



Trans European Policy Studies Association  
TEPSA Briefs – December 2018

## Strengthening the EU as a security actor: citizens' views and perspectives

*Juha Jokela\**

Citizens' expectations towards the EU as a security actor and provider have grown, yet more detailed data on European public opinion about security and defence matters would be beneficial for policy planners and decision-makers in national capitals and Brussels.

### Introduction

The security landscape of the European Union (EU) has changed considerably in the recent years. Concurrently, the debate on the EU's global and regional role in providing security has intensified, and the EU has made progress in various security and defence policy domains. In member states, expectations towards the EU's contribution to security have grown stronger among governments and the public alike. The European Commission has called for a full-fledged defence union as well as swift action and reforms in the field of internal security under the broader rubric of "a Europe that protects". Some analysts and political leaders have also

suggested that taking more responsibility for the security of citizens could strengthen the legitimacy of the Union, which has been impaired by several and severe crises in the recent years and Brexit.

While there exist a substantial number of analysis on the member states' security interests and priorities, as well as their aspirations towards the EU as a security actor, less has been written on the views of the citizens. Given the increasingly polarised and fragmented political landscape in Europe, which is also shaped by Eurosceptic populism(s), mapping out and analysing the European public opinion seems to have particular value for decision-makers and the public debate on security.

The aim of this TEPSA Brief is to summarise some of the key findings of a research project commissioned by the Finnish Government on the EU as a security community. The briefing will first discuss the framework of the analysis, and

\* Juha Jokela is Programme Director of the European Union Research Programme at the Finnish Institute of International Affairs (FIIA), Finland, and a member of the TEPSA Board. All the opinions expressed in this briefing are the sole view of the author, and do not represent the position of FIIA nor of the Trans European Policy Studies Association (TEPSA).

then lay out some of the key findings and recommendations.

### **European public opinion on security and defence matters**

There is no shortage of data displaying developments in the European public opinion. The Eurobarometers published by the European Commission and the European Parliament, other Europe-wide surveys and national polling constitute a substantial and rich set of material enabling also analysis of longer-term trends. Yet the data should be approached with consideration given the common methodological challenges and error margins of polling. Relatedly, what is commonly understood to constitute European public opinion is largely a collection of national data, which might obscure some significant national variation.

Importantly, the data explicitly addressing security and defence matters are much more limited. However, and in addition to security and defence related set of questions, the barometers also address key concerns and challenges of the citizens. Some of these are clearly security related.

The recent Eurobarometers, other Europe wide surveys and national opinion polls suggest that security and defence matters are seen as increasingly important by EU citizens. Terrorism is currently seen as the second most important issue facing the EU, and significantly more important than for instance economy. Many

other key challenges such as climate change, migration and cyber issues have direct or indirect security implications, and they are clearly notable concerns of the citizens.

The available data also suggest that traditional foreign and defence policy issues have not been key priorities for the citizens, although joint EU action in these fields is strongly supported. This is understandable, as foreign and defence policy themes are rarely citizens' key concerns in national contexts either, and often elections, for instance, are fought on themes close to voters such as welfare, healthcare and taxation. However, this might be changing, at least to some extent. The EU's global say is seen as increasingly important by the citizens. Moreover, tackling terrorism and managing migration are believed to require action first and foremost at EU level, and including effective foreign policy. Importantly, in many member states, such as Finland, Poland and Sweden, and to a somewhat lesser extent in France and Germany, traditional defence matters are considered important by the citizens also in the EU context.

The public opinion also continues to display distinctively strong and stable support for the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). The support for the CFSP has varied from 61 to 72 % since 1992 when the question was first introduced in Eurobarometer. The CSDP has featured since 2004, and its support has been between 71 and 78 %. Citizens also view the EU's mutual assistance clause (TEU 42:7) very

positively (85 % of citizens thought it was a good thing in 2016). Support for an EU army has also climbed recently, and currently 55 % of EU citizens support it.

### **More detailed information needed**

The available data suggest that public opinion does not constitute any significant hindrance for moving forward in the field of security and defence in the EU context. Indeed, the public opinion seems to lend its support for developing the EU forward as a security actor and provider. Yet stable support expressed in the major public opinion surveys such as the Eurobarometers should also be viewed critically, as the polls address these policy fields on a rather abstract and general level.

It might be easy for the citizens to support the CFSP and the CSDP, as well as mutual assistance and even an EU army, when budgetary implications as well as the nature of these policies or the purpose of an EU army are not explicated. Would an EU army carry out crisis management operations outside the EU borders? Or would it be set up to defend the EU's own territory, deter Russia, and possibly project military power globally? Relatedly, what kind of assistance would the citizens be willing to provide under TEU 42:7 for other member states? Would it include sending soldiers to harm's way? Moreover, to what extent and under what conditions would citizens be ready to increase spending on security and defence? Addressing these kinds of potentially politically divisive questions would provide highly

important information concerning the citizens' views on their desired role for the EU in the field of security and defence.

Although citizens view strengthening the role of the EU in the field of foreign policy and defence positively, this does not however appear to be a key political priority for EU citizens. On the one hand, this might set some limits for improving the legitimacy of the EU through reforms and streamlining policies in these fields. On the other hand, terrorism and migration are currently notable political priorities for the citizens, and many believe that these matters should be addressed primarily at the EU level. Successful reforms and sound policies in these fields could therefore have a tangible impact on the EU's legitimacy. Yet moving forward with reforms on the EU's internal security and especially management of migration is clearly politically difficult for the member states, and hence for the EU. Improving the EU's legitimacy by addressing the key concerns of the citizens that are directly or indirectly related to security might therefore prove to be difficult in practice.

Finally, the available data suggest that for the citizens the EU is a real and relatively stable, yet a secondary political community. Citizens increasingly identify themselves as Europeans and EU citizens, even if their primary political community remains their member state. EU membership is also clearly seen as beneficial by the citizens. Recent years of EU crises have had a negative impact on the citizens' trust towards the EU, but this is currently bouncing back. Notwithstanding the concerns related to the

future of the EU, political polarisation and fragmentation as well as Eurosceptic populism(s), European public opinion displays resilience about the EU as a political community.

---

This is clearly a crucial point for current attempts to deepen integration in the field of security and defence. Credible and lasting reforms in this field require sound political basis and solidarity.

## References

Iso-Markku, T., Pesu, M. and Jokela, J. (2018) *The EU as a Security Community: Public opinion, attitude and value environment*, Prime Minister's Office, Finland (available only in Finnish). [https://vnk.fi/artikkeli/-/asset\\_publisher/tutkimus-turvallisuuspoliittiset-kysymykset-aiempaa-tarkeampia-eu-n-kansalaisille?\\_101\\_INSTANCE\\_iemYRQDn9G8r\\_languageld=en\\_US](https://vnk.fi/artikkeli/-/asset_publisher/tutkimus-turvallisuuspoliittiset-kysymykset-aiempaa-tarkeampia-eu-n-kansalaisille?_101_INSTANCE_iemYRQDn9G8r_languageld=en_US). Accessed 14.12.2018

European Commission (2018) *Standard Eurobarometer 89: The views of Europeans on the European Union's priorities*. Eurobarometer Surveys, Spring 2018 [online]. European Commission. <http://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Survey/getSurveyDetail/instruments/STANDARD/surveyKy/2180>. Accessed 15.11.2018

European Commission (2017) *Special Eurobarometer 464b: European's attitudes towards security*. Eurobarometer Surveys [online]. European Commission. <http://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Survey/getSurveyDetail/instruments/SPECIAL/surveyKy/1569>. Accessed 15.11.2018



**Trans European Policy Studies Association**  
Rue d'Egmont 11, B-1000  
Brussels, Belgium

To know more about TEPSA visit: [www.tepsa.eu](http://www.tepsa.eu)

Follow TEPSA on:

 [@tepsaeu](https://twitter.com/tepsaeu)

 [@tepsa.eu](https://www.facebook.com/tepsa.eu)

 [TEPSA – Trans European Policy Studies Association](https://www.linkedin.com/company/tepsa-association)



**Finnish Institute of International Affairs (FIIA)**  
Arkadiankatu 23B, FI-00100  
Helsinki, Finland

Visit FIIA at: <https://www.fia.fi/en/>

Follow FIIA on:

 [@FIIA\\_fi](https://twitter.com/FIIA_fi)

 [@upifia](https://www.facebook.com/upifia)

 [Finnish Institute of International Affairs](https://www.linkedin.com/company/finnish-institute-of-international-affairs)

Co-funded by the  
Europe for Citizens Programme  
of the European Union



*The European Commission support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents which reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.*