

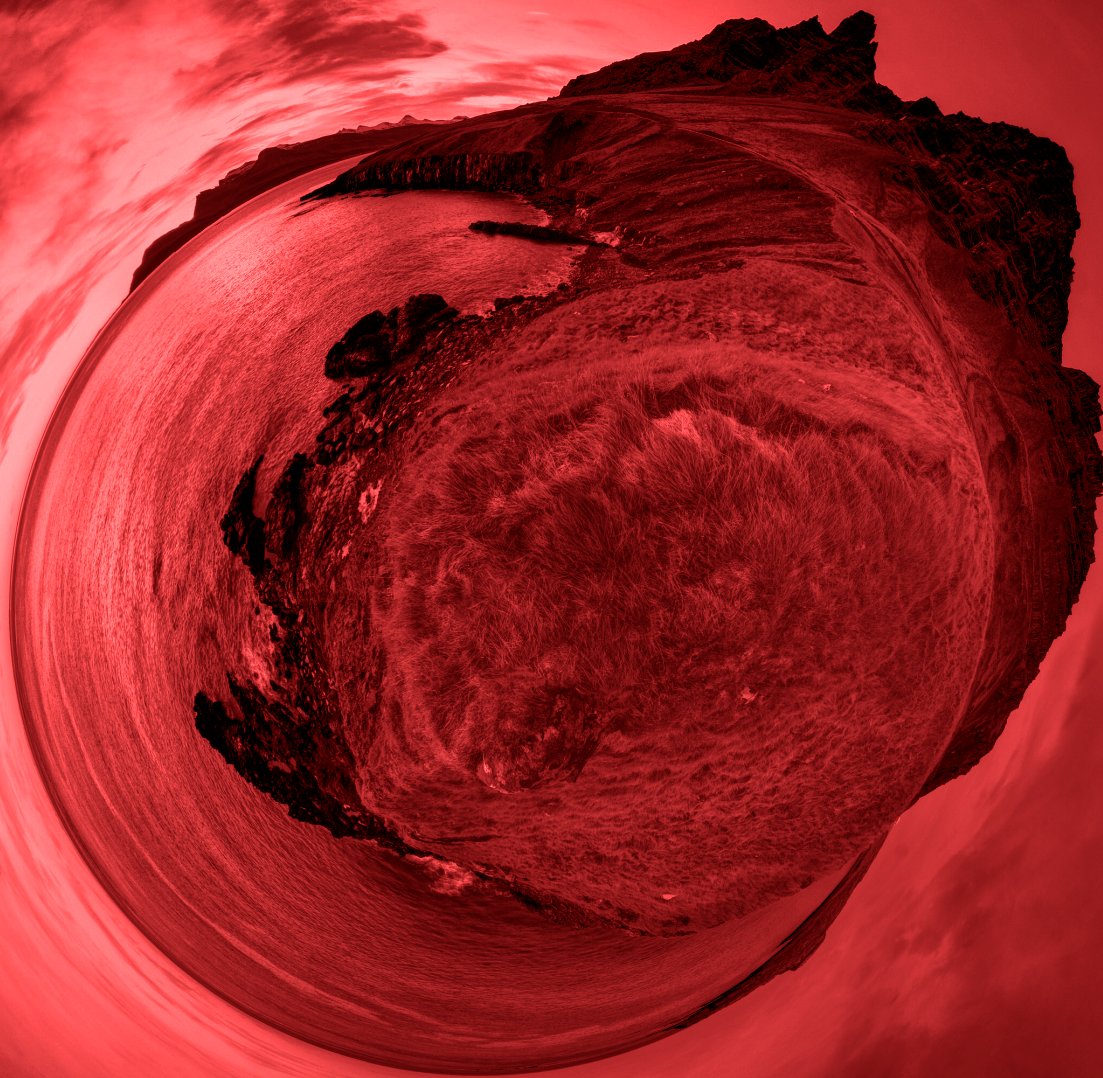
# Leaning into Cooperation

Changes in Icelanders' Perspectives on International Politics after Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

Silja Bára Ómarsdóttir



INSTITUTE OF  
INTERNATIONAL  
AFFAIRS  
UNIVERSITY OF ICELAND





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Address: Aragata 9, 102 Reykjavik, Iceland

Website: [www.iiia.hi.is](http://www.iiia.hi.is)

E-mail: [ams@hi.is](mailto:ams@hi.is)

Tel.: (+354) 525-5262

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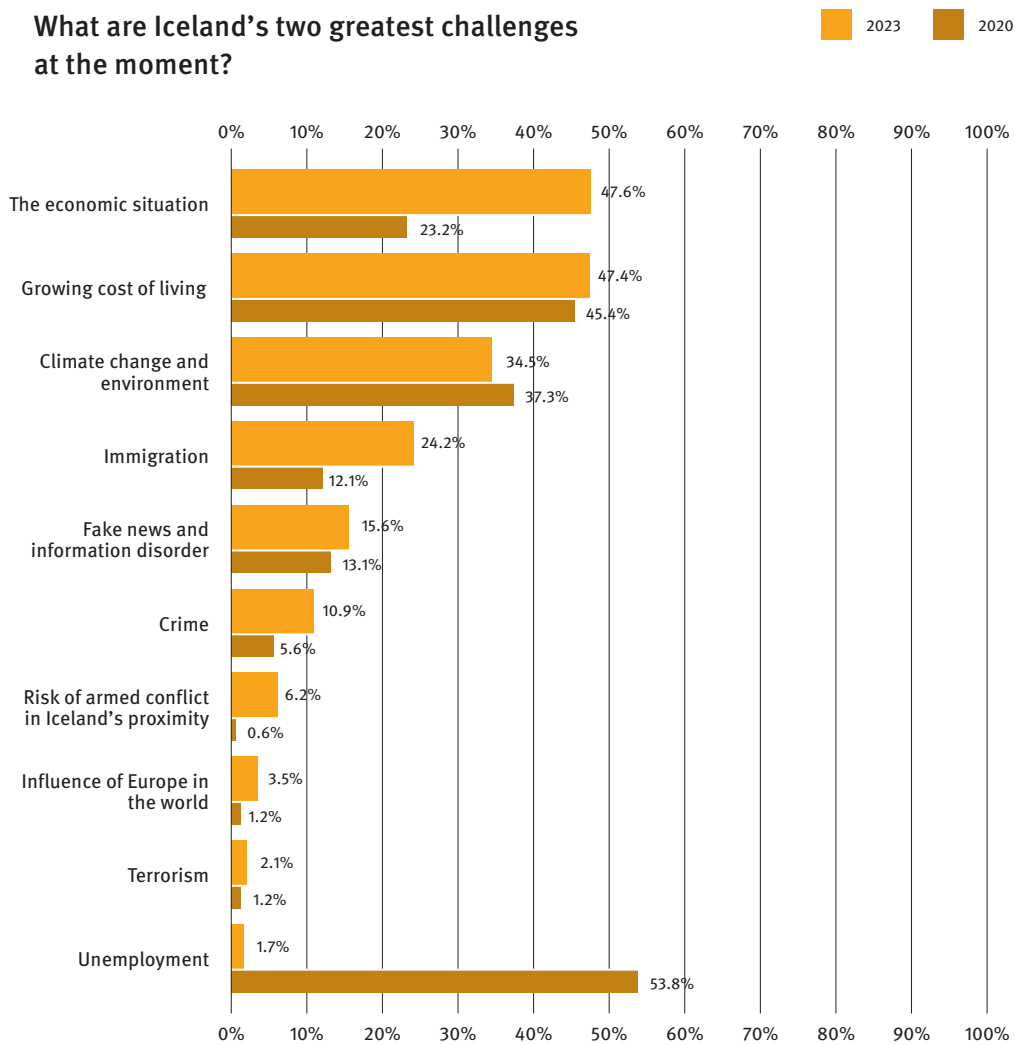
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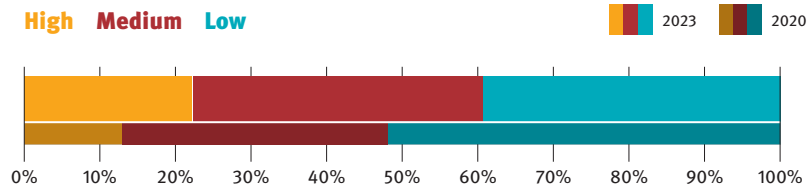


# Icelanders' attitudes to foreign policy issues

## Challenges and perceived threats

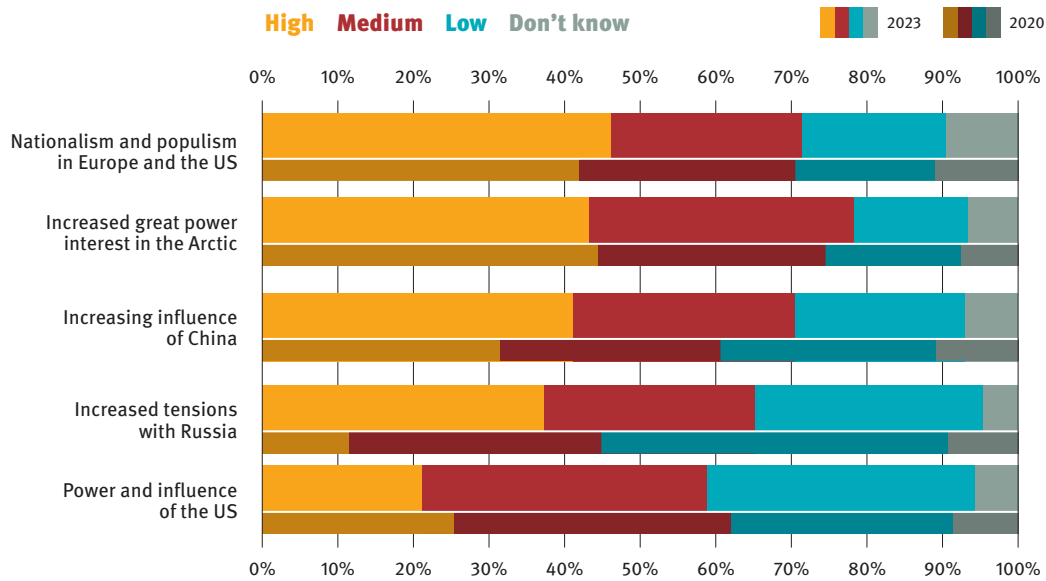


### How do you perceive the level of security threats against Iceland?



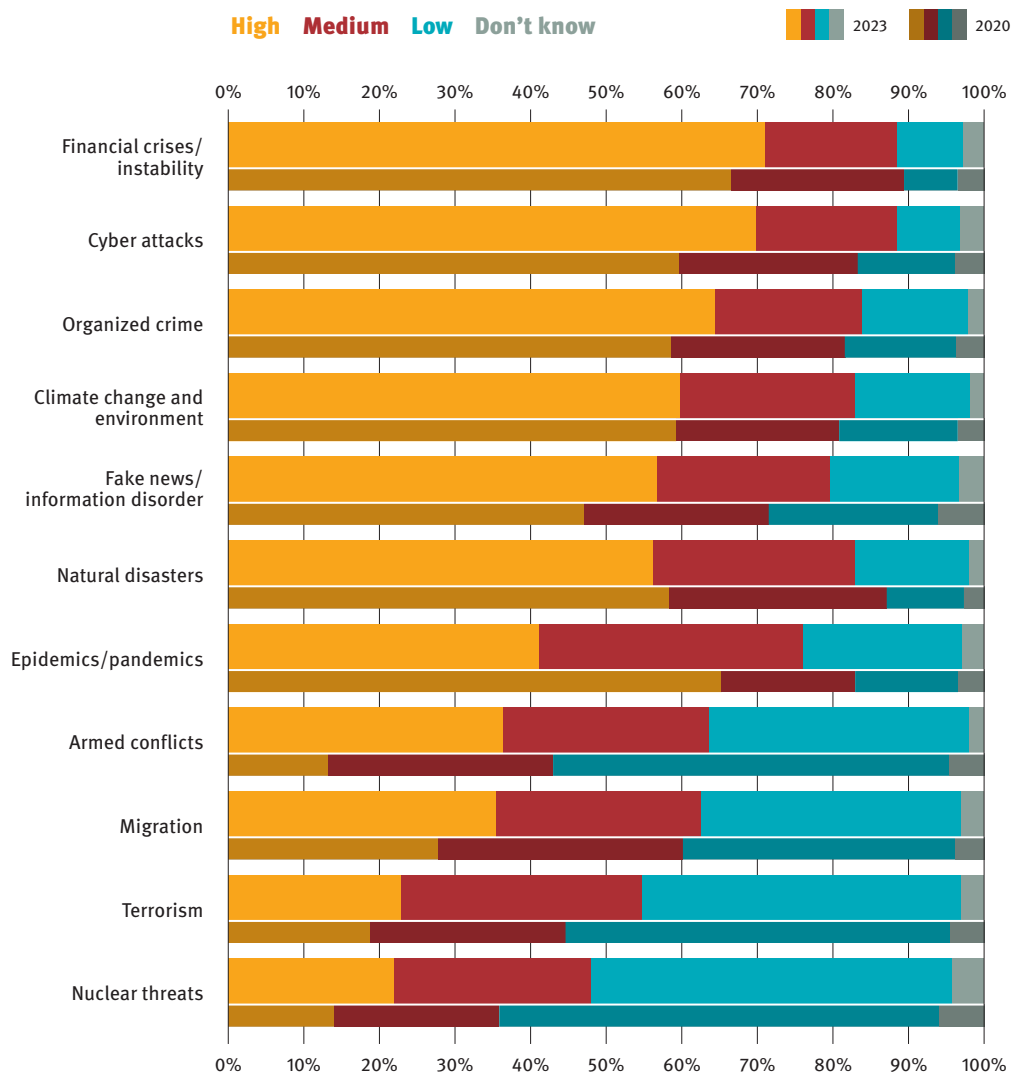
### Regional threats

#### How high is the threat from the following to Iceland?



## Thematic threats

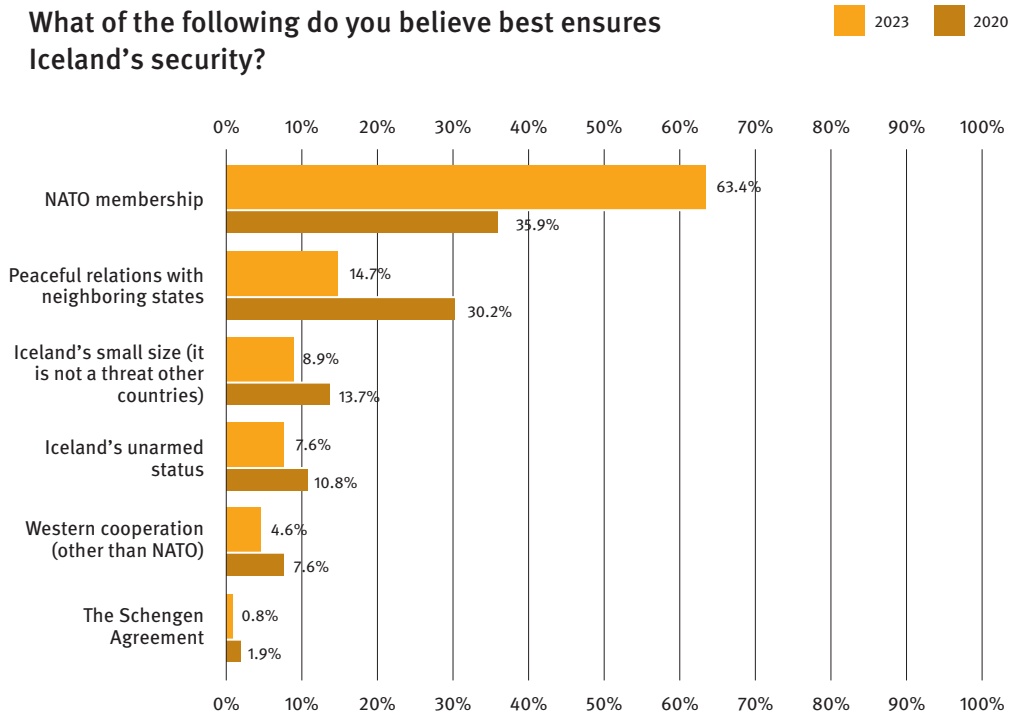
How high is the threat from the following to Iceland?



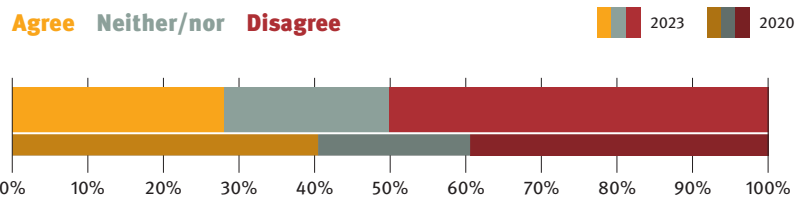


## Security and defense cooperation

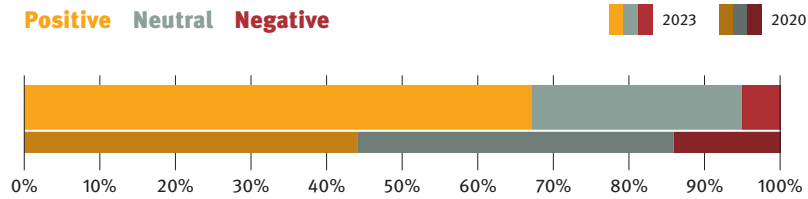
What of the following do you believe best ensures Iceland's security?



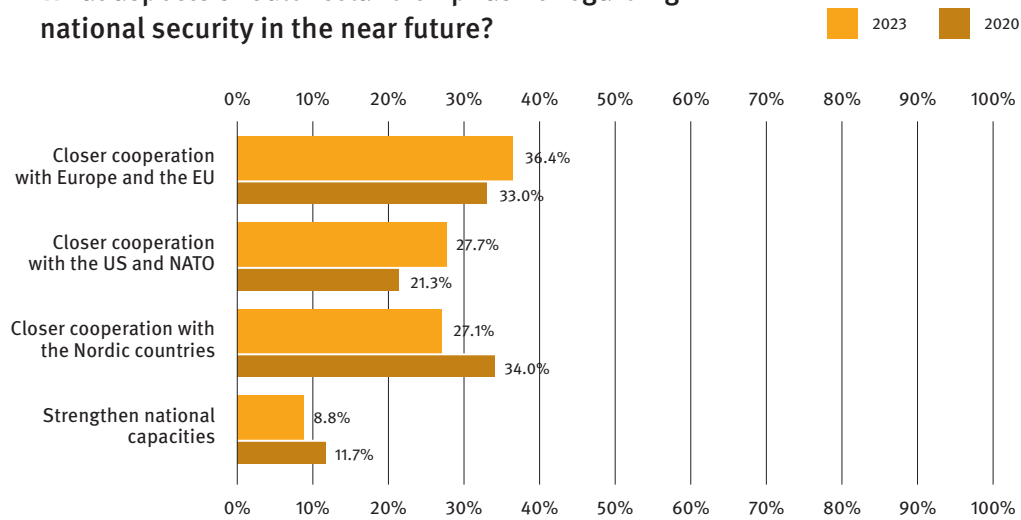
Iceland is neutral when it comes to military affairs



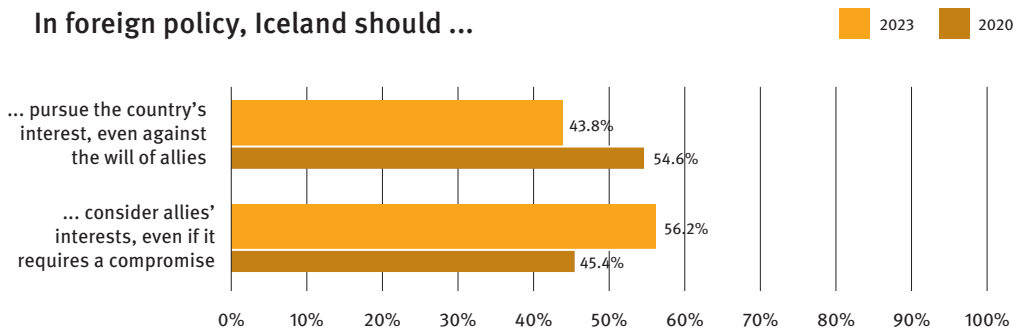
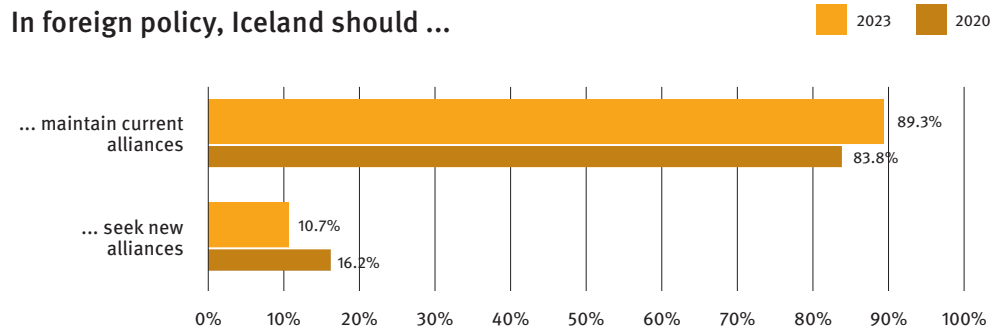
### Do you have a positive or negative view of NATO?



### What aspects should Iceland emphasize regarding national security in the near future?

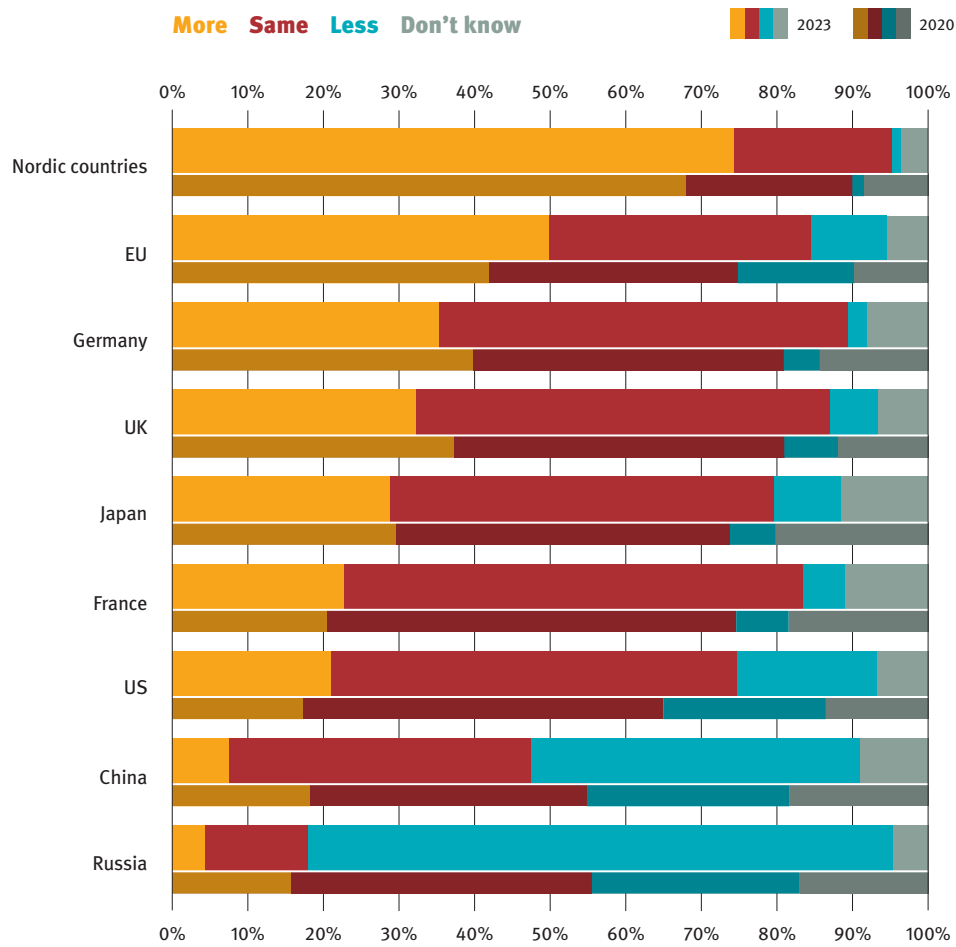


## Iceland's foreign policy

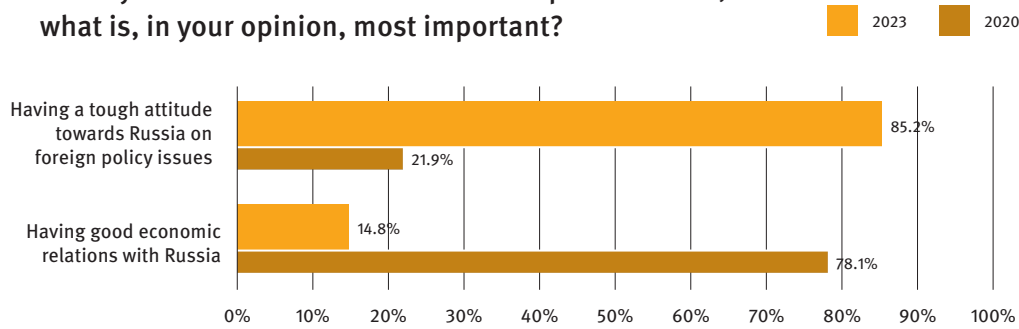


## Iceland's relations to other countries

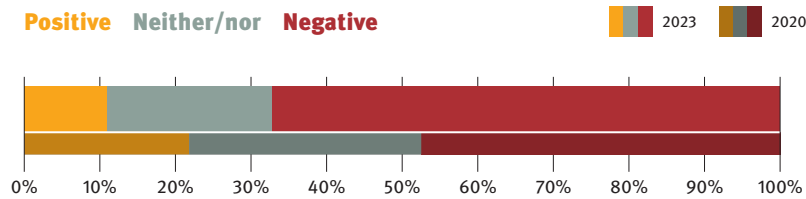
Should Iceland cooperate more or less with these (groups of) countries in the future?



**When you consider Iceland's relationship with Russia, what is, in your opinion, most important?**



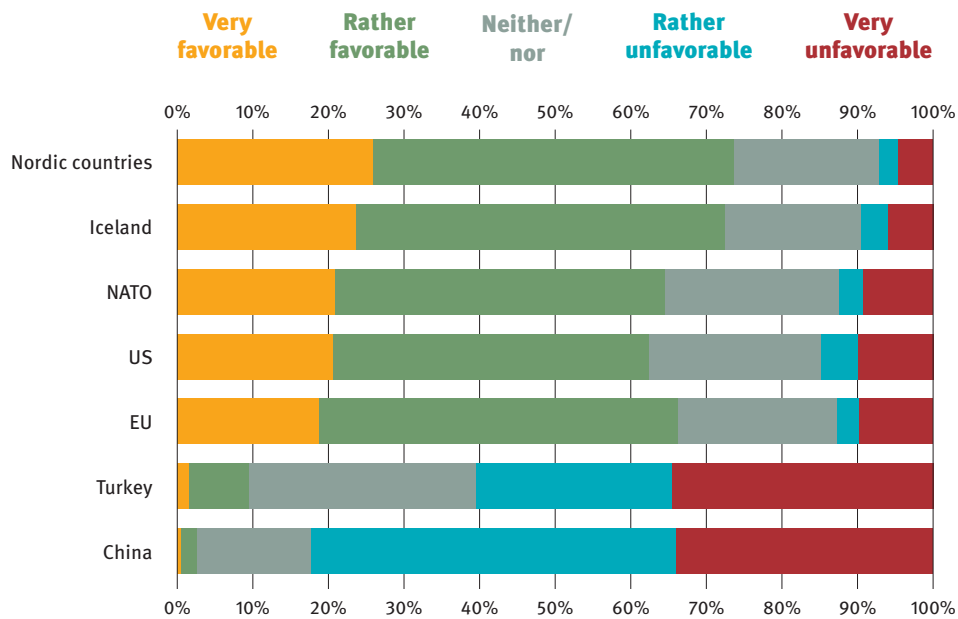
**Do you believe Brexit has had a positive or negative impact on cooperation in Europe?**



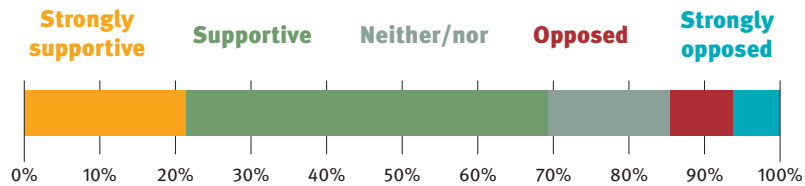
*In the 2020 survey the question was: "Will Brexit have a positive or negative impact on cooperation in Europe?"*

## Iceland and the response to the war in Ukraine

How favorable/unfavorable are your views of these actors' responses to the war in Ukraine?

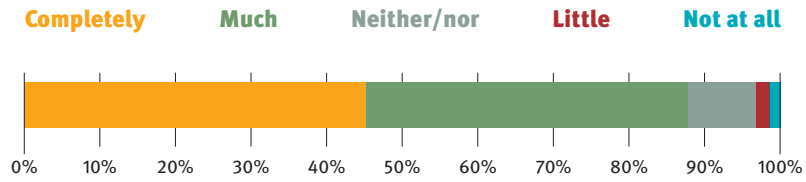


How supportive or opposed are you to Icelandic authorities providing financial support to Ukrainian authorities for the war between Ukraine and Russia?  
*(Results show total, with and without explanatory text)*

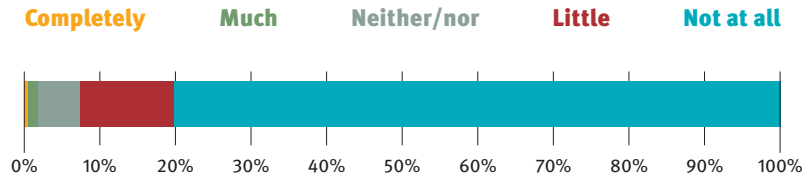


*In the survey experiment, half of the respondents were presented with the following text before they answered the question. "The war between Russia and Ukraine is costly to the Icelandic public, as it results in, for example, increased inflation and higher interest rates, which in turn results for example in increased cost of housing."*

How much or little do you think Iceland should support Ukraine on the one hand or Russia on the other hand in the war between them? - Support Ukraine



How much or little do you think Iceland should support Ukraine on the one hand or Russia on the other hand in the war between them? - Support Russia





## Introduction

Since February 2022, the landscape of international politics has been debated extensively and many have argued that such a momentous shift has not been seen since the end of WWII. While the Ukrainian people and military shoulder the blunt weight of the war, populations of many other countries have certainly felt its impact. This is in part due to the increased cost of living that resulted from the war, but no less the changing attitudes of peoples around the world towards military cooperation. This can be seen, for example in the Swedish Minister's for Foreign Affairs Statement of Foreign Policy in February 2023, where he argues that Sweden's freedom is at stake along with that of Ukraine.<sup>1</sup> This fits well with the fact that Sweden started providing a country at war with military equipment for the first time since the Finnish Winter War of 1939-1940. The same can be said for Finland, where the socially agreed upon position that Finland should remain non-aligned, turned on a dime after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The turning tide in these, formerly non-aligned, states' stance towards NATO membership is accompanied by a significant increase in armaments and military preparedness in Europe, where imports of major arms have increased by 47% in the five-year period from 2018-2022, compared to 2013-2017.<sup>2</sup>

Iceland has not been left untouched by this shifting environment any more than its Nordic neighbors. The country remains firmly economically and politically integrated into the liberal international order.<sup>3</sup> Its deep roots in the transatlantic alliance have, however, become even more significant in current political discourse, as evidenced by increased funding being put towards defenses in 2022, and an intense, if short-lived discussion of the possibility of establishing an Icelandic military in the spring of 2023.<sup>4</sup> While limited research has been conducted on the political debate that has taken place in Iceland, it can safely be stated that it is no less significant than that which has been ongoing in the Nordic countries. In such studies, it has been observed that, in addition to Sweden's application and Finland's accession to NATO, Norway has moved closer to NATO's core, and Denmark has opted in to the defense dimensions of the EU.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, Nordic defense cooperation is being strengthened, as declared by the region's defense ministers at their meetings in both 2022 and 2023.<sup>6</sup> These commitments, it has been argued, "would not

1 Regeringen och Regeringskansliet, "Statement of Foreign Policy 2023," Text, Regeringskansliet (Regeringen och Regeringskansliet, February 15, 2023), <https://www.government.se/speeches/2023/02/statement-of-foreign-policy-2023/>.

2 SIPRI, "Surge in Arms Imports to Europe, While US Dominance of the Global Arms Trade Increases | SIPRI," March 13, 2023, <https://sipri.org/media/press-release/2023/surge-arms-imports-europe-while-us-dominance-global-arms-trade-increases>.

3 Silja Bára Ómarsdóttir, "Pragmatic and Wary of Change. Icelanders' Views on International Cooperation" (Institute of International Affairs, University of Iceland, 2021), <https://ams.hi.is/en/publication/69/>.

4 Kristján H. Johannessen, "Skýra þarf varnir Íslands," accessed September 10, 2023, [https://www.mbl.is/frettir/innlent/2023/03/07/skyra\\_tharf\\_varnir\\_islands/](https://www.mbl.is/frettir/innlent/2023/03/07/skyra_tharf_varnir_islands/); Kristín Sigurðardóttir, "Varnir Íslands eflar," RÚV, March 24, 2022, <https://www.ruv.is/frettir/innlent/2022-03-24-varnir-islands-efldar/>.

5 Douglas Brommesson, Ann-Marie Ekengren, and Anna Michalski, "From Variation to Convergence in Turbulent Times – Foreign and Security Policy Choices among the Nordics 2014–2023," *European Security* 0, no. 0 (June 13, 2023): 1–23, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2023.2221185>.

6 "Norraent varnarsamstarf styrkist," accessed September 10, 2023, <https://www.stjornarradid.is/efst-a-baugi/frettir/stok-frett/2023/06/21/Norraent-varnarsamstarf-styrkist/>; "Norðurlöndin efla samstarf í öryggis- og varnarmálum," accessed September 10, 2023, [https://www.mbl.is/frettir/innlent/2022/05/13/nordurlondin\\_efla\\_samstarf\\_i\\_oryggis\\_og\\_varnarmalum/](https://www.mbl.is/frettir/innlent/2022/05/13/nordurlondin_efla_samstarf_i_oryggis_og_varnarmalum/).

have come about without a sense that the Nordic model of defence cooperation is a “safe” choice because of a shared Nordic commonality of values.”<sup>7</sup>

Iceland's response to the war in Ukraine has been more decisive than to previous conflicts, likely in part due to the perceived need to defend shared values. Iceland's direct support includes more than 1.5 billion ISK in defense related support, around a third of which has been contributed to the International Fund for Ukraine. Iceland has also organized, in cooperation with the other Nordics and Lithuania, explosives detection and elimination training, and sent significant amounts of winter clothing to Ukraine. The last effort is particularly noticeable, as it was based on the volunteering efforts of thousands of Icelandic citizens, who have thus mobilized for the war effort in a way that has not been seen before in the country.<sup>8</sup> In addition to this direct support, it is also notable that Iceland, in June 2023, closed its embassy in Russia and requested Russia to have its ambassador to Iceland leave the country.<sup>9</sup>

The impact of Russia's war in Ukraine has been felt in Iceland as well as in the Arctic. Following the invasion in 2022, the remaining seven members of the Arctic Council issued a joint statement condemning the invasion and halting the AC's formal meetings during Russia's chairmanship of the organization, although these have now been resumed after Norway took over the organization's chairship.<sup>10</sup> As a member of the Arctic Council, Iceland adhered to this statement, which appears to represent the position of most Icelanders, as support for Ukraine is overwhelming in all opinion polls, including the one discussed here. It can be surmised that Ukraine's fate has resonated with Icelanders, who probably realize that their security is mainly guaranteed by international cooperation and adherence to international law. The geopolitical impact of the war in Ukraine has been significant, and hybrid threats may be increasing in the region.<sup>11</sup> This may need to be explored in the Icelandic context, as our respondents continue to consider fake news and information disorder a significant security threat, and infrastructure may be susceptible to sabotage. Icelanders' perceptions of the international response to the war in Ukraine and their stance towards Russia's aggression are elaborated in more detail later in this report.

7 Tine Elisabeth Brøgger, “Beyond the ‘Lowest Common Denominator’? Mutually Binding Commitments in European Security and Defence Cooperation: The Case of the Nordic States,” *European Security* 32, no. 1 (January 2, 2023): 42–61, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2022.2052724>.

8 Utanríkisráðuneyti, “Innrás Rússlands í Úkraínu - viðbrögð íslenskra stjórnvalda,” Innrás Rússlands í Úkraínu - viðbrögð íslenskra stjórnvalda, accessed August 29, 2023, <https://www.stjornarradid.is/verkefni/utanrikismal/strid-i-ukrainu-vidbrogd-islenskra-stjornvalda/>.

9 Jóhanna Vígdís Hjaltadóttir, “Sendiherra Rússlands er farinn frá Íslandi,” RÚV, August 8, 2023, <https://www.ruv.is/frettir/innlent/2023-08-08-sendiherra-russlands-er-farinn-fra-islandi-389412/>; Aradóttir, Júlía, “„Þessi sólarhringur var mjög skrautlegur“,” RÚV, July 6, 2023, <https://www.ruv.is/frettir/menning-og-daegurmal/2023-07-06-thessi-solarhringur-var-mjog-skrautlegur-386931/>.

10 US Department of State, “Joint Statement on Arctic Council Cooperation Following Russia's Invasion of Ukraine,” United States Department of State (blog), March 3, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-on-arctic-council-cooperation-following-russias-invasion-of-ukraine/>; “Arctic States and Indigenous Permanent Participants Convened for the 13th Arctic Council Meeting and Issued Statement,” Arctic Council, accessed September 10, 2023, <https://arctic-council.org/news/13th-arctic-council-meeting-salekhard/>.

11 Colin Wall and Njord Wegge, “The Russian Arctic Threat: Consequences of the Ukraine War,” January 25, 2023, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russian-arctic-threat-consequences-ukraine-war>.

The main conclusion that can be drawn from the survey conducted here is that Icelanders are now more in favor of international cooperation. This can be deduced from their increased support of international organizations, but also from the increasingly negative attitude towards acts and actors that reject international cooperation, such as the impact of Brexit, which more than two-thirds (67.3%) of our respondents now believe has had a negative impact on cooperation in Europe, as opposed to 47.5% in 2020. It is also important to note that despite the shake-up of Iceland's geopolitical environment and the ongoing war in Ukraine, Icelanders continue to perceive themselves safe. The sense of risk has certainly increased, and the ongoing war clearly has a significant impact. Far more people now identify armed conflict as a threat to Iceland's security, and the same can be said of tensions with Russia. While other issues are still at the forefront of our respondents' minds, the war appears to have shaken the confidence that Iceland is insulated from the impact of the war.

## A note on data

This report is the second of its kind and is based on a survey conducted by the Social Science Research Institute at the University of Iceland (SSRI) at the request of the Institute of International Affairs at the University of Iceland. The survey was administered through the SSRI's online panel from 21 March to 16 April 2023. The panel is composed of a random sample from the census, acquired from Statistics Iceland. Members of the online panel are collected steadily, and its composition is monitored to adequately reflect the distribution of sex, age, residence, education, and income of the general population of Iceland. The survey was sent to 1987 panel members and completed by 841 respondents, for a total response rate of 41%.

## What threatens Iceland?

Before we explore what threats Icelanders perceive in their international and physical environment, it is useful to first look at what they believe provides the state with security. Support for NATO has become more prominent, and the organization is perceived as a more reliable provider of Iceland's security after the invasion of Ukraine. NATO membership is now perceived as the main guarantor of security by approximately two-thirds of our respondents (63.4%) as opposed to just around one-third (35.9%) in 2020. Peaceful relations with neighboring states, which was almost equal (30.2%) as the main security guarantee in 2020, is now down to 14.7%. Iceland's size and non-threatening stance dropped from 13.7% to 8.9%, its unarmed status from 10.8% to 7.6%, and other Western cooperation (code for EU relations) decreased to 4.6% from 7.6%.

While it can obviously be argued that NATO is a military alliance and, as such, provides primarily military security, in the context of the other responses in this survey, this falls neatly along the lines of international cooperation. The growing support for NATO is also evident in the increased share of respondents who think favorably of the alliance; more than two-thirds (67.2%) now have a generally positive attitude towards it as opposed to 44.1% in 2020. Far fewer are neutral, 27.7% compared with 41.1% in 2020, and hardly any respondents hold a negative view of the alliance now, only 5.2% as opposed to 14.1% in 2020. Alongside this shift in attitudes towards NATO, our respondents' answers also reflect an increased understanding of Iceland's membership. When asked to take a stance on the statement that Iceland is neutral in military affairs, 28.1% agreed, opposed to 40.5% in 2020, and 50.2% disagreed, compared with 39.5% in 2020.

The way in which Icelanders would like to provide for their security has also shifted in the past years. In 2020, the strongest support was for enhanced cooperation on national security with the Nordic countries (34%), but that has now gone down to 27.1%. Increased cooperation with Europe and the EU followed close behind the Nordic neighbors, with 33% support in 2020, but now has surpassed that alignment with 36.4% wanting closer cooperation with European countries and organizations. The largest increase, however, is in enhanced cooperation with the US and NATO, which was at 21.3% in 2020, but now comes in second at 27.7%. And while there was a fairly public debate about the need for an Icelandic military in the spring of 2023, our respondents indicate a decreased interest in strengthening domestic capacities in the near future, support for that drops from 11.7% to 8.8%, again suggesting that support for international cooperation enjoys strong support among the population.

The perception of the need for military security leads us to look closer at what threatens Iceland. While Icelanders still do not perceive a significant threat to the country's security, the proportion of respondents who feel that there is a significant threat has nearly doubled since 2020. In 2023, 22.2% believe that there is a high threat (significant or very significant threat), as compared to 13% three years ago. Most respondents still feel that financial crises and instability are the greatest threats to the country's security, with an even higher proportion now (71%) than in 2020 (66.6%). Cyber attacks have gained more prominence among our respondents, as nearly as many perceive them as an equally high threat as financial crises, or 69.9% now compared with 59.7% in 2020. Organized crime has also taken a jump, with 64.5% now perceiving it as a significant threat, up from 58.7%, as has fake news and information disorder, up to 56.7% from 47.1% in 2020. The perceived threats from climate change and natural disasters, as well as terrorism, remain fairly stable, and the threat perceived from pandemics has dropped significantly as Covid-19 is receding from the news and people's memory.

The most significant changes among these thematic threats, however, are in the perception of threat from armed conflict in Iceland's vicinity – now ranked as a significant threat by 36.4% of our respondents as opposed to 13.3% in 2020. The fear of nuclear threats has also increased significantly, to 22% from 14% in 2020. Another major shift that can be linked to the war in Ukraine is that the threat from migration is now seen as much greater than it was. Today, 35.5% of our respondents believe that it is a significant threat, as opposed to 27.8% in 2020. This is likely a reflection of the increased number of refugees coming to Iceland in the last few years, a significant number of whom are from Ukraine. This has sparked a growing negative public debate about Iceland's capacity to manage the influx of refugees and authorities' ability to meet the needs of this group of people. It is, however, important not to exaggerate the threat people perceive by these shifts in the international environment; armed conflict now ranks 8<sup>th</sup> out of 11 threat categories, migration 9<sup>th</sup>, and nuclear threats 11<sup>th</sup>, or last. Put together, these factors nonetheless indicate both that the perception of threats to Iceland's security overall is increasing, and that people are more aware of these risks than those more "civilian" in nature.

## Financial needs first – shifting priorities post-Ukraine

Our findings make it clear that Icelanders continue to consider financial instability to be the greatest threat to their security. While concern with unemployment, at a high in our previous survey, has nearly disappeared as the Covid-19 pandemic has dissipated, the current major concerns are the status of the economy and the increasingly high cost of living. This reflects continued turbulence in the Icelandic economy. Inflation has run rampant in the last year, housing has become prohibitively expensive, and options for young people to enter the housing market are extremely limited. Simultaneously, food prices have risen along with global increase in food costs. Nonetheless, our respondents do not indicate significantly *increased* concern about this factor. Another factor that has not shifted significantly is concern with the power and influence of the US in the world, today 22.5% consider it a threat to Iceland's security, whereas 25% were of that opinion in 2020.

The major shift is more visible when it comes to the roles of China and Russia. Starting with Russia, it was an interesting outcome in 2020 that only 11.5% of our respondents considered tensions with Russia threatening to Iceland's security. It is far less surprising that today, 37.3% do – Russia's willingness to transgress international norms and violate the sovereign borders of Ukraine has created a lack of faith in the state among Icelanders. This is supported by the substantial change in interest in collaborating with Russia internationally; 77.4% of our respondents now say they would like Iceland to collaborate *less* with Russia than it does, up more than 50 percentage points from 2020. The harsh response of Icelanders to Russia's invasion of Ukraine is most notable, however, in the response to the question whether it is more important to take a strong stance against Russia or maintain positive economic relations. Here, the responses have shifted completely since 2020, when 21.9% wanted to take a strong stance and 78.1% wanted to maintain cordial economic relations. Today, 85.2% of our respondents support a strong stance against Russia, and only 14.8% want to protect business.

Attitudes towards China are trending in the same direction, although the change is not as significant. In 2020, 31.4% considered China's growing global influence a threat to Iceland's security, but today that number is 41.2%. Only 7.5% are currently interested in working *more* with China, compared to 18.3% in 2020, and 43.5% want to work less with the country, as opposed to 26.8% in 2020.

Despite the increased perception of threat stemming from both China and Russia, it must be noted that of the regional threats perceived, the highest percentage of our respondents identifies increased nationalism and populism in the West – Europe and the US – as a threat. Nearly half – 46.2% - believe this is a very or somewhat significant threat to Iceland's security, an interesting contrast to the 35.5% who perceive migration that way. The perceived threat stemming from great power interest in the Arctic also overshadows the direct threat perceived from China and Russia.



## Support for Ukraine

As stated in the introduction, it is clear that our respondents are quite strongly in favor of Ukraine, as it fights against Russia's invasion. We tested this attitude with a number of questions asking for both support for Ukraine and Russia. When asked whether Iceland should provide financial support to Ukrainian authorities in the war, 69.3% answered affirmatively, and only 14.6% negatively. We suspected that support might be high, but wanted to see whether the support was nominal or involved willingness to take on any costs associated with the support. Therefore, for half of the respondents we also included a preface explaining that financial support would entail some costs to Icelanders, such as a higher cost of living. There was minimal difference found between those who were primed to think of the associated costs and those who weren't, so we conclude that the support is more ideological than just superficial. Icelanders are also unified in their support for Ukraine; over 87.9% of our respondents say that Iceland should support Ukraine whereas only 1.8% think it should support Russia.

Finally, we explored the perception of international responses to the war by asking whether respondents were satisfied with the actions of various international actors. These included the EU, NATO, the Nordic countries, the US, China, Turkey, and Iceland. The Nordic countries are perceived most favorably, with 73.6% of our respondents perceiving their responses very favorably or somewhat favorably. Iceland comes close behind, with 72.4% favorability, followed by the EU at 66.3%, NATO at 64%, and the US at 62.4%. China and Turkey are perceived as completely opposite, with 9.8% perceiving Turkey favorably and only 2.7% having a favorable view of China's response. China is also perceived even more unfavorably than Turkey; 82.3% China vs. 60.6% for Turkey. The strong opposition to supporting Russia in the conflict – 80.2% of our respondents say that Iceland should not support Russia at all, only 1.8% that it should support it rather much, very much, or exclusively. These findings indicate increasing intolerance of state actors perceived as not behaving according to the norms and values shared by Iceland's allies.

## A greater focus on international cooperation

The past few years have been turbulent and the shifting geopolitical landscape has received a great deal of attention. This has resulted in fewer Icelanders now wanting to see the country abandon its current international alliances. While an overwhelming majority of respondents in 2020 wanted to continue working with current allies, a significant number preferred to seek new alliances. That has now dropped to 10.7%, as opposed to 16.2% in 2020. The perceived need for increased protection through international cooperation is also visible in a shift in responses to the question of how the country should behave in international politics, defend its own interests, or accommodate the interests of partners. In 2020, 54.6% of respondents wanted Iceland to defend its own interests at the risk of alienating allies, whereas 45.4% were willing to compromise to accommodate allies. In the 2023 round of the survey, this was reversed, indicating that cooperation is more valued than single-minded solitary approaches, which have often been considered valuable in Icelandic politics. It is also noticeable that interest in cooperating more with the UK has dropped by seven percentage points, perhaps signifying a decreased interest in working closely with states that shun international cooperation as brazenly as the UK did by exiting the EU.

Iceland's preferred partners, however, continue to be mostly the same. There is strong support for continued Nordic cooperation, which has even increased by a small percentage. The same holds true for cooperation with the EU, while support for increased cooperation with the individual major European powers has remained static or gone down somewhat. At the same time, attitudes towards the US have softened slightly, although the change appears mostly in less negativity towards cooperation with this traditionally most significant ally of Iceland.

The question on interest in more or less cooperation with specific countries provides continued indications that Russia and China are far more undesirable partners than they were previously. Support for cooperation with either of these powers has more than halved since the last survey, with only 7.5% of our respondents wanting to see more cooperation with China and an even smaller percentage, or 4.3%, wanting more cooperation with Russia. The attitude towards Russia is noticeably more hostile, however, as 77.4% of our respondents want less cooperation, whereas that percentage for China is 43.5%. China may therefore be considered an outsider, whereas the strong attitude towards Russia indicates that it is seen as an aggressor, or even a pariah state.

The changes we can observe in Icelanders' attitudes towards cooperation with these potential partners in the international system lead us to conclude that the preference now is for more cooperation with blocs of states or alliances, rather than individual countries. This again provides a stronger foundation for the assumption that Russia's war in Ukraine has brought home the realization in Iceland, that it is international solidarity, not individual assurances, that can provide security for the country.

## Conclusions

This report summarizes the main findings of the second iteration of a survey of Icelanders' attitudes towards foreign affairs and international cooperation. The findings reflect a changed reality, as Russia's war against Ukraine has shaken belief in the sanctity of borders and respect for international law. The ramifications of this shift have also had an interesting impact on Icelanders' perspectives, as summarized in this text. The primary conclusion we can draw is that the invasion of Ukraine has demonstrated to our respondents that they must rely on international cooperation to protect their borders and sovereignty. For Icelanders, that means relying more extensively on NATO to provide that security. The interest that previously existed in Brexit and a pragmatic approach to economic collaboration with Russia and China has practically evaporated. At the same time, even more respondents state support for international organizations such as the UN and far fewer indicate an interest in abandoning existing alliances in favor of seeking new ones. This attitude can be interpreted as reflecting a stronger ideological stance, pushing Icelanders more into the liberal camp of international relations as they perceive a strong need for protection through international organizations, rather than wanting states to prepare for the potentiality of war at any point.

The ideological stance in favor of international cooperation not only extends to increasingly favorable attitudes toward international organizations and interest in cooperating more with, for example, both the EU and NATO. This is also reflected in the shift in attitudes towards states that previously enjoyed support for economic reasons. The most apparent shift is in the willingness to maintain cordial business relations with Russia, rather than taking a strong stance against the state based on politics. This shift not only extends to attitudes towards states that may be perceived as outside of the Western zone of cooperation, but also can be observed in attitudes towards the UK, as fewer of our respondents now want to collaborate more with the country, and far more believe Brexit negatively impacts cooperation in Europe than did so in 2020. Further support for the strengthening of the ideological foundation of Icelanders' attitudes toward foreign affairs can be identified in the strong support for Ukraine. This extends beyond nominal support to willingness to accept the economic costs associated with providing assistance to Ukraine, and finally, in the fact that a greater proportion of our respondents are now providing an opinion when presented with our questions, rather than saying they do not know or do not want to answer. Whether this is a temporary phase, while Russia's war against Ukraine continues, or an indication of a greater interest in foreign policy and international cooperation remains to be seen.







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**Author:**

Dr. Silja Bára Ómarsdóttir is Professor of International Affairs at the Faculty of Political Science at the University of Iceland. Her research addresses Icelandic society and politics, reproductive rights, Iceland's foreign and security policy and feminist international relations.

**Editors:**

Pia Hansson is Director of the Institute of International Affairs at the University of Iceland. Tómas Joensen is Researcher and Program Manager at the Centre for Small State Studies, Institute of International Affairs, University of Iceland.



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