MISSIONE 4
ISTRUZIONE RICERCA

LESSONS LEARNED? THE PAST AND FUTURE OF ITALIAN DEFENSE POLICY

DELIVERABLE 4.1

WORKING PAPER

"THREAT PERCEPTIONS, DEFENSE PREFERENCES AND SUPPORT FOR MILITARY OPERATIONS ABROAD IN EUROPE"

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1. INTRODUCTION[1]

This paper examines public opinion on foreign and security policy, with a particular focus on military operations abroad (MOAs) in Italy and four other European countries. One of the central objectives of this research is to assess how missions abroad, along with broader security and defense policy issues, are perceived within the wider public debate, encompassing both mass public opinion and political elites. As part of WP5, this paper reports public attitudes toward foreign and security policy based on data from an original survey conducted in summer 2025 in five European countries – France, Germany, Italy, Poland, and the United Kingdom.

Building on the previous deliverable (Amantini et al. 2025), the analysis focuses on four key dimensions of attitudes toward foreign and security policy: 1) threat perceptions; 2) sentiments toward key international actors and national armed forces; 3) support for different mechanisms of defense arrangements; and 4) support for the use of force in the context of military interventions. With regard to support for the use of force – our fourth dimension – we examine public attitudes in two hypothetical scenarios related to the Russian threat: a presumably less domestically contentious United Nations-led peacekeeping operation following the war in Ukraine aimed at maintaining a ceasefire, and a presumably more contentious operation to defend Estonia, a NATO member state, from a Russian attack.

Through descriptive and inferential analyses, we provide a comprehensive overview of public attitudes toward foreign and security policy in Europe during this challenging and transformative period. The findings presented here are directly compared with those from a previous study employing similar questions, as summarized in the earlier deliverable (Amantini et al. 2025). They are also broadly contrasted with results derived from other surveys conducted within this research project, including those targeting political elites and NGO representatives, which are presented in a separate deliverable (Olmastroni and Vignoli 2026).

[1] This working paper was prepared by Valerio Vignoli (Post-doc researcher, University of Siena) and Francesco Olmastroni (Associate Professor, University of Siena). 27 February 2026.

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2. CONTEXT AND OVERVIEW

Previous research suggests that EU foreign and security policy has often operated under a "permissive consensus," rooted in a combination of limited salience and low levels of public information (Angelucci et al. 2024). Under such conditions, political elites have enjoyed substantial autonomy in shaping external action, facing relatively weak electoral incentives to politicize security and defense issues. In other words, foreign policy has frequently remained insulated from partisan competition and public contestation.

In the Italian case, this dynamic has been particularly evident. Despite profound transformations in the party system and the persistence of ideological cleavages, policymakers have displayed remarkable continuity in certain areas, especially defense policy and military operations abroad (MOAs). Coticchia and Vignoli (2020) trace the domestic foundations of this continuity to parliamentary behavior, documenting a broad and enduring cross-party consensus on key foreign and security policy votes between 1994 and 2016. This pattern suggests that, at least until recently, foreign and defense policy in Italy was characterized more by elite convergence than by open political conflict, reinforcing the notion of a relatively insulated policy domain.

However, the international and European security environment has changed significantly in recent years. Russia's aggression against Ukraine, renewed debates on NATO's role, and increasing discussions surrounding the creation of a common EU army have heightened both the salience and visibility of foreign and security policy issues within domestic political arenas. These developments may reduce the scope for elite autonomy by increasing public attention, activating partisan divides, and encouraging political actors to adopt more explicit and differentiated positions on security and defense matters. As a result, what was once a domain of relative consensus may become increasingly politicized.

Against this backdrop, this paper examines contemporary public attitudes toward foreign and security policy across five European countries. By focusing on threat perceptions, sentiments toward key international actors, preferences for different defense arrangements, and support for the use of force, it contributes to the broader literature on the domestic determinants of foreign policy. In doing so, it allows us to assess whether public opinion continues to provide elites with broad latitude in matters of security and defense, or whether it is becoming a more constraining and politically salient factor in European foreign policy decision-making. It also enables a comparative evaluation of whether similar dynamics are unfolding across different European contexts or whether national trajectories continue to diverge.

3. THE SURVEY

To explore public attitudes toward foreign and security policy, we fielded a survey in five European countries – France, Germany, Italy, Poland, and the United Kingdom – between June 30 and July 23, 2025. In all countries, the sample was drawn from an opt-in online panel owned and managed by Dynata, a leading marketing research company, using a stratified quota sampling procedure. Quotas were set for gender, age group, area of residence, and level of education, in line with the distribution of the adult populations as reported by Eurostat (2025). As shown in Table 1, each national sample consists of approximately 2,000 valid respondents (for more technical information on the survey design and implementation, see Olmastroni and Vignoli 2025).

Table 1. Number of interviews by country

	Valid responses	Speeders	Total
France	2,009	237	2,246
Germany	1,995	245	2,240
Italy	2,001	244	2,245
Poland	2,020	249	2,269
United Kingdom	2,006	171	2,177
Total	10,031	1,146	11,177

In this paper, we focus exclusively on questions related to four key dimensions: 1) threat perceptions; 2) sentiments toward key international actors and national armed forces; 3) support for different mechanisms of defense arrangements (national armies, their integration within EU and NATO frameworks, and the relationship between these two frameworks); and 4) support for the use of force in the context of military interventions. Analyzing these dimensions allows us to evaluate whether attitudes towards security and defense policy are characterized by polarization or by consensus among political elites and the general public. From a longitudinal and comparative perspective, this analysis sheds light on potential divergences between policymakers and their constituents, highlighting how ideological clusters may differ across European countries (Italy compared with other European 'middle powers'). A more detailed description of the four dimensions and their relevance is provided in the previous deliverable (Amantini et al. 2025).

In all analyses, we excluded respondents who completed the survey in an unrealistically short amount of time (so-called "speeders," approximately 10 per cent of the total sample, defined as those with a completion time less than 40 percent of the median questionnaire duration). We also applied iterative post-stratification weights (raking) for gender, age group, area of residence, and level of education. The order of presentation of the two military scenarios (i.e., a UN-led peacekeeping operation following the war in Ukraine and an intervention to defend a NATO member state from an external attack) was randomized.

4. RESULTS

Perceived threats

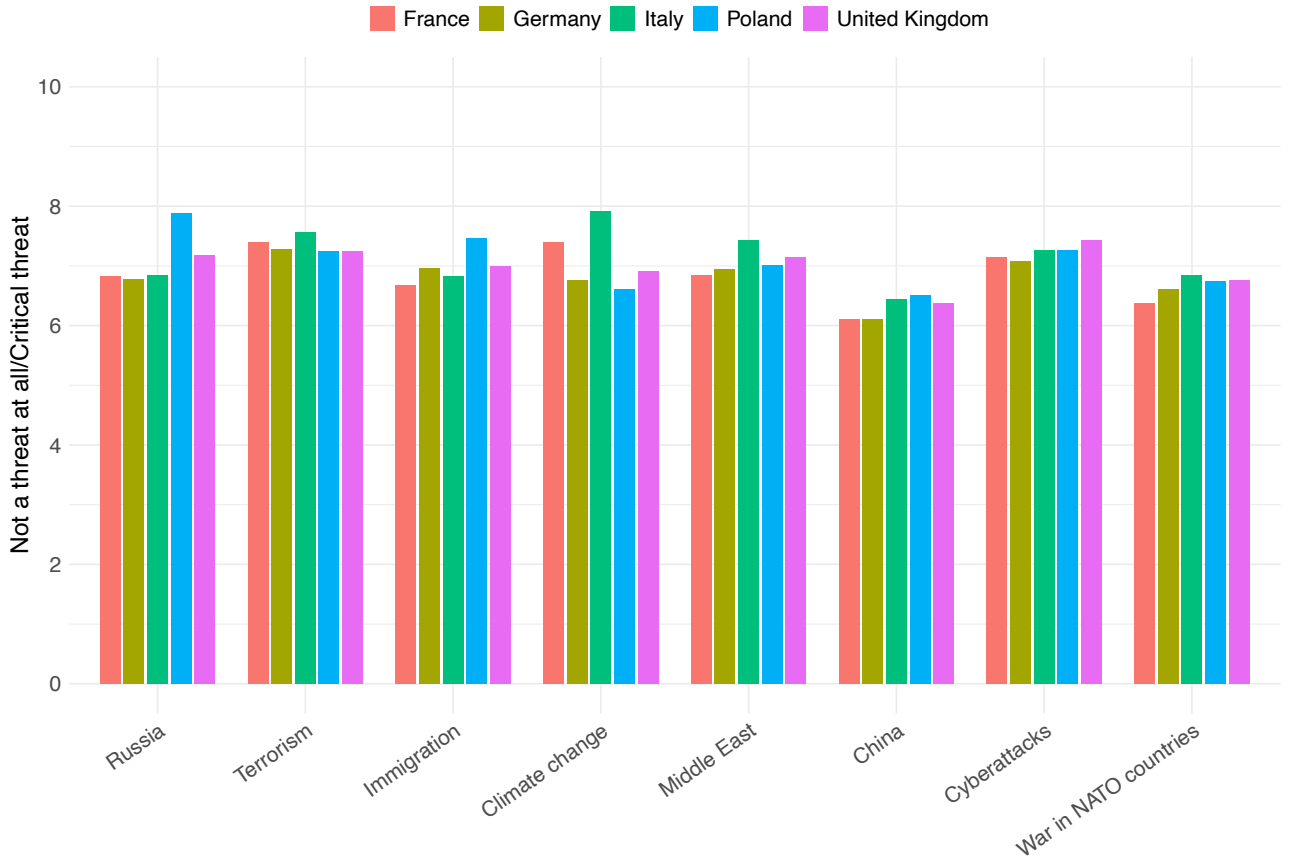
We start our analysis by examining the first dimension: threat perceptions. In the survey, respondents were asked to rate the extent to which the following items represent a threat to the security of their own country on a scale from 0 (not a threat at all) to 10 (critical threat): Russia's territorial ambitions; international terrorism; large numbers of immigrants and refugees coming into the country; tensions in the Middle East; tensions between the West and China; cyber-attacks on the country's computer networks; the possibility of war involving NATO countries; and climate change. The items were selected on the basis of both our assessment of the most salient contemporary security challenges and a review of threat indicators used in recent European surveys, thus ensuring comparability and substantive relevance.

In the previous deliverable (Amantini et al. 2025), we focused in particular on the perceived threat of a potential war involving NATO countries, drawing on data from a survey conducted by NATO, and on the perceived threat posed by Russian interference, using data from the InTune survey. The present analysis allows us to reassess these perceptions in light of the evolving geopolitical context and to situate them within a broader set of security concerns.

Figure 1 presents respondents' answers in our survey. Overall, all the listed threats are perceived as fairly serious, with mean scores ranging from 6.3 to 7.3. This relatively compressed distribution at the upper end of the scale suggests a generalized sense of insecurity across countries. International terrorism (7.3), cyberattacks (7.2), climate change (7.1), and Russian expansionism (7.1) generate slightly higher levels of concern than the other items, indicating that respondents tend to view both traditional security threats (terrorism, military aggression) and non-traditional or hybrid threats (cyberattacks, climate change) as comparably salient.

Cross-national differences, however, reveal meaningful variation. In Italy, climate change (7.9) and tensions in the Middle East (7.4) are perceived as more serious threats than in the other European countries considered. Italian respondents, on the other hand, appear to view Russian territorial ambitions as less concerning for national security than their Polish and British counterparts (6.8 versus 7.8 and 7.1, respectively), consistent with Poland's geographic exposure and historically heightened sensitivity to Russian assertiveness. Unlike the results reported in the previous deliverable, differences between Germany, Italy, and France on the issue are minimal, suggesting a certain convergence in threat assessments among Western European publics.

Figure 1. Perception of threat to national security



Question: Now, below is a list of threats that some people consider as a critical threat to the security of (COUNTRY) today while others do not consider it to be a threat at all. For each one, please select how serious a threat you think it is using a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means "Not a threat at all" and 10 "Critical threat". (Average).

Consistent with earlier findings (Amantini et al. 2025), Italian respondents express greater concern about the possibility of war than their French and German counterparts (6.8 against 6.4

in both countries). Although the scale used in this survey ranges from 0 to 10 rather than from 0 to 100, the proportional level of perceived threat for this item closely mirrors that observed previously, reinforcing the robustness of this pattern over time.

Taken together, these findings suggest that while a broad sense of insecurity is shared across the five countries, national contexts continue to shape the relative prioritization of specific threats. This provides an important foundation for interpreting subsequent attitudes toward defense arrangements and the use of force.

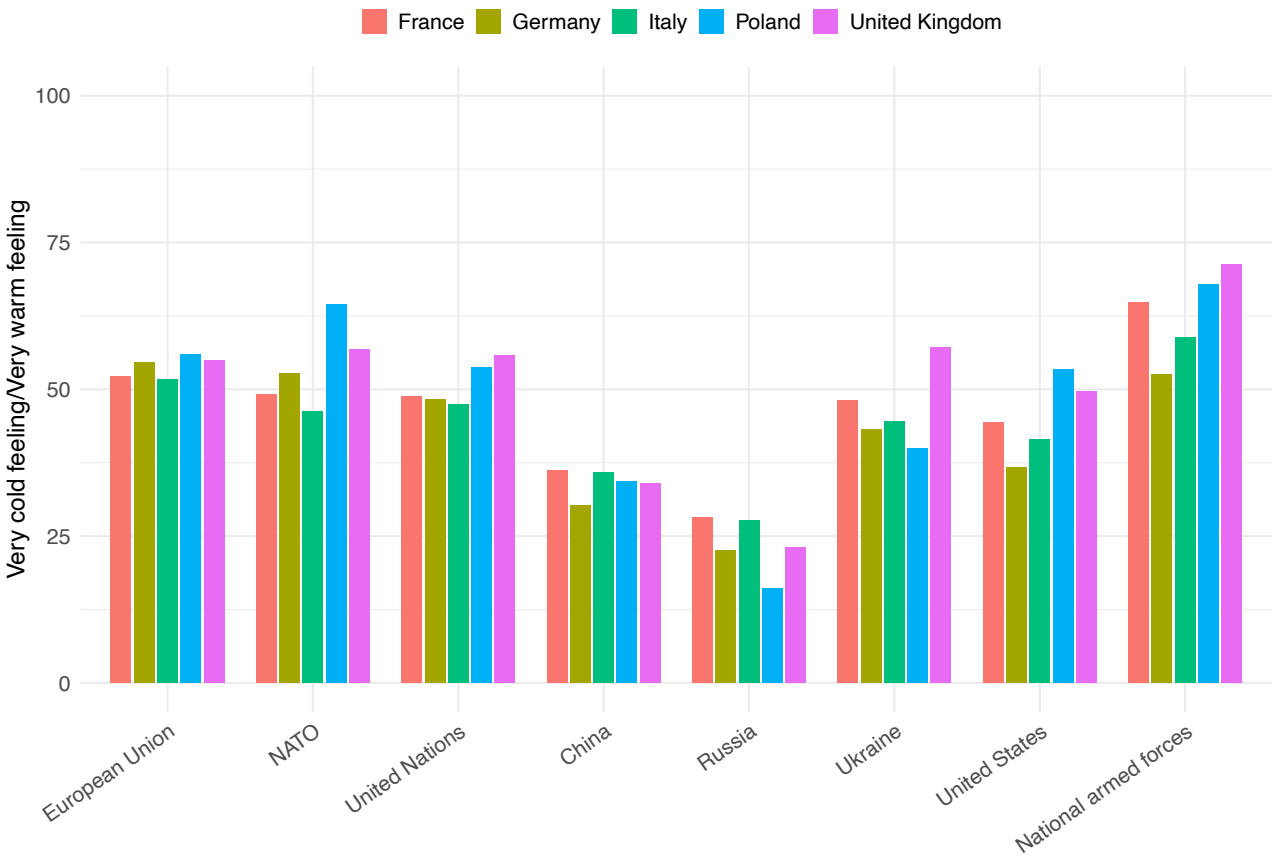
Opinions on international actors

We now turn to the second dimension: sentiments towards international actors and armed forces. To measure this dimension, respondents were asked to rate their feelings toward a set of actors using a feeling thermometer ranging from 0 (very cold feeling) to 100 (very warm feeling). These actors included the European Union, NATO, the United Nations, China, Russia, Ukraine, The United States, and the national armed forces. These items were selected because of their substantive relevance in the current geopolitical context and their comparability with indicators used in existing surveys discussed in the previous deliverable (Amantini et al. 2025). In particular, the earlier report analyzed public sentiment in France, Germany, and Italy toward the United States, Russia, China, the United Nations, and NATO using data from the Pew Research Center.

Figure 2 presents the results. A considerable degree of variation emerges both across actors and across countries. The United States elicits slightly negative sentiments overall (mean score 46.5), but with substantial cross-national differences. Germany stands out as the most critical country (36.7), whereas Poland (53.3) and the United Kingdom (49.7) display comparatively warmer attitudes. This pattern of relatively stronger anti-American sentiment in Germany was also evident in the previous deliverable.

Sentiment toward China is even more lukewarm (34 on average), with comparatively limited cross-national variation, suggesting a broadly cautious or skeptical stance across the five countries. Russia generates strongly negative reactions (23 on average), particularly in Poland (16), and to a lesser extent in Italy (27.6) and France (28.2). Compared with PEW data analyzed in the previous deliverable, our survey reveals somewhat greater cross-national variation in attitudes towards Russia, possibly reflecting the evolving security context and differing national sensitivities to Russian actions.

Figure 2. Feelings toward countries and institutions



Question: Now we would like to rate your feelings towards some countries and institutions with '100' meaning a "Very warm, favourable feeling", '0' meaning a "Very cold, unfavourable feeling", and '50' meaning "Not particularly warm or cold". You can use any number from 0 to 100. (Average).

By contrast, Ukraine attracts moderately neutral-to-slightly positive evaluations overall (46.6), with notable variation. In the United Kingdom, sentiment is clearly positive (57), while in other countries it remains closer to the midpoint of the scale.

Turning to international organizations, the European Union receives moderately positive evaluations (54), relatively limited cross-national variation. While the EU is viewed more favorably than most state actors, the absence of strongly positive scores may signal the persistence of diffuse Euroscepticism across countries. NATO (53.9) and the United Nations (50.8) are evaluated somewhat less favorably overall. Italian respondents are noticeably more critical of both institutions than their Polish and British counterparts (for NATO and the UN, respectively: 64.5 and 53.8 in Poland; 56.8 and 55.7 in the UK). As highlighted in the previous

deliverable, using Pew data, Italy exhibits comparatively colder attitudes toward these two organizations (Amantini et al. 2025).

Finally, national armed forces receive clearly positive evaluations overall (63), confirming the enduring legitimacy of national military institutions. However, this support is somewhat weaker in Italy (58.8) and especially in Germany (52.5), suggesting that historical legacies and domestic political cultures may continue to shape attitudes toward the military.

Overall, these findings point to a structured pattern of public sentiment: strong rejection of Russia, cautious distance from China, ambivalent or differentiated attitudes toward the United States, moderate support for international organizations, and robust – though not uniform – confidence in national armed forces. These attitudinal configurations provide an important backdrop for understanding preferences regarding defense arrangements and the use of force.

Support for institutionalized defense mechanisms

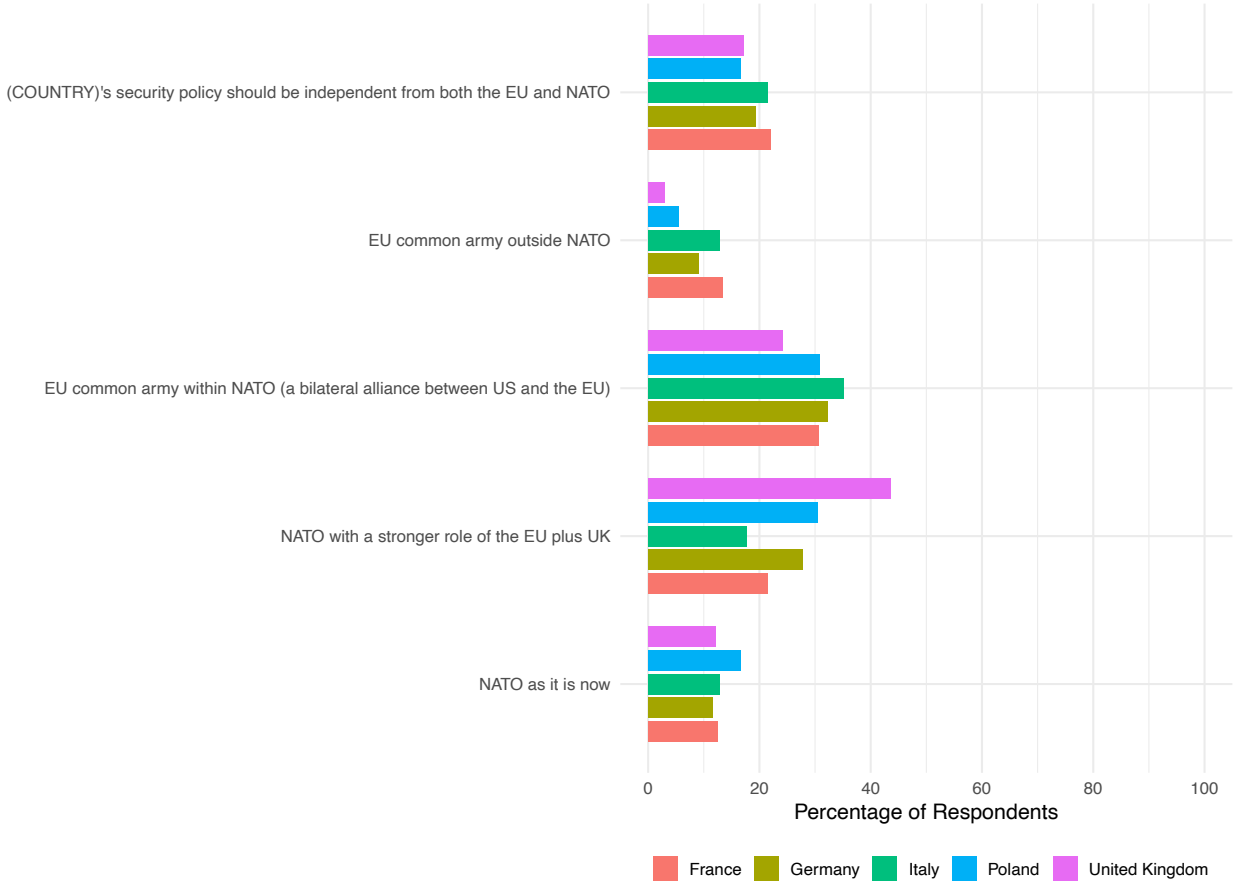
To measure public support for different institutional mechanisms of defense, we asked respondents two separate questions. First, we invited them to indicate which option they considered the best solution for their country's security among five alternatives. These options varied in terms of the degree of integration of national army within EU and NATO frameworks and in the relationship between these two institutional arrangements. Figure 3 reports the percentage of responses for each option across the five countries. Overall, preferences are relatively evenly distributed, suggesting the absence of a single dominant vision of European security. Two options receive slightly higher levels of support: the creation of a common EU army within NATO (31 percent), and a stronger role for the EU (including the UK) within the NATO framework (28 percent). These results indicate that respondents tend to favor solutions that combine greater European coordination with the continued centrality of NATO, rather than alternatives that would fundamentally decouple the two frameworks.

By contrast, a common EU army operating outside NATO emerges as by far the least preferred option – garnering even less support than a purely national security policy independent of both the EU and NATO (9 percent versus 19 percent). This finding suggests that, despite ongoing debates about European strategic autonomy, a fully autonomous EU defense structure currently lacks broad public backing.

Cross-country differences are generally limited, pointing to a certain convergence in overall preferences. However, some national patterns stand out. Italian respondents emerge as the

strongest supporters of a common EU army, both within and outside NATO (35 and 13 percent, respectively), confirming Italy's comparatively pro-integration stance in defense matters. British respondents, in contrast, express markedly stronger support for NATO as the primary security framework (44 percent) and are significantly less favorable toward the establishment of a common EU army than respondents in the other countries (3 percent outside NATO and 24 percent within it). This pattern is consistent with the United Kingdom's traditional reliance on NATO and its more skeptical orientation toward EU-led defense integration.

Figure 3. Support for various institutional mechanisms of defense

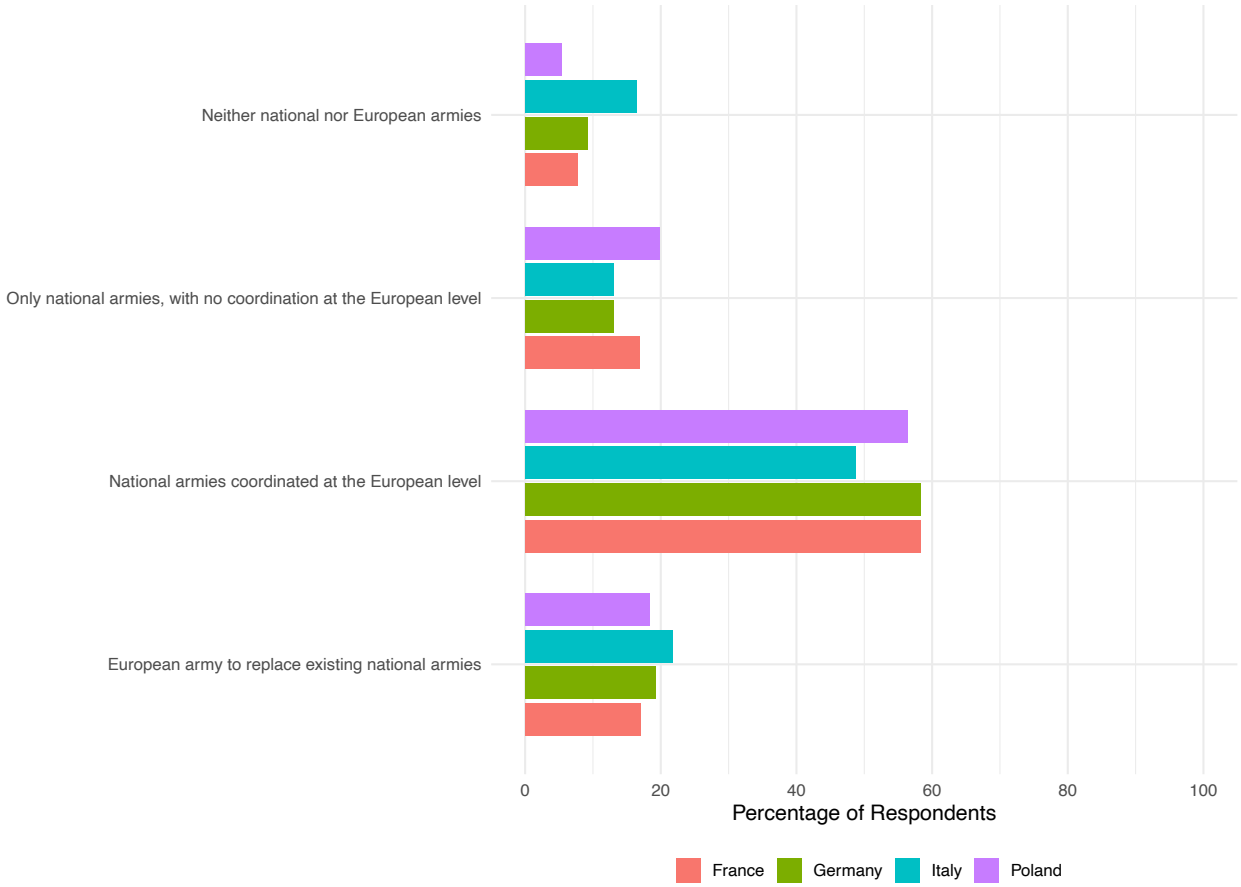


Question: There is a lot of discussion on what is the best framework in which the (NATIONALITY) security policy should be carried out. You find below a list of possible solutions that (COUNTRY) could pursue. Please, choose the one you think would be the preferred choice for (COUNTRY).

Second, respondents were presented with a set of options reflecting varying degrees of integration of national forces into a potential EU common army and were asked to select the

arrangement that best reflected their views. Figure 4 reports the average percentage of respondents choosing each alternative across the four EU countries in our sample (excluding the United Kingdom). A clear majority of respondents (56 percent) indicate that the optimal security arrangement for their country consists of maintaining national armies coordinated at the EU level. This option clearly outweighs all others, suggesting that most citizens favor enhanced European cooperation without fully relinquishing national control over military forces. Only a minority support replacing national armies entirely with a single EU army (19 percent) or, conversely, having no coordination of national forces at the EU level (16 percent). An even smaller share of respondents favors the complete absence of both national armies and a common EU army (10 percent).

Figure 4. Support for various degrees of integration of national armies in the EU Common Army



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

Cross-national differences are present but not dramatic. French and German respondents are the most supportive of coordinating national armies at the EU level (58 percent). Italy once again stands out as the country where a comparatively larger proportion of respondents express support for a fully-fledged common EU army (22 percent). Interestingly, this result diverges from the Eurobarometer data discussed in the previous deliverable (Amantini et al. 2025), which show relatively similar levels of support for a common army in Italy, France, and Germany – at least in the most recent wave. Italy is also the country where support for having no army at all is comparatively higher (17 percent), suggesting a more polarized or heterogeneous distribution of preferences.

Taken together, these results indicate that while European coordination in defense is widely accepted, full supranational integration remains a minority position. The dominant preference continues to center on cooperative models that preserve national armed forces within a broader EU framework.

Use of military force

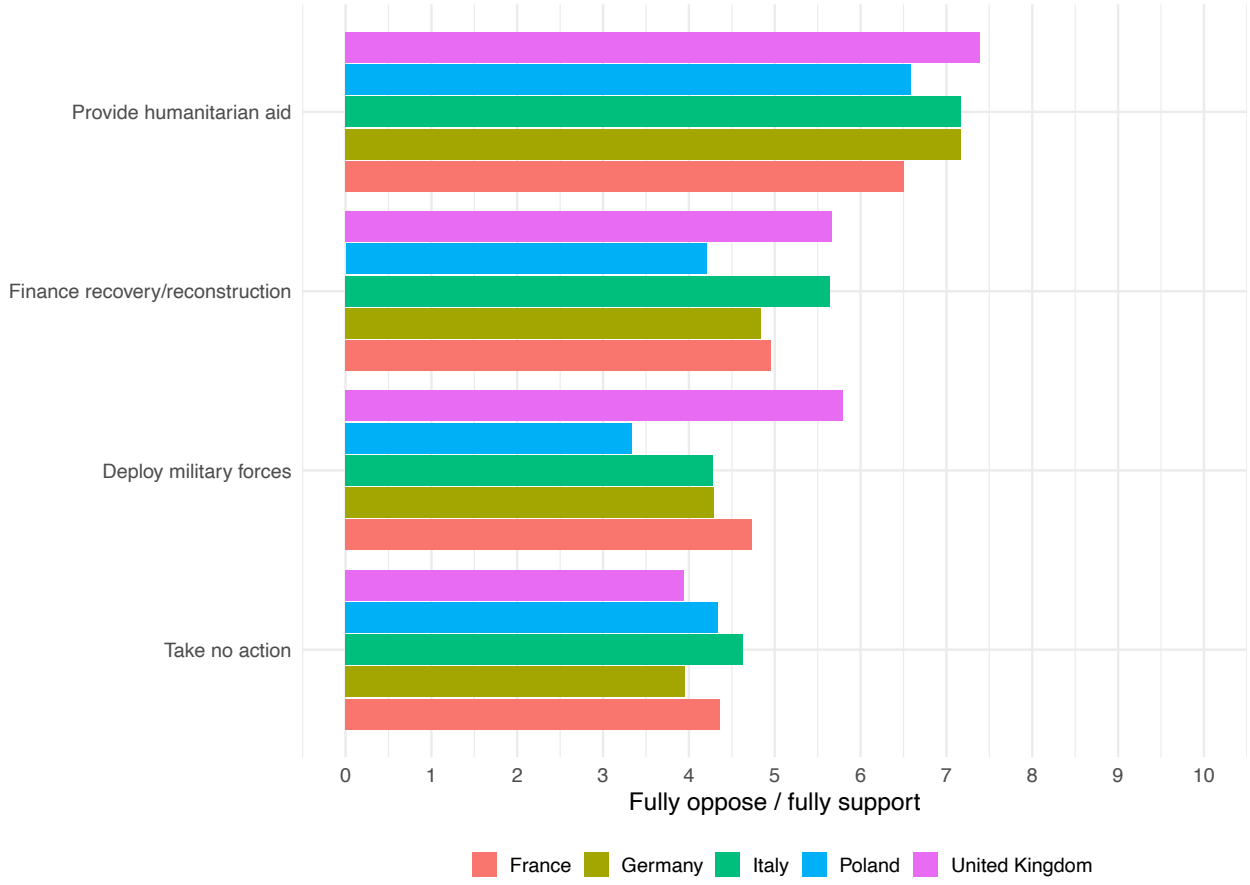
As anticipated, we first examined public support for the use of force in the context of a hypothetical UN-led peacekeeping operation following the war in Ukraine. Respondents were presented with four potential policy options reflecting different levels of governmental commitment in this scenario: deploy military forces to Ukraine; providing humanitarian aid; financing Ukraine's recovery and reconstruction; or taking no action. They were first asked to rate their level of support for each option on a scale from 0 (full opposition) to 10 (full support), and subsequently to indicate their preferred course of action.

Figure 5 reports the average level of support for each initiative across countries. Overall, respondents tend to favor more moderate and indirect forms of engagement – providing humanitarian aid (6.96) and financing reconstruction (5.06) – over more consequential options such as deploying troops (4.49) or remaining completely inactive (4.25). This pattern suggests that while there is broad support for solidarity with Ukraine, publics remain cautious about direct military involvement.

At the same time, notable cross-national differences emerge. The United Kingdom stands out as the country where respondents express the strongest support for sending troops (5.8), indicating comparatively greater openness to direct military engagement. Poland, by contrast, records the lowest level of support for troop deployment (3.3), despite its geographic proximity to the conflict

and historically strong anti-Russian sentiment. Italy appears as the country where respondents are, on average, most inclined toward inaction (4.6).

Figure 5. Level of support for national policy initiatives in a post-war UN peacekeeping operation in Ukraine



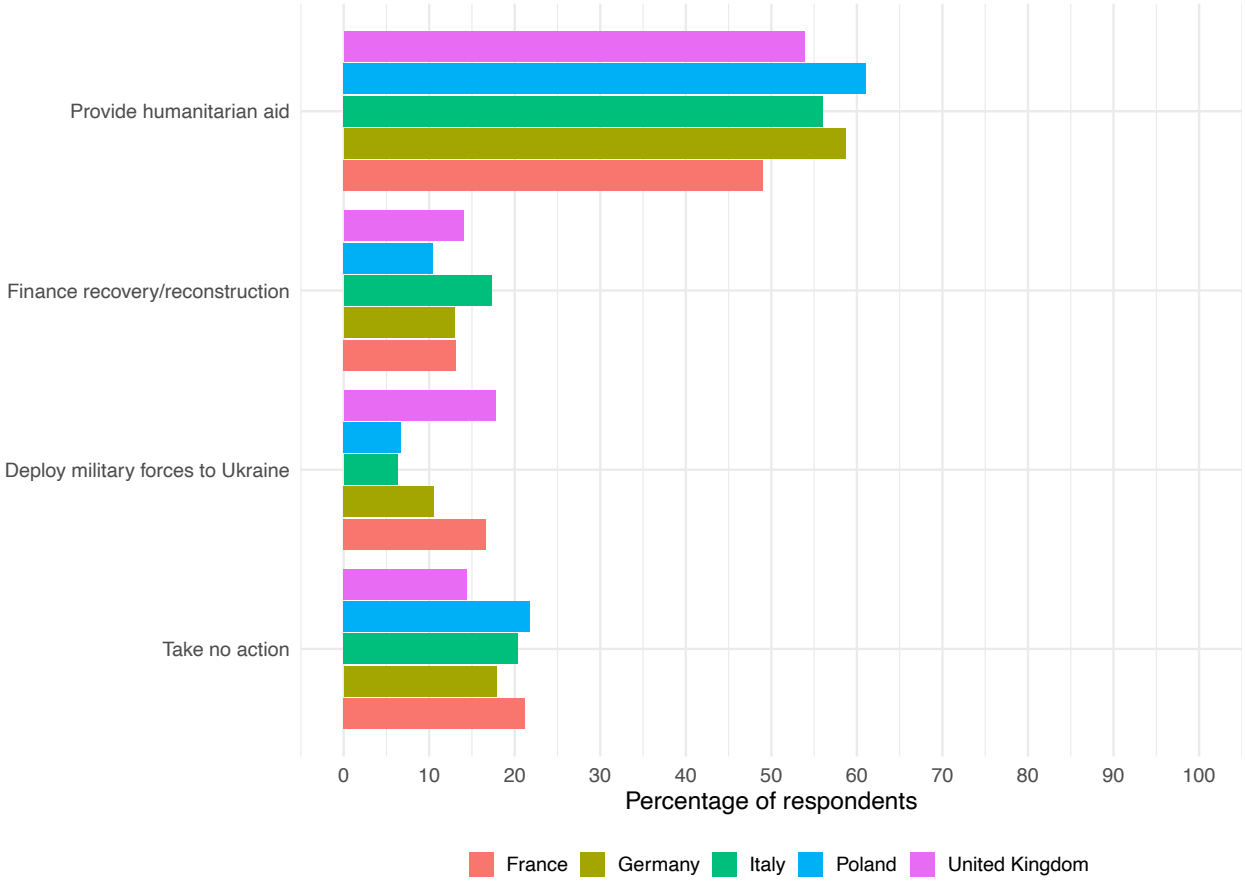
Question: Using a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means "Fully oppose" and 10 means "Fully support", to what extent do you support or oppose each of the following policy initiatives to address the situation? (Average).

Figure 6 presents the percentage of respondents in each country who selected each option as their preferred policy. An absolute majority favors the provision of humanitarian aid (56 percent).

The deployment of troops emerges as the least preferred alternative overall (12 percent). However, in France and the United Kingdom, support for troop deployment is significantly higher than elsewhere (17 and 18 percent, respectively), suggesting that in these countries a non-negligible minority is willing to endorse direct military engagement. In the United Kingdom, the proportion of respondents favoring inaction is also substantially lower than in the other countries

(14 percent compared to an average of 19 percent), reinforcing the impression of a relatively more proactive public stance.

Figure 6. Preferred national policy initiative in a post-war UN peacekeeping operation in Ukraine (%)



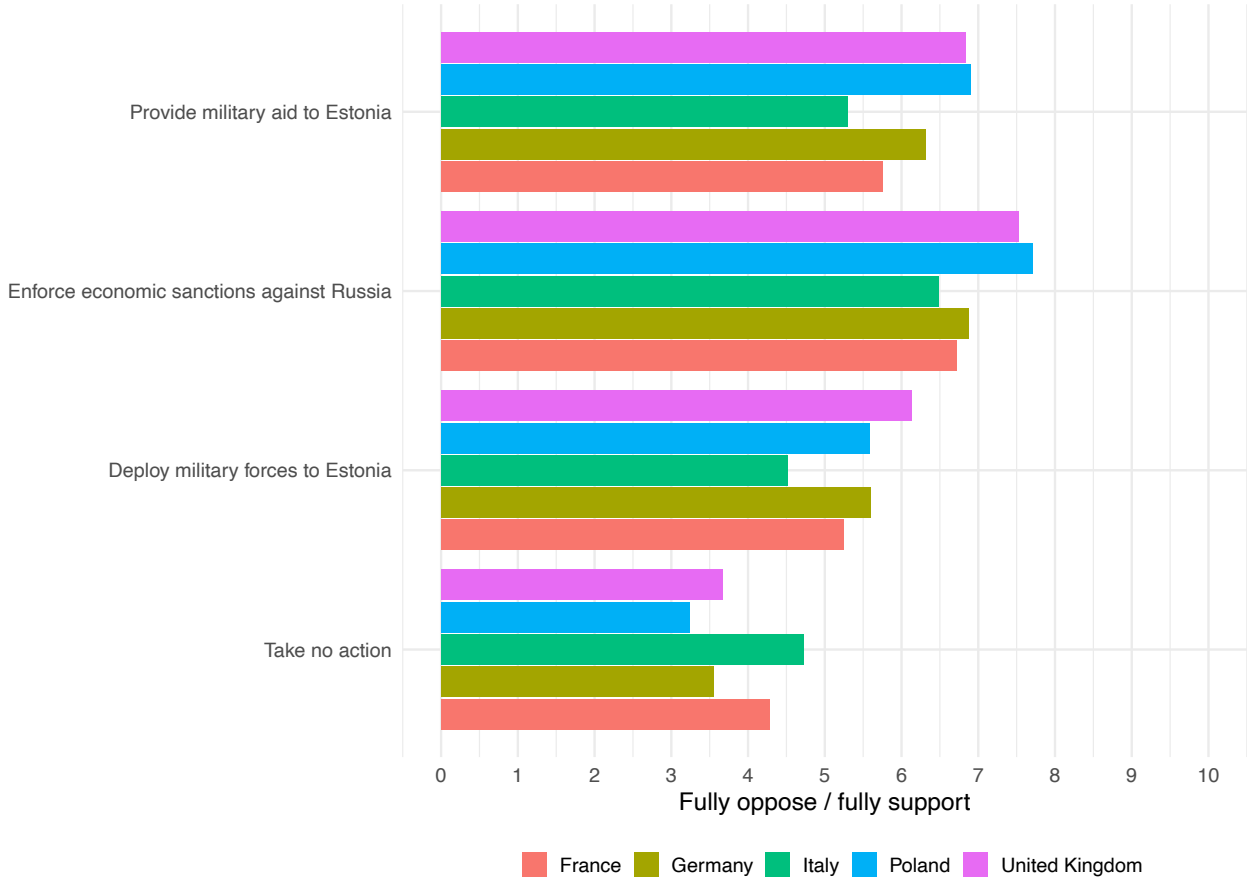
Question: If you had to choose only one of the following policy initiatives, which one would you select to address the situation?

We formulated the same questions in a second scenario involving a potential intervention to defend Estonia, a NATO member state, from a Russian attack. Respondents were presented with four policy options that again varied in their level of commitment: deploying military forces to Estonia; providing military assistance to Estonia; imposing economic sanctions on Russia; or taking no action. Figure 7 reports the average level of support for each initiative on the same 0 to 10 scale across countries. As in the previous scenario. respondents tend to favor intermediate responses – imposing sanctions on Russia (7.06) and providing military assistance to Estonia (6.22) – over either troop deployment (5.41) or complete inaction (3.89). This pattern indicates a

willingness to respond firmly to aggression, but with some caution regarding direct military engagement.

Cross-national differences are again significant. Respondents in Poland (7.7 for sanctions and 6.9 for military aid) and the United Kingdom (7.5 for sanctions and 6.8 for military aid) express markedly stronger support for these proactive measures than those in the other countries. Italian respondents, by contrast, are the least supportive of both sanctions and military assistance (5.3). Unlike in the previous scenario, in all countries except Italy respondents are clearly more supportive of taking action than of remaining inactive. The gap between action and inaction is especially pronounced in the United Kingdom (6.1 versus 3.7) and Poland (5.6 versus 3.2), highlighting a stronger inclination toward active defense commitments in these contexts.

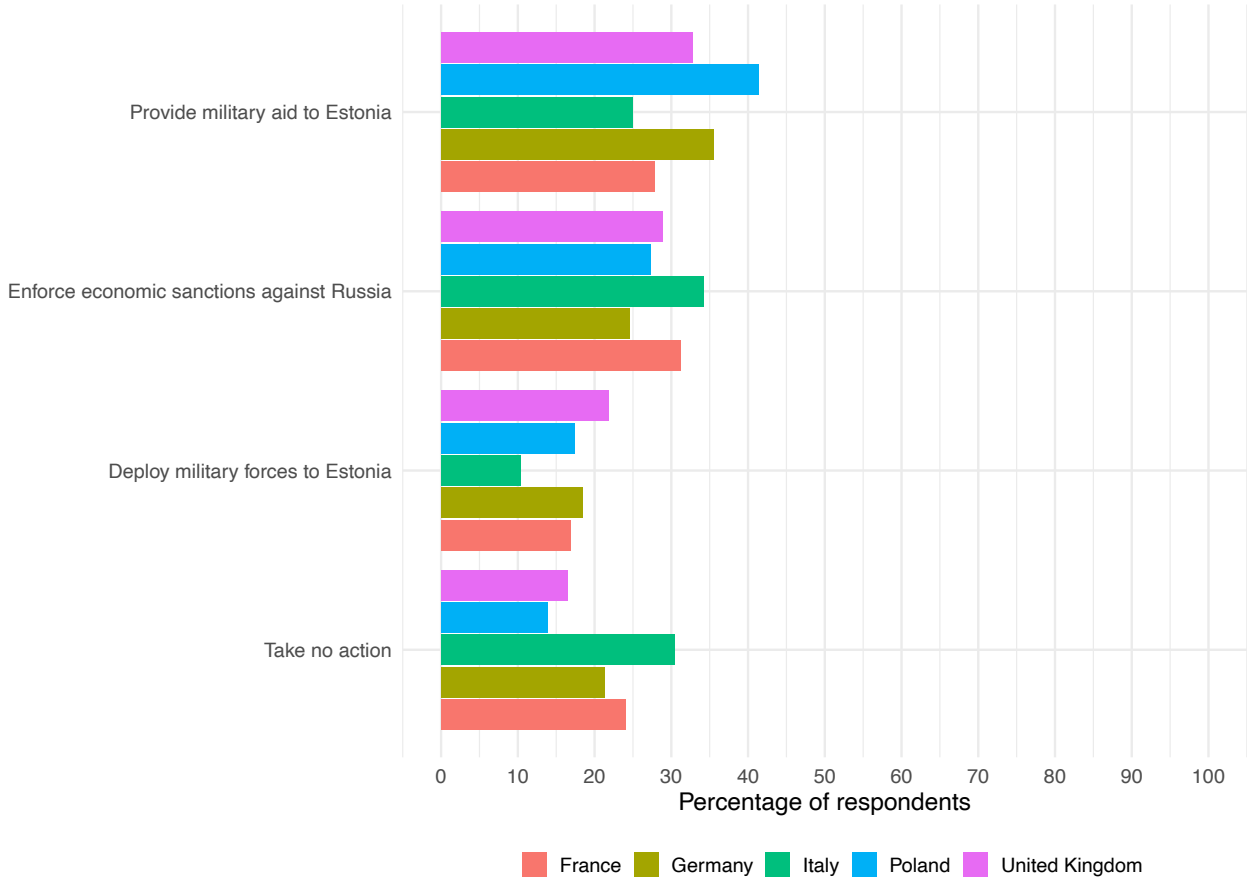
Figure 7. Level of support for national policy initiatives in response to a Russian invasion of Estonia (NATO member)



Question: Using a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means "Fully oppose" and 10 means "Fully support", to what extent do you support or oppose each of the following policy initiatives to address the situation? (Average).

Figure 8 shows the distribution of preferences with respondents were required to select a single preferred option. As expected, differences narrow under this forced-choice format. Nevertheless, intermediate options remain more popular than the more extreme alternatives: 32 percent choose military assistance, 29 percent sanctions, 21 percent no action, and 17 percent troop deployment. Poland stands out as the country most clearly supportive of military assistance (41 percent), reflecting its heightened sensitivity to Russian aggression.

Figure 8. Preferred national policy initiative in response to a Russian invasion of Estonia (NATO member) (%)



Question: If you had to choose only one of the following policy initiatives, which one would you select to address the situation?

Italy (34 percent) and France (31 percent) show comparatively stronger support for sanctions as the preferred response. At the same time, Italian respondents are by far the most favorable toward inaction (30 percent) and the least supportive of troop deployment (10 percent).

Compared to the 2024 data presented in the previous deliverable (Amantini et al. 2025), Italian support for deploying troops to defend an attacked NATO member state appears to have declined relative to other European countries. In contrast, in the United Kingdom and Poland, the proportion of respondents favoring inaction is substantially lower than elsewhere (16 and 14 percent, respectively), reinforcing the impression of a more assertive public stance in these two countries.

Overall, these findings suggest that while there is broad support for responding to aggression against a NATO member, publics continue to prefer calibrated measures – such as sanctions or military assistance – over direct troop deployment. At the same time, Italy remains comparatively more reluctant than the other countries to endorse high-commitment responses, pointing to a persistent cross-national divergence in readiness to use force.

5. CONCLUSION

In this paper, we provide a comprehensive examination of public attitudes toward foreign and security policy. To this end, we analyze the results of a survey fielded in summer 2025 across five European countries: France, Germany, Italy, Poland, and the United Kingdom. Although the survey included a large number of questions, we focus on those related to four fundamental dimensions: threat perceptions, feelings toward international actors, support for different defense arrangements, and support for the use of force. These are the same dimensions analyzed in the previous deliverable, which summarized and assessed data from existing surveys. This continuity enables a systematic comparison between the findings of our original survey and results previously conducted by other institutions.

With regard to threat perceptions, we find that European publics are particularly concerned about international terrorism, immigration, tensions in the Middle East, and cyberattacks. With the notable exception of Poland, citizens are somewhat less concerned about Russian expansionism and the prospect of war involving NATO member states. Tensions between China and the West generate comparatively lower levels of concern. Sentiment toward the United States is generally lukewarm, while attitudes toward China – and especially Russia – are significantly colder. The European Union elicits moderately positive but far from enthusiastic evaluations, comparable to those directed at the United Nations and NATO. By contrast, national armed forces are viewed more favorably, particularly in the United Kingdom, Poland, and France. Germany and Italy display comparatively cooler attitudes, consistent with the more restrained or pacifist strategic cultures that have developed in both countries since the end of the Second World War.

Support for the creation of a common EU army remains limited, especially if conceived as independent from NATO. Italy appears to be the country least opposed to this proposal, although even there support is far from overwhelming. More broadly, respondents tend to favor cooperative models that preserve national armed forces while strengthening coordination at the European level, rather than fully supranational or purely national alternatives.

Public support for the use of force in response to a Russian threat is generally cautious. Support increases when intervention is framed as the defense of a NATO member state, compared to participation in a post-war peacekeeping mission in Ukraine. At the same time, complete inaction is rarely the preferred option. Instead, respondents tend to favor calibrated responses combining humanitarian, economic, and military assistance, as well as sanctions against Russia. Among the countries surveyed, Italy stands out as the least supportive of troop deployment and the most favorable toward inaction, while Poland and the United Kingdom display comparatively more assertive positions.

Overall, this paper contributes to a deeper understanding of public attitudes toward foreign and security policy during a particularly challenging and transformative period for European defense. The findings are especially relevant in light of renewed debates about the establishment of a common EU army. European publics appear cautious, if not skeptical, about fully autonomous defense integration, and continue to view NATO as a central pillar of collective security. The results also shed light on the resilience of the NATO alliance in the context of an escalating Russian threat. Although support for troop deployments to defend an attacked NATO member is not particularly high, it is not negligible in principle. However, it declines considerably when respondents are required to choose among alternative policy responses, suggesting that while solidarity is broadly endorsed, willingness to bear the costs of direct military engagement remains conditional and context-dependent.

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