

**THE FAROE ISLANDS
AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS:**

MAPPING PUBLIC OPINION IN THE FAROE ISLANDS ON SECURITY AND FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Working Paper
Heini í Skorini
Associate Professor

Department of History and
Social Science University of
the Faroe Islands

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Author: Heini í Skorini

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Address:

Jónas Broncks gøta 25, 4th floor

FO-100 Tórshavn

Tel.: +298 352580

email: ssd@setur.fo

Website: <https://www.setur.fo/en/the-university/faculties/faculty-of-history-and-social-sciences/>

Introduction:

The curious evolution of Faroese policies vis-à-vis Russia

Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Western countries have been forced to reconsider their trade relations with Russia and their economic dependence on the government in the Kremlin. EU member states have significantly reduced their import of Russian gas, coal and oil (European Union, 2024) while adopting unprecedented economic sanctions (European Council, 2023). However, economic dependence on Russia varies greatly throughout the west, and different states have adopted different reservations in specific areas of particular importance (see for instance Eurostat, 2023).

Since 1977, the Faroe Islands has adopted annual bilateral fishery agreements with Russia. And during the last 15 years, export to Russia – mainly in the form of salmon, mackerel and herring – has significantly increased and boosted economic growth (Hagstova Føroya, 2024). However, despite EU sanctions not encompassing food products, the growing economic dependence on Russia has triggered both domestic conflicts in Faroese politics as well as international criticism (Wall Street Journal, 2023; Frihedsbrevet, 2023; DR, 2023a; DR, 2024). What are the short-term and long-term security implications of closer cooperation with Russia in a period characterised by growing great power rivalry in the North Atlantic and Arctic region (DIIS, 2020; Udenrigsministeriet, 2022; NUPI, 2023)? To what extent is it possible to separate trade, economic policy and security policy? As part of the NATO alliance, what dilemmas confront Faroese authorities when economic interests and security considerations pull in different directions?

Such questions are frequently debated in the corridors of government, parliament and diplomacy – often behind closed doors. However, these questions have also shaped the public debate in the Faroe Islands in recent years as they have in every European democracy since the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. And the survey results presented in this report is an attempt to examine how regular voters outside the corridors of power relate to pressing issues in the realm of security, foreign policy and international cooperation.

Shortly after the Russian invasion of Crimea in 2014, the Faroese prime minister launched an official visit to the Kremlin (DR, 2014). His delegation's mission was to strengthen economic and political ties with Russia and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) comprising Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Armenia and Kyrgyzstan. In contrast to neighbouring state Iceland and EU members, the Faroe Islands refrained from condemning the annexation of Crimea and opened a new diplomatic mission in Moscow in 2015 (KvF, 2015). Four years later, the Faroese government and the EAEU signed a so-called "memorandum" whose goal was to "promote comprehensive cooperation (...) towards higher volumes of mutual trade and investments" while emphasising the need for "closer cooperation in areas of mutual interest" (EAEU, 2018). This rapprochement between the Faroes and Russia triggered international criticism and came shortly after Denmark and other European states had expelled Russian diplomats due to the assassinations of Russian dissidents on British soil (TV 2, 2018).

The Faroe Islands is not a member of the EU and refrained from joining European sanctions against Russia after the annexation of Crimea in 2014. The domestic debate in the Faroes was heavily shaped by the fact that in 2013, the EU imposed sanctions against the Faroes due to a fishery dispute in the North Atlantic (European Commission, 2013). Therefore, the Faroes were not targeted by the Russian boycott of European food products. Faroese companies could unimpeded continue their growing export to the ever expanding Russian market, and demand for Faroese products increased year by year. From 2012 to 2022, export to Russia went from around 10 % to 25 % of the total export – comprising over 2 billion DKK in 2022 (Hagstova Føroya, 2024). Export

to Russia was already growing before 2014, but the Russian boycott only strengthened demand for Faroese products and boosted economic growth.

However, when the Russian army invaded the whole of Ukraine in February 2022, the Faroese government did not continue its “neutral” position. This time around, the Faroese government unequivocally condemned the war, donated money to Ukraine, accepted Ukrainian refugees and ratified all EU sanctions (Løgmansskrivstovan, 2022). Furthermore, in 2023, the Faroese government imposed a partial closure of harbours for Russian ships. The prime minister warned against the Faroes becoming a hub for the Russian fleet in the North Atlantic (KvF, 2023). Furthermore, other politicians pointed out that the Russian government was increasingly using civilian ships for military purposes in line with Russia’s new maritime strategy adopted in 2022 (Arctic Institute, 2023). For instance, Russian trawlers have been accused of spying and crippling undersea communication cables in the North Atlantic (Bueger and Liebetrau, 2021; RUSI, 2023; DR, 2023b). Meanwhile, Faroese export to Russia was reduced by almost 50 % as the salmon farming industry unilaterally decided to collectively halt all export to Russia. This somewhat drastic decision was solely made by the private sector and not by political authorities (Fiskerforum, 2023; Fonyhedsbureau, 2022).

Hence, the Faroese government – and actors in the private sector – reacted very differently to the all-out Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 compared to the invasion of Crimea in 2014. This transition from appeasement to condemnation has never been systematically analysed. On the basis of the new approach, many expected the Faroese government to opt out of the annual bilateral fishery agreement. As leaders of the opposition before parliamentary elections in December 2022, the current prime minister and foreign minister were unequivocal in their condemnation of all economic cooperation with Russia (Uttanlandsnevndin, 2022). Furthermore, news outlets from the Russian Ministry of Agriculture indicated that Russian authorities were also considering a boycott of Faroese products (TASS, 2023; The Times, 2023; Nordic Labor Journal, 2023). However, in December 2023, the new Faroese government led by the Social Democratic Party signed a new bilateral agreement with Russia for 2024. The agreement is a simple quid-pro-quo deal allowing Russian trawlers to fish nearly 100.000 ton of mainly blue whiting in Faroese waters while Faroese trawlers can catch around 15.000 ton of mainly cod, haddock and shrimp in Russian waters (Landsstýrið, 2023). Peculiarly, the prime minister himself openly opposed the agreement, claiming that his party was outnumbered in the parliament (KvF, 2024a).

In the spring of 2024, the Faroese parliament adopted a new security strategy as well as a new Arctic strategy (Løgting, 2024). In both cases, the Faroese government is explicitly emphasising its commitment to NATO and the west as such. Meanwhile, opposition parties have simultaneously argued in favour of lifting the ban preventing Russian ships to use Faroese harbours (KvF, 2024b). Therefore, the survey conducted in May 2024 is of utmost topicality, and the controversial relationship with Russia problematises the perception of a strict separation between portfolios under Danish and Faroese jurisdictions. According to the Home Rule Act from 1948, security, defence and foreign policy are under Danish jurisdiction, while portfolios such as trade, fishery, telecommunication and energy are under Faroese jurisdiction. However, as tensions rise between the superpowers and hybrid security threats increasingly supersede conventional warfare, security can no longer be perceived as one delimited policy area (Løgting, 2024). Therefore, the conceptual idea of security implicates many different policy areas, e.g. military security, economic security, societal security, environmental security etc. (Mortensgaard and Søby, 2022). Fishery, trade, telecommunication, energy and other Faroese portfolios contain an overt security dimension which may trigger tensions within the Danish kingdom (Bertelsen and Justinussen, 2020; DIIS, 2020; Udenrigsministeriet, 2022). In cases of dispute, who has the final say?

Main findings:

Unified support for Ukraine and NATO, but disagreement on fishery agreement with Russia

The main motive behind the survey presented in this working paper is to examine how people in the Faroe Islands relate to pressing foreign policy, defence and security issues. This is a follow-up survey to another survey carried out in November 2021 before the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Both surveys are financed by the German think tank Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, and we would like to express our gratitude to the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung for enabling yet another survey. Some tentative results show that Faroese respondents in general

- support the government's official condemnation of the Russian invasion of Ukraine
- support the acceptance of Ukrainian refugees
- support restricting the access for Russian ships in Faroese harbours
- have become more pro-western and pro-NATO after the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022
- consider NATO a positive organization
- think that the Faroes should be part of NATO
- think that the Faroes should allow American ships to use Faroese harbours
- are divided on NATO military activities in Faroese territory
- are divided on the annual bilateral fishery agreement with Russia
- are worried that war can also hit the Faroes in the future

Needless to say, every survey is a snapshot of public opinion, and public opinion can be an unstable and changeable phenomenon to observe and scientifically monitor. Therefore, these tentative findings are not uniform, and different interpretations of the results are certainly possible. Furthermore, the number of respondents replying "I don't know" is relatively high compared to other surveys about politics and society in the Faroe Islands. This finding might indicate that for a relatively large group of people, foreign policy, security and defence issues are not very present in people's everyday lives despite media coverage and public debate.

Method and data

In the present survey, around 700 respondents have participated (N=678) between the age of 18 and 75, and data has been collected in May 2024 by the Faroese statistical company Lóður. First, we received a retrieval from the Faroese National Population Register and sent out 1500 online letters containing an online link. Secondly, people replied the survey online, and thirdly, the descriptive data was analysed. With regard to gender, age, place of resident and other demographic variables, the survey has proved to be representative and within the normal demographic distribution. The questionnaire was in local Faroese language, and we have used the Greenlandic, Norwegian and Icelandic questionnaires for comparative purposes. However, many questions are particularly relevant in a Faroese context and only used in the Faroes. Furthermore, we also included other background variables not included in the other surveys (such as self-reported standpoint on a left-right scale, self-reported standpoint on a liberal-conservative scale, religious views, political party affiliation etc.).

Survey results

4.1 Supporting Ukraine but divided on the fishery agreement with Russia

As noted, one of the most divisive issues in this survey is the bilateral fishery agreement with Russia which has been renewed every year since 1977 (figure 1). While 36 % support the decision to adopt a new fishery agreement with Russia, 21 % are in between and 28 % either disagree or completely disagree. Furthermore, 16 % reply that they don't know. As visible in figure 2, this question is significantly related to ideological self-perception on a right-left scale. The more to the right respondents identify, the more likely they are to favour a fishery agreement with Russia. As illustrated in figure 3, there are differences between different areas in the Faroes, and the fishery agreement is least popular in the capital of Tórshavn where less than 30 % support the agreement. Furthermore, as figure 4 shows, there are significant differences between different party voters. In general, the fishery agreement with Russia is much more popular among conservative or right-winged opposition voters (Fólkaflokkurin, Sambandsflokkurin and Miðflokkurin) compared to voters supporting the liberal or left-wing coalition parties (Javnaðarflokkurin, Tjóðveldi and Framsókn).

Figure 1

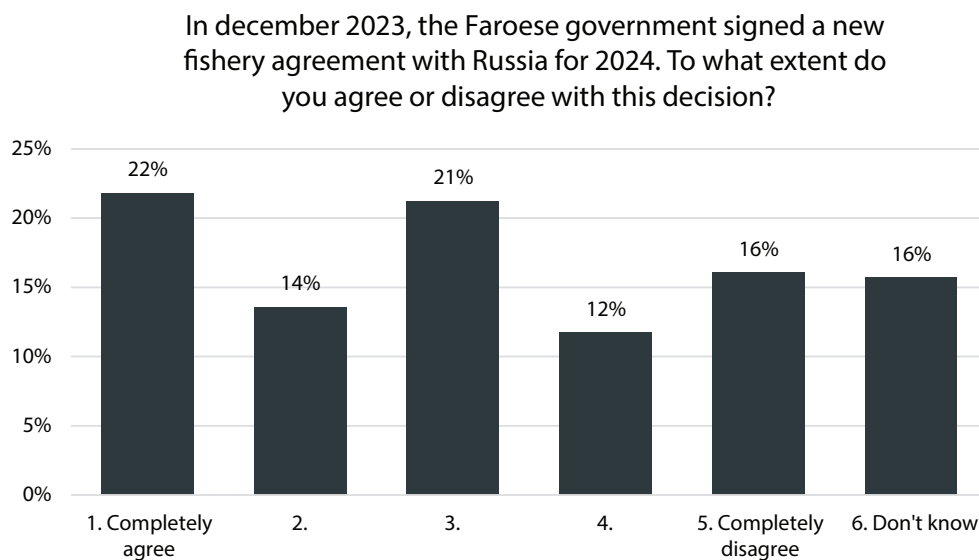


Figure 2

In december 2023, the Faroese government signed a new fishery agreement with Russia for 2024. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this decision?

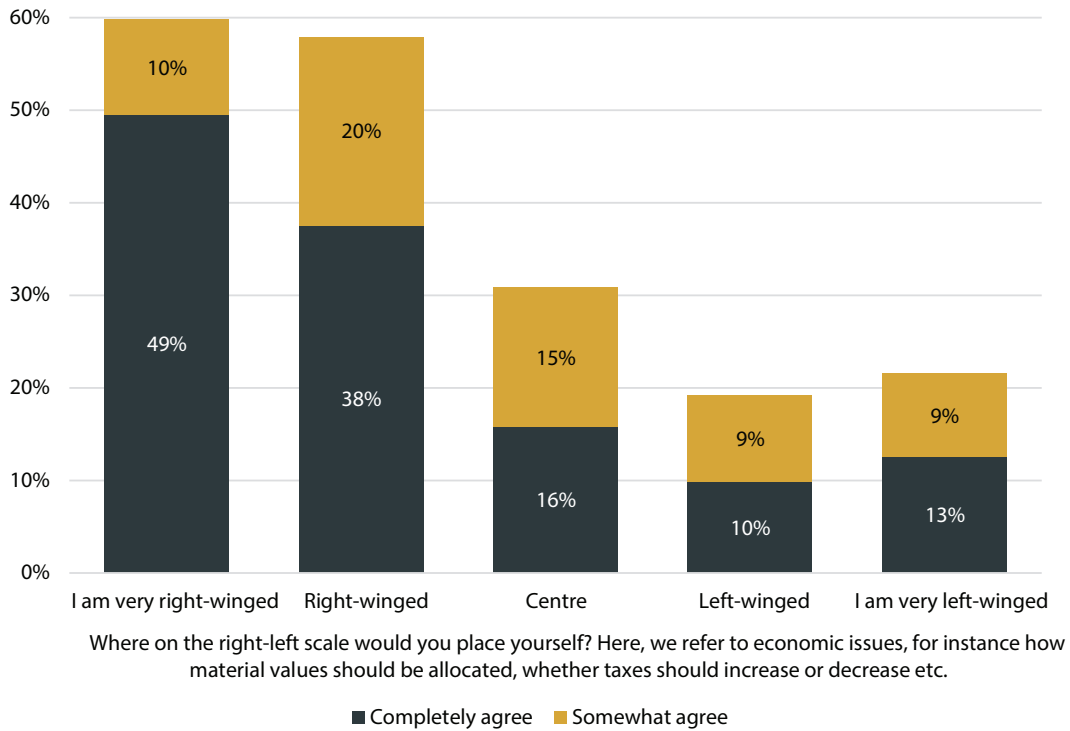


Figure 3

In december 2023, the Faroese government signed a new fishery agreement with Russia for 2024. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this decision?

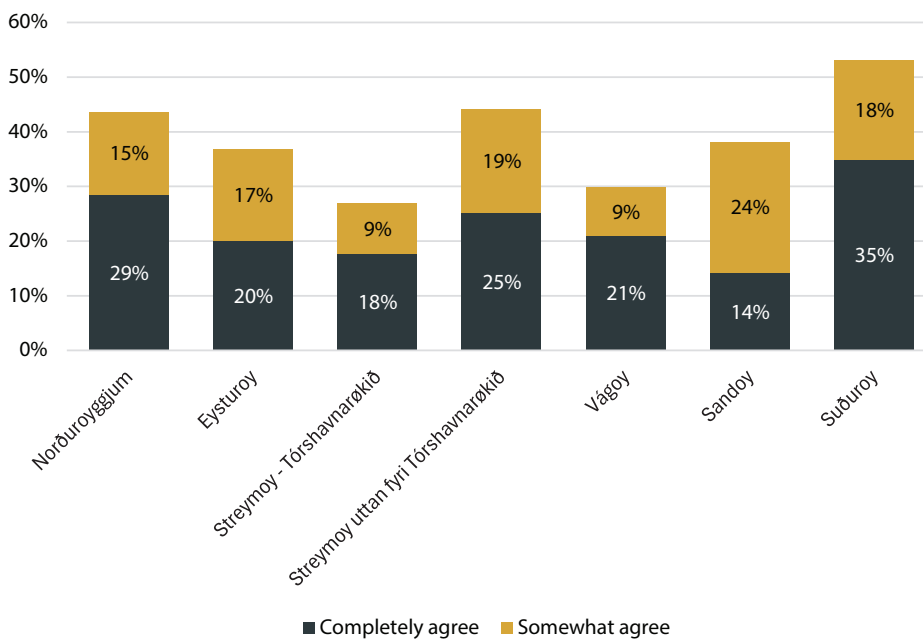
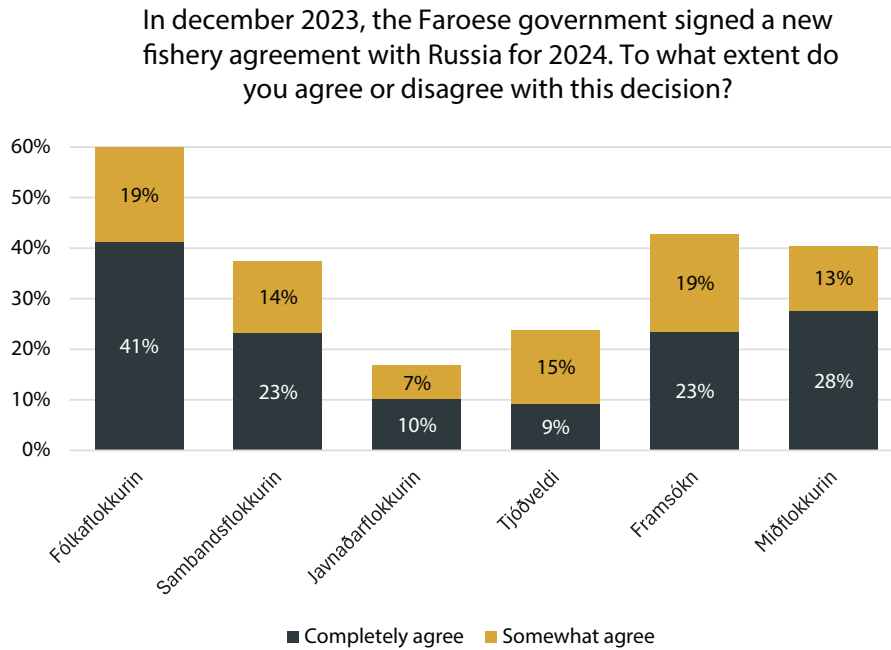


Figure 4



As noted above, and as a direct consequence of the war in Ukraine, the Faroese government has imposed restrictions that limit the number of Russian ships in Faroese harbours. These restrictions have entailed a significant reduction of Russian ships using Faroese harbours. As visible in figure 5, the largest group of respondents seem to support these restrictions. Furthermore, there is a positive correlation between left-wing identification and support of the restrictions (figure 6). As visible in figure 7 and 8, these restrictions are more popular among voters supporting the current coalition parties (Javnaðarflokkurin, Tjóðveldi and Framsókn) compared to voters supporting the opposition parties (Fólkaflokkurin, Sambandsflokkurin and Miðflokkurin). Furthermore, restricting the number of Russian ships in Faroese harbours is more popular in the capital of Tórshavn compared to other areas around the Faroe Islands (figure 8).

Figure 5

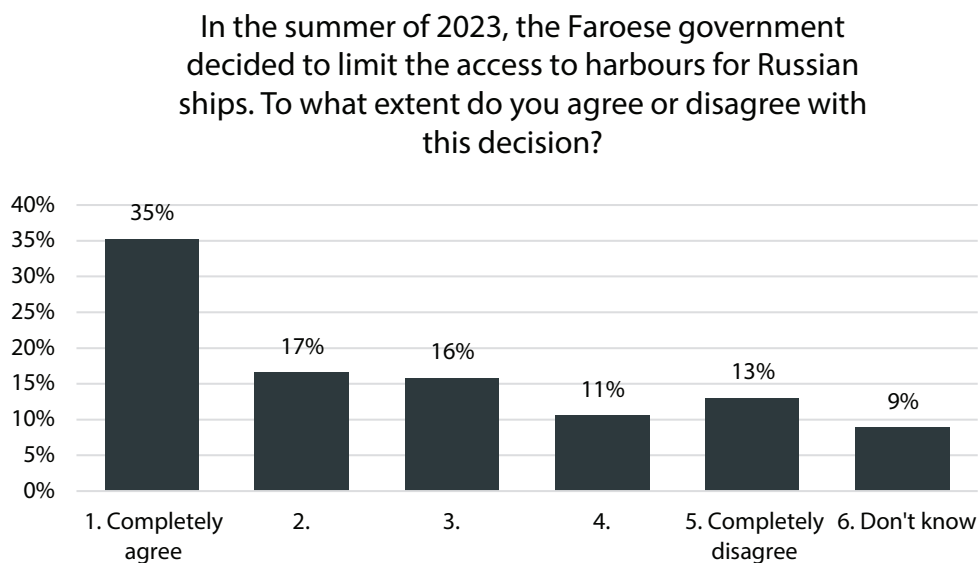


Figure 6

In the summer of 2023, the Faroese government decided to limit the access to harbours for Russian ships. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this decision?

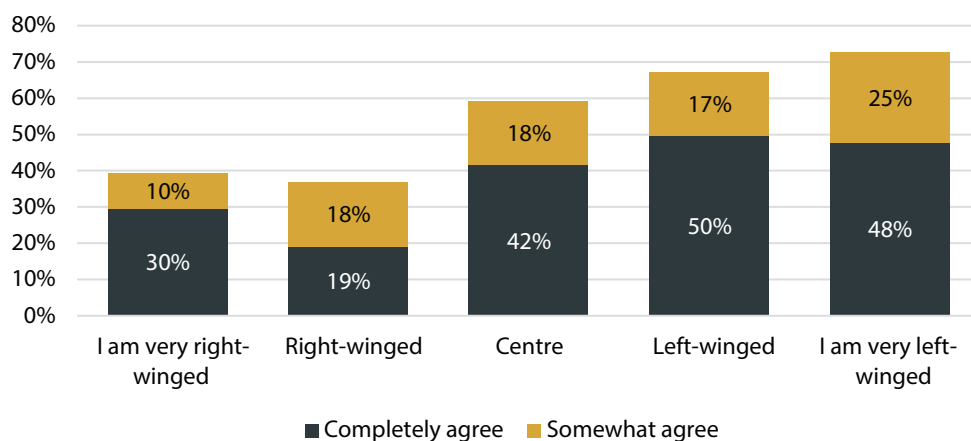


Figure 7

In the summer of 2023, the Faroese government decided to limit the access to harbours for Russian ships. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this decision?

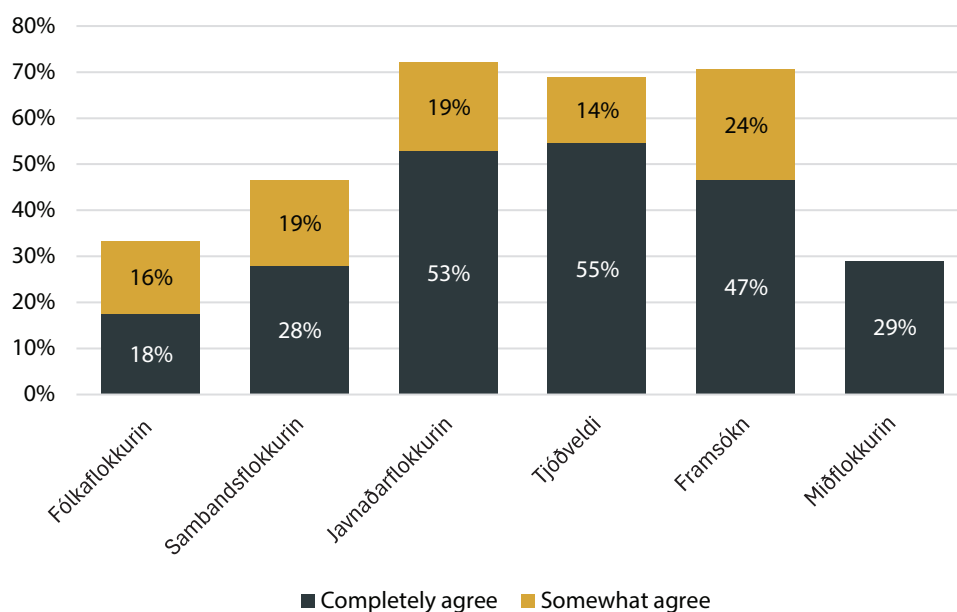
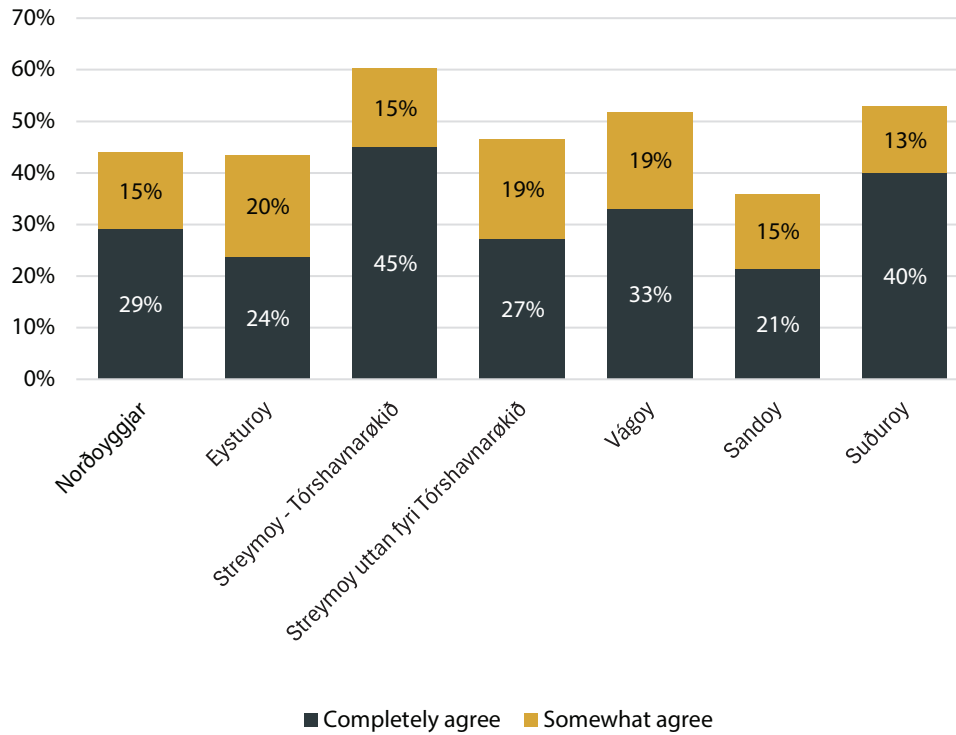


Figure 8

In the summer of 2023, the Faroese government decided to limit the access to harbours for Russian ships. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this decision?



Despite the divisions regarding the bilateral fishery agreement between the Faroe Islands and Russia, a majority of respondents clearly support Ukraine and pro-Ukrainian policies, both with regard to publicly condemning the invasion (figure 9), accepting Ukrainian refugees (figure 10) or whether or not to remain neutral (figure 11). In other words, respondents seem to separate the issue of the fishery agreement with Russia and the general stance regarding the war in Ukraine. Hence, these findings indicate that Faroese voters may support a fishery agreement with Russia – which is not violating EU sanctions – while also supporting pro-Ukraine policies.

Figure 9

After the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Faroese government publicly condemned the invasion. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the decision to condemn the invasion?

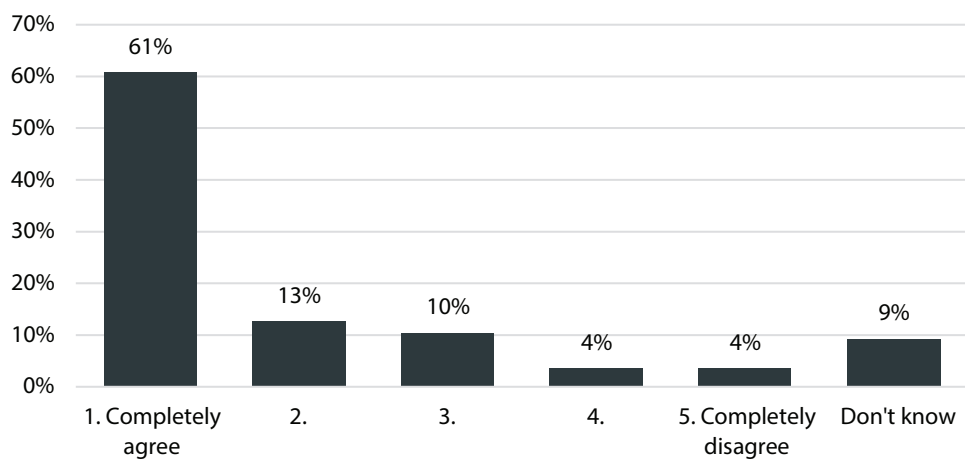


Figure 10

Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Faroe Islands have received around 200 Ukrainian refugees. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the decision to accept Ukrainian refugees?

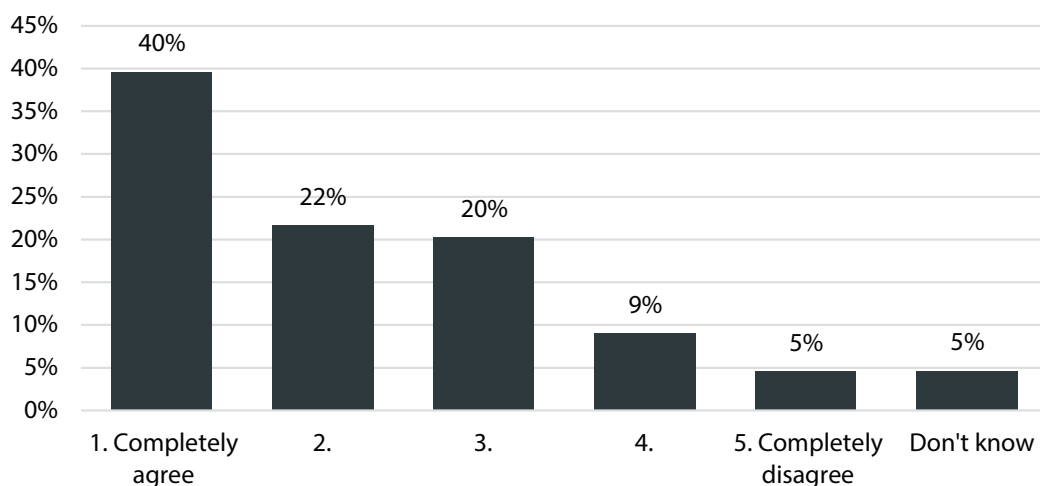
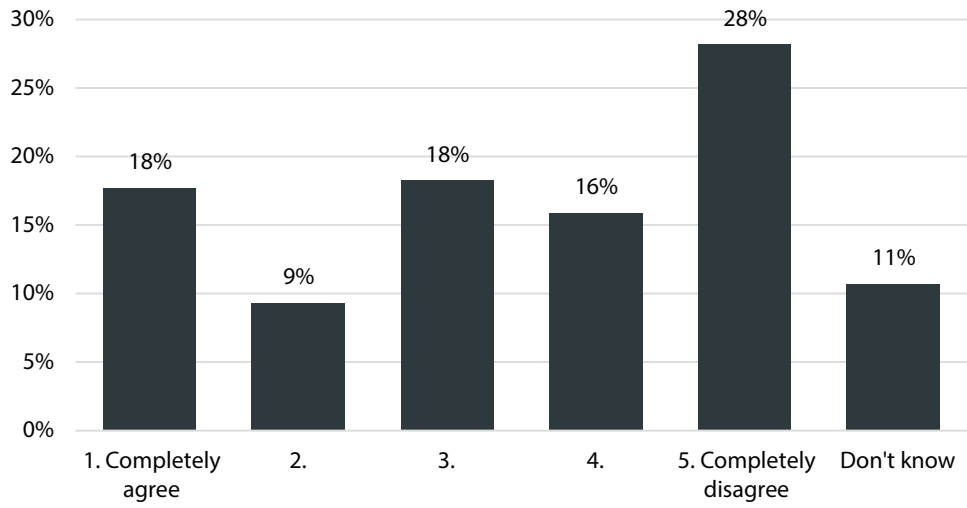


Figure 11

To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement: "The Faroe Islands should not adopt any position regarding the war in Ukraine and remain neutral."



4.2 Increasing support for NATO and the west, but divided on military activities in Faroese territory

Another aspect of the survey examines what the Faroese public thinks about international alliances and cooperation in the field of foreign policy and security. Historically, the Faroese parliament has adopted several resolutions professing neutrality and the wish to stay out of great-power rivalry. Already in April 1940, when 7000 British troops occupied the islands while Denmark was occupied by Nazi Germany, the Faroese parliament protested the occupation while proclaiming neutrality. The same message was repeated throughout the Cold War (Skorini 2022). However, in the spring of 2024, both the Faroese and the Greenlandic governments adopted new security and defence strategies. In February 2024, Greenland presented its first explicit foreign, security, and defence strategy document (Government of Greenland 2024), and in April 2024, the Faroese government presented ten overall principles for a new national security strategy (Uttanríkis- og Vinnumálaráðið 2024). Both strategies pledge allegiance to NATO as the main security umbrella protecting the overseas territories within the Danish kingdom. Despite the fact that defence and security policy remain Danish portfolios under Danish jurisdiction, both strategies emphasise that as tensions rise between the great powers and hybrid security threats increasingly supersede conventional warfare, security can no longer be perceived as one delimited policy area.

Since the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, American military presence in Faroese territory has drastically increased. And in the autumn of 2024, the Faroese government will open a new Faroese representation office in Washington, four years after the Faroes and the US signed a so-called “partnership declaration” in 2020 (Landsstyri 2020). In this context, we asked Faroese respondents about international cooperation and alliances. In figure 12 below, two thirds of the respondents reply that the Faroes should be part of the west in foreign and security affairs. Comparing this result with the survey from 2021, the overall picture is quite similar. However, there seems to be a slight drift towards more pro-western attitudes (figure 13).

Figure 12

Below are some statements on Faroese relations with the rest of the world. What statement is closest to your own opinion? The Faroes should...

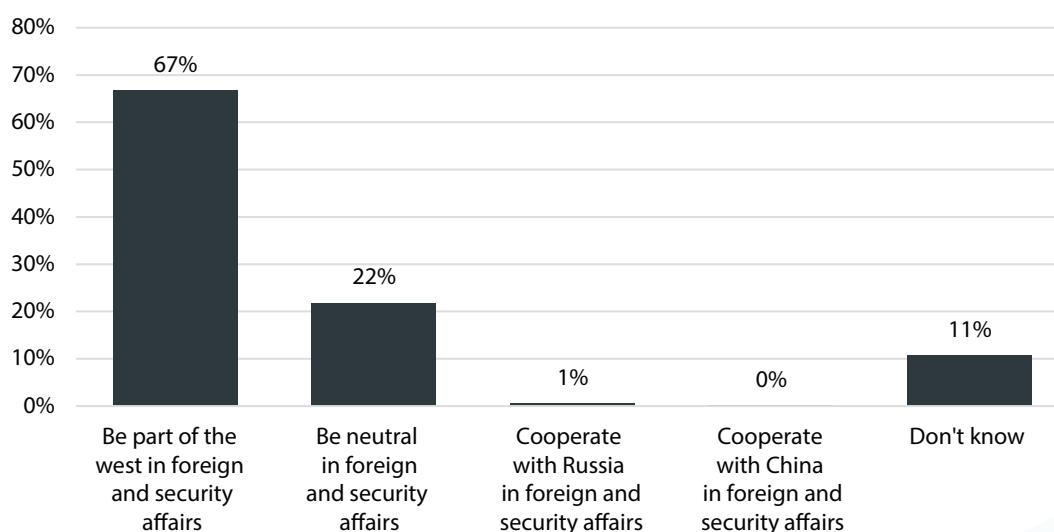
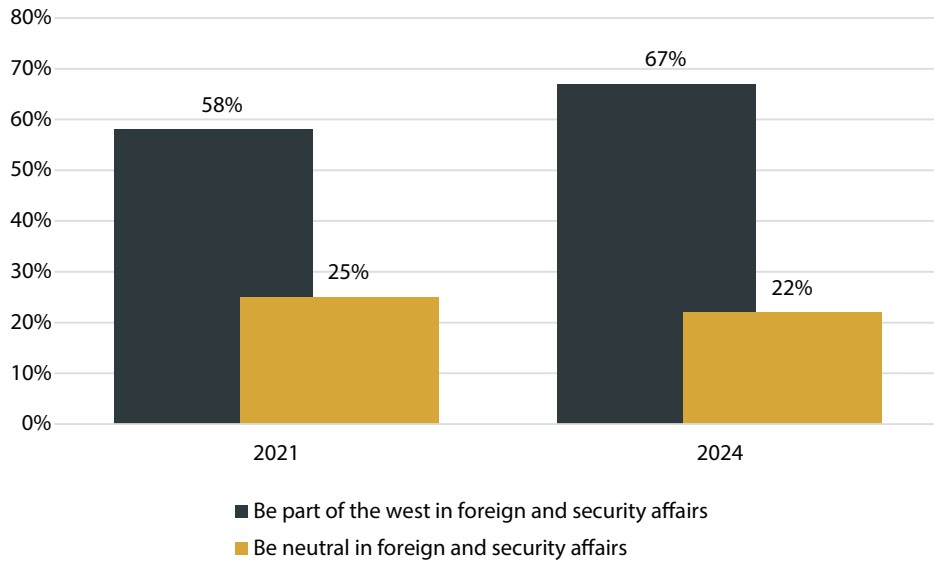


Figure 13

Below are some statements on Faroese relations with the rest of the world. What statement is closest to your own opinion? The Faroes should...



With regard to Russia, there are clear indications of a shift in public opinion before and after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. In our survey from November 2021, most respondents preferred good economic relations with Russia rather than a tough attitude on foreign policy and security issues (figure 14). However, when asked the same question again in 2024, the majority now prefers “a tough attitude towards Russia” while only 27 % prefer good economic relations. This change before and after February 2022 is quite significant. When comparing with our partners at the University of Greenland who also conducted a similar survey with some identical questions in the summer of 2024, the picture is quite similar. Most Greenlandic voters also prefer a tough attitude vis-à-vis Russia (figure 15).

Figure 14

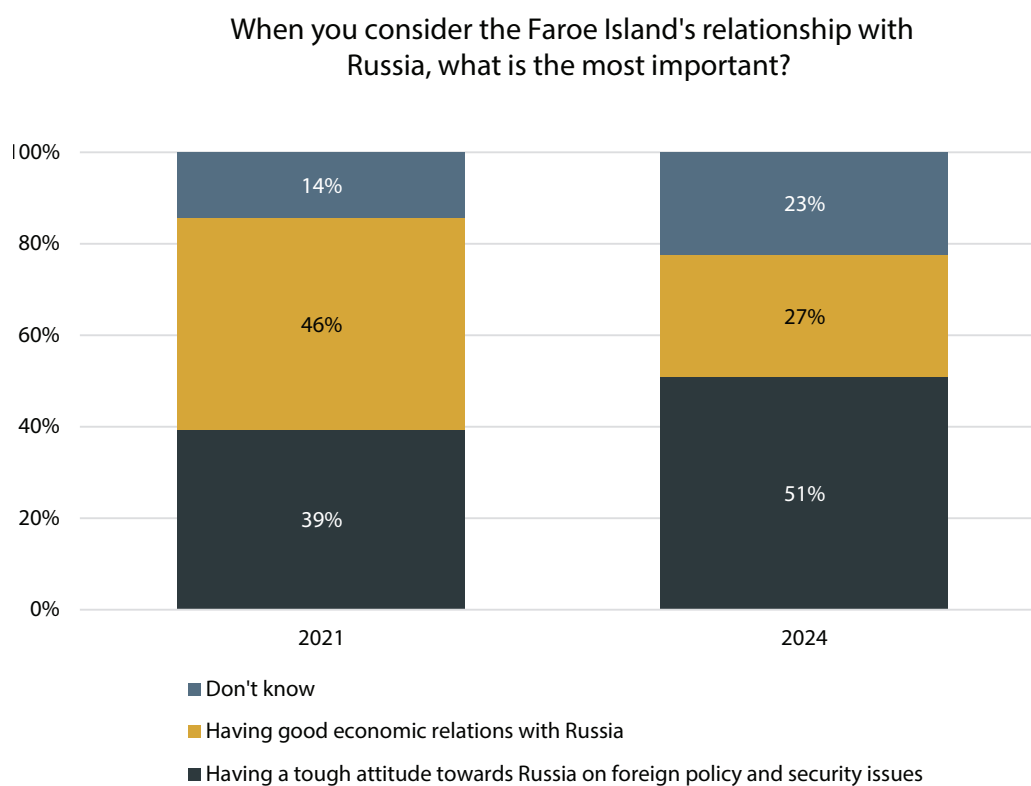


Figure 15

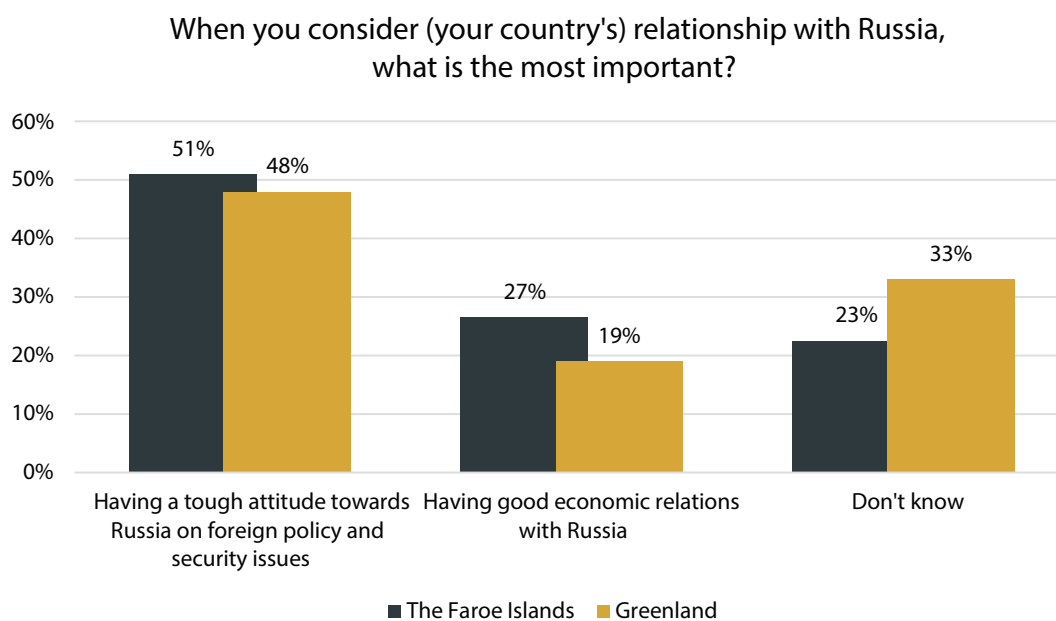
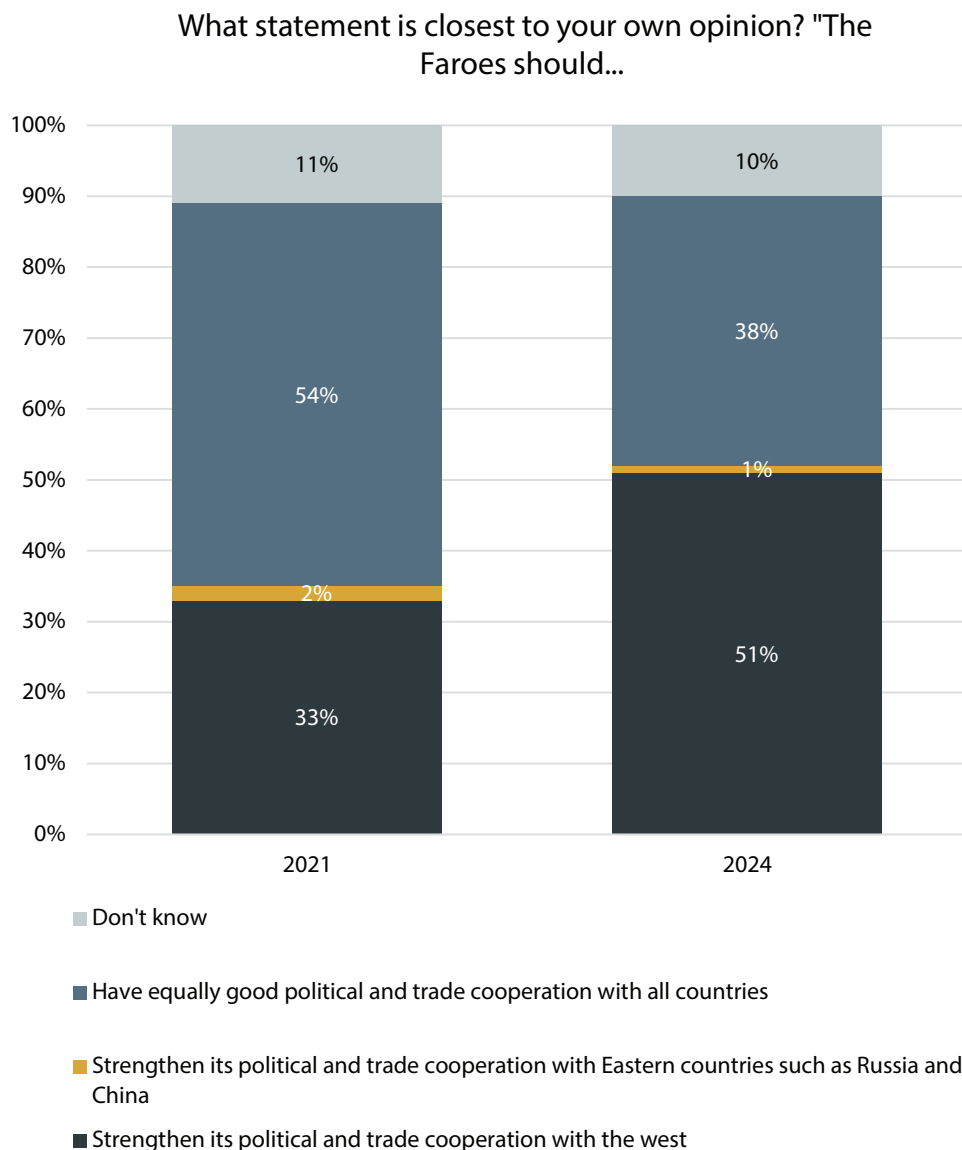


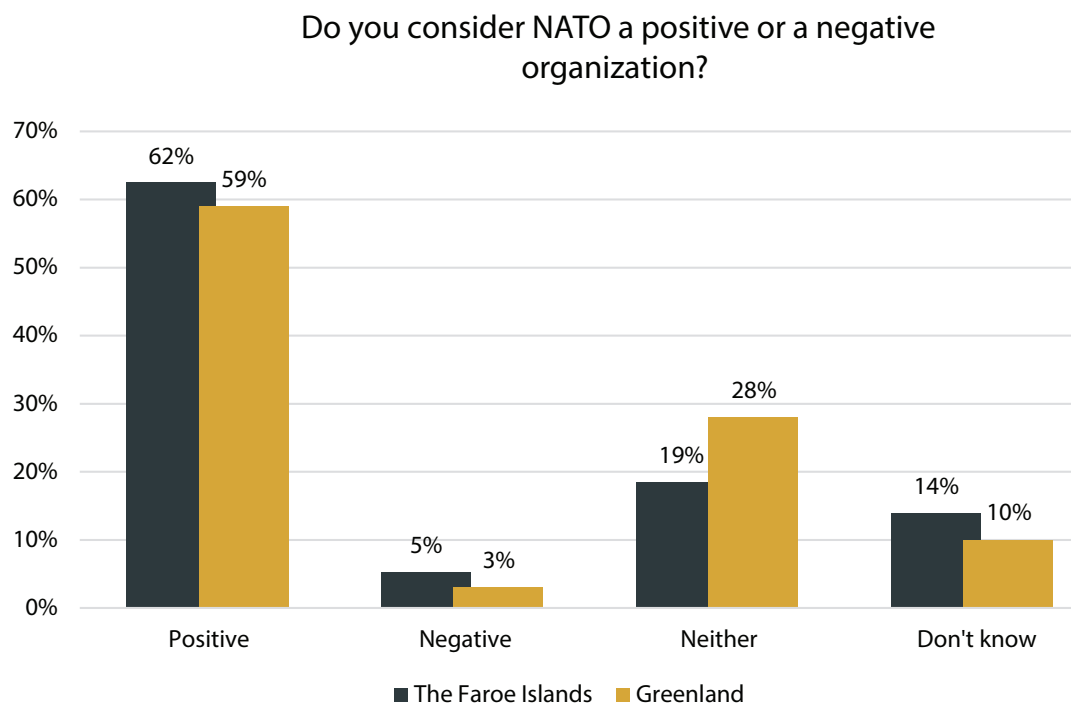
Figure 16 below also indicates a shift in public opinion before and after the war in Ukraine. When asked to prefer between the different statements, a majority of the respondents (54%) preferred equally good relations with all countries back in 2021. However, in the most recent survey from 2024, this number decreases to 38% while a new majority emerges which prefers stronger political and trade cooperation with the western world. In 2021, only 33% selected better relations with the west as their preferred option. This number has increased to 51% in the 2024 survey.

Figure 16



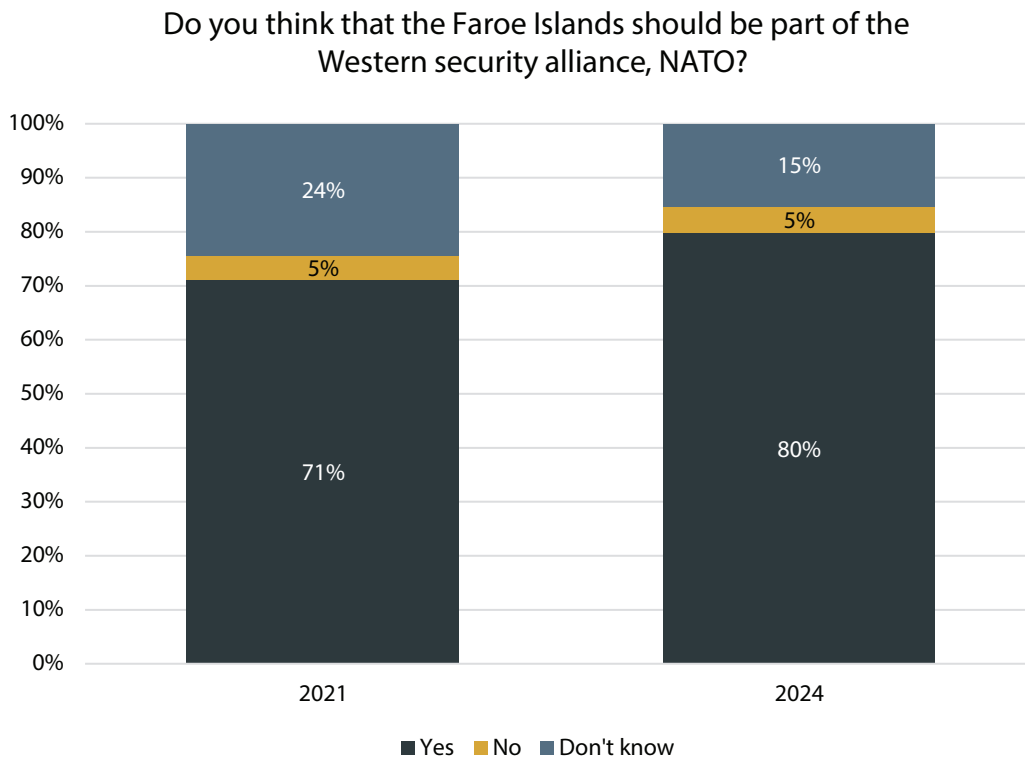
When asked specifically about NATO, a majority of 62 % consider NATO a positive organization. Only 5 % consider NATO a negative organization while 19 % reply neither and 14 % reply that they don't know. Although a clear majority has a positive view of NATO, the amount of people who are in between or simply don't know is quite significant. Again, the picture is Greenland is quite similar where most voters consider NATO a positive organization.

Figure 17



Furthermore, a vast majority of respondents say “yes” when asked whether the Faroes should be a part of NATO (figure 18). When comparing the surveys in 2021 and 2024, the amount of people replying yes to this question has increased from 71 % to 80 %. However, this is a tricky question as it does not elaborate whether the Faroes should be a part of NATO via Denmark or as an independent member.

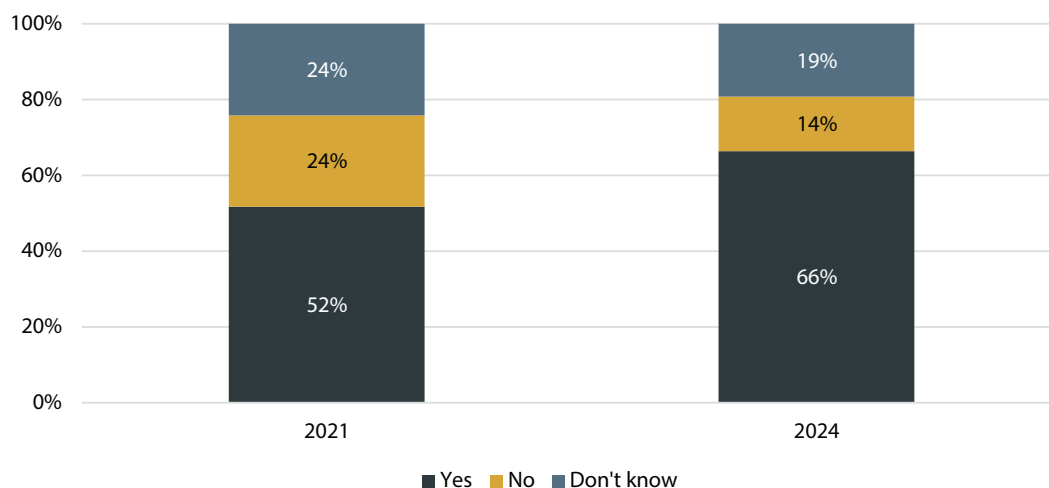
Figure 18



As noted above, American military traffic in Faroese waters has significantly increased during the last couple of years. When asked whether the Faroes should allow American military ships to use Faroese harbours, two thirds of the respondents reply “yes” to this question (figure 19). Again, compared to the survey from 2021, the number of people supporting this policy has increased from 52 % to 66 %.

Figure 19

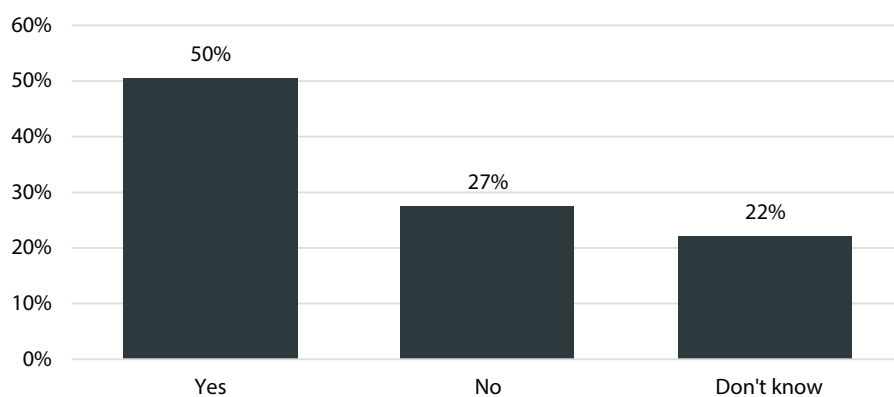
Do you think that the Faroe Islands should allow American military ships to use Faroese harbours in order to bunker, take in supplies, change crew etc.?



However, Faroese public opinion is much more divided when asked about NATO military exercises and other military activities in Faroese waters. In figure 20 below, only 50 % say “yes” when asked whether the Faroes should allow military activities in Faroese territory. The rest is either against or undecided. This question was not used in the survey from 2021, and the finding might suggest a popular distinction between allowing the US to use Faroese harbours and allowing direct military activities in Faroese territory.

Figure 20

Do you think that the Faroe Islands should allow NATO to have military exercises and other military activities in Faroese territory?



The survey also examined the issue of membership of the European Union (EU) and the relationship with Denmark. As expected, there is a clear minority in favour of EU membership (figure 21), but many respondents are undecided (27%). The results from the Greenlandic survey are quite different. Here, most voters would vote in favour of EU membership. However, this does not necessarily mean that Faroese respondents have negative attitudes towards the EU. As figure 22 reveals, the largest group of respondents have a positive view of the EU while only 15% have a negative view of the EU.

Figure 21

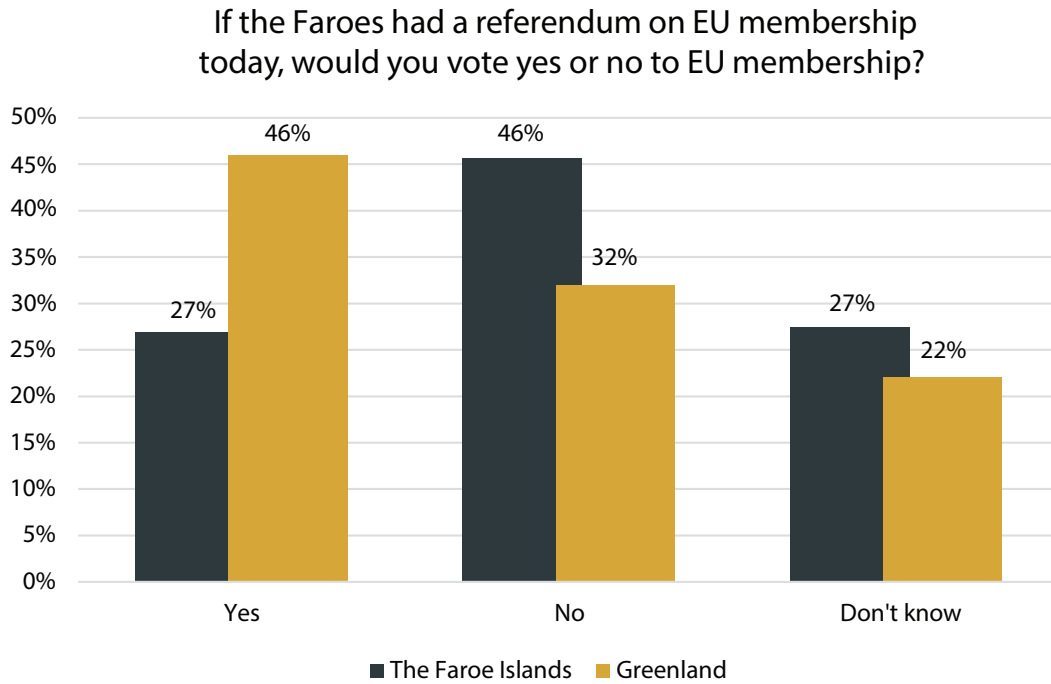
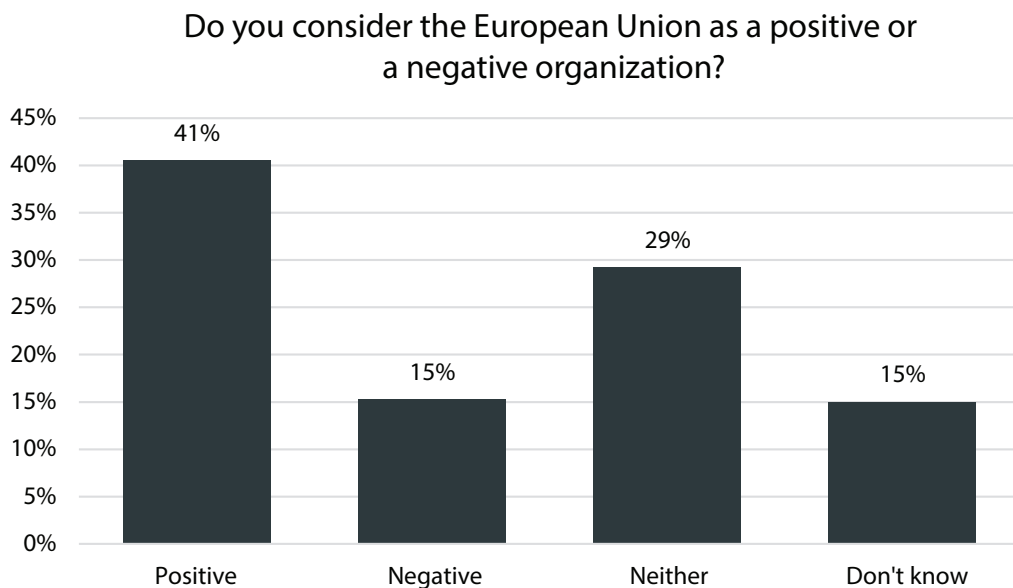
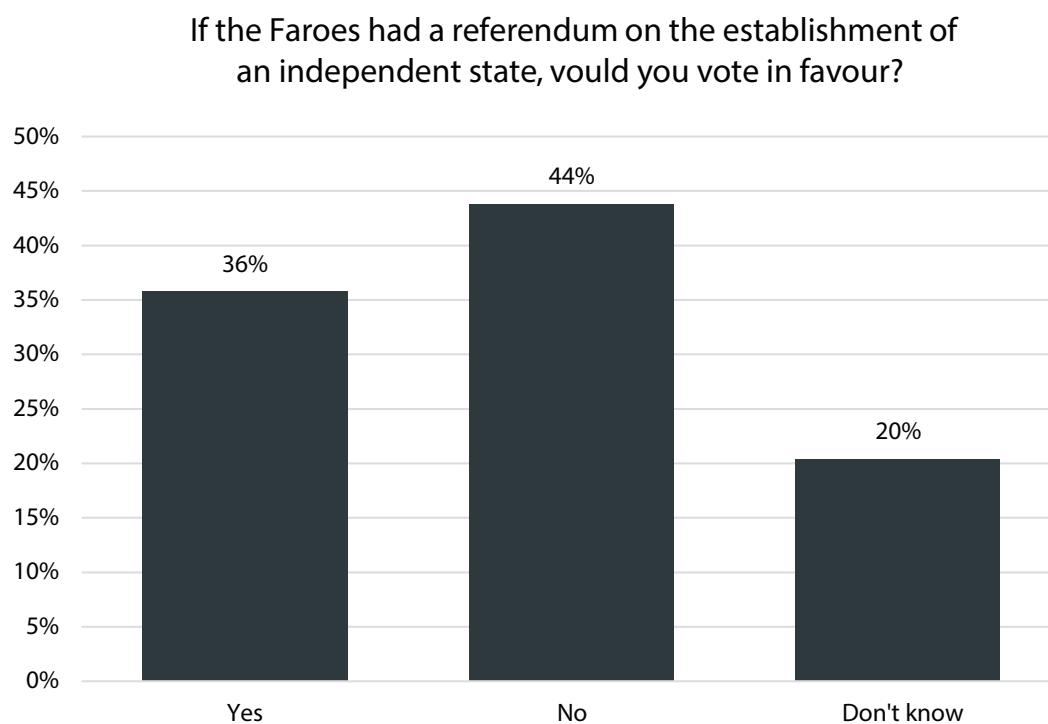


Figure 22



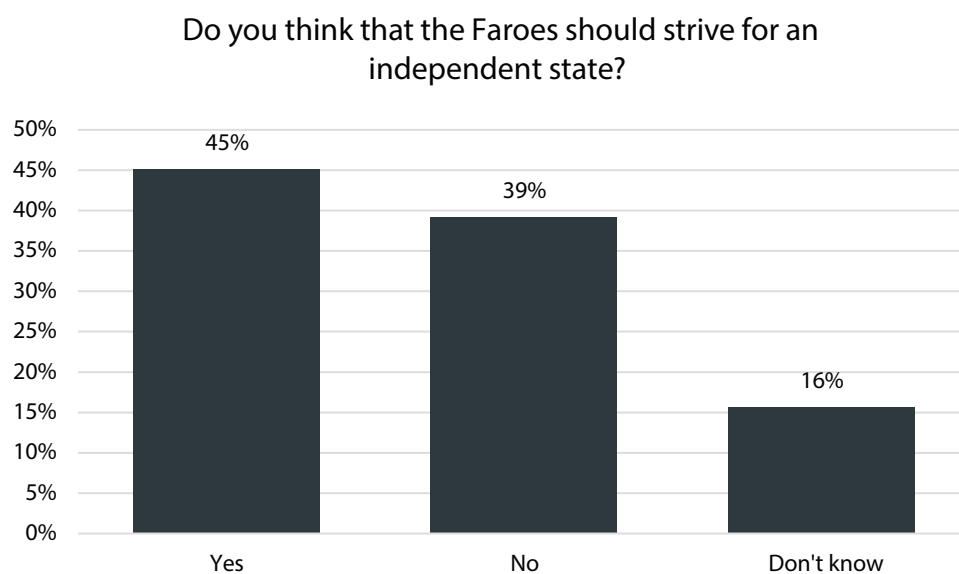
Turning to the relationship with Denmark, there does not seem to be any majority in favour of independence in case of a referendum today. When asked how people would vote, 36 % would support independence while 44 % would say “no”. However, a significant amount of voters (20 %) seem undecided (figure 23).

Figure 23



However, when rephrasing this question, 45 % of the respondents still think that the Faroes should strive for an independent state, while 39 % oppose this vision. The difference between the two results might indicate a distinction between supporting independence here and now and supporting independence in the longer run.

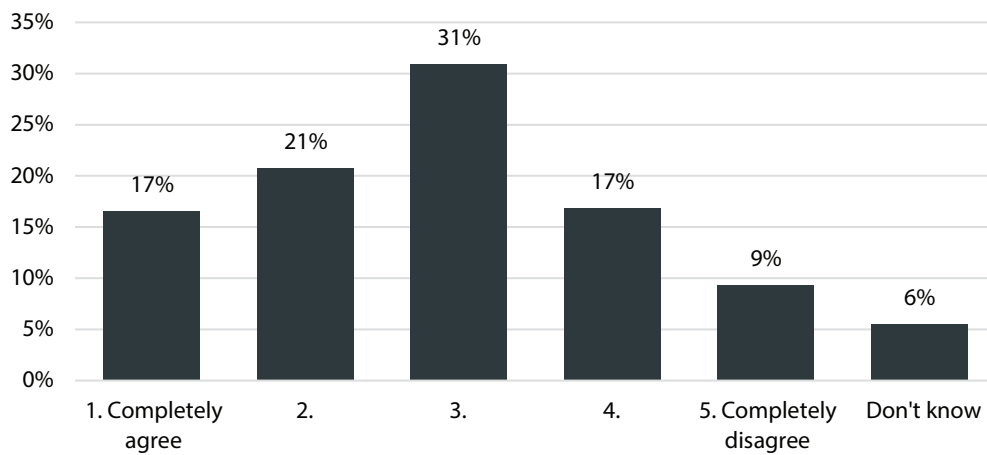
Figure 24



Finally, the survey examined how people perceive the current security situation and the likelihood of war hitting the Faroes. Perhaps surprisingly, 38 % either completely agree or agree with the below statement that “with the current situation in the world, I fear that war can also hit the Faroe Islands in the future” (figure 25). 31 % are in between while 26 % disagree with the statement. This finding can be interpreted in many ways, but it might be surprising that so many Faroese respondents fear the consequences of war in such a remote and peaceful place.

Figure 25

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: "With the current situation in the world, I fear that war can also hit the Faroe Islands in the future."



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