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## Public Opinion and the European Foreign and Security Policy: Is there a Risk of Politicisation?

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# Public Opinion and the European Foreign and Security Policy: Is there a Risk of Politicisation?

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## Abstract

This paper explores the current state of contention in the European Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and the conditions that could lead to its politicisation. We start from the question about why there has been so little progress in foreign and defence policy integration despite the widespread support for it from both the public and political elites. We suggest that the reason for that is the existence of a “politicisation trap”, in which politicians are reluctant to scale Europeanisation up in these areas because they fear domestic opposition forces would instrumentalise the issue. Our research suggests that CFSP is exposed to politicisation from both extreme left and extreme right policy entrepreneurs. However, it also shows that the orientation of the public is more receptive to arguments than to ideological affiliations. The implication for public debate is pretty consequential: the ability to convey substantive elements in the public debate may well be the single most important factor in determining whether advocating for more foreign, security and defence policy integration can turn into a political win. In other words, the onus is on politicians and their ability to let the debate run in substantive ways.

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# 1. Introduction: Is security and defence policy exposed to a politicisation trap?

This study explores the present state of public contention around the European Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), the conditions that might foster its politicisation and the direction it might eventually take. As compared to the past, in which politicisation was seen as a desirable, if not inevitable, consequence of the increased interdependence among policy sectors,<sup>1</sup> over the last two decades politicisation has been increasingly discussed as a worrisome if not dysfunctional byproduct of increasing Europeanisation.<sup>2</sup> This is because politicisation of European integration is widely seen as part of a wider process of erosion of the liberal order, in which support for international cooperation is increasingly criticised and challenged.<sup>3</sup> Trade, migration, monetary policies and even coordination on Covid-19 response measures are sources of domestic political conflicts in all European countries.<sup>4</sup>

Politicisation has, for many years, involved mostly issues of domestic nature. It has started to be discussed in connection with EU's foreign and security policy only

<sup>1</sup> See Philippe C. Schmitter, "Three Neo-Functional Hypotheses About International Integration", in *International Organization*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (Winter 1969), p. 161-166, DOI 10.1017/S0020818300025601; Ernst B. Haas, "International Integration: The European and the Universal Process", in *International Organization*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (Summer 1961), p. 366-392, DOI 10.1017/S0020818300002198.

<sup>2</sup> Tanja A. Börzel and Thomas Risse, "From the Euro to the Schengen Crises: European Integration Theories, Politicization, and Identity Politics", in *Journal of European Public Policy*, Vol. 25, No.1 (2018) p. 83-108, DOI 10.1080/13501763.2017.1310281.

<sup>3</sup> See G. John Ikenberry, "The End of Liberal International Order?", in *International Affairs*, Vol. 94, No. 1 (January 2018), p. 7-23, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix241>; Columba Peoples, "The Liberal International Ordering of Crisis", in *International Relations*, Vol. 38, No.1 (March 2024), p. 3-24, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00471178221128187>; John J. Mearsheimer, "Bound to Fail. The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order", in *International Security*, Vol. 43, No. 4 (Spring 2019), p. 7-50, [https://doi.org/10.1162/isec\\_a\\_00342](https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00342); Elias Götz, "The Crisis of Liberal World Order", in András Sajó, Renáta Uitz and Stephen Holmes (eds), *Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism*, New York, Routledge, 2021, p. 907-922, DOI 10.4324\_9780367260569-65; Riccardo Alcaro, "Contestation and Transformation. Final Thoughts on the Liberal International Order", in *The International Spectator*, Vol. 53, No. 1 (March 2018), p. 152-167, DOI 10.1080/03932729.2018.1429533; Robert Jervis et al. (eds), *Chaos Reconsidered. The Liberal Order and the Future of International Politics*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2023.

<sup>4</sup> See Catherine E. De Vries, Sara B. Hobolt and Stefanie Walter, "Politicizing International Cooperation: The Mass Public, Political Entrepreneurs, and Political Opportunity Structures", in *International Organization*, Vol. 75, No. 2 (Spring 2021), p. 306-332, DOI 10.1017/S0020818320000491; Julia C. Morse and Robert O. Keohane, "Contested Multilateralism", in *The Review of International Organizations*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (December 2014), p. 385-412, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11558-014-9188-2>.

more recently.<sup>5</sup> This discussion has grown in parallel to steps taken by the EU to improve CFSP coordination, advance further its Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) and attempt to create greater synergies across all policies with an external dimension – which we refer to under the broad heading of EU foreign and security policy (EUFSP). The question we engage with is why these steps have produced so little in terms of further integration. Can the risk of politicisation be the answer?

On surface, the conditions for a more integrated EUFSP have been present for years. Both public opinion and elites (political, bureaucratic, business) have consistently expressed support, which appears to have further grown because of the Ukraine war.<sup>6</sup> An analysis of available longitudinal data for the 2000-2020 period, carried out by the JOINT project,<sup>7</sup> as well as a special JOINT survey in six European countries (France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland and Spain), ostensibly show that, when it comes to a common European defence and foreign policy, the issue is not “whether” to do it, but rather “how much” these two policy areas should be Europeanised. And yet, foreign and defence policies remain areas under the full competence of the member states, and there are no signs of future changes.

We contend that this apparently paradoxical state of affairs is the result of a combination of factors that make up the puzzle that motivates this study. First, public support at the mass level might be shallow or ignorant, or both. Support could be shallow because, as argued by several scholars,<sup>8</sup> ordinary Europeans may

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<sup>5</sup> Oriol Costa, “The Politicization of EU External Relations”, in *Journal of European Public Policy*, Vol. 26, No. 5 (2019), p. 790-802, DOI 10.1080/13501763.2018.1478878; Katja Biedenkopf, Oriol Costa and Magdalena Góra, “Introduction: Shades of Contestation and Politicisation of CFSP”, in *European Security*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (2021), p. 325-343, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2021.1964473>.

<sup>6</sup> Catarina Thomson et al., “European Public Opinion: United in Supporting Ukraine, Divided on the Future of NATO”, in *International Affairs*, Vol. 99, No. 6 (November 2023), p. 2485-2500, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiad241>.

<sup>7</sup> Leonardo Puleo, “Summary of Party Positions on EU Foreign, Security and Defence Policy. Case Studies: France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland and Spain”, in *JOINT Research Papers*, No. 9 (June 2022), <https://www.jointproject.eu/?p=1066>; Pierangelo Isernia et al., “Inventory of EUFSP-related Public and Elite Opinion Surveys”, in *JOINT Research Papers*, No. 10 (June 2022), <https://www.jointproject.eu/?p=1103>.

<sup>8</sup> See Richard C. Eichenberg, *Public Opinion and National Security in Western Europe. Consensus Lost?*, Basingstoke/London, Macmillan, 1989; Philip Everts and Pierangelo Isernia, *Public Opinion, Transatlantic Relations and the Use of Force*, Basingstoke/New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015; Clifford J. Carrubba and Anand Singh, “A Decision Theoretic Model of Public Opinion: Guns, Butter, and European Common Defense”, in *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (April

not want to pay for their defence (free riding), may not favour the use of force (pacifism) or may not want to bear the human costs of the use of force (casualty aversion). Support could be ignorant because security and defence are areas of which people tend to know little and are not particularly motivated to get informed.<sup>9</sup> This combination of shallowness and ignorance qualifies support for CFSP as a form of “permissive consensus”. If such a consensus does really exist and it is shallow, it means that it can easily be shaken.<sup>10</sup>

Here, a second factor comes into play. Politicians, no matter how enthusiastic they are in principle, are reluctant to scale Europeanisation up in these areas because they fear opposition parties and policy entrepreneurs would agitate and politicise the issue. Politicians could, in other words, sense a “politicisation trap”, in which “latent opinions” (a concept first introduced by Key in 1956 and further developed by Zaller in 1991 to suggest that political elites pay attention not to the present public opinion but to the one that might become relevant once somebody else agitates the issues to be discussed)<sup>11</sup> might not match what is reported in public opinion polls. If this were the case, politicisation could turn the permissive consensus into a constraining dissensus. Once an issue gets politicised, grounds for disagreement among European publics are more likely to emerge.

The main purpose of this study is to shed light on the potential risk of negative politicisation. We explore whether some of the conditions the literature considers necessary for politicisation to take place do exist in the EUFSP (including CFSP, CSDP and other external relations policy areas). To do so we need first to spell out what those conditions are. This is the task of the next section.

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2004), p. 218-231, DOI 10.1111/j.0092-5853.2004.00066.x; Franz Kernic, Jean Callaghan and Philippe Manigart, *Public Opinion on European Security and Defense. A Survey of European Trends and Public Attitudes toward CFSP and ESDP*, Frankfurt am Main, Peter Lang, 2002.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Sinnott, “Knowledge and the Position of Attitudes to a European Foreign Policy on the Real-to-Random Continuum, in *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (June 2000), p. 113-137, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijpor/12.2.113>.

<sup>10</sup> Kaija E. Schilde, Stephanie B. Anderson and Andrew D. Garner, “A More Martial Europe? Public Opinion, Permissive Consensus, and EU Defence Policy”, in *European Security*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (2019), p. 153-172, DOI 10.1080/09662839.2019.1617275.

<sup>11</sup> Valdimer Orlando Key Jr., *Public Opinion and American Democracy*, New York, Knopf, 1961; John R. Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991.

## 2. What we know about the sources and characteristics of politicisation

The literature on politicisation is still debating the mechanisms through which such a dynamic takes place – why it affects some sectors and issues more than others, and why it is particularly intense in some countries rather than others. This is a consequence in part of the fact that the politicisation of international cooperation, as a disciplinary topic, falls in the middle of two stools. It is a concern for international relations, a field of study not particularly keen to explore the domestic ramifications of foreign policy (while it does look at the nexus from the opposite angle, namely at how domestic politics informs foreign policy). It is also a primary focus of comparative politics, which, in turn, is less concerned with the international ramifications of domestic politics. While gaps in understanding are increasingly acknowledged,<sup>12</sup> and more attention is now devoted to the dynamics between external and domestic processes,<sup>13</sup> we are far from enjoying a fully developed theoretical framework to analyse these processes.

Building on the present state of the art in the field,<sup>14</sup> three main factors are considered relevant to account for the issue of politicisation: the nature of public opinion, the entrepreneurship of political elites and the institutional context in which both mass and elites interact.<sup>15</sup> For “international issues [...] to become

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<sup>12</sup> Oriol Costa, “The Politicization of EU External Relations”, cit.; Michael Zürn, “Opening Up Europe: Next Steps in Politicisation Research”, in *West European Politics*, Vol. 39, No. 1 (2016), p. 164-182, DOI 10.1080/01402382.2015.1081513; Marianna Lovato et al., “The Internal Contestation of EU Foreign and Security Policy. A Literature Review of the Implications of Intra-EU Contestation on Crises and Conflicts”, in *JOINT Research Papers*, No. 1 (September 2021), <https://www.jointproject.eu/?p=516>.

<sup>13</sup> Robert D. Putnam, “Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games”, in *International Organization*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (Summer 1988), p. 427-460, DOI 10.1017/S0020818300027697.

<sup>14</sup> See Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks, “A Postfunctionalist Theory of European Integration: From Permissive Consensus to Constraining Dissensus”, in *British Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 39, No. 1 (January 2009), p. 1-23, DOI 10.1017/S0007123408000409; Swen Hutter, Edgar Grande and Hanspeter Kriesi (eds), *Politicising Europe. Integration and Mass Politics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2016; Michael Zürn, Martin Binder and Matthias Ecker-Ehrhardt, “International Authority and Its Politicisation”, in *International Theory*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (March 2012), p. 69-106, DOI 10.1017/S1752971912000012.

<sup>15</sup> Catherine E. De Vries, Sara B. Hobolt and Stefanie Walter, “Politicizing International Cooperation”, cit. See also Pieter de Wilde, Anna Leupold and Henning Schmidtke, “Introduction: The Differentiated Politicisation of European Governance”, in *West European Politics*, Vol. 39, No. 1 (2016), p. 3-22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2015.1081505>.

publicly contested and politicized”,<sup>16</sup> there needs to be a convergence between public opinion and political elites in an institutional context conducive to a controversial interaction.

More in detail, for an issue to become domestically politicised, *first* public opinion must hold some kind of foreign policy attitude towards international cooperation, either in a general sense or within a specific sector, and these attitudes must be salient compared to other issues. *Second*, on the political elite side, two further conditions should be met: that political elites differ on these issues, be it on the left-right continuum, the divide between green/alternative/libertarian and traditionalist/authoritarian/nationalist forces (GAL-TAN) or others still such as the Communitarian vs Globalist;<sup>17</sup> the other condition is that some policy entrepreneurs must take the matter into their hands and turn it into a subject of political controversy. The pivotal factor is therefore the presence of policy entrepreneurs, usually from non-mainstream parties, willing to exploit these latent divisions to make EUFSP a contested issue. *Third*, politicisation needs a set of institutional conditions through which popular discontent can be channelled or against which it can be targeted. For example, De Vries and others suggest that “political opportunity structures, such as permissive elections or referendums on international treaties, must exist to channel this discontent into concrete demands for more or less international cooperation”.<sup>18</sup>


In this report we explore the first two sets of conditions. We take the third one for granted because the present institutional context is conducive to politicisation. The European Parliament election might represent a consequential discontinuity in the European political landscape if the traditional coalition between Socialists and Popular that has dominated the European scene for decades is either downsized or altogether overthrown by a more right-wing oriented coalition, including the conservative party family and possibly the extreme right groups. Depending on

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<sup>16</sup> Catherine E. De Vries, Sara B. Hobolt and Stefanie Walter, “Politicizing International Cooperation”, cit., p. 308.

<sup>17</sup> See Michael Zürn, “Opening Up Europe: Next Steps in Politicisation Research”, cit.; Pieter de Wilde, Anna Leupold and Henning Schmidtke, “Introduction: The Differentiated Politicisation of European Governance”, cit.; Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks, “A Postfunctionalist Theory of European Integration”, cit.

<sup>18</sup> Catherine E. De Vries, Sara B. Hobolt and Stefanie Walter, “Politicizing International Cooperation”, cit., p. 309.



which majority will come out of the election, EUFSP politicisation could be more or less likely. A further, albeit *indirect*, element constituting the “institutional context” in which politicisation is likelier to take place is the US election, and specifically the fact that former President Donald Trump, the Republican nominee for president, shapes the European public’s imagination both as a major point of reference for European right-wing political forces and as a potential disrupter of transatlantic relations.

Taking this context into account and adopting the framework discussed before, we have proceeded in two steps to explore the potential for politicisation of EUFSP. The first step has been to update our understanding of the state of public opinion on issues related to EUFSP and the extent to which public opinion is willing and open to changes in the conceptual, sectorial and institutional dimensions of it. Is public opinion on these issues shallow and permissive in its attitudes? Are there differences across countries, and in which directions? As a second step, we have explored the conditions under which politicisation would materialise, also identifying in which countries and sectors this is more likely to happen. The present study is inevitably foresight-oriented, and as a consequence, more nuanced and tentative in its conclusions.

To explore the conditions for a potential politicisation of EUFSP we address the salience of the issue among public opinion and parties; the existing distribution of positions among the parties and the public on the left-right cleavage and whether this cleavage might turn the issue into a public source of controversy. Accordingly, the rest of this report is organised in three sections. The following section looks at the salience of EUFSP for both parties and public opinion. We then explore, using the survey conducted by the JOINT project, the degree of polarisation existing in the six countries surveyed by the project, looking at one crucial dimension along which polarisation on these topics can occur, namely the ideological left-right continuum. Next, we move to examine the potential expandability of the policy area, drawing upon the results of a factorial experiment especially designed to explore the conditions of expansionary politicisation. In the conclusion, we briefly summarise the results of our analysis, and we discuss some potential future short- and medium-term implications.



## 3. Has foreign and security policy become more salient and more controversial in Europe?

### 3.1 Has EUFSP become more salient?


This question has acquired renewed saliency after Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, the largest conventional war in Europe since the end of the Second World War. A review of public and elite opinion that we conducted before the war established that EUFSP is in a condition of “permissive consensus”.<sup>19</sup> How has the war affected it?

“Permissive consensus” for more EUFSP was characterised by three elements. The first was the low political salience of EUFSP in all party systems. Relying upon a systematic analysis of the Manifesto Research on Political Representation (MARPOR) in the period between 1970 and 2020,<sup>20</sup> we found that the salience of foreign and defence issues was always modest. Narrowing down our focus to the six countries later investigated by our own JOINT survey, namely France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland and Spain, we identified no clear pattern across all parties in the national party systems, with parties in France (3.6 per cent of topics covered and categorised by the Manifesto Project), Italy (2.7 per cent) and Spain (2.1 per cent) showing the lowest degree of salience of foreign policy issues in the last period considered (2015-2020).<sup>21</sup> The two exceptions were Greece, which showed a less linear trend and a high degree of salience (>10 per cent) both in the 1995-1999 and 2010-2020 periods, and the nationalist party family, which from 2010 onwards increasingly prioritised foreign policy issues (>10 per cent). Notwithstanding, our overall conclusion was that EUFSP was a low salient issue for all parties: references to this policy remain scattered, and attention was irregular in all countries.

<sup>19</sup> See Leonardo Puleo, “Summary of Party Positions on EU Foreign, Security and Defence Policy”, cit.; Pierangelo Isernia et al., “Inventory of EUFSP-related Public and Elite Opinion Surveys”, cit.

<sup>20</sup> The MARPOR codes political parties’ manifestos issued at the national elections into 56 categories. Among these categories, the study in-depth analysed all the mentions related to foreign policy issues. Furthermore, employing the corpus of the manifestos publicly available on the MARPOR website, we performed a qualitative content analysis of those sections directly dealing with foreign policy issues, explaining in detail the political parties’ position and salience. For more details see Leonardo Puleo, “Summary of Party Positions on EU Foreign, Security and Defence Policy”, cit.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.



The second element we reported in our review was that the EUFSP enjoyed wide public approval. The longitudinal data for the 2000-2020 period confirmed stable public support for, and increasing familiarity with, EUFSP throughout Europe, with the neutral countries (at the time still including Finland and Sweden) showing attenuated enthusiasm. Europeans' support for EUFSP grew markedly during the first decade of the 2000s, especially due to perceived strong unilateralism espoused by then US President George W. Bush. Still, large segments of the public were and remain elusive on whether a common European security and defence policy should mean a transfer of decision-making power from the state to the EU level and/or the end of the Atlantic Alliance. The enlargement of the EU brought more variety of opinions but no change of tack. Although the founding six were more supportive of EUFSP in general, public opinion in the newer member states also favoured more EUFSP. The fact that the country housing the most critical public towards European defence, the United Kingdom (UK), left the EU in 2020 seemed to indicate that a window of opportunity was (and is) available for increased security and defence integration. The data before the war showed that this support was widespread among political, business and social elites. The topics on which there were divisions were about how far to go with a single European army and what kind of relationship this should have with the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the United States. Here the main cleavage was the East-West divide. In general, Eastern European countries preferred a national army and cooperation via NATO, while the Western and Southern European ones were in favour of a combination of national and European army and a revised role for NATO.

The third element of the pre-war permissive consensus was a certain amount of ambivalence in the public attitudes to EUFSP. This ambivalence was observable in the fact that Europeans, on security and defence issues, seemed to want it “both ways”.<sup>22</sup> In other words, with little variation across countries, general support for CSDP and NATO remained substantial. At the same time, significant segments of West Europeans wanted the EU to adopt a more independent approach from

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<sup>22</sup> Richard C. Eichenberg and Richard J. Stoll, “The Acceptability of War and Support for Defense Spending: Evidence from Fourteen Democracies, 2004–2013”, in *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 61, No. 4 (2017), p. 788-813, DOI 10.1177/0022002715600760; Matthias Mader, Francesco Olmastroni and Pierangelo Isernia, “The Polls—Trends: Public Opinion Toward European Defense Policy and NATO: Still Wanting It Both Ways?”, in *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 84, No. 2 (Summer 2020), p. 551-582, DOI 10.1093/poq/nfaa031.

the US, although large segments showed no clear opinion on whether European defence should mean a transfer of decision-making power from the state to the EU level. Cross-country differences were more pronounced when it came to the creation of an EU army and its deployment. This ambivalence, it has been suggested,<sup>23</sup> make Europeans particularly sensitive to framing effects in their support for a common foreign and defence policy and this becomes particularly topical when it moves from support in principle to support for the actual use of force.

This was the context in which the Ukraine war broke out. The question is then whether the war has had an impact on the salience of CFSP and CSDP for the European public and, additionally, whether this has also created a bigger risk of politicisation. Political leaders have no doubt on the momentous consequences of the war, variously defined as “a watershed moment”,<sup>24</sup> a “*Zeitenwende*”,<sup>25</sup> a “turning point”<sup>26</sup> and a “moment of truth for Europe”.<sup>27</sup> Has the public followed?

The empirical data of the JOINT survey results, as well as of other studies, point to both lights and shades in the post-invasion public appreciation of EUFSF. On the one hand, the war has increased the salience of foreign policy issues. In the Flash Eurobarometer 506 of April 2022, on average 69 per cent of Europeans in the 27 member states were regularly following the news on Ukraine at least once a day and 41 per cent were discussing this topic with friends and relatives.<sup>28</sup> Over a year

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<sup>23</sup> Catherine E. De Vries, Sara B. Hobolt and Stefanie Walter, “Politicizing International Cooperation”, cit.

<sup>24</sup> Henning Hoff, “Europe’s Watershed Moment”, in *Internationale Politik Quarterly*, 30 June 2022, <https://ip-quarterly.com/en/europes-watershed-moment>; Charles A. Kupchan, “Putin’s War in Ukraine Is a Watershed. Time for America to Get Real”, in *The New York Times*, 11 April 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/11/opinion/ukraine-war-realist-strategy.html>.

<sup>25</sup> German Federal Government, *Policy Statement by Olaf Scholz, Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany and Member of the German Bundestag*, Berlin, 27 February 2022, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/news/policy-statement-by-olaf-scholz-chancellor-of-the-federal-republic-of-germany-and-member-of-the-german-bundestag-27-february-2022-in-berlin-20083-78>.

<sup>26</sup> French Presidency, *Address to the Nation*, 2 March 2022, <https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2022/03/02/address-to-the-nation>.

<sup>27</sup> European Commission, *Speech by President von der Leyen at the European Parliament Plenary on the Russian Aggression against Ukraine*, 1 March 2022, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech\\_22\\_1483](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_22_1483).

<sup>28</sup> European Commission, *Flash Eurobarometer 506 (April 2022)*, May 2022, <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2772>.

later, in the Flash 533 of August 2023, the percentages were similar.<sup>29</sup> On the other hand, the existing research so far is anything but certain that increased salience has transformed into thicker public support for more EUFSP. As an example, Mader and Schoen contend that there are no clear indications that the German public has “bought in” the *Zeitenwende* narrative.<sup>30</sup> Other studies conducted either in single countries (for instance, in Italy)<sup>31</sup> or in comparative perspective suggest that the war produced short-term effects but nothing durable in terms of support for more foreign and security policy integration.<sup>32</sup> An example of this can be appreciated in Figure 1, which displays the long-term trend support for foreign and security policy integration in the EU in general and the six JOINT countries in particular. The chart clearly shows no significant deviation in the public attitude towards CFSP either way after the start of the Ukraine war. The only country in which the Ukraine war has produced a short-term rally effect of some size is Poland, where support for a common foreign and security policy moved from 77 per cent in February 2022 (before the beginning of the invasion) to 88 per cent. In the EU countries, the variation of the support for CFSP has been only modestly positive and in Italy it has actually been slightly negative. In addition, after the short-term effect evaporated, the oscillations did not show significant variations with respect to the pre-war period.

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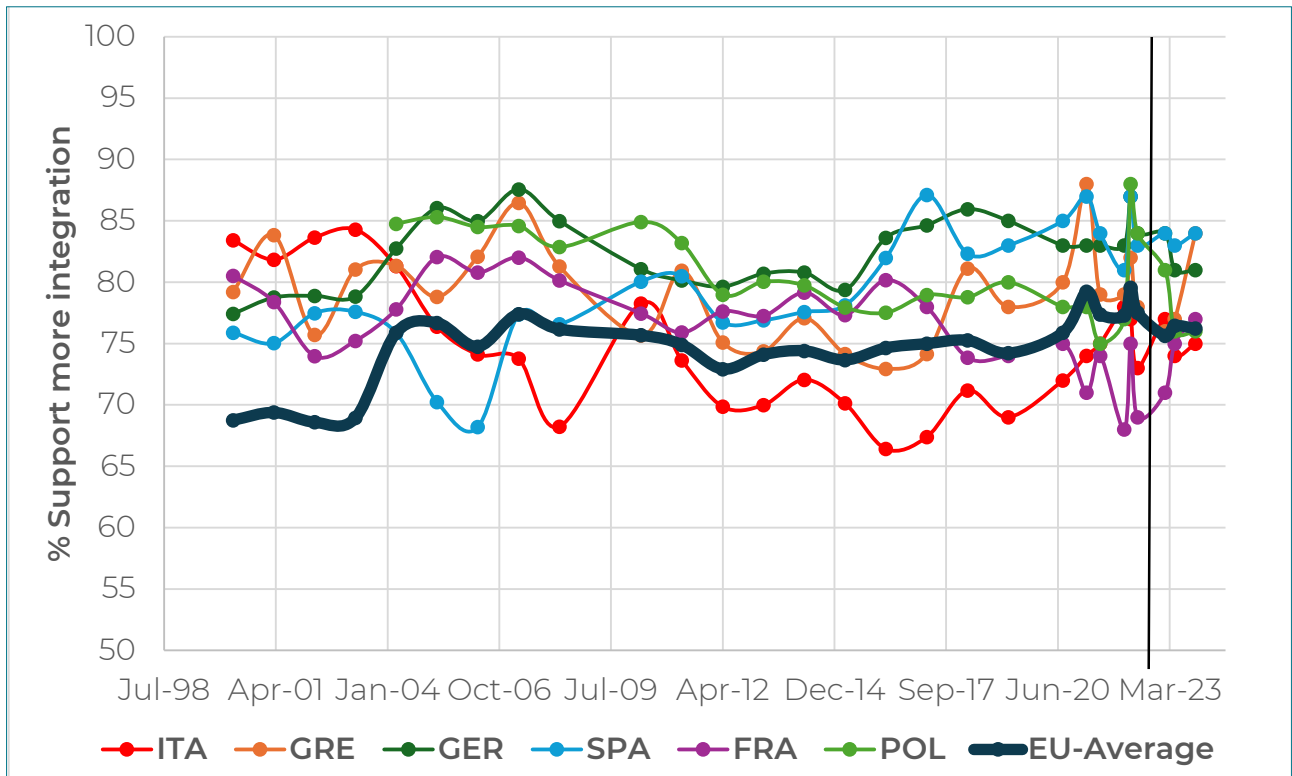
<sup>29</sup> European Commission, *Flash Eurobarometer 533 (August 2023)*, September 2023, <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3092>.

<sup>30</sup> Matthias Mader and Harald Schoen, “No *Zeitenwende* (Yet): Early Assessment of German Public Opinion Toward Foreign and Defense Policy after Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine”, in *Politische Vierteljahresschrift*, Vol. 64, No. 3 (2023), p. 525-547, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11615-023-00463-5>.

<sup>31</sup> Fabio Bordignon, Ilvo Diamanti and Fabio Turato, “Rally Round the Ukrainian Flag. The Russian Attack and the (Temporary?) Suspension of Geopolitical Polarization in Italy”, in *Contemporary Italian Politics*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (2022), p. 370-386, DOI 10.1080/23248823.2022.2060171.

<sup>32</sup> Dietlind Stolle, “Aiding Ukraine in the Russian War: Unity or New Dividing Line among Europeans?”, in *European Political Science*, 12 October 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41304-023-00444-7>.

**Figure 1** | Support for a common defence and security policy (% in favour)



Question: What is your opinion on each of the following statements? Please tell for each statement, whether you are for it or against it: A common defence and security policy among EU member states. Reported here the percentage of those in favour.  
 Source: Eurobarometer data.

In the past, other events that appeared monumental when they happened did not prove to be as consequential as initially anticipated; establishing the impact of historical occurrences is, to an extent, often in the eyes of beholders.<sup>33</sup> Given the limited amount of time elapsed between the outbreak of the Ukraine war and the time in which our empirical data allow us to assess its consequences, we do not venture into predictions about the long-term impact of the war on public opinion. Instead, our interest is to assess whether the war represents a test of the potential stability of traditional cleavages on foreign and security issue and whether the left-right cleavage is relevant to explain differences in attitudes toward integration in this sector. For this purpose, we will look at the two main actors of every politicisation dynamic: parties and public opinion.

<sup>33</sup> Giovanni Capoccia and R. Daniel Kelemen, “The Study of Critical Junctures: Theory, Narrative, and Counterfactuals in Historical Institutionalism”, in *World Politics*, Vol. 59, No. 3 (April 2007), p. 341-369, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0043887100020852>; Andrew Abbott, *Time Matters. On Theory and Method*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2001.

## 3.2 Has EUFSP become more controversial?

To answer this question, we look at two sources of data: party positions, as measured by the Chapel Hill expert surveys (CHES),<sup>34</sup> with a particular focus on 2019 and 2022, and public opinion data as they emerge from the JOINT survey of 2023.<sup>35</sup> Our focus are the six countries analysed in the JOINT project: France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland and Spain.

### 3.2.1 Political parties

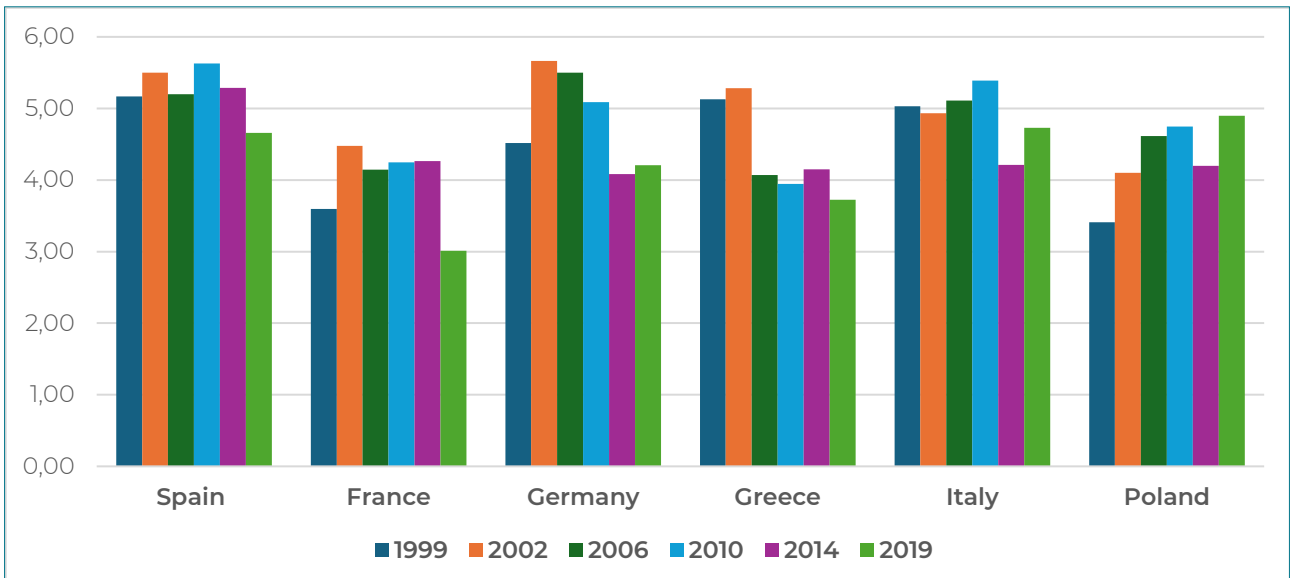
Starting with parties, the question we ask is whether the positions of parties on EUFSP has changed over time and, in particular, because of the war. Unfortunately, not much data is available for the period after 2022. We rely upon the CHES surveys of 2019 and 2022, the latter mostly focused on Ukraine. Unfortunately, in the 2022 CHES no question has been asked specifically on CFSP, CSDP and EU foreign policy in general. Therefore, we have to limit our comparison to the period between the last European parliamentary elections in 2019 and 2022. Figures 2 and 3 offers a picture of the evolution of parties' position on European integration in foreign and defence matters over the years. Figure 3 shows that the average party support for European integration has declined in five of the six JOINT countries, especially between 2014 and 2019, with the exception of Poland. This is presumably a consequence of the growth of populist and extreme right- and left-wing parties in the European parliament over the years.

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<sup>34</sup> Seth Jolly et al., "Chapel Hill Expert Survey Trend File, 1999-2019", in *Electoral Studies*, Vol. 75 (February 2022), Article 102420, DOI 10.1016/j.electstud.2021.102420.

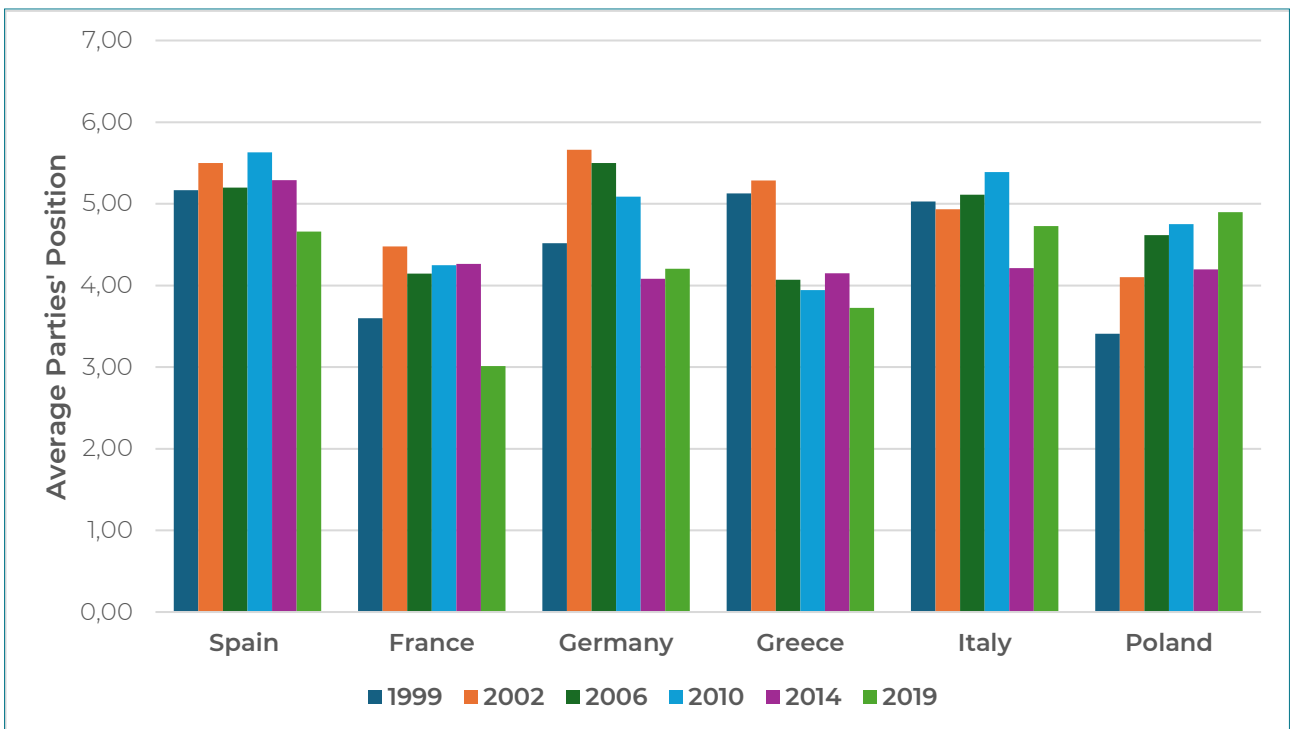
<sup>35</sup> Rossella Borri et al., "European Public Opinion on the Challenges and Future of EU Foreign and Security Policy", in *JOINT Research Papers*, No. 23 (January 2024), <https://www.jointproject.eu/?p=1936>.

**Figure 2** | Party support for EUFSP over time



Note: The figure presents the average position of parties within the country's party system regarding the EU foreign and security policy on a scale from 1 (strongly oppose) to 7 (strongly favour).

**Figure 3** | Average party support for EUFSP

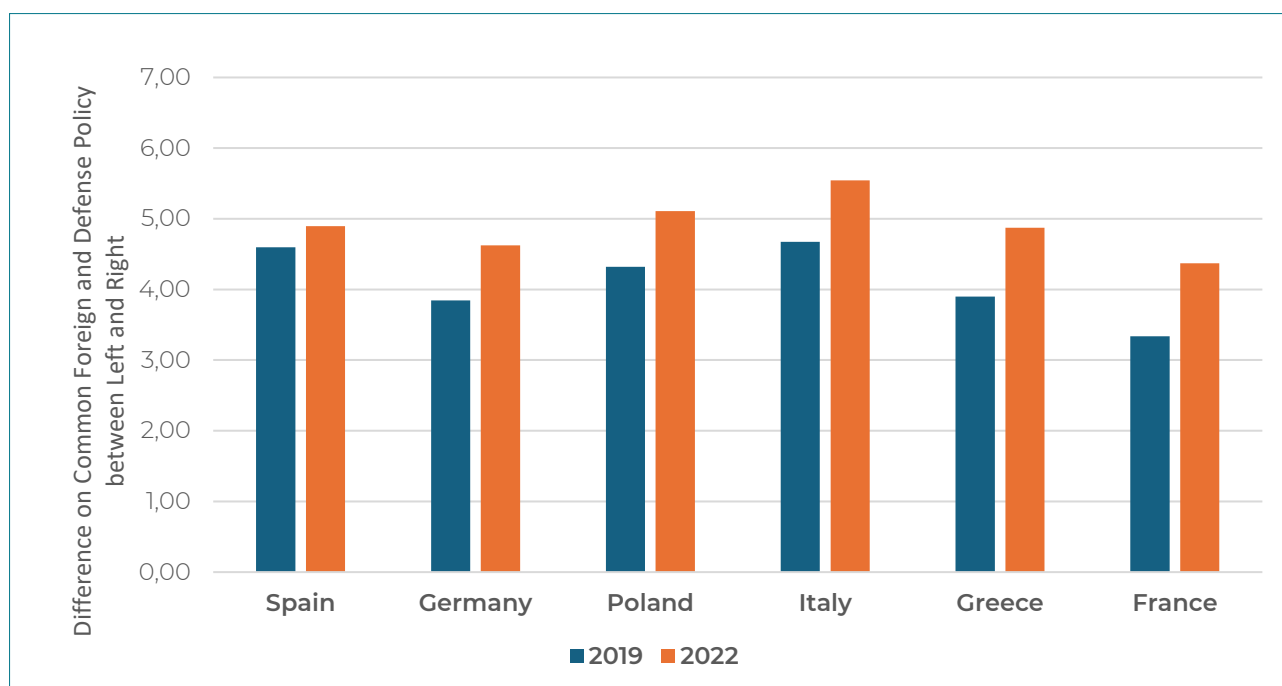


Note: The figure presents the average position of parties within the country's party system regarding the EU foreign and security policy on a scale from 1 (strongly oppose) to 7 (strongly favour).

Source: Seth Jolly et al., "Chapel Hill Expert Survey Trend File, 1999-2019", cit.

Assessing the impact of the war on support for CFSP is difficult because no data on this topic are available from CHES for 2022. Using the support for EU integration as a proxy, Figure 4 compares the distance between left and right between 2019 and 2022. The data clearly show that the left-right distance among parties' positions on European integration has grown significantly in the period considered.

**Figure 4** | Average left-right difference over time



Note: Each bar is calculated by subtracting the average party position of the extreme left-wing parties from the average party position of the extreme right-wing parties on a scale from 1 (strongly oppose) to 7 (strongly favour). A higher value indicates a greater difference in positions between the two extremes.

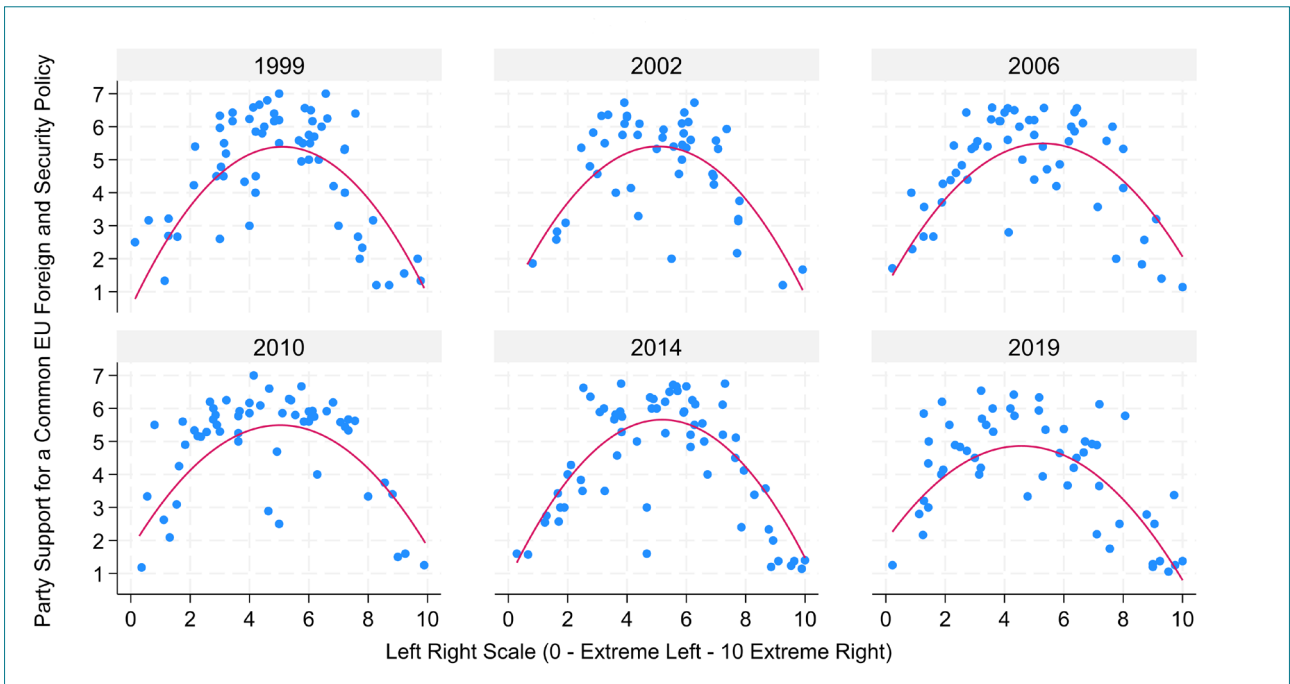
Source: Liesbet Hooghe et al., "The Russian Threat and the Consolidation of the West: How Populism and EU-Skepticism Shape Party Support for Ukraine", in *European Union Politics*, 18 March 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1177/14651165241237136>; and Seth Jolly et al., "Chapel Hill Expert Survey Trend File, 1999-2019", cit.

As suggested elsewhere,<sup>36</sup> a closer look at the various stances along the left-right political continuum shows that the distribution of parties' positions on EU security and defence policy follows a curvilinear pattern that marks a clear difference between mainstream parties and far right and far left forces. As shown in Figures 5 and 6, this curvilinear distribution has held across years for all countries on both support for foreign and security policy (Figure 5) and support for EU integration (Figure 6).

<sup>36</sup> Davide Angelucci and Pierangelo Isernia, "Politicization and Security Policy: Parties, Voters and the European Common Security and Defense Policy", in *European Union Politics*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (2020), p. 64-86, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1465116519851193>.

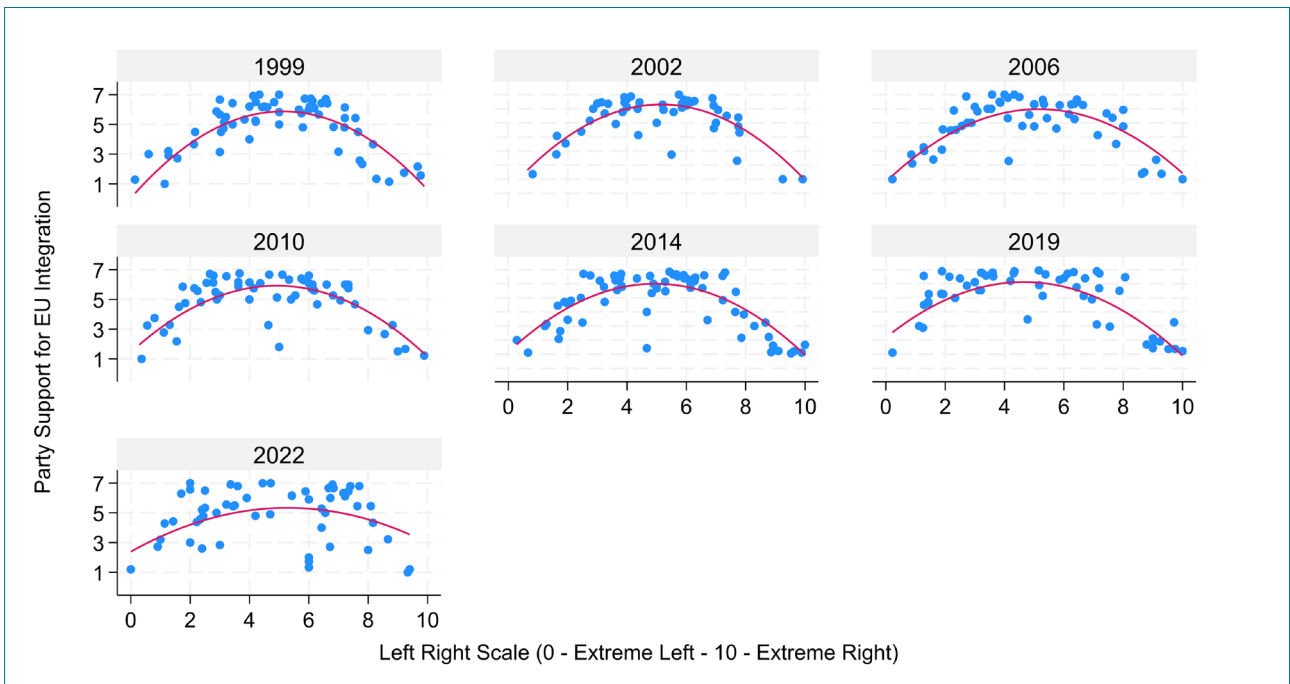


**Figure 5** | Party position on EUFSP along the left-right continuum



Note: Each dot reports the party position on a Common EU Foreign and Security Policy in a country, arrayed along the left-right scale.  
Source: Seth Jolly et al., "Chapel Hill Expert Survey Trend File, 1999-2019", cit.

**Figure 6** | Party position on EU integration along the left-right continuum

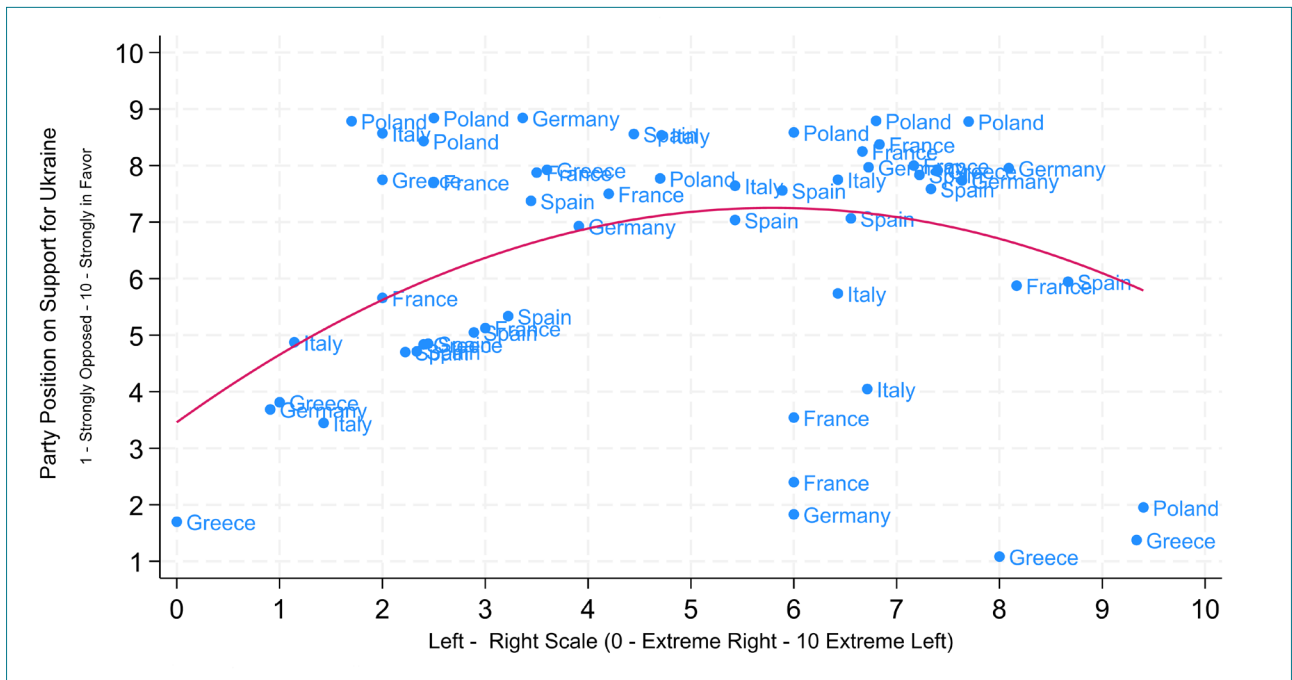


Note: Each dot reports the party position on EU integration of each party in a country, arrayed along the left-right scale.  
Source: Seth Jolly et al., "Chapel Hill Expert Survey Trend File, 1999-2019", cit.

In the six countries surveyed by JOINT parties on both ends of the spectrum are much less enthusiastic of EU integration in general and EU foreign and security policy in particular than the mainstream parties.

These distributions are confirmed looking at the position of parties in the six JOINT countries on support for Ukraine (measured combining the position of parties on four issues: shipment of weapons, sanctions, acceptance of Ukrainian refugees and Ukraine’s accession to the EU). Here too mainstream parties are more supportive of the effort to help Ukraine than those on the far left and far right.

**Figure 7** | Party position on Ukraine support along the left-right continuum



Note: each dot reports the party position on Ukraine of each party in a country, arrayed along the left-right scale  
 Source: Liesbet Hooghe et al., “The Russian Threat and the Consolidation of the West”, cit.

### 3.2.2 Public opinion

In the JOINT public opinion survey, respondents in the six countries were asked two questions: first, whether integration in EUFSP has gone too far (i.e., a retrospective evaluation of EU integration in foreign and defence policy); second, whether more integration was desirable (i.e., a prospective evaluation of EU integration). Table 1 shows the percentage of those who believe that integration in foreign policy and

defence policy has gone too far and those who think that integration should be increased. Simultaneously, we have reported the difference between these two proportions to facilitate comparison.

**Table 1** | Retrospective and prospective support for EU foreign and defence integration

	Foreign policy			Defence policy		
	Too much integrated	Should be more integrated	Diff. Pp	Too much integrated	Should be more integrated	Diff. Pp
France	32%	44%	12	22%	61%	39
Germany	21%	57%	36	18%	62%	44
Greece	18%	68%	50	15%	71%	56
Italy	20%	55%	35	16%	61%	45
Poland	25%	49%	24	18%	63%	45
Spain	24%	58%	34	23%	64%	41

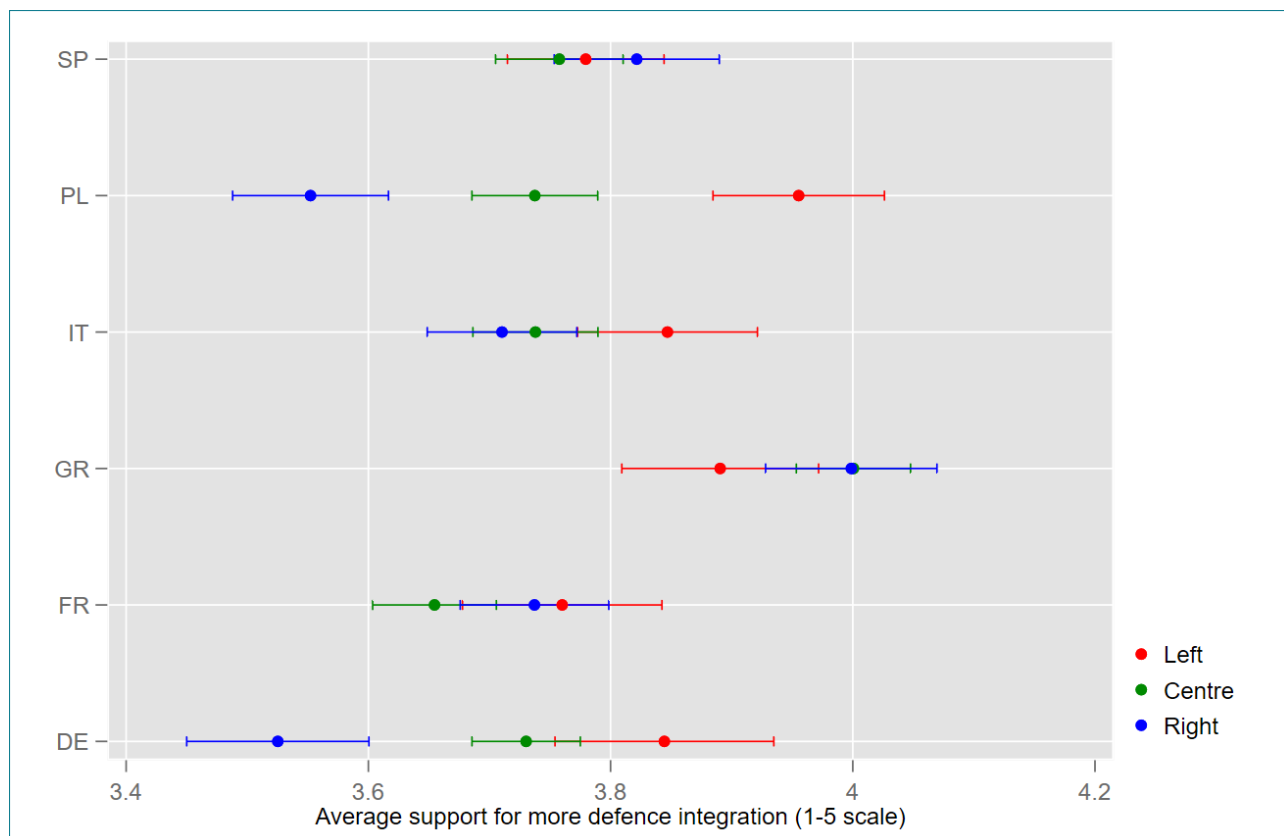
Source: Rossella Borri et al., “European Public Opinion on the Challenges and Future of EU Foreign and Security Policy”, cit.

In all the surveyed countries, the proportion of those who would like more integration is consistently higher than the proportion of those who believe there has been already too much integration. There are, of course, differences across countries regarding the intensity of this preference – Greek citizens, for instance, are the most supportive of integration in both foreign policy (68 per cent) and defence (71 per cent) – but these tend to be less relevant than the broader picture of a largely supportive public opinion. A second interesting finding emerges from the comparison between the two policy areas. While it is true that in both cases the proportion of those wanting more integration is greater than that the share of citizens who believe that there has already been too much integration, support is higher for defence integration than it is for foreign policy integration.

These data become even more intriguing when considering the preferences of citizens sorted by their ideological orientation. In Figure 8, we have reported for each country the average support (measured on a scale ranging from 1 to 5, with 1 indicating the minimum level of support and 5 the maximum level) for greater integration in the defence policy area, broken down by citizens’ ideological orientation. It clearly emerges that only in two out of five countries do citizens

differ based on their ideological orientations. In the outliers, France and Poland right-wing voters show less enthusiasm for greater integration than centrists and especially left-wing voters. In Italy, Germany and Spain, there are no significant differences among voters with different ideological orientations.

**Figure 8** | Support for more defence integration by ideological orientation

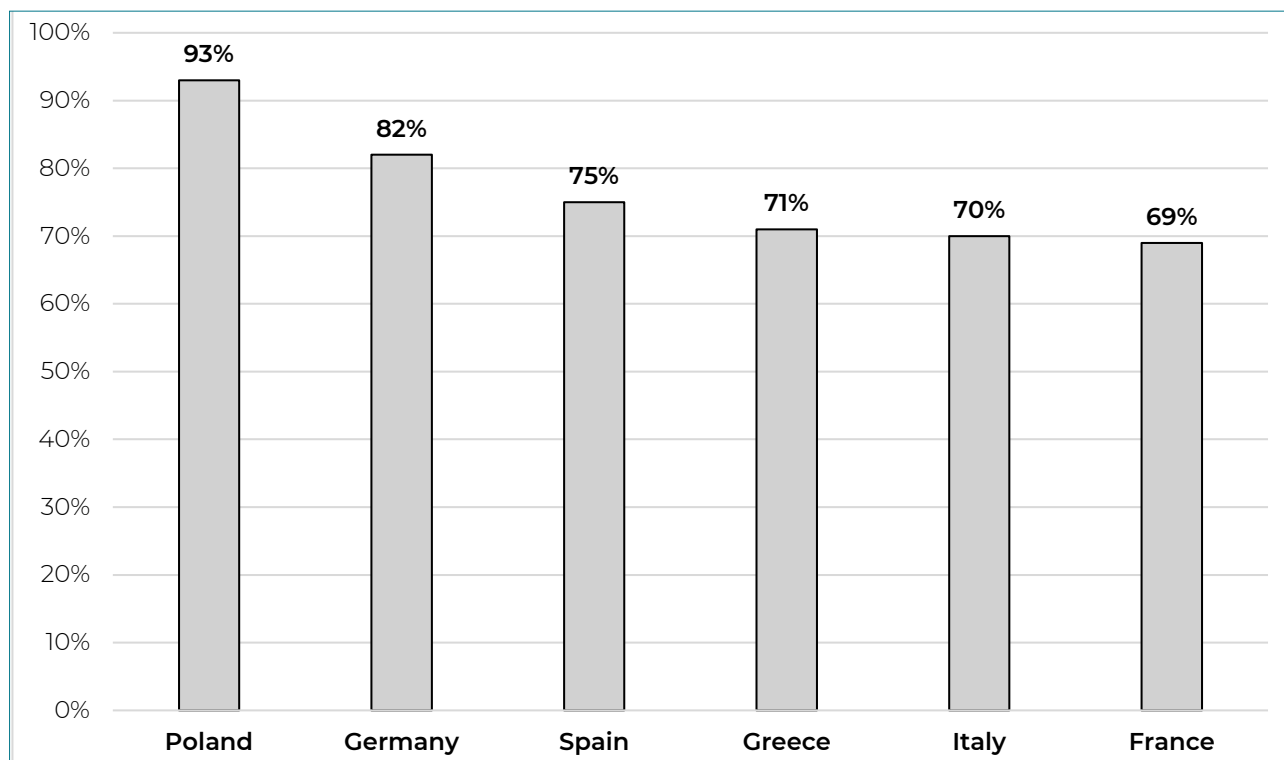


Note: The figure reports the average support for EU integration in the defence policy area as measured on 1-5 scale (95 per cent confidence intervals).

Source: Rossella Borri et al., “European Public Opinion on the Challenges and Future of EU Foreign and Security Policy”, cit.

While it is true that a large majority of public opinion supports greater integration in the defence area, it is also true that greater integration does not necessarily mean an autonomous European defence, detached, for example, from the NATO framework. In all six surveyed countries, an absolute majority of citizens considers NATO essential for the security of their respective countries (Figure 9), although the level of support varies significantly across countries (ranging from 93 per cent in Poland to 69 per cent in France).

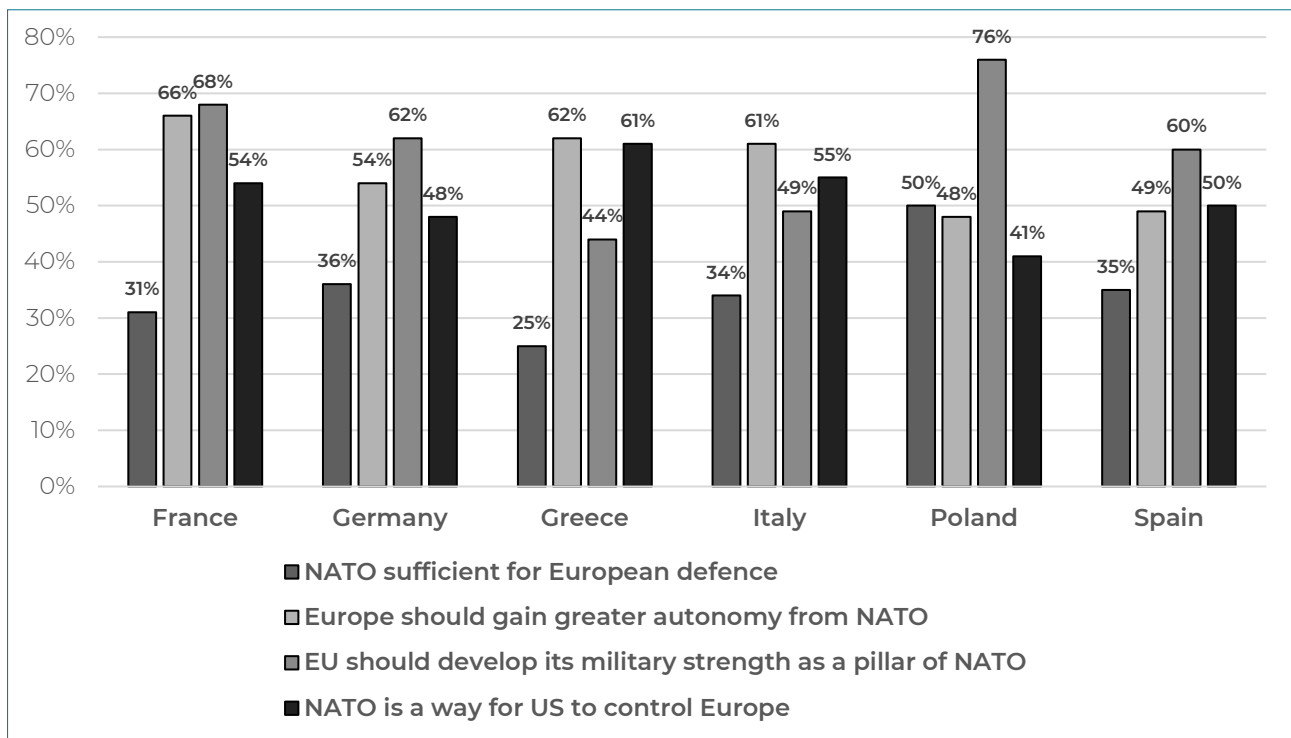
**Figure 9** | Proportion of respondents declaring NATO is still essential for national security



Source: Rossella Borri et al., “European Public Opinion on the Challenges and Future of EU Foreign and Security Policy”, cit.

When the defence issue is framed at the European level, and not solely in terms of national security, opinions become more nuanced and the role of NATO is downsized (Figure 10). While it is true that NATO is considered essential for national security by most citizens, only in Poland do 50 per cent of respondents believe it is sufficient for European security. In all other countries, this percentage is lower. In four countries – France, Germany, Greece and Italy – an absolute majority actually believes that the EU should gain greater independence from NATO. Polish and Spanish citizens are divided on the issue, with 48 and 49 per cent of them, respectively, agreeing with the proposition. A big majority of Polish respondents (76 per cent) think that the EU should develop its military strength as a pillar of NATO, an opinion largely shared in France, Germany and Spain. In Greece, only 44 per cent look at the military strengthening of Europe as a process that should unfold within NATO. In Italy, opinions are polarised, with half of respondents (49 per cent) agreeing that the EU should develop its military strength as a pillar of NATO and the other half disagreeing.

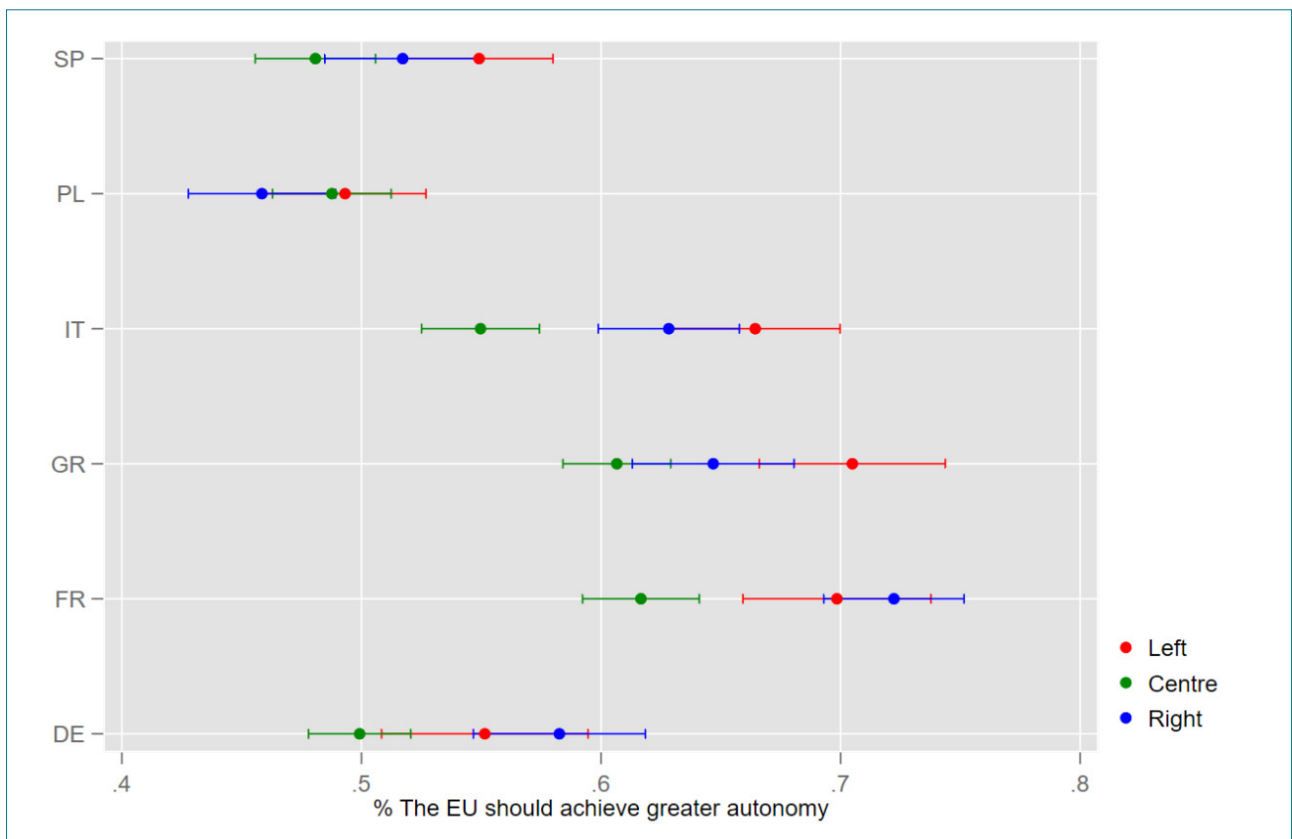
**Figure 10** | Public opinions on the relationship between EU defence and NATO



Note: The figure reports the proportion of respondents supporting each statement.  
 Source: Rossella Borri et al., "European Public Opinion on the Challenges and Future of EU Foreign and Security Policy", cit.

It is interesting to note that in all countries, the idea that the EU should gain greater autonomy from NATO is largely shared both on the right and on the left; as shown in Figure 11, there are no significant differences between left- and right-wing citizens in this respect. The absence of a significant divide across ideological lines is also observable in the two countries where opinions in this respect are more polarised, Poland and Spain. This suggests that the dividing line among citizens regarding greater European autonomy from NATO does not run along the left-right cleavage.

**Figure 11** | Support for greater EU autonomy from NATO

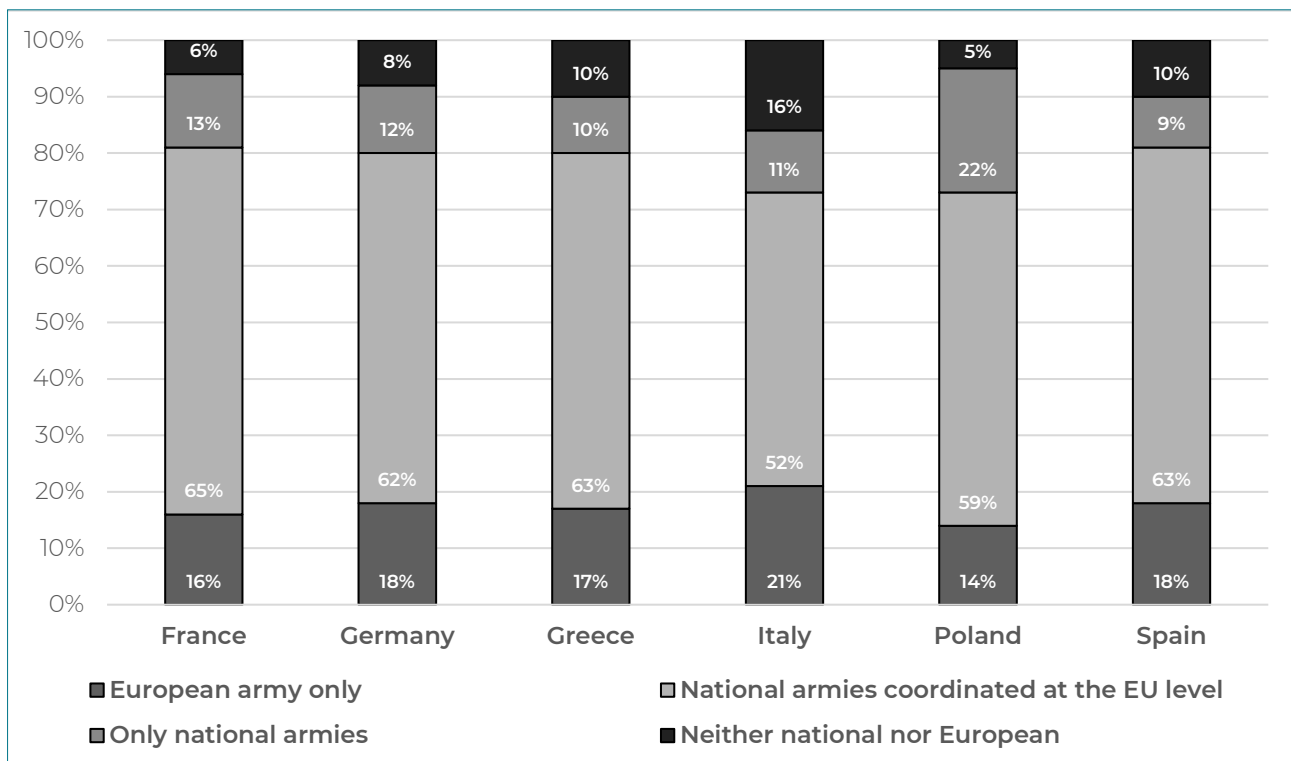


Note: The horizontal axis reports the proportion of support for the EU greater autonomy across the 6 countries in the row for the right-wing, left-wing, and centre respondents (95 per cent confidence intervals).

Source: Rossella Borri et al., “European Public Opinion on the Challenges and Future of EU Foreign and Security Policy”, cit.

Based on these data, the idea that a more autonomous European defence and NATO should coexist seems still to be valid for European citizens. This interpretation is further confirmed by an additional piece of information. Figure 12 shows the answers to a survey question concerning the preferences for national armies and a European common army. In all countries, the percentage of those who believe that a European common army should replace national armies is below 20 per cent (only in Italy does it reach 21 per cent). At the same time, the percentage of those who believe that there should only be national armies is also very low (in all countries the percentage is below 20 per cent with the exception of Poland). Even lower is the percentage of those who believe that there should be no armies at all (neither national nor European). Absolute majorities in all countries want national armies coordinated at the EU level.

**Figure 12** | Support for national and European armies (in %)



Question: Sometimes, people talk about the need to create a European army. Which of the following is closest to your opinion on this subject?

Source: Rossella Borri et al., "European Public Opinion on the Challenges and Future of EU Foreign and Security Policy", cit.

Our data are revealing. Citizens' positions on European defence do not appear superficial at all. Our findings clearly show a preference for greater defence integration, but also for a clearly limited integration. NATO is perceived as essential for national defence but not sufficient to guarantee European defence. In all countries, the preference is for some form of supranational coordination that would make it possible for the EU to provide for a stronger European pillar within NATO.



## 4. Is politicisation looming large?

So far, our data have shown wide public support for greater integration in foreign and defence policy. Our previous reports<sup>37</sup> provide robust empirical evidence showing that this support appears neither shallow nor significantly polarised across traditional ideological lines. In this policy report, we address the question of whether there is room for European foreign, security and defence policy to become politicised. In particular, we have focused here on the two fundamental conditions for politicisations to take place: first, the public must care, EUFSP must be salient; second, some elites – especially political parties – must be willing to exploit latent divisions within public opinion to campaign against the proposition of greater EUFSP integration.

We have analysed these questions by leveraging the results of a factorial survey experiment. Respondents to the JOINT survey were administered a question about their general support for the creation of a common European army. The question was preceded by a brief introduction, containing a set of statements coming from a left-wing or right-wing politician either in favour or against a common army, as well as the indication of whether these statements had generated any public controversy. Both the ideological orientation of the politician, the type of arguments used by the politician on the desirability of creating a common army (completely in favour, completely opposed or mixed), as well as whether these statements had or had not produced controversy, were randomly varied among all respondents. As a consequence, respondents could receive an introduction to the common army question reporting information about the position of a specific left or right-wing politician, framing the idea of a common army in completely positive, negative or mixed terms, with two different possible outcomes in terms of public debate (controversy or complete agreement). This design allowed us to isolate the effects of each of these three conditions (orientation of the politician, framing of the arguments on the common army, implications in terms of public debate) on the respondent's final answer. Additionally, we introduced the

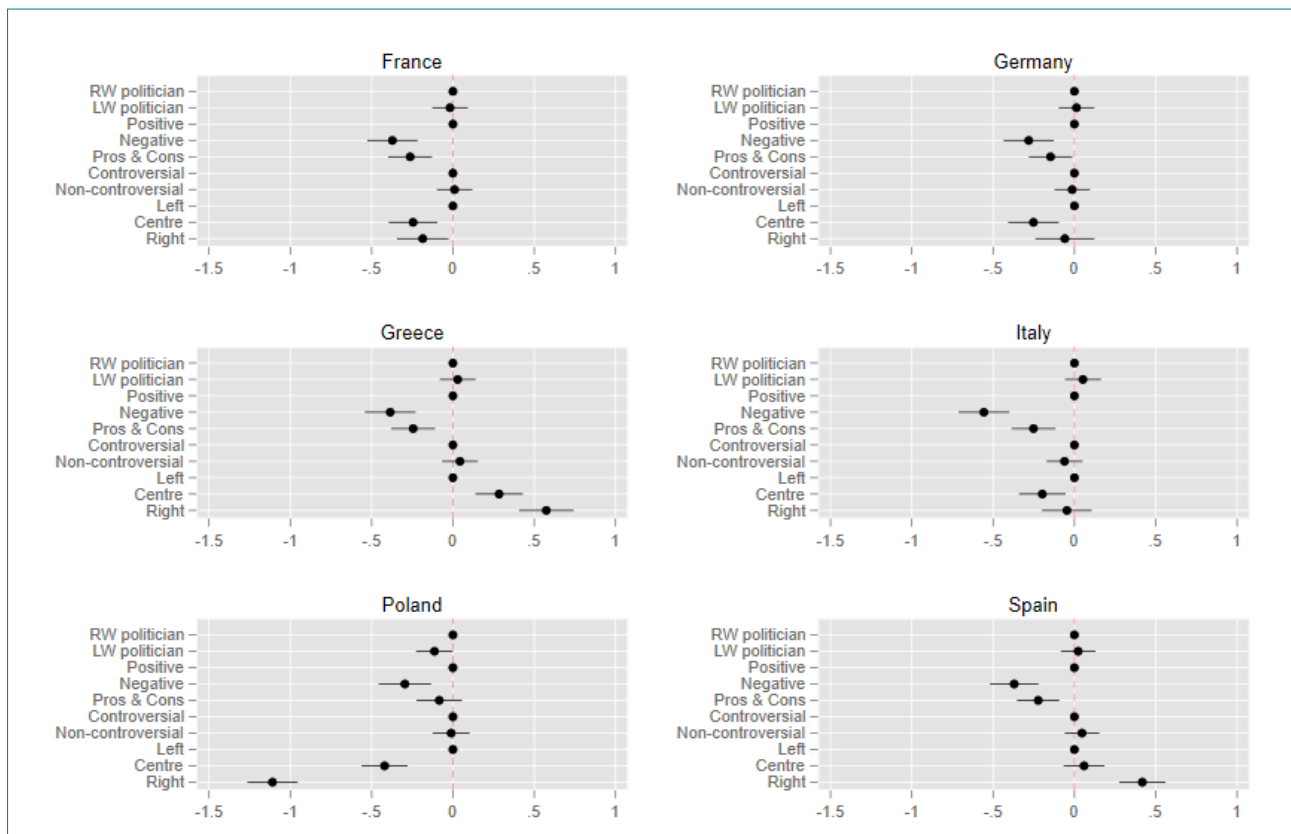
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<sup>37</sup> Pierangelo Isernia et al., “Inventory of EUFSP-related Public and Elite Opinion Surveys”, cit.; Leonardo Puleo, “Summary of Party Positions on EU Foreign, Security and Defence Policy”, cit.; Rossella Borri et al., “European Public Opinion on the Challenges and Future of EU Foreign and Security Policy”, cit.

ideological orientation of the respondents themselves into our analysis to verify to what extent individuals with different orientations present significantly different positions on the desirability of creating a common army.


The experiment has produced four findings, shown in Figure 13. First, the ideological orientation of the politician whose statement in support or against was relayed to respondents does not have a significant effect on the choices of the respondents. The fact that a right or left-wing politician is discussing the desirability of a common European army does not significantly affect the likelihood of respondents declaring themselves in favour of a common army.

**Figure 13** | A factorial experiment on public opinion attitudes towards a common European army



Note: This graph reports the average effect in the dependent variable, support for a common European army of each of the condition listed in the vertical axis, while holding all other variables in the model constant. As an example, fully negative or mixed (pros & cons) arguments decrease support for a common army across all countries as compared to positive arguments.

Source: Rossella Borri et al., "European Public Opinion on the Challenges and Future of EU Foreign and Security Policy", cit.




Second, the ideological orientation of the respondents does not always seem to have an effect: right and left-wing citizens do not significantly differ in their preferences in Germany and Italy (where, however, centrist voters are slightly less likely than left-wing voters to support a common army). In France, right-wing citizens are slightly less favourable than left-wing citizens and in Poland much less so. On the contrary, right-wing citizens are significantly more favourable towards a common European army than left-wing citizens in Greece and Spain. In general, the differences between right-wing and left-wing citizens in some countries do not seem to follow a consistent trend.

Third, whether the politician's arguments have sparked heated debate or not has no effect on the orientation of citizens. In this case as well, citizens' opinions, in all six countries, are not influenced by any controversy on the topic generated by statements from political elites.

What seems to really matter in shaping citizens' choices is the framing with which the issue of the common army is proposed: not so much who says what, but how it is said. Those exposed to a completely positive framing (i.e., the politician frames the choice for a common army as an entirely positive thing from different perspectives) are significantly more supportive of a common European army than those exposed to a completely negative or mixed one. This suggests that public opinion is indeed responsive and sensitive to how the proposition for more EUFSP is presented – that is, whether they find the argument in favour or against convincing.

The JOINT survey has found that support for a common European army does not exceed 20 per cent in any of the six countries. Our experiment, however, shows that respondents are receptive to the “better argument” on the issue. Respondents in the experiment were not sensitive to the political orientation of the proponent (or opponent), but rather, regardless of the political orientation of political entrepreneurs, they are sensitive to the potential advantages or disadvantages of a common army. In our perspective, this indicates that political parties supportive of more defence – and by extension, foreign and security policy – integration at the EU level may have a responsive public if they use the “right” argument. At the same time, the experiment also suggests that there is room for top-down politicisation of the European defence issue (and, by inference, foreign and security policy in



general), which can be exploited from parties across the whole political spectrum. This means that political entrepreneurs (either on the left or on the right) can seize the issue of EUFSP integration and politicise it, if they are able to frame the public debate according to their own preference, for or against.

## Conclusions

Our study has shed some light on the potential sources of politicisation and on the role of political debates in these countries. The results suggest that, irrespective of ideological leanings, the content of what s/he says is crucial in swaying the orientation of the public. This result raises two issues. The first is that EUFSP is “up for grab” from policy entrepreneurs from either left or right. The second and most important is that arguments matter more than ideology in shaping public attitudes. The implication for public debate is pretty consequential: the nature of the debate, the ability to convey substantive elements in it rather than escalating the controversy in symbolic ways counts a lot in determining whether the issue might politically turn into a political win. This clearly also impose the onus on the politicians and on their ability to let the debate run in substantive ways rather than quickly turn into a play of tricks for political mobilisation.

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