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Framing Public Perception of the Challenges to the EU Foreign Security and Defence Policy. Focus Groups as a Method of Investigation

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Abstract

This report presents the results of twelve focus groups carried out in six European countries (France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland and Spain) and addressing topics of concern for the study of EU foreign security and defence policy. In particular, participants were engaged in discussions on three main topics: (1) the most pressing international challenges and the role of the EU in addressing and responding to them; (2) the war in Ukraine; and (3) citizens' view of the role of their country on a conflict or crisis in which the EU is involved (for France and Poland: Iran; for Germany and Greece: Serbia-Kosovo; for Italy and Spain: Libya). The objective of such investigation was threefold: explorative, to understand how people envisage a complex reality such as the one related to international politics; interpretive, to inductively explore the ideas and feelings people have of problems in this policy sector; finally, constructive, to inform the design of a large scale, cross-national public opinion survey on the same topics to be conducted in May 2023.


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Summary

The current report presents the main findings of twelve focus groups (FGs) conducted in six European countries (i.e., two groups per country) – namely, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland and Spain – and addressing topics of concern for the study of EU foreign security and defence policy. It thus gives an overview of the main concerns, attitudes, positions and solutions envisioned by participants, highlighting the relevant trends that emerged from the groups' discussion. The objective was threefold: first, an explorative one, to figure out how people understand a complex reality such as the one related to international politics; second, an interpretive one, to inductively explore the ideas and feelings people have of problems in these policy areas; third, a constructive one, to inform the design of a large scale, cross-national public opinion survey on the same topics to be conducted in May 2023.

Participants were engaged in discussions on three main topics: the most pressing international challenges and the role of the EU in addressing and responding to them; the war in Ukraine; and their view of the role of their country on one of the conflict areas examined by the JOINT project (for France and Poland, Iran; for Germany and Greece, Serbia-Kosovo dispute; for Italy and Spain, Libya).

A qualitative analysis of the group discussions shows a common and shared understanding of the logic of great powers politics, meaning the necessity for EU member states to act united and develop a unified response to common challenges, together with the awareness of the impossibility by each single country to successfully cope with multiple global crises (environmental, health-related, political or military). Depending on their nature, the EU was identified as the most suitable actor to address such challenges within international fora (the UN) or in cooperation with international alliances (NATO). Moreover, a common perception was found among groups on the following topics: the war in Ukraine; the energy crisis and its consequences (e.g., inflation); and the humanitarian (food security) crisis. Environment and climate change were also identified as high-priority issues, as well as health (mostly related to the COVID-19 pandemic), international security (cyberterrorism) and migration.



Another interesting finding deals with the way different countries prioritise certain foreign policy issues as this affects how participants frame their arguments, perceptions and points of view about the most pressing international challenges faced by the EU. This linkage between national priorities and ways of framing issues translated into different, and sometimes opposite, ideas on subjects such as the building of a European army and its role, as well as the future of NATO. As for the former, the creation of a common EU army was expected to have a positive and practical impact on Greece's confrontation with Turkey according to some Greek participants, whereas participants from the Polish groups found the idea of a European army unnecessarily complicated, given the role of security-enforcer already played by NATO. This is just one example in which national priorities effectively shaped the discussion among participants and influenced their positions on a topic under debate.

The section devoted to the war in Ukraine was the one that captured most of the participants' attention. Discussions ranged from who was responsible for initiating the war to the discussion on the national and European responses to the conflict. All groups expressed a clear condemnation of Russia's aggression towards Ukraine. However, in two countries, namely Greece and Italy, participants did not express clear-cut opinions on the responsibility for the initiation of the conflict. In these two countries, moreover, the theme of disengagement, that is, the desire for a solution that would not entail either an economic, political, or military intervention in the conflict, emerged stronger than in other groups. Still, in all groups and countries the most divisive topic was the issue of sending weapons to Ukraine. While in some countries this raised some debates and mixed opinions, other countries such as Greece and Italy offered an overall negative stand on the decision by their own government and by the EU to send weapons to Ukraine. In both Italian groups, this view also extended to the topic of sanctions, overall perceived as ineffective in their deterring purpose. In all countries, participants expressed the need to intensify efforts towards a diplomatic solution. Moreover, participants showed a disposition not to be involved in conflicts unfolding outside the EU borders. This not only held true in the case of Ukraine but also in other disputes presented to FG participants.

As for the third and final section, which focused on different cases of EU involvement in crisis/conflict management, two main points can be highlighted. On the one hand, and quite unsurprisingly, participants seemed to be less informed and aware



of these cases compared to the Ukrainian war. On the other hand, each case raised a different “driving theme” in the countries that discussed it. In Italy and Spain, for example, the issue of migration and security largely dominated the discussion about the Libyan crisis. And again, in both groups, a preference for disengagement from the conflict clearly emerged. As for the case of Iran, discussed by French and Polish participants, the conversation mostly focused on the issue of nuclear weapons, which had already been positioned among the top priorities for both countries. Finally, in Germany and Greece the discussions on the Serbia-Kosovo dialogue mostly focused on the topic of EU enlargement.

Introduction

The EU Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) have never been salient among European public opinion. Even during national elections, the academic literature finds a general and continuous lack of attention towards these issues both at the public and at the elite level, including a scarce attention to foreign policy matters in party manifestos.¹ Still, it is legitimate to ask whether after two years of the on-going pandemic and significant international events, among which the increasing assertiveness of China, the ongoing Russia-Ukraine confrontation and the first visible confirmations of the upcoming global threat of climate change, this trend might change in the near future. While these issues continue to be top priorities in the EU policy-making agenda, it is crucial to understand how they are perceived by national publics. What are their views of the role that both the EU and single member states may play in facing them? How are recent events and systemic changes in the international system framed by the general public?

While this report does not aim at offering a comprehensive picture of European public opinion on EU foreign security and defence policy,² it offers an interpretation of the way people conceive, understand and interpret foreign and security policy

¹ 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>.

² For this purpose, see 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>.

at the European level by relying on data acquired during focus group discussions held in six EU member states: France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland and Spain. Moreover, the report helps us figure out what aspects of a number of conflicts and crises in which the EU and its member state have a major stake are more relevant in the understanding of non-experts and laypersons, thus offering an input for the content and wording of questions to be asked in the mass online survey that we will be conducting in Spring-Summer 2023. The paper reports the findings of twelve focus groups (i.e., two per country) addressing issues related to the EU Foreign and Security Policy (EUFSP). In all countries, the focus group discussion was organised along three main sections: the most pressing international challenges and the role of the EU in addressing and responding to them; the war in Ukraine; and participants' view of the role of their own country and the EU on specific foreign policy crises such as Iran and the nuclear deal (France and Poland), the Serbia-Kosovo dispute and the dialogue process (Germany and Greece) and the more than a decade-long conflict in Libya (Italy and Spain).

1. Methodology

1.1 The focus groups as a method of investigation

Originally born in sociology in the 1920s but, for many years, mostly used in market research,³ focus groups are now a well-established and increasingly used data collection technique in social and political analysis. A focus group consists of a guided discussion in which participants are stimulated to share their opinions and experiences on a specific set of issues using their own language and categories.⁴ The main advantage of this research tool is its interactive character, so that it allows to observe “a large amount of within-group interactions in a short period of time”.⁵ The exposure to shared opinions and, at the same time, to divergent views,

³ Robert K. Merton and Patricia L. Kendall, “The Focused Interview”, in *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 51, No. 6 (May 1946), p. 541-557; Pamela Johnston Conover and Donald D. Searing, “Studying ‘Everyday Political Talk’ in the Deliberative System”, in *Acta Politica*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (September 2005), p. 269-283, <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.ap.5500113>.

⁴ Pamela Johnston Conover and Donald D. Searing, “Studying ‘Everyday Political Talk!..’”, cit.

⁵ Janet Smithson, “Focus Groups”, in Pertti Alasuutari, Leonard Bickman and Julia Brannen (eds), *The Sage Handbook of Social Research Methods*, Los Angeles, Sage, 2008, p. 357-370; David L. Morgan, “Focus Groups”, in *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 22 (1996), p. 129-152.

generates a discussion in which participants can elaborate on a complex topic and even clarify their own views of it during the discussion.⁶

The way shared values and experiences are used to give meaning to social and political events somehow echoes everyday social discursive dynamics.⁷ The analysis of FG data can thus inform us about how people interpret and construct reality. In other words, unlike large scale quantitative surveys, useful in gathering opinion data on broad representative samples and suitable for verification of hypotheses, FGs are more suited to understand how people's views are constructed. Yet, these tools can be easily combined. FGs in fact are particularly useful to inform subsequent quantitative survey questionnaires, in that they can help elaborate questions on pertinent and salient issues and generate new hypotheses.⁸

Although scarcely used in the field of international relations, focus groups can be an especially useful method for studying everyday narratives in world politics and the related mechanisms of attribution of meaning.⁹ For instance, as stressed by Liam Stanley, they can tell us a lot “about how political change instigated at an elite level is conferred a degree of legitimacy”.¹⁰

Considering all this, we deemed FGs to be the most appropriate tool for the preliminary in-depth exploration of public opinion on EU Foreign and Security Policy in a multi-country context. Accordingly, we designed them taking into account different goals: first, an explorative one, to get knowledge of how people interpret and construct reality in regard of complex topics such as those related to international politics; second, an interpretive one, to inductively explore the ideas and feelings people have of problems in these policy sectors; third, a constructive one, to inform the design of a large scale, cross-national public opinion survey on the same topics.

⁶ Emma ter Morset al., “A Comparison of Techniques Used to Collect Informed Public Opinions about CCS: Opinion Quality after Focus Group Discussions versus Information-Choice Questionnaires”, in *International Journal of Greenhouse Gas Control*, Vol. 18 (October 2013), p. 256-263.

⁷ Janet Smithson, “Focus Groups”, cit., p. 358; Liam Stanley, “Using Focus Groups in Political Science and International Relations”, in *Politics*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (August 2016), p. 236-249.

⁸ Richard A. Powell and Helen M. Single, “Focus Groups”, in *International Journal of Quality in Health Care*, Vol. 8, No. 5 (1996), p. 499-504, <https://doi.org/10.1093/intqhc/8.5.499>.

⁹ Liam Stanley, “Using Focus Groups in Political Science and International Relations”, cit.

¹⁰ Ibid.

1.2 Research design

Our research design consisted of two sets of six on-line focus groups run with adult citizens in six European countries, namely France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland and Spain. We deem that this sample of countries captures a variety of situations in terms of historical experience with European integration (France, Germany and Italy are three founding members, Greece and Spain joined in the 1980s, while Poland in the 2000s), geography (they are located in Western, Central, Southern and Eastern Europe) and foreign policy outlook (France and Poland occupy the two opposite ends of the spectrum of those in favour/sceptical of a more strategically autonomous EU, with the other countries in-between).¹¹ The research design, including the recruitment procedures and questionnaires' structure (see below), was identical for all the countries.

1.3 The focus group participants

A total of 91 participants were recruited by a professional company (Toluna) among the members of an international online opt-in panel by means of a CATI-CAWI (Computer assisted telephone interview – Computer assisted Web interview) screening questionnaire. In the formation of the groups, we tried to ensure a mix of participants in terms of age-groups and educational attainment as well as a balance in terms of gender. Specifically, the gender breakdown (Figure 1) was 44 female (48 per cent) and 47 male participants (52 per cent).

As displayed in Figure 2, participants' age distribution was quite normal, with most of them (n=52) aged between 35 and 54 years and the remaining sample split between 18-34 years (n=23) and 55 years or over (n=16).

¹¹ An additional element that motivated the choice of these specific countries is related to more practical concerns, since in four of them we were able to rely on partners in the JOINT project, in the framework of which this research has been conducted, to contribute to the focus groups directly.

Figure 1 | Participants' gender breakdown (absolute numbers)

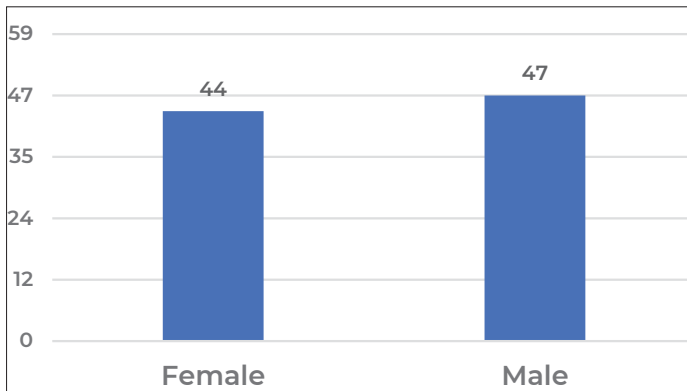
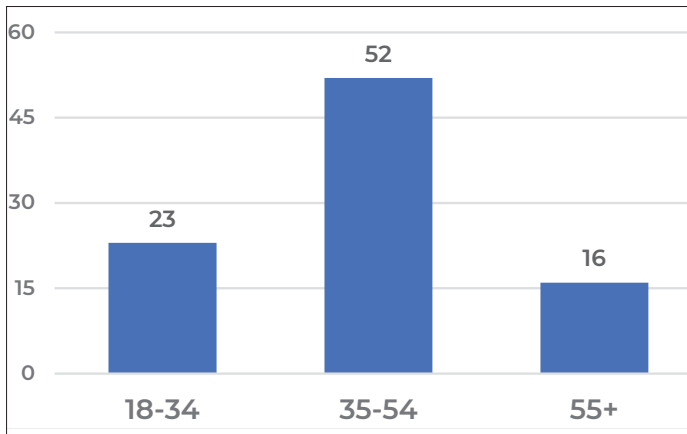
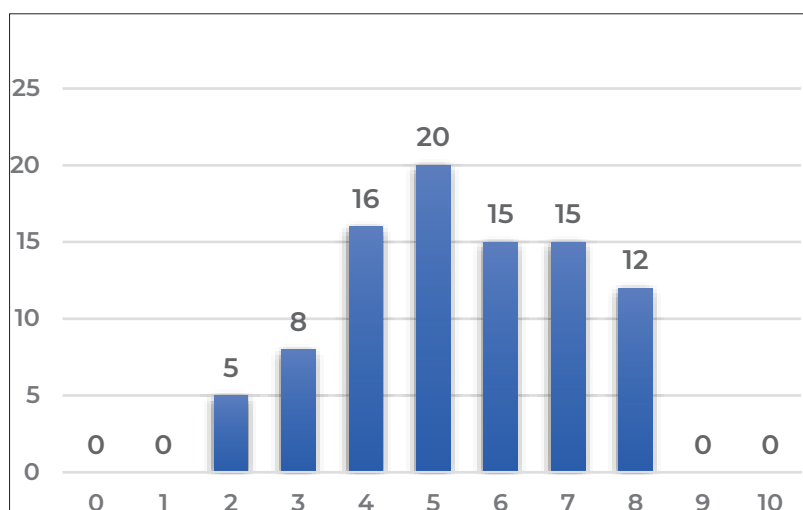


Figure 2 | Participants' age distribution (absolute numbers)



As we wanted our sample to include people with a variety of political leanings, we also sampled participants on the basis of their political orientation using their self-positioning on the traditional left-right scale (Figure 3). Given that an excessive polarisation within the groups might have hindered participants from openly expressing their ideas, we used the same 0-10 left-right scale question to screen out people who placed themselves at the furthest ends of the ideological spectrum (i.e., those scoring 0-1 and 9-10).

Figure 3 | Frequency distribution of participants' responses on a question



Question: "In politics, people sometimes talk of left and right. Where would you place yourself on a scale from 0 to 10, where "0" means the extreme left and "10" means the extreme right?"


In addition, we included questions designed to capture participants' interest in and level of knowledge about EU foreign policy.

1.4 The focus group design

In each country, selected participants were allocated to the groups according to their level of "attention" to international politics, so that we had an "attentive" and a "mixed group" in each of the six countries. The first set of groups was made up of 45 people with a high level of interest in and knowledge of international politics, while the second was made up of 46 participants with mixed scores on these variables. Each group was composed of 6-8 people. A few days before the FGs took place, participants were invited to read a four-page briefing document containing some basic information on the following topics:

- The government's official position on EU CFSP and, if available, the position of the main national parties on the very same issue;
- The government's official position and hints on national political debate about the war in Ukraine (including the position of the main national parties);
- The government and country's position on the assigned case study.

Moderators were all professionals in the field of market and social research and native speakers of the six languages in which the focus groups were held. They



were trained by University of Siena (UNISI) staff, which was responsible for the whole exercise, during two briefing sessions organised in the weeks before the fieldwork. During the training, the moderators were familiarised with the FGs' guidelines. As regards the style, moderators were asked to follow the sequence of questions included in the guidelines and involve everyone in the conversation; yet, they were required to maintain a conversational style without giving direction or expressing judgment. As none of the moderators had previous experience in moderating groups on topics related to EU Foreign and Security Policy, country experts in international politics were invited to attend the focus groups and support the activity of the moderators when required. To prevent that the presence of an expert in the discussion could “intimidate” participants and restrain them from speaking freely, the experts could only observe the focus group sessions with no ability to interact with the participants. They could communicate directly with the moderators using a chat-box without interfering in the discussion. All the focus groups lasted about 90 minutes and took place on the online video platform Collabito between 27 June and 7 July 2022.

The discussion was structured into four main sessions:

1. A quick warm up/icebreaker session in which the moderator illustrated the objective of the study and the way findings would have been used. During this session, the moderator briefly explained the flow of activities and asked participants' permission to record the discussion, inviting them to make a round of introductions. The main goal of this first session was to establish a collaborative and inclusive environment. Duration: 5-10 minutes approximately.
2. A second session in which participants were invited to express their opinions on the main international challenges that their country was facing, the way the national government and the EU were dealing with them and the possible solutions to these problems. Duration: 30-35 minutes approximately.
3. A third session on the Ukraine-Russia conflict during which the focus group participants were asked to discuss how they viewed the conflict, the way the national government and the EU were dealing with it, what had to be done and by which actors. Duration: 20-25 minutes approximately.
4. A final session was devoted to the discussion of an assigned case study. For each case study participants were invited to express their opinion and to talk about the implications for their country and its role. The case of the dispute between Kosovo and Serbia was discussed in the German and Greek groups;

the conflict in Libya was the case assigned to the Italian and Spanish groups; the case of Iran and the nuclear deal was assigned to the Polish and French groups. Duration: 20-25 minutes approximately.


Each focus group was video-recorded and transcribed by the panel provider. All video recordings were detained by the panel provider company and were permanently deleted once transcripts were finalised. All the transcripts were then anonymised, translated into English and a qualitative analysis was performed. The analysis consisted of a preliminary systematic coding of the main themes and interpretative frames emerged across countries and group-types.

2. Opinions about the EU Foreign and Security Policy

2.1 What are the most pressing international challenges your country is facing? Most urgent issues and envisioned solutions


Ten core issues emerged from FG discussions on the most pressing international challenges, spontaneously raised across all the different countries and types of groups (attentive, mixed) and with significant connections to one another. Discussions surrounding the identification of these issues are significant not only for a purely informative scope; they also provided an overarching frame to the following discussions, where such issues constantly re-emerged. As foreseeable, the first and most spontaneously mentioned topic was the return of “war” in Europe and the Russian offensive against Ukraine.¹² Other topics that followed were: the energy crisis and climate change (France and Germany), linked to economic concerns such as rising inflation and youth unemployment (Greece); security, related to armaments and nuclear weapons (France), but also food security and humanitarian security (the “impending famine” in Germany and Poland); health and the COVID-19 pandemic; migration (Germany, Poland, Spain and Italy). Finally, and to some extent unexpectedly, the theme of misinformation also emerged (France, Italy, Greece and Spain).

¹² For a more detailed overview of opinions and recurrent themes on the war in Ukraine, see Section 3.




Generalities. A separate section of this report is devoted to the participants' opinion about the different facets of the war in Ukraine. However, the topic of “war” was the first to be spontaneously raised in almost every group and country, thus making it a top priority, with the only exception of France where it was mentioned only after the energy crisis. More importantly, the analysis of the discussions underlines how “the war” very often informed and helped frame all other addressed topics. Indeed, these were most of the times discussed by the participants within the framework of the ongoing war, being them the energy crisis, the return to fossil fuels and lack of action on climate change, humanitarian and security issues, or direct effects of the conflict (inflation, health, unemployment, misinformation). Another distinct element that encompassed the discussed topics about the most pressing challenges, and that also returned throughout the discussion, was the feeling of “being left alone” at the mercy of international crises. This feeling, in particular, emerged in Southern European countries (Greece, Italy and Spain). As remarked by a Greek participant: “Greece is left behind when it comes to evolutions (sic), and the major reason is the politicians’ inactivity [...]. Instead of us being the major country and have regulatory role and control our own fates, [...] we are at the mercy of the international evolutions and crisis” (EL15).

Security. Strongly linked to the issue of the war and encompassing the current conflict in Ukraine, the topic of security emerged in all groups. However, this was declined along different nuances, ranging from discussions focused on military and nuclear security (France, Greece, Spain), including inter-state rivalry (Italy), to issues of food and humanitarian security (Germany, Poland), (e)migration (Greece, Spain), borders (Greece) and terrorism (Spain). Furthermore, it also provided some hints about the influence of national foreign policy priorities (e.g., Greece) on the perception of security challenges. Groups from France, Greece and Spain focused more on the military and nuclear aspects of the present security challenges. The nuclear threat, as said, remained present, as much as a general concern related to the return of a “politics of blocs” (Germany). “This Cold War mentality should not boil up again, that, again, blocs are created. Well, NATO is there. But that Asian countries or, for example, Russia and China would be merging (sic), and this is creating more and more blocs” (DE15). The French groups focused on the national dimension and mentioned the importance of preserving, and possibly enhancing, the chances for political and military sovereignty, by further investing in armaments and increasing the national defence budget. In Greece, national



foreign policy priorities emerged, as the challenge of security was mostly discussed in relation with Turkey. Spanish groups raised the issue of the internal threat of jihadi terrorism, while the Italian groups mostly focused on the increasing role of international actors such as Russia and China, expressing fear for their possible political and military actions. Food and humanitarian security were raised by the Polish and German groups.

The energy crisis, inflation and climate change. The issues of energy crisis, energy dependence and climate change surfaced in all groups. In both French groups, such issues were mentioned first, even before the war in Ukraine. Although, on average, the theme of the energy crisis mingled with the one of the environment and climate change in almost all groups, it was framed along different perspectives across groups. On the one hand, concerns were raised about the proposed solutions (at the national and European levels) to cope with the energy crisis. The attribution of responsibility and the calls to change lifestyles and reduce consumption habits were deemed insufficient to deal with issues that were rather considered as global (France): “It’s an attempt to individualise the problem, while it’s something eminently global and which concerns heavy industries. Basically, they’re making us feel guilty” (FR12). Hand in hand with the challenge of security and the energy crisis came the theme of social security, channelled through considerations of rising inflation. All groups expressed concerns about the rising costs of living. At the same time, the topic was addressed by emphasising the lack of a European common response: comments remarked the still present energy dependence from actors such as Russia and the lack of foresight on energy diversification, which connected in some groups (e.g., France and Germany) with the topic of energy autonomy and political sovereignty, not only from countries like Russia but also from the US (Germany). “We see that it’s very difficult to act jointly at a European level, although this is necessary, and even more so at the global level, because we are not respecting the Paris agreements at all, while this is a real risk for Europe in terms of its industrial dependence on the rest of the world, and for areas that will face drought, floods etc.” (FR11). All Groups put the blame for this perceived lack of foresight on their own national or European leaders. Only in one case a participant commented the behaviour of another EU country: “Germans depend on Russian gas, [...] now they are trying to come back to coal, and so is the Netherlands. They do not see anything wrong with it, even though they tell others that they should not use coal” (PL27).



One interesting feature of the discussion relates to the debate on inflation. Some members of the French groups, for instance, shared the concern that the rise in prices could not be entirely due to the conflict: “feel that Ukraine is taking the blame for a lot of things, and we don’t really know whether it’s justified. About the conflict, the origin of the inflation, the shortage of certain products, are all blamed on the conflict” (FR14) and “the price of fuel has started to rise again, for instance, but I find that, since the conflict has started, it’s as if they’ve found an excuse to make inflation increase” (FR14).

Misinformation. Concern for misinformation unexpectedly came out in several groups across countries as a key challenge. This was presented as an item that creates polarisation (Italy), negatively impacts social cohesion (Italy), creates counterproductive effects in the fight against climate change (France) and affects the international image of the country (Greece). This was not purely related to the war but also concerned communication during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the words of one participant: “The things that are said about the war put us against each other, and the same thing applies to the pandemic” (IT17). Participants also highlighted the dangers of cyber-attacks. This showed the co-presence of two specific features of misinformation: the understanding of the role of information in shaping individual and collective mindsets, with concrete societal effects; and a growing distrust towards the media, especially in Italy, Spain and Greece. At the same time, it is important to notice that participants did not distinguish between governmental official positions and the media.

Migration. The challenge of migration emerged in most groups, though in unexpected ways. On the one hand, groups from countries that had experienced the heaviest impact of migration over the last decade, such as Greece, Italy and Spain, did not always spontaneously mention the topic. Rather, they raised the topic of *emigration* (Greece and Spain), also linked to youth unemployment and social-economic issues in general. By contrast, participants from Germany and Poland mentioned migration within the framework of the war and of its expected consequences during the next Autumn-Winter.

2.2 Strengthening international cooperation and EU integration

Besides the adoption of more specific solutions such as investing on recycling and solar energy, a definite aspect of the envisioned solutions to the international challenges mentioned in the first part of the focus groups implied international cooperation and a strengthened role for the EU. If the lack of coherent responses emerged spontaneously in discussions about international challenges such as the energy crisis, the improvement of coordination among the EU Member States was perceived as a key element to stand up to the above. This coincided with the perceived need by the EU to build on its strengths and find its “global way”. In the words of one Polish participant: “the topic of European identity and [...] what the European family should look like in the context of the global situation, or in relations with the Chinese or Russian bloc [...]. Now the UK has left, along with its huge commonwealth [...]. We are becoming a global player, so to speak, and it would be a good idea if we assumed the right position, but we do not quite know what our participation in the whole process should look like” (PL27).

However, on the same line, but with a more precise image in mind, we find that the EU, often framed as a predominantly economic actor, is described as an “agent of peace” that might exert its influence through trade: “trade also creates peace. One thinks twice before allowing a crisis to break out. Because then supply chains or economic relationships are affected too badly” (DE15). Similarly, participants also reflected on the need to further improve cooperation among countries also beyond the EU borders (Poland and Spain), as well as to strengthen the EU diplomatic weight and to develop a common foreign policy (Greece). Finally, participants in Germany and Poland stressed the importance of preserving alliances for the sake of different purposes. “When I think of trade, for example, or decoupling from any dependencies, then I would always back the EU. Regarding military issues, I would appeal to NATO, and so forth” (DE16).

2.3 What international actors would you call a superpower and what feature makes it so? Can the EU be defined as a “superpower” and should it become one?

With no great variation across countries and types of groups, superpowers were defined by three features: their nuclear and military power; their economic power; and their capacity to generate new technologies and investing in innovation. Furthermore, all groups expressed the view that countries such as China, Russia and the US can be called superpowers, given that they possess all these characteristics or a combination of some of them. Some participants also referred to the Gulf States (France-mixed; Poland-mixed), India, North Korea (Italy) and Japan (Italy-mixed) as superpowers. Similarly, the UK, France and Germany (Greece-mixed; Italy-mixed) were described as powers in the European continent. In some cases, discussion also dealt with the topic of whether the EU could be considered a superpower or should strive to become one. This originated some articulated discussions and different views not only among countries, but also among types of groups within the same country. These discussions will be examined more in detail in the next section. However, another interesting topic to emerge was the view that the EU could overall strive to be considered a superpower by adding a military dimension to its policy instruments (Germany-mixed). Some participants, moreover, stressed the point that the EU should give up the ambition to become a superpower if that meant abandoning its tradition of “civilian power” (Germany-attentive).

2.4 European army

The possibility of building a European army was widely discussed by the groups, especially in the light of the current situation in Ukraine, with mixed opinions not only across countries but also within types of groups. Some participants saw the creation of a common European army as a strong benefit for the EU’s international position and a way to help the EU feature among international superpowers (France, Germany-attentive, Greece, Spain). On the contrary, others (e.g., Germany-mixed, Italy and Poland) expressed a negative view on this matter. As in the debate on the most urgent international challenges, it is worth noticing that some participants’ views reflected specific national foreign policy attitudes and priorities. This was particularly evident in the case of both Polish groups, which expressed a negative

view about the establishment of a European army, given the already established role of NATO in ensuring European security. Furthermore, though on the opposite line, participants in the German attentive group considered the creation of a common army as a loss of the EU's "civil" tradition and a degeneration of the original European project. Finally, in the case of Greece, the idea of a common army was positively welcomed as a key element for addressing disputes with Turkey.

Across countries and regardless of their composition (attentive or mixed), all groups highlighted key concerns. The most frequently raised, concerned insufficient cohesion among the EU member states, the uncertainty about who should lead it,¹³ the need to overcome unanimity within the Council on matters of foreign security and defence policy (Italy, Germany, France and Spain). In the words of one participant from Germany: "This unanimity principle has to go. And there must be a majority principle so that the EU can basically act competitively, so to speak, vis-à-vis authoritarian states. Because otherwise it has no chance at all" (DE24). Other concerns related instead to the costs that the realisation of such an army would imply, being in addition to national forces: what might this imply for the EU's relationship with NATO? Finally, one participant also expressed the fear that the establishment of a common military by the EU would be interpreted as threatening by other international actors, such as China and Russia, thus exposing the continent to greater security risks (Germany-mixed): "Countries would be deterred because they don't have these nuclear weapons and they would have to live permanently in fear, put in inverted commas, that Europe would like to assert some economic interests and could then theoretically attack the countries" (DE23). These concerns also extended to the possibility of Europe going nuclear: "Nuclear weapons would, I think, definitely worsen Europe's image [...]. And, accordingly, I would not go along and say that Europe should strive for that" (DE23).

Another important difficulty raised by the participants related to the composition of such an army: again, the Polish groups expressed the most definitive criticism, especially due to the different geopolitical and geostrategic priorities of the EU member states. Nevertheless, the same concern emerged and was also shared in Italy, Spain and Greece: "It would be great if they could cooperate with one

¹³ Only in one group, the German attentive one, one participant directly addressed the topic by supporting the creation of a European Ministry of Defence.

another, but each country knows its own defence needs the best” (PL23). Finally, all countries and groups, with the only exception of one participant from the Spanish mixed group, expressed the view that countries should maintain, and perhaps harmonise through some European common guidelines, their national armies.

3. The public opinion on the war in Ukraine

Discussions on the ongoing war in Ukraine involved participants across all countries and with similar levels of engagement irrespectively of the type of group they had been assigned to (attentive or mixed). However, cross-country differences were found on certain specific issues, namely the groups’ assessment of the role that their own governments and the EU had played (or might play) in the conflict (sanctions; military assistance) as well as the way forward. This section is thus articulated around five main issues: the responsibility for the outbreak of the war; the public views of the actions undertaken by the national government and the EU; the opinions about the economic sanctions towards Russia; the military aid to the Ukrainian resistance; and the proposed ways forward. As might be expected, participants expressed different opinions on all these topics. Yet, the one that most divided the groups was the decision to ship weapons to Ukraine.

3.1 Responsibility

In the majority of the selected countries, almost all participants agreed on the clear and direct responsibility of Russia in starting the war (France, Germany, Poland, Spain). The only outliers were some participants from Italy (attentive; mixed) and Greece (mixed), who expressed a more ambiguous understanding about the outbreak of the conflict, situating the responsibility on both sides, when not overtly placing it, in one case, on Ukraine. “Who’s to blame? Both sides, in my opinion, it cannot be just one of them” (IT17); “Responsibilities lie in the middle” (EL26); “In my opinion, the fault lies with Ukraine, which I believe has been stepping on Russia for almost ten years” (IT17). Another element that came out from Greek and Italian FGs was the preference not to engage in the conflict.¹⁴ Especially participants from


¹⁴ This feeling of having been subjected to a constrained choice by the war, also emerged in the subsequent discussions on the theme of sanctions: not just in Italy and Greece, but also in Germany

Italy (attentive; mixed) expressed concerns about the way the conflict was binarily portrayed: “I don’t like the image of two blocs, one good and one bad (IT14). Finally, in all conversations, regardless of whether participants considered responsible Russia, Ukraine, NATO, or expressed an attitude of neutrality, a general awareness about the complexity and delicacy of the situation emerged, coupled with some concern about the possible repercussions that an EU and/or NATO engagement in the conflict might have for Ukraine, Europe and the globe.

3.2 Individual countries and the EU’s responses to the war

While considering the response of national governments, groups expressed different degrees of concern. In some countries, participants agreed on the necessity to align with the rest of the EU partners and support Ukraine (France, Germany, Poland, Spain). Other participants, however, preferred a more neutral stance (Germany, Greece, Italy, and, to a lesser degree, Spain) and criticised some governments’ reactions (Poland). Interestingly, some participants (e.g., France) focused on the European common response, rather than the one from their own national government, highlighting how “unity” was the key in addressing the challenge of the war: “Europe is already united, it’s showing its unity and strength, and we’re showing that we can help a country when it’s at war, because France immediately retaliated by giving arms to Ukraine. I feel that France is playing its role” (FR25). In some other countries, instead, participants mostly focused on national responses. The Polish government’s reaction to the migration and humanitarian crisis during the first weeks of the conflict was sternly criticised by both Polish groups, which underlined its lack of support and/or central management of the sheltering and welcoming operations. Along similar lines stood the evaluation of the Greek government’s response, with some participants from this country preferring a more “neutral” position, focusing on humanitarian and food assistance and, in some cases, recalling other national foreign policy priorities of the country (e.g., the Turkish issue). Finally, Spanish participants maintained a more balanced position, with some hints of resignation: the response of the government was perceived as necessary, though perhaps insufficient, and in line with the rest of the EU.

and Spain.



In evaluating the response of the EU, groups from France, Germany and Spain expressed a clear and positive judgment, underlining how the EU had remarkably responded to the challenge in a cohesive way. Again, especially French groups remarked the positive global impact of such choice: “it shows that you can’t just do anything, you can’t hit a country like that, and nobody will help it. What did Russia expect? That it could attack Ukraine and that everyone would wash their hands of it, and no one would intervene? It shows that we’re united and that we’re strong together” (FR25). At the same time, criticism emerged about specific but crucial topics, such as the energy crisis: “I find it incredible that we had to wait for the war in Ukraine to say that we must lower our heating or find alternatives to gas because we want to show solidarity with Ukraine and sanction Russia, while we haven’t necessarily put an alternative to gas in place” (FR11). Of an opposite view were instead both Polish groups, which emphasised the lack of cohesion and the confusing mingling of different priorities by EU member states and EU institutions, both at the start of the conflict and after the official visit by the French, German and Italian leaders in Kiev: “[they are] Highly divided, interests are inconsistent, you cannot hear one voice, you can see when you look at leaders who met together – the Presidents (sic) of Italy, Germany and France, the Chancellor of Germany and the President of France, they went to Kiev together, and there was no clear message, everyone spoke for himself. And it had no impact on that war, it caused no reaction. They went there, they came back, and the war is going on the way it did before” (PL22).

3.3 Economic sanctions

Most groups agreed on their government’s choice to align with the EU on international sanctions against Russia. Groups from France, Germany and Spain also highlighted how important it was for EU countries to act united. Moreover, in one German group, the importance of common sanctions was also linked to the necessity to move forward with energy independence, as well as to provide an example to the rest of the world: “it is incredibly important that one sets an example oneself. And, also, to draw lessons for one’s own country and for Europe. We are sort of ignoring what a narcissistic self-centred person Putin is. And I consider the danger that emanates from ignoring it at some point to be fatal” (DE17). In line with the previously discussed patterns, only Italian and Greek participants expressed different opinions by maintaining an attitude of equal distancing, when




not openly criticising the measure.

However, despite the widespread agreement on the need to adopt these measures, significant concerns were raised on the effect of sanctions on Russia and European societies. This also occurred in the groups with the most favourable attitudes towards the implementation of sanctions, and not only in those groups that had professed neutrality or opposition to them. Not only participants from Italy and Greece, but also those from France, Germany and Spain pointed out that no concrete effects could be seen on Russia's behaviour since the imposition of sanctions. Specifically, both German groups raised the issue of the visible counter-effects of sanctions on European societies. Besides considerations of social and economic nature related to the rising inflation, an interesting feature that emerged from the debate regarded the lack of compliance to sanctions by several countries in the world: "Particularly when you look at the global map and the countries that have negotiated sanctions against Russia and the ones which have not. That is actually mostly the EU and its allies, like Australia, Canada and the US. And these countries have actually isolated themselves with the sanctions. You can see what is happening in these countries. Inflation is rising, food prices, electricity, gas are getting scarce, that is the case with everyone. Russia is actually less affected" (DE13).

3.4 Military aid

Military aid, under the form of weapons' supply to Ukraine, was by far the most divisive topic in all groups. With the exception of France, where both groups reached an overall agreement on the need to help Ukraine resisting Russian aggression while, at the same time, arguing that Europe should avoid looking for a direct military confrontation, and Poland, most of the other countries had divergent opinions on the matter, articulated through different arguments. German (and to some extent Spanish) groups were probably the ones with the most striking difference in terms of points of view. When imagining the goals of the main actors in the conflict, both German groups reached the conclusions that an agreement had to be achieved and that this would probably have to be a compromise. At the same time, participants presented very different opinions about the supply of weapons to Ukraine, based on three main arguments: the belief that sending weapons would somehow prolong the conflict instead of shortening it; the feeling of existing double standards towards the victims of other conflicts; and the German



tradition of “neutrality”. Moreover, like in the case of Greece, German participants underlined a certain uneasiness and argued that the government was forced by allies to pick a side, thus applying sanctions to Russia and sending weapons to Ukraine. At the same time, German groups considered these measures as something inevitable due to the actions undertaken by Russia in the conquered territories: “I wanted to say something again about the issue, in favour of arms delivery. It’s a very complex issue, but I think it’s important to see what the Russian military does when it encounters no resistance. And the Russian military doesn’t just conquer cities, it somewhat systematically attacks civilians. Look at Mariupol” (DE23). However, as occurred in the French groups, facing the possibility of an escalation of the conflict, both German groups expressed their agreement on the undesirability of a direct EU or NATO military intervention.

Another case in which the two groups expressed different opinions was Spain. The first group of participants (attentive) generally aligned with the Spanish government’s decision, though with some concerns. Participants in the mixed group, instead, had different preferences. On the one hand, some argued that Spain should try to stay out of the conflict as much as possible, sufficiently not to derogate to its duty as a NATO ally. On the other hand, other participants thought that military support was necessary, though perhaps a bit late for concretely influencing the course of the war. Participants in both groups expressed concerns related to the economic costs of continuing the war. Finally, as anticipated, both Greek and Italian groups acted as outliers. Overall, groups from these countries expressed a negative view of supporting Ukraine through military aid. In one of the two Greek focus groups, in particular, the idea of sending arms to Ukraine was perceived as a submission to NATO’s lead as well as something that was against the national interests. One of the Greek participants, however, also showed a sense of constraint vis-à-vis the situation, seeing Greece as an easily blackmailable country by its EU partners: “the last time we pretended to be close to Russia we did not have a government for about five years” (EL23). Both groups supported, as an alternative to military aid, an increase of the diplomatic efforts and the supply of humanitarian and medical help to the Ukrainian population. To conclude, being it either because of a certain perceived “civil” tradition (Germany), or because of a feeling of being subjected to international actors playing against the national interests (Greece), either because of a desire of “neutrality” or disengagement, or because of a possible retaliation against the country and heavy social economic

consequences (Italy, Spain), the military support to the Ukrainian resistance was by far the topic that generated more diverse opinions among the participants. Still, despite the differences here discussed, most groups shared the view that the EU and its member states should avoid a direct military involvement in the war.

3.5 The way forward

Evaluation of the way forward reflected previous considerations and positions regarding the issue of sanctions and military aid. Groups in France, Germany, Poland and Spain all agreed on the need to continue supporting Ukraine, moving forward with the sanctions and providing military aid if needed. They also agreed that European unity was the key not only to consistently support Ukraine in the current military efforts and future reconstruction, but also to acquire some international prestige and recognition: “of course we must continue. I don’t know about the effects, how it will go, and nobody knows, but first of all it’s about showing that France is part of Europe and that we’re all united within Europe” (FR25). The French groups were also those which more strongly expressed their support for continuing helping Ukraine militarily and financially, especially in view of the rebuilding of the country: “[we should support them] militarily, so that perhaps Ukraine could manage to push him [Putin] back, maybe it’s utopian, to push the Russians out of their territory. Then financially, to help them rebuild, morally and structurally, rebuild their infrastructures, houses, and deploy not only financial but also human resources to help them rebuild their country overall” (FR25). By contrast, in Greece and Italy, and to a lesser extent in Germany and Spain, some participants called for a compromise in which Ukraine had probably to give away parts of its territory. Finally, some geopolitical considerations about the importance of negotiating with China, which should be convinced to stop helping Russia, emerged.

4. The opinion on selected case studies

The focus on a specific case study after the examination of a common topic such as the Ukraine war allows us to gather insights on how the public thinks about foreign policy issues that are not necessarily under the spotlight. At the same time, an analysis of discussions on the national and European foreign policy actions towards specific countries in the EU’s neighbourhood (Serbia and Kosovo; Libya)

and of international significance (Iran) not only helps understand how salient such issues are in the mind of informed and less interested European citizens, but it also gives an idea of what challenges they see related to relations with certain areas of the globe (Iran); the future of European integration and enlargement (Serbia-Kosovo); and the role of their countries and the EU in addressing different international crises and players. Consequently, this section proposes a review of the main topics emerged and positions expressed while discussing three case studies: Iran (France, Poland); Libya (Italy, Spain); Serbia-Kosovo (Germany, Greece).

4.1 Libya

Discussions around the national and EU foreign policy objectives and actions towards Libya focused, in both Italy and Spain, on some of the challenges identified at the beginning of the report. Rather than dwelling into the details of the Libyan conflict or the Italian or Spanish governments' involvement in the region, the distinctive emerging themes in both countries were migration and – though more extensively in Spain – energy dependence. As for migration, participants focused on the difference of treatment between Ukrainian and Libyan (coming from or through) asylum seekers and on possible solutions, among which economic assistance, creation of humanitarian corridors, stricter border controls. Combined with the topic of migration, misinformation again appeared as a significant feature, influencing and shaping the debate on Libya and, more specifically, on migration waves, especially if compared to the flows coming from Ukraine. “The news that reaches us tells us that the poor ones who need our help are the Ukrainians, so there is more sympathy for them” (IT14); and “We do not even remember the Libyan refugees. Maybe when they go through the Melilla border, they appear in the news from time to time, but that is all. They are second class” (ES12). In both Spanish groups, the difference in treatment and in the experienced welcome from Spanish society was mostly explained through cultural and religious differences existing between the two groups of asylum seekers, but also as a consequence of terrorism concerns. “There was a real paranoia when you came across a Muslim carrying a backpack. It was a feeling of uneasiness and an ‘okay, let us watch out for this one’. I think that this has been ingrained in people. The fear of Islamic attacks and terrorism” (ES14).


Another important topic was, specifically in Spain, energy. The very first comment addressed concerns for the possibility of Spain being cut off from the pipeline running from Algeria (not Libya) because of the events in the region.¹⁵ Again, this also shed light on national foreign policy priorities and interests: not only the energy needs (natural resources, mainly gas and oil) dominated a significant part of the discussion in both Spanish groups, but participants also agreed on the fact that their country should continue improving bilateral relations with Libya exactly because of such a priority. More broadly, in terms of the role of the respective countries in the Libya conflict, Italian and Spanish participants expressed the encompassing feeling of being left alone in facing the consequences of the Libyan crisis and other conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa. Again, much in line with the proposed solutions to the most urgent international challenges, groups in both countries turned to the EU as the most appropriate actor to provide a solution to such a crisis. However, the groups differed in terms of proposed solutions. Overall, Italian participants agreed that migration flows from the African continent should be controlled and claimed to be against the removal of economic barriers to support African local economies.¹⁶ Participants in the Spanish groups also expressed the opinion that the EU should ensure the proper management of the migration challenge: while they shared the view that Spain could not welcome refugees coming from the area anymore, thus criticising the governmental initiatives of increasing the number of humanitarian corridors, they also supported the improvement of the local economy, perceived as a way to stabilise the area and reducing migration flows towards Europe.

4.2 Iran

The debate on Iran was mostly focused on the nuclear deal, its future prospect, the management of nuclear weapons and the most efficient ways to reach an agreement. In this respect, participants from both the French and the Polish groups showed similar patterns, highlighting a certain distance and lack of awareness

¹⁵ The participant making this comment misunderstood Libya for Algeria. Still, the topic of energy was further developed by the rest of the group.

¹⁶ One participant also positively sided with the proposal of “naval blockade”, a quite popular (and illegal) proposal sponsored by the right in the campaign for the upcoming national elections. Supposedly, the EU should enforce such a blockade in the Mediterranean, as: “having a blockade would also give Europe more authority”.




about the topic. This was explained by matters of geographical distance, united with a lack of sufficient coverage in the news.

At the same time, the need to reach a new agreement was felt by the participants of both countries for significant strategic reasons. As for their countries' role, the French groups stressed the need for France to keep playing a mediation role in international fora in order to reach a new agreement. This was perceived as an action aimed at pursuing and preserving France's national interests, especially in the light of the renewed nuclear threat posed by the war in Ukraine. Therefore, the theme of national sovereignty emerged again. One participant, in particular, stressed how France should not get rid of its nuclear plants, not only for its civil use but also for its deterrence potential. Again, an interesting and recurring feature was the idea that France should not necessarily follow the United States on this issue, but rather try to reach a new agreement. Polish groups also stressed how they felt the topic far from their horizon. At the same time, both groups emphasised the need to reduce the possibility of an increased nuclear threat. The attentive group expressed support for a new agreement, while the mixed group appeared a bit more sceptical about an active role of the EU in the crisis and called for each country to follow its own national interests.

4.3 Serbia-Kosovo

Discussions on the Belgrade-Pristina dispute, the role of selected EU member states, and the one of the EU in facilitating the dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo were mostly addressed through the lenses of the EU's enlargement process. Like for Iran, participants from Greece and Germany felt themselves not particularly informed about the developments of the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue. The details of the enlargement process and the requirements accessing countries must meet before accession (absence of ongoing conflict, economic, political and institutional standards) were also not well known by participants. This notwithstanding, the possibility of Ukraine's accession to the EU following Russia's aggression helped the groups better frame the main challenges and objectives related to both their respective countries' position and the role of the EU. On this, Greek and German participants showed some common views, although these were framed from different national perspectives. German participants mainly focused on the economic challenges and on the impact of Serbia's relation with Russia, should it



enter the EU. Probably due to geographical proximity, Greek groups focused more on the prospects of geopolitical balance and the implications for Greece's national interests.

Both German groups addressed Serbia and Kosovo's applications for EU membership with certain elements of concern. Specifically, the attentive group raised the question of the need for countries of the region to further improve neighbourly relations. Furthermore, the ambiguity of Serbia's foreign policy and its ties with Russia, especially at this moment in time, were another source of concern that influenced participants' negative attitudes towards Serbia's possible membership. This, however, did not extend to Kosovo, which was viewed as more "in line" with the EU's geopolitical alliances, also due to its strong ties with the United States. The second source of concern that emerged was of economic nature. Some participants recalled the difficulties Germany had in absorbing a workforce coming from poorer countries after the 2004 enlargement to Central and Eastern Europe. Finally, the position of Germany and the EU in trying to mediate and help Serbia and Kosovo reach an agreement was evaluated rather positively.


Conversely, the Greek FGs raised issues related to national history and geopolitics. Some participants recognised the role played by Greece in contributing to international and UN-led stabilisation operations in Kosovo and thus expressed support for solving the conflict and facilitating the entry of both Serbia and Kosovo into the EU. Other participants expressed doubts regarding the benefits of another enlargement. Moreover, when addressing the topic, attentive participants sided with their country's official position of not recognising Kosovo's independence. They not only expressed a strongly negative view of Kosovo, not recognising it as a state and calling it a mere "creation of NATO", they also did not consider alternative solutions for the role of Greece and the EU in mediating the conflict. Moreover, they agreed on siding with Serbia, both for religious and cultural reasons. Discussions within the mixed groups followed similar trends, though addressing the role of Greece as a mediator in facilitating a peaceful solution of the dispute between the two countries while safeguarding relations with Serbia.

Final considerations

This report presented the main findings of twelve FGs (i.e., two per country) conducted in six EU member states (France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland and Spain) on topics concerning the EU Foreign and Security Policy. The objective of the study was to understand, first, the level of familiarity with and importance of relevant issues for the EU foreign policy agenda. Second, the study aimed to highlight the most crucial challenges, divisive topics and proposed solutions as perceived by participants. Overall, it could be said that, in line with existing research, foreign policy matters are still less salient among European citizens if compared with other domestic topics. There are, however, some interesting elements to consider: first, the ongoing war in Ukraine has significantly influenced the ways participants think about the future of the EU. This event not only influenced their perception of security, but also their view of the most pressing international challenges, and the role that their respective countries and the EU can play globally.

All groups highlighted the need to move forward with European integration to find common solutions to global problems. Beside the most pressing security concerns, related to the uncertainty of the war in Ukraine, the mentioned topics ranged from inflation to climate change, from the international role of China to increasing geopolitical tensions. This attests to a growing awareness among participants of the changing international environment. It also highlights how most participants identified the EU as the actor that could best represent their countries' interests in the global arena. This occurred notwithstanding the EU limits in the management of global and regional crises, which were underlined across all groups especially in connection with the management of crucial issues, such as the energy crisis, the need to disengage from the dependency on Russian fossil fuels and the war-related consequences, such as the further rise of inflation. Interestingly, disinformation was also an emerging topic in various groups.

On average, in all countries the discussion showed an overall positive view of the EU's effort for greater autonomy and stronger sovereignty, especially on matters related to energy, with a shared perception that this would help secure the EU position in the global arena. This is interesting considering participants' awareness about the shortcomings and constraints of the EU's action at the present. In this



connection, participants mentioned as important limits to EU action the structural difficulty in finding quick, cohesive, consistent and efficient solutions (also due to the unanimity clause on matters of foreign and security policy); furthermore, they expressed concerns related to the costs, feasibility and necessity for the EU to have common military capabilities.

As already mentioned, the war in Ukraine made even more visible certain weaknesses of present EU policies, such as the energy dependence from non-reliable actors. As expected, while a general consensus could be found on the use of economic sanctions against Russia, the decision to support Ukraine through military aid was the topic that caused the greatest disagreements among participants across all countries. Also in this case, however, all the proposed solutions to address the conflict pointed to a more significant role for the EU rather than individual member states. Participants showed a certain awareness and preoccupation for the increasing geopolitical challenges linked to the growing role of actors such as China and Russia. Also in this respect, the EU was seen as the most suitable actor to commonly address such geopolitical challenges.

Differently from what might have been expected, the analysis did not highlight significant elements of intra-EU contestation. Only on rare occasions participants pointed out to perceived hypocrisy, or double standards, in the behaviour of other member states. There was, however, a certain shared feeling, especially in Southern European countries (namely, Greece, Italy and Spain), of being left alone in dealing with previous crises, such as the migration crisis of the mid-2010s. As for the war in Ukraine, participants had the perception of being somehow forced by EU institutions and by the circumstances to align with policy positions that do not reflect the actual or perceived weight or leadership role of member states (Germany; Greece; Spain).

Finally, results from selected case studies indicate a remarkable lack of awareness about issues and crises that are not currently under the radar of the mainstream media, such as the Iran nuclear deal, the dispute between Serbia and Kosovo and the Libyan conflict, despite the fact that they all constitute significant challenges to EU security. In conclusion, in spite of the increased relevance of foreign policy in the daily life of European citizens due to the war in Ukraine and the constant presence of related topics in the news, there is still little evidence of an increasing salience of these topics among the public in EU member states.

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