

TOWARDS AN EU SECURITY COMMUNITY?

PUBLIC OPINION AND THE EU'S ROLE AS A SECURITY ACTOR

**Matti Pesu
Tuomas Iso-Markku
Juha Jokela**



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- The EU's ability to contribute to the security of its citizens forms a key part of a new emerging narrative for the Union. Finland is one of the advocates of increased EU activity in security and defence, frequently referring to the EU as a security community.
- Existing data on public opinion suggest that citizens' views provide building blocks for more potent EU action in security and defence matters and support for the idea of the EU security community.
- EU citizens broadly share concerns related to terrorism and migration. The fear of armed conflict is low, however.
- In general, EU citizens are disposed towards collective action by the EU in questions of foreign, security and defence policy. Support for the CFSP and CSDP has remained high and strikingly stable. Moreover, there seems to be a nascent sense of solidarity and unity among Europeans, which may facilitate the EU's agency in these areas.
- However, the EU should survey public attitudes on security-related questions in a more detailed fashion in order to gain a better grasp of the prevailing sentiments among EU citizens.



MATTI PESU

Research Fellow

FIIA



TUOMAS ISO-MARKKU

Research Fellow

FIIA



JUHA JOKELA

Programme Director

FIIA

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INTRODUCTION

The events in Ukraine in 2014 and thereafter, the jihadist terrorist attacks in several European cities, and the migration pressure on continental Europe from the volatile southern neighbourhood have all tested the European Union's (EU) ability to provide stability and security in Europe and beyond. By posing challenges of a widely differing nature and scope, these shocks have highlighted the EU's manifold weaknesses as a security actor. At the same time, they have also underlined the urgent need for more able and credible EU action in the domains of foreign, security and defence policy, as well as emphasised the nexus between the EU's internal and external security. Currently, security features strongly in the debates about the future of the Union.

The number of analyses focusing on the premises of, and developments in, the EU's foreign, security and defence policy, as well as on the variation in the member states' security interests and strategic cultures, has grown steadily in recent decades.¹ Importantly, less has been written about citizens' views on the EU as a security actor. Examining public attitudes concerning security is crucial, since the EU can hardly pursue an ambitious agenda in foreign, security and defence policy without the public's blessing. Moreover, by taking more responsibility in responding to different security challenges, the EU could meet some real expectations that its citizens have towards the Union.

This Briefing Paper investigates the ways in which and to what extent public opinion underpins the EU as a security actor and, potentially, a security community – an idea that Finland has actively entertained. In other words, the paper studies EU citizens' perceptions of the Union's primary security challenges, the public's expectations with regard to EU action in the fields of foreign, security and defence policy, and the sense of community and mutual solidarity within the EU. Moreover, the paper discusses whether and how these attitudes contribute to the emergence and maintenance of the EU as a security actor and security community.

The paper will firstly look at how security has emerged as a central element in the ongoing debate about the future of the EU and the resulting narrative. It will then delve into existing data on public opinion with regard to the EU's role as a security actor and community. The paper argues that citizens' views provide some building blocks for more potent EU action in the foreign, security and defence realm and general support for the idea of the EU as a security community. However, the EU should survey public opinion on security in a more detailed fashion in order to obtain a more comprehensive and, at the same time, more nuanced picture of citizens' views on the Union's role in foreign, security and defence policy.²

THE EU AS A SECURITY COMMUNITY

The development of the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) has been an incremental process. Nevertheless, the EU has managed to carve out a role for itself in both foreign and security policy. During the last few years, the CSDP in particular has taken notable steps forward with the launch of Permanent Structured Cooperation and the European Defence Fund. Recently, there has also been discussion on ways to improve the efficiency of decision-making in the area of the CFSP.

Additionally, and more broadly, the idea of an EU that is able to offer protection and security to its citizens has clearly gained traction in recent years. This development is partly linked to the EU's search for new sources of legitimacy and new ways to connect with its citizens in the aftermath of a series of internal and external crises, including the Brexit vote and the notable electoral gains achieved by Eurosceptic parties in almost all member states. While the EU's legitimacy has traditionally rested on the Union's promise of peace and prosperity – that is, its role in guaranteeing peace among its member states and contributing to their

1 For an overview of existing CFSP/CSDP literature, see for example Knud Erik Jørgensen, Åsne Kalland Aarstad, Edith Drieskens, Katie Laatikainen and Ben Tonra (eds.) (2015), *The SAGE Handbook of European Foreign Policy*. SAGE reference: London et al.

2 This paper is based on a larger study funded by the Finnish government and conducted by the authors of this paper together with a broader research group. The study evaluated public attitudes and values concerning the EU's agency in security and defence policy. See Tuomas Iso-Markku, Matti Pesu & Juha Jokela (2018), "Euroopan unioni turvallisuusyhteisönä: Kansalaismielipide, asenne- ja arvoympäristö", *Valtioneuvoston selvitys- ja tutkimustoiminnan julkaisusarja* 68/2018, <http://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/handle/10024/161205>.

economic well-being – several voices have recently argued that this will no longer suffice to win the hearts and minds of EU citizens. The EU’s ability to contribute to the security of its citizens now seems to form a key part of a new emerging narrative for the Union.³

Correspondingly, the EU’s 2016 global strategy on foreign and security policy emphasises the security of the Union as the highest priority of the EU’s external action. Security also featured high in the 2017 Rome Declaration – a statement of the EU’s future ambitions. Furthermore, the concepts of ‘security union’ and ‘defence union’ now appear frequently in policy documents published by EU institutions and agencies. French President Emmanuel Macron, for his part, has put the idea of a ‘protective EU’ at the centre of his EU policy, calling for robust European action to safeguard the security of the continent. Most recently, in his European-wide op-ed, Macron urged the building of a revived EU around freedom, protection, and progress.⁴

France is not the only member state underscoring the potential of the EU in enhancing the security of Europe and Europeans. Such views also resonate strongly in Finland, where references to the Union as a ‘security community’ are part of the official foreign and security policy lexicon.⁵ President Sauli Niinistö, in particular, has stressed that the EU must step up both as an actor preserving European security and as a player in world politics – a message echoed by other prominent Finnish decision-makers. The President has also argued that the EU is not a true union if it does not protect its citizens, emphasising that there is a mutually enforcing connection between the EU’s measures to protect its citizens and the sense of community among Europeans.⁶

Thus, the idea of a security community – which bears some resemblance to the academic definition of

the term⁷ – links the EU’s agency in foreign, security and defence policies with public views and expectations regarding security issues. In other words, stronger EU action must be based on – but also contribute to – a sense of solidarity among the European public.

However, public opinion on security-related issues and the EU’s role in dealing with them remains understudied. In the following, we will draw on existing data to shed some light on citizens’ views on these matters.

CITIZENS’ VIEWS ON EUROPEAN SECURITY

One of the key questions regarding a greater role for the EU in security terms is what the Union’s main threats are, that is, against what should it protect itself and its citizens. The lack of a shared threat perception is generally argued to form one of the major obstacles to more coherent EU action in foreign, security and defence policy. It is well known that the EU member states hold different views on the major security threats facing them (and Europe at large) as well as the intensity of these threats, with one major fault line often seen between those worried about an aggressive Russia and those concerned about the instability in the EU’s southern neighbourhood. However, when it comes to the views of EU citizens, such divides largely seem to recede into the background.

Instead, Europeans perceive similar security challenges. The most widely shared concern is the threat of terrorism. During the past few years, terrorism has rapidly emerged as a key concern across the member states, replacing economy as the main worry. For example, in 2011, a Special Eurobarometer showed that only one-third of EU citizens spontaneously mentioned terrorism as a security challenge, whereas in 2015, in a similar survey, the figure was 49 percent. If terrorism is given as an alternative on a list of potential security threats, then practically every EU citizen views it as a threat to the EU’s security. In 2015, 95 percent saw terrorism as a threat, and two years later the figure had risen to 97 percent. Surveys by the Pew Research Center confirm the observation. In 2016, 93

3 See e.g. Luuk Van Middelaar (2019), *Alarums and Excursions. Improvising Politics on the European Stage*. New York: Columbia University Press; *The Economist*, “The era of a ‘protective Europe’ is dawning”, Charlemagne, April 13, 2019, <https://www.economist.com/europe/2019/04/13/the-era-of-a-protective-europe-is-dawning>.

4 See e.g. Emmanuel Macron, “Dear Europe, Brexit is a lesson for all of us: it’s time for renewal”, *The Guardian*, March 4, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/mar/04/europe-brexit-uk>.

5 Prime Minister’s Office (2016), “Government Report on Finnish Foreign and Security Policy”, *Prime Minister’s Office Publications* 9/2016, pp. 19–21, <https://valtioneuvosto.fi/documents/10616/1986338/VNKJ092016-en.pdf/b33c3703-29f4-4cce-a910-b05e32b676b9>.

6 Sauli Niinistö (2017), “Speech at the Lennart Meri Conference”, 13 May 2017, <https://www.presidentti.fi/en/speeches/speech-by-president-of-the-republic-of-finland-sauli-niinisto-at-the-lennart-meri-conference-in-tallinn-on-13-may-2017/>; Sauli Niinistö (2018), “Keynote Address at the Brookings Institution”, September 27, 2018, <https://www.presidentti.fi/en/speeches/keynote-address-by-president-of-the-republic-of-finland-sauli-niinisto-at-the-brookings-institution-in-washington-d-c-on-27th-september-2018/>.

7 The term was coined by Karl Deutsch in 1957, and refers to a region where war has become very unlikely or unthinkable. Moreover, in a security community, people are bound by a sense of community, mutual sympathy, trust, and common interests. See Karl Deutsch (1957), *Political Community and the North Atlantic Area: International Organization in the Light of Historical Experience*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

percent of surveyed EU citizens regarded Islamic terrorism as a threat.⁸

The results of the biannual Standard Eurobarometers further endorse the primacy of terrorism as EU citizens' most significant security concern. In autumn 2017 EU citizens (38 percent) listed terrorism as the biggest challenge facing the EU. In autumn 2018, terrorism was the second biggest concern among Europeans; this time 20 percent of EU citizens put it among their top two concerns. More importantly, in a total of 20 EU member states, terrorism features as one of the two primary worries. In addition, according to a 2018 survey, EU citizens considered the fight against terrorism the most important topic of discussion ahead of the electoral campaign for the 2019 European Parliament elections.⁹

Migration is another issue that citizens across the EU are worried about. Although migration is a highly complex phenomenon and does not primarily constitute a security issue, the European public clearly sees some issues related to migration as a concern or even as an outright threat. For example, in a 2016 survey by the Pew Research Center, 76 percent of the respondents in 10 EU countries viewed a large number of refugees from Iraq and Syria as a security threat. Lately, migration has bypassed terrorism as the greatest perceived challenge among EU citizens, although 'challenge' here is to be understood broadly, going beyond the simple framing of migration as a security matter. In autumn 2018, in all EU member states except for Portugal and Sweden, migration was the biggest European-level concern, as 40 percent of EU citizens included it among the two most pressing concerns.¹⁰

What is noteworthy is that traditional security threats – such as the threat of military conflict – do not feature prominently on the citizens' lists of concerns, and this has not changed significantly despite the annexation of Crimea and the Russian involvement in the war in Eastern Ukraine. However, this might also partly reflect the nature of the available surveys. Eurobarometers, in particular, have seldom included military conflicts or military tensions as alternatives on the lists of potential challenges and threats. On the other hand, even when looking at national data in Finland and Sweden, two member states that are both concerned about Russian aggression and its implications for security in their region, the threat of military

conflict is still not perceived by citizens as being among the most important security concerns. This applies to Poland as well.¹¹

The uniformity of threat perceptions notwithstanding, there are national and regional differences. For example, whereas 52 percent of Finns disagreed with the claim that the country did not have any military threats in 2017, in that same year only one percent of the French population were concerned about the possibility of an armed conflict. Furthermore, Poles are much less concerned about terrorism than the French or the Germans, and the Swedes in turn are not as concerned about migration matters as many other member states.¹²

Moving beyond threat perceptions, a second crucial question concerning the EU's role as a security provider is how, and by whom, EU citizens want the different threats – and security issues in general – to be addressed. To the extent to which answering these questions is possible based on the available data, one clear message is that there is strong support for collective action by the EU. Support for the CFSP and CSDP is high and has remained strikingly stable over the years. While there is variation in the level of support between individual member states, an absolute majority of citizens support both policies in almost all member states.

Similarly, when it comes to concrete foreign and security policy issues and problems, the EU populace clearly expects more joint policies. According to a 2017 survey by the European Parliament, a significant majority called for EU action against instability in the Arab-Muslim world (73%), the increasing power of China (71%), the increasing power of Russia (71%), the Trump presidency (64%), and Brexit (63%).¹³

However, this is where the limitations of the available data also come into play. Survey questions about citizens' views on the CFSP and CSDP as well as joint EU action in response to different foreign and security policy issues have mostly approached these topics at a very general level, and in an abstract manner. They say little, amongst other things, about the way in which European foreign, security and defence policies should be organised institutionally, the kind of relationship they should have with national policies, and their key focuses. Crucially, the data tell us very little about the way they should be operationalised in substantive policy terms.

8 Iso-Markku, Pesu & Jokela, 38–9.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid, 39; 60–62.

11 Ibid., 40; 61–62.

12 Ibid., 60–61.

13 Iso-Markku, Pesu & Jokela, 46.

This leads to a number of open questions. It is, for example, unclear whether citizens' strong support for the CSDP indicates that they are content with the kind of niche it has carved out for itself as an instrument for conducting small-scale crisis management operations outside the EU territory. It could also signal that EU citizens would actually want a stronger and more comprehensive CSDP, potentially stretching to areas that are currently outside its scope of action, including questions of defence and deterrence. Similarly, the data say little about whether citizens would prefer the CSDP to be developed primarily as a platform for cooperation between national defence forces, or whether they would like the EU to advance genuine military integration, including common units as well as pooled and shared capabilities. There is also no information about how citizens would like the CSDP to relate to NATO. Finally, and quite crucially, the available data do not give any indication of the kind of resources that citizens would be ready to invest in the CFSP and CSDP.

Taking into account that the two shared concerns across the member states are, firstly, terrorism and, secondly, migration, it is clear that there is at least an implicit expectation that EU action, including in the areas of foreign, security and defence policy, should contribute to addressing these two broad, complex and widely differing issues. However, also here, information about citizens' views on more concrete measures is lacking. On the other hand, it is clear that neither of these issues can, or should, be addressed exhaustively through the means of foreign, security and defence policy. Instead, they require the EU to make effective use of its whole policy palette.

SIGNALS OF SOLIDARITY AMONG CITIZENS

Enabling the EU to deal with security issues more effectively and in a more coherent manner is likely to require various sacrifices from the EU member states. Therefore, a sense of unity and solidarity is a central facilitator of more potent and more united EU action. It is also a prerequisite for an EU security community whose members are able and willing to contribute to the security of each other and the community as a whole.

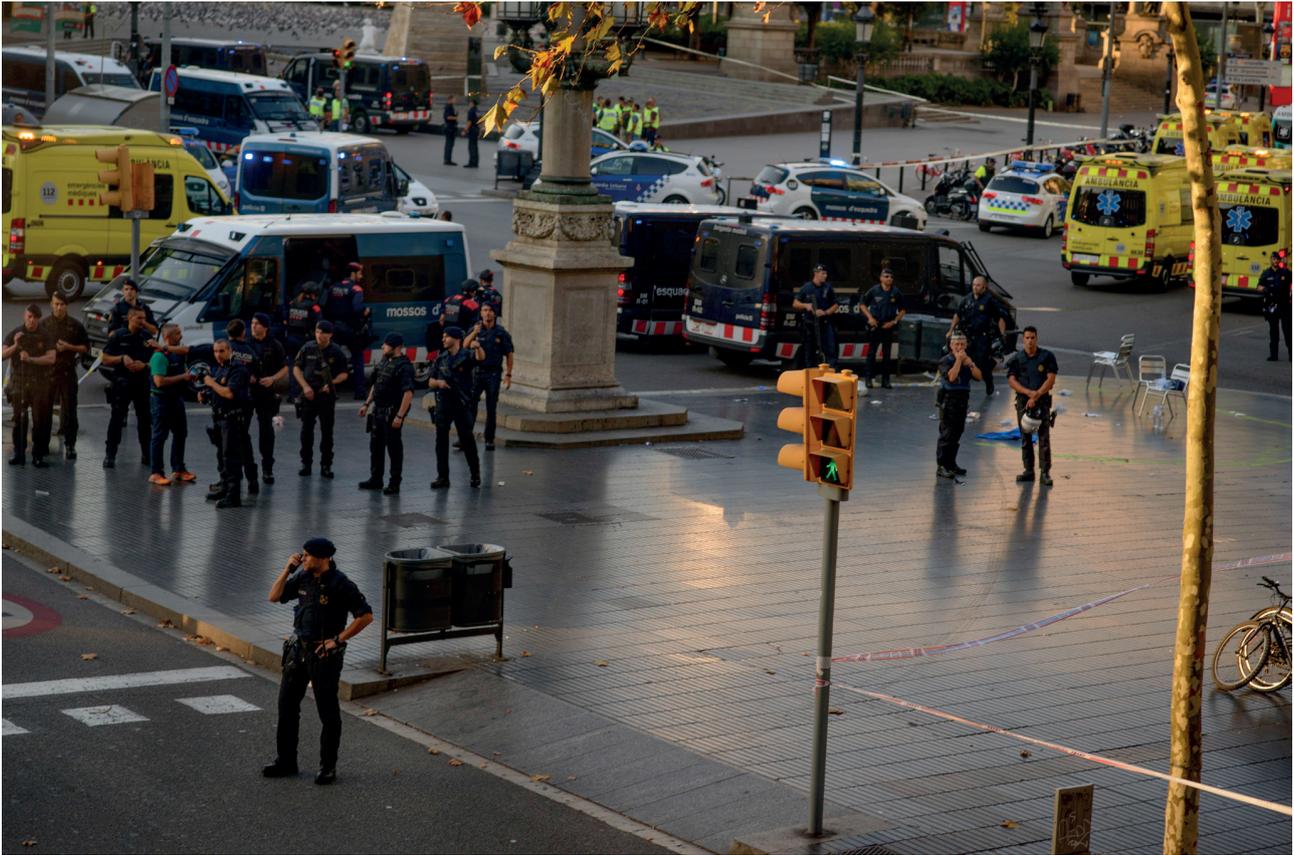
Interestingly, there seems to be at least nascent solidarity and unity among ordinary Europeans. When asked about the mutual assistance clause of the Lisbon Treaty, 85 percent of EU respondents described it as a good idea. This sentiment is shared across the member states, with strong majorities in each and every one of them. Support for the clause is highest in Luxembourg (94%) and lowest in Austria (70%). However, ironically, only a handful of the respondents had actually heard of the clause. This is likely to point to a lack of concrete planning and training under this Treaty commitment, even if it has now been invoked by the EU upon France's request after the Paris terrorist attacks in 2015. Only in Finland – where the political leadership has frequently referred to the clause – were over half of the public at least partly familiar with the clause. At the EU level, 68 percent of respondents admitted that they had never heard of such a clause.¹⁴

However, a number of other, more abstract indicators also point to a sense of community among EU citizens. While it is clear that individual member states remain the citizens' primary source of identification, surveys show that a significant majority of EU citizens also see themselves as just that, EU citizens, at least to some degree. There are significantly more people who feel some degree of attachment to the EU and/or Europe in general than people who do not. Notably, these feelings of community have not been decisively affected by the multiple crises that the EU has gone through in recent years, or the more explicit manifestations of Euroscepticism in national and European politics. If anything, the experiences of the last few years seem to have strengthened some aspects of EU citizens' sense of community, or at least made them more vocal about them.¹⁵

However, again, the available data allow very little insight into the kind of concrete commitments that EU citizens would be ready to take on in order to contribute to the EU's and each other's security, or to more decisive EU action in the foreign, security and defence policy realm. Nevertheless, citizens' views stand in some contrast to recent perceptions of a growing lack of solidarity among the EU member states.

¹⁴ Ibid., 46.

¹⁵ Ibid., 27–30.



Police securing Barcelona city centre after a terrorist attack that killed 13 people in August 2017. Terrorism is seen as a primary security concern by the public in many EU member states. Image: Jimmy Baikovicus / Flickr, used under the Creative Commons license.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Judging by public opinion data touching upon EU citizens' views on foreign, security and defence matters, the European public generally expects the Union to do more in foreign, security and defence policy. Moreover, there are some signals that the European public may be amenable to the idea of the EU as a security community, where solidarity and shared concerns facilitate the EU's increasing activity and further integration in the realm of both hard and comprehensive security. There is perhaps no strong push on behalf of the populace, for whom issues of foreign, security and defence policy still appear somewhat remote. However, broadly favourable public opinion provides a solid basis for the emergence of more potent EU action.

There are two concerns that citizens across the EU expect the EU to address, both of which touch upon the EU's role as a security actor. The first is terrorism, which is clearly a security issue, albeit a complex one, blurring the traditional separation between internal and external security. Citizens across the EU currently

consider terrorism the most significant security threat facing the Union. The second is migration, which is not primarily a security issue, but which clearly also poses questions about the EU's role as a security actor, especially as it is inherently linked to the instability of the EU's southern neighbourhood.

Moreover, EU citizens lend their support to joint action; both the CSDP and CSFP enjoy solid public backing, as does a common EU approach to urgent foreign and security policy-related issues such as the rise of China or the Trump presidency. Furthermore, there seems to exist at least some degree of solidarity and unity among the EU public, as evidenced, for example, by wide support for the mutual assistance clause of the Lisbon Treaty. Such solidarity and unity can be a critical facilitator of collective EU action.

If an impression took hold that the EU has successfully contributed to the security of its citizens by extirpating terrorism or by managing migration and tackling its root causes, this could potentially enhance the Union's public legitimacy. Moreover, based on public expectations, it is conceivable that a new EU narrative centred on protection and security could gain traction

among citizens. However, attempts to strengthen the EU's security and defence policy and advance the EU as a security community should be built on realistic expectations. From the point of view of EU citizens, a majority of security questions remain secondary to issues related to the economy and employment, for example. Thus, security in and of itself will not be enough to strengthen the EU's legitimacy and connect with citizens.

Finally, an inherent weakness of any analysis probing public views on the EU's role as a security actor is the lack of specific data. The questions – particularly in Standard Eurobarometers – are very general. A few

surveys on the EU's internal security aside, previous detailed public opinion polls on the CSFP and CSDP date back to the early and mid-2000s. If the EU truly wants to have stronger public underpinnings for its foreign, security and defence policy efforts, it must become more active in exploring what the public actually think about specific security-related issues. A clearer and more nuanced picture of public concerns and preferences could help the EU to identify those very areas where expectations are greatest. Moreover, it could also provide a better idea of where divisions may appear when the EU takes further steps as a security actor.