z and younger Millennials than among people aged 30 and older. In the same vein, the current level of military engagement in conflict management is supported more strongly by younger people. Support for military operations to fight terrorism follows along the same lines: Across all age groups, two thirds believe this to be “right” (67%). Among 18- to 29-year-olds, a remarkable 78% support this type of operation, while only 65% of the 30-year-olds and older agree.

In the future, should Germany be more involved in conflict resolution – including militarily – than it is to date, should Germany be less involved, or should Germany stay as involved as it currently is? (agreement in percent, N=1026)*

Do you think it is right that Germany contributes militarily to international missions against terrorism or do you think this is not right? (agreement in percent, N=1026)*

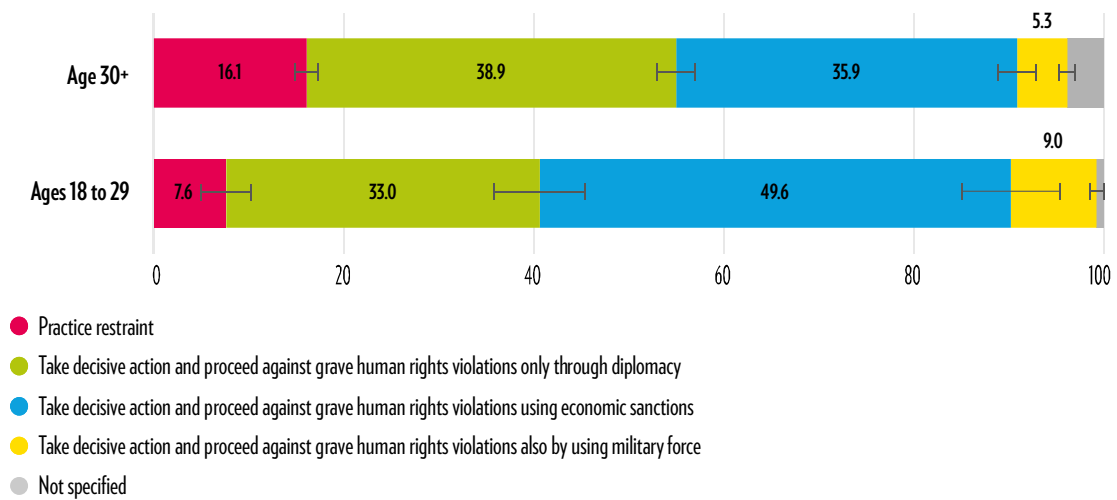


Source: Forschungsgruppe Wahlen/BPA (April 2019) | * missing to one hundred: “not specified”

Figure 8: Military involvement in conflict resolution/counterterrorism, differences between age groups

A similar picture emerges with regard to policy instruments against “grave human rights violations” (where 82% of older and 92% of younger people prefer “decisive action”, see above) (→ Figure 9). Among those aged 30 and above that favor decisive action (82%), almost half would use “diplomacy only” (47%), while among the younger supporters of decisive action (92%), only about a third (36%) would accept such limitations. “Economic sanctions” are accepted by a majority of Gen-Z and younger Millennials (54%), much more so than by the older groups (44%). Even the use of military force “against grave human rights violations” is, at a very low level, almost one and a half times as high (10%) among those under 30 as among the over-30-year-olds (6%).

Champion human rights - but how? (“Do you think Germany should champion human rights internationally?” and “How should Germany proceed against grave human rights violations?” / agreement in percent, N=1026)



Source: Forschungsgruppe Wahlen/BPA (April 2019), by age group

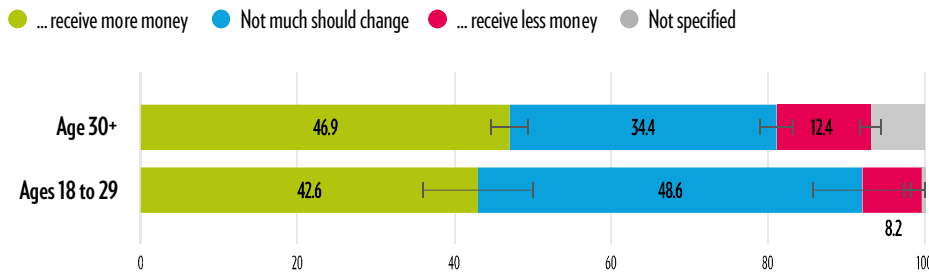
Figure 9: Champion human rights by different means, differences between age groups

Building Capabilities: Keep NATO, Build up EU, Deadlock on Defense Spending

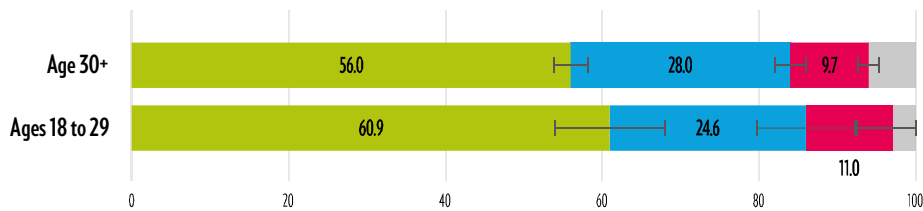
A majority of German adults supports the current level of defense spending, including recent increases, and would even be willing to invest more, as various surveys have confirmed time and again. The comprehensive poll on crises and conflicts commissioned by the BPA in spring 2019 asked two differently framed questions in this regard. When the question was posed in the context of “the Bundeswehr and defense,” approval rates across all age groups were at 57%. But when the question was framed in terms of the costs for “missions abroad,” only 46% approved. Minor variations among the younger respondents remained within the margin of error (→ Figure 9).

However, when asked to ponder another “considerable increase to reach the 2% goal,” the respondents were split: 46% were in favor, while 48% believed “Germany should not do that.” Given a random error of about +/- 4%, this is a stalemate. Minor differences between younger and older respondents remain within the margin of error, as well. Other ways of framing the question used by the Bundeswehr Institute (spring 2019) and Körber Foundation (fall 2019) suggest that younger people are actually comparatively more likely to reject an additional increase in defense spending. When asked by ZMSBw, “Should spending on defense be increased, reduced, or stay the same in the future?” almost half of the total respondents (45%) favored an increase. Almost a third (38%) preferred the option “stay the same,” and almost a ninth (12%) preferred a reduction. Among 16- to 29-year-olds, only 38% favored an increase, while 39% chose “stay the same,” and 15% preferred a reduction. When asked a very similar question by the Körber Foundation (“increase,” “lower,” or “keep on the current level”), the younger respondents (here: ages 18 to 34) were also most likely to reject an increase of defense spending (35% favoring increased spending vs. 40% among all age groups, 37% favoring the current level vs. 41% among all age groups, and 21% favoring a reduction vs. 15% in all age groups).

Germany takes part in a number of military missions abroad. In the future, do you think the German Armed Forces should... (agreement in percent, N=1026)



What do you think about Germany's spending for armed forces and defence? In the future, should the German Armed Forces receive more money? (N=1026)



Source: Forschungsgruppe Wahlen/BPA (April 2019)

Figure 10: Expenses for the Bundeswehr, framed as defense/framed as missions abroad, differences between age groups

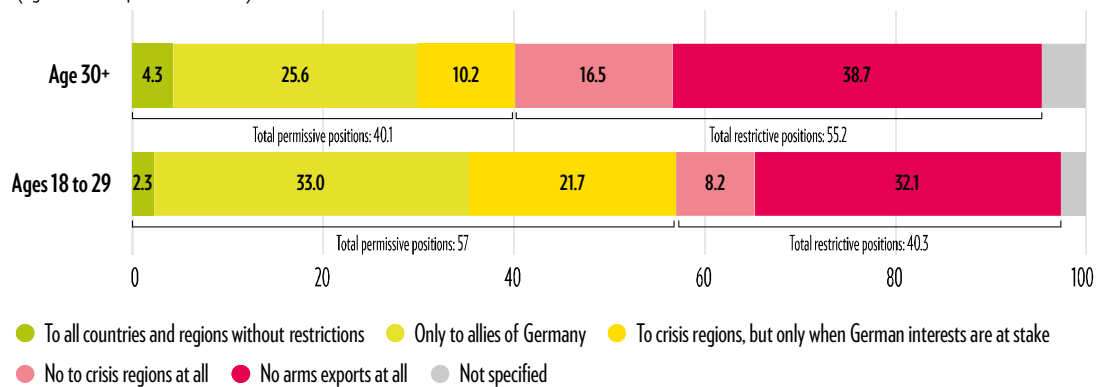
Apart from investments in diplomacy, development and defense, Germans are particularly eager to see the European Union “engage more” in the resolution of conflicts around the world (52%). Young people share this view more frequently (64%) than older people (51%). The same picture emerges in relation to NATO: Younger people are more likely (89%) than older people (80%) to be of the opinion that “we will continue to need the Western defense community NATO in the future.” When asked to compare NATO and the EU as “military organizations,” a majority across all age groups (55%) prefers to “use NATO,” while a third (36%) favors the “creation of an EU military organization.” In response to a different question, a majority across all age groups (58%) supports the creation of “common European armed forces under a European supreme command.”

Arms exports: majority of 18- to 30-year-olds more open, majority of older people more restrictive

Arms exports are another sensitive issue that shows the generational divergence of key foreign policy attitudes. On the whole, Germans remain skeptical toward arms exports. However, 18- to 29-year-olds were much less likely than older people to hold the extreme positions on either side (“no arms exports at all” or “not into regions of crisis at all” on the one hand, and “no restrictions” on the other; → Figure 11). Conversely, younger people were much more likely than older people to allow arms exports to allies only (33%, stalemate with a total ban: 32%). With regard to exports into regions in crisis, the difference was particularly large: more than twice as many younger respondents (22%) than older respondents (10%) supported arms exports into regions in crisis “when German interests are at stake.”

If responses are clustered into a group in favor of restrictive rules (total ban, ban on “crisis areas”) and a group in favor of permissive rules (no restrictions, allies only, and to crisis areas if German interests at stake), the majorities are completely reversed between the two age groups (→ Figure 11).

To which countries or regions should German arms manufacturers be allowed to deliver weapons and other military equipment?
(agreement in percent, N=1026)



Source: Forschungsgruppe Wahlen/BPA (April 2019) | margin of error between +/- 3% und +/- 9% (below age 30), and between +/-1% und +/-3% (over age 30)

Figure 11: Arms exports, differences between age groups

Conclusion and Further Research

The survey data cited shows a fundamental trend toward a higher demand for an active, committed German foreign, security and peace policy. This is particularly, though not exclusively, the case for younger Germans. The international events of the recent past, such as the war in Syria, the election of Donald Trump, and the climate crisis, do not appear to have nurtured a desire for isolation among the German public. Rather the opposite is true: younger people in particular expect their political leaders to actively engage internationally – even though the fundamental attitude among Germans remains reluctant to employ military force.

All in all, this analysis also shows the limitations of available polling data on foreign and security policy in Germany, and the need for further research. For instance, we would need considerably longer, more consistent time series if we wanted to know whether the observed age differences point to a growing trend as current members of the Generation Z and younger Millennials grow older, or if they are more likely to change their attitudes with age. Another obvious gap in the research exists in relation to the factors that influence the different age groups’ attitudes toward issues of foreign policy, security and peace. The surveys we used reveal only very little about why specific age groups support certain foreign policy instruments more or less strongly, or how respondents even interpret the oft-cited notion of international “responsibility.” For most of these surveys, the numbers of respondents are also insufficient to comprehensively analyze the foreign policy attitudes held by supporters of particular political parties or smaller demographic groups.

Additionally, the comparison of the few surveys cited shows how framing and phrasing a question differently can lead to different results. Precisely because German foreign policy also relies on opinion polls, further research into the effects of framing – including the role of explanations or specific formulations of goals and means – on the foreign policy attitudes of voting-age Germans is important.

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