

BOOK REVIEW

EUROPEAN PUBLIC OPINION ABOUT SECURITY: Who Can Help Us in a Threatening World?

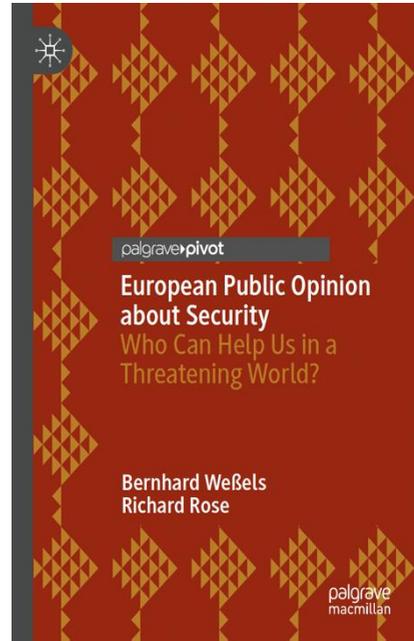
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Security and foreign policy, which may once have been perceived as abstract and distant, is now moving to the center of citizens' everyday lives. This is not only due to the widening range of threats, but also because risks related to climate change, economic vulnerabilities, immigration, and cyber threats can directly affect individuals. To illustrate, climate change can be a “threat multiplier” leading to resource scarcity or worsen economic conditions that can threaten human security (United Nations 2025). For example, Russian invasion of Ukraine resulted with food security concerns, driven up food prices and inflation.

Therefore, from the traditional “Almond-Lippmann consensus,” which argued that public opinion is largely irrelevant to the foreign policy-making process, recent events such as Russia’s invasion of Ukraine have heightened the salience of public opinion in security debates particularly in Europe (Wang and Moise 2023). As governments cannot act alone in addressing major threats and instead favor international cooperation and alliances such as the European Union (EU) or NATO, this opens up another dimension: not only the accountability of governments for their security policies but also questions about public opinion on their governments’ alliance preferences. Moreover, although the impact of public opinion in International Relations has received relatively little attention in terms of how foreign and security policies are formulated, the growing availability of online surveys and large-scale sampling has enhanced both the

relevance and the ecological validity of studies focusing on public opinion in these domains.

Weßels and Rose's book titled *European Public Opinion about Security: Who Can Help Us in a Threatening World?* reflects both the increasing relevance of public opinion about security and methodological rigor. Taking Europe as its core focus, and in contrast to studies primarily concerned with political elites, this book asks: *Do individuals see their country facing security threats? If so, do they want their government to respond on its own or seek help from alliances?* This question provides an analytically rich perspective, as it not only reveals whether the most pressing securitized issues resonate with ordinary citizens, but also connects directly to contemporary debates on the European security landscape, alliances, and institutions. The central contribution of this book lies in the model proposed by the authors, which seeks to capture the interaction between Europeans' individual threat perceptions and their governments' alliance preferences, while taking into account differences in individuals' national contexts as well as their political and socio-economic positions.

Methodologically, the book draws on the "European Security Survey," (EuroSec) which interviewed 12,685 people from eight countries, United Kingdom, Germany, Poland, Sweden, Romania, Hungary, Italy, and Croatia, conducted roughly one year after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In line with the book's central questions, this approach aims to capture how people perceive different types of security threats, their preferences regarding alliances, and whether national contexts shape respondents' views.

To address its central research question, the book is structured into six chapters. The first two chapters provide the background by tracing the historical evolution of distinct threats and their varied impacts on Europe, as well as assessing the main alliances available for European governments to respond to these threats, namely the EU, NATO, and the United Nations (UN). While the authors do not clearly explain why these particular three threat types were selected, the first chapter evaluates the historical evolution, causes, and instances of military, economic, and climate insecurity for European countries. The latter part of the chapter examines how these insecurities are managed in contexts where individual citizens' capacities are limited and where national governments, faced with resource constraints, may need to join alliances.

Chapter two builds on the preceding discussion by taking a closer look at three key alliances through which European countries may pool their resources. Recognizing that alliances differ in their scope and capacities, the authors present the EU as stronger in addressing economic insecurities, NATO as the primary guarantor against military aggression, and the UN as central in dealing with climate-related insecurities. At the same time, they acknowledge the

shortcomings of each option: while the UN's inclusive structure can make achieving unanimity on complex problems difficult, in NATO's case the position of the United States often determines whether an attack should trigger Article 5.

Chapter three sets out the rationale for the book's empirical strategy and data collection while advancing the claim that public opinion matters, particularly for governments' alliance preferences, given security conditions that directly affect Europeans' lives. The chapter illustrates how security problems, primarily climate change and economic insecurity, now resonate at the grassroots level.

To develop their "individual security choices" approach, the authors introduce two models. The first, a "model of individual perceptions of threats", argues that individuals' threat perceptions are shaped less by government choices than by their own experiences. It highlights three sets of influences: national context (e.g., history, resources), political attitudes, and socio-economic status, which together help explain whether a threat is perceived as high or low. The second, a "model of choice or rejection of an alliance", links perceived threat to the subsequent decision between "going it alone" and seeking help from an alliance (EU, NATO, UN).

These models structure the chapter's hypotheses, treating alliance choice as the dependent variable and national context, political attitudes, and socio-economic characteristics as key independent variables. The remainder of Chapter three provides further details on the main data source used to test the hypotheses, the EuroSec survey, as well as the rationale behind the country selection. One advantage of this dataset, the authors argue, is its capacity to be applied to different types of security threats. The choice of countries, in turn, is justified by their substantial differences in resources and population size.

Chapters four and five report the findings derived from the two models introduced earlier. Chapter four analyzes EuroSec respondents' views on whether their countries face major or moderate risks, while Chapter five examines their preferences regarding cooperation with alliances. To give further details about these two chapters, Chapter four's message is clear: to mobilize support for costly security policies, governments need to understand how citizens perceive risks. Accordingly, the EuroSec data shows that nine out of ten respondents expressed an opinion about security risks. Among the three threats identified in the preceding chapter, economic insecurity stands out as the most salient, followed by climate change and, to a lesser extent, military action in terms of "substantial risks." The remainder of Chapter four addresses the question of who perceives security risks and proposes that the 'risk perception function' is shaped by the combination of national history, resources, individual attitudes, and socio-economic status. In line with this, the chapter presents regression analyses of how these variables interact. Overall, the results confirm a widespread awareness

among European citizens of security threats, despite variations linked to distinct political attitudes (e.g., left-wing outlooks) and socio-economic status (e.g., education).

While Chapter four explains how various factors shape Europeans' threat perceptions, Chapter five carries these findings into the realm of alliance preferences of European citizens. The chapter first examines public support for a "going it alone" strategy", dealing with security threats solely through national capabilities, and the political and other factors associated with it. Support varies by threat type: 46% favor going it alone for economic insecurity, but only 22% do so for military threats (and 38% for climate risks). Consistent with this pattern, the authors report that valuing democracy is associated with less support for going it alone and a greater willingness to work with allies.

The remaining part of the Chapter five turns to alliance preferences. While the authors find that a majority of respondents favor working with an ally, most notably NATO, patterns of alliance choice are highly contextual and vary with the type of threat. Strikingly, although most respondents come from EU member states, only around one-tenth regard the EU as providing effective support against military threats, whereas the EU is much more strongly preferred in relation to climate-related risks. As for the UN, Europeans appear well aware of its limited effectiveness in dealing with economic and military threats, yet they still recognize it as an important factor in addressing climate change. For the authors, these divergences illustrate a pragmatic orientation among European citizens and suggest a form of differentiated policy integration when confronting different types of security challenges.

The final chapter synthesizes the book's main finding: Europeans display a pragmatic orientation in alliance preferences, matching different security threats to different institutions. This does not necessarily reflect a common identity or value-based orientation; rather, it signals a self-interested calculation about which ally (EU, NATO, or the UN) can deliver effectiveness. The authors also underscore that these patterns are contingent: unexpected shocks and long-term trends can shift attitudes over time.

One of the strengths of this book is its accessible language, which allows it to address not only the International Relations community and scholars but also a broader audience. Moreover, it offers several empirically grounded takeaways for policymakers, most notably the finding that European citizens adopt a pragmatic orientation that can shape the policy-making process in an era when the effectiveness and structures of the international order and alliances are increasingly contested.

At the same time, however, the book suffers from frequent repetitions across sections, which may disengage readers and obscure the clarity of its key messages

and findings. Also, the lack of a clear justification for the selection of military, economic, and climate-related threats raises questions about the scope of the analysis. In particular, the omission of contemporary technology-related risks, such as those linked to technopolitics or energy security, may reduce the model's relevance, given that these pressing issues increasingly may shape foreign policy orientations and alliance choices. Ultimately, the book provides valuable insights into European public opinion on security and alliances at a time when Europe is facing some of its most pressing challenges, from the Russian invasion of Ukraine to ongoing debates about its "strategic autonomy". Nonetheless, the validity of its empirical claims would benefit from follow-up research, as the data were collected in 2022 and the dynamics of threats and alliances continue to evolve rapidly.

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