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## Epistemic Intermediaries and Europe's Defence Turn: Expert Knowledge and the Communication of the CSDP

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### 1. Introduction

History is once again accelerating under the conditions of permacrisis and poly-crisis, where overlapping and chronic disruptions reshape political, economic, and security landscapes (Hoeffler *et al.* 2024; Lausberg *et al.* 2024). In recent years, the European Union (EU) has faced a succession of transformative crises -the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the resurgence of conflict in the Middle East, and growing uncertainty over NATO's future- that have exerted extraordinary pressure on its strategic posture (Faure & Zurtrassen 2024; Jurčák & Ivančík 2023; Mader *et al.* 2024). Concurrently, a global technological arms race in artificial intelligence (AI), driven by the United States and China, is reshaping defence paradigms worldwide (Clapp 2025). Together, these dynamics are catalyzing a paradigmatic shift: the EU is moving beyond reactive crisis management toward a more assertive geopolitical agency (European Parliament 2023). Yet this transformation is not merely material. Strategic autonomy also needs to be communicatively constructed: the meanings of security, sovereignty, and legitimacy have to be actively forged and stabilized within the public sphere (Doyle & Desta 2021; Kantner 2014). Recent enquiries point to a growing public awareness of Europe's evolving security landscape. Fifty-five percent of Europeans believe the EU is now better prepared to face major crises -including geopolitical instability- than five years ago, and 77% of citizens support the establishment of a common defence and security policy (European Parliament 2024a; 2024b). However, previous studies have shown that defence and security issues influence citizens' attitudes toward the European Union (Sinnott 1995; 1997; 2000). This makes the way these issues are communicated a matter of critical importance. In sensitive domains such as defence, public institutional communication emerges as a strategic instrument of governance and democratic resilience. Security communication often remains technical, opaque, and detached from broader publics, as particularly visible in the case of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). Within this evolving communicative landscape, a critical but underexplored group -the epistemic intermediaries- gains prominence. Comprising scholars, policy advisors, civil servants, and strategic communicators embedded within the CSDP policy process, these actors

mediate between institutional narratives and public perceptions (Von Soest 2023). Their agency not only shapes how security policies are interpreted by stakeholders but also how the legitimacy of European defence integration is produced under conditions of uncertainty. Despite its growing importance, the nexus between public institutional communication, expert knowledge, and the CSDP remains severely under-researched. Contemporary analyses rarely examine systematically how the EU communicates security through expert networks, or how such communication infrastructures influence legitimacy, trust, and contestation in the defence domain. Addressing this gap, this article investigates two interrelated research questions: (RQ1) How is knowledge about the CSDP framed and transmitted through European public communication to experts acting as intermediaries? (RQ2) How do these European experts position themselves toward the evolving CSDP, and how might their knowledge frames influence broader citizen perceptions? While this study does not directly analyze the discursive content of expert communication, it adopts the perceptions of epistemic intermediaries as a proxy for their communicative framing, thus allowing for an indirect but analytically valuable insight into the ways in which institutional narratives are internalized, mediated, or contested. Rather than surveying citizens directly, this study adopts an innovative perspective by focusing on epistemic intermediaries as key conduits between institutions and public opinion. To address the research questions, it employs a cross-national purposive-sample survey ( $n=129$ ) targeting scholars, civil servants, and policy actors directly engaged in the governance of the CSDP. Participants were selected based on their affiliation with European Union institutions, national ministries of defence and foreign affairs, research centres, and think tanks specializing in European security. Through this analysis, the article illuminates the communicative infrastructures through which the legitimacy of European security governance is precariously constructed -and at times contested- providing insights into future challenges for public institutional communication in a post-crisis, post-consensus Europe.

## **2. Background information**

### **2.1 Strategic autonomy and the structural evolution of the CSDP**

Rather than a steady march toward integration, the CSDP has evolved through cycles of crisis-driven adaptation and contestation, shaped by competing visions of Europe's strategic role and identity. Early post-war initiatives, notably the 1948 Brussels Treaty and the Western European Union (WEU), exposed the structural fragility of European efforts to assert strategic autonomy-understood both as a normative aspiration for independent agency and as an operational capacity for autonomous action. Rather than fostering a self-sufficient security architecture, these efforts were subsumed within NATO's protective framework, embedding Atlanticism as the dominant paradigm of European security (Howorth 2020). The notion of strategic autonomy has remained intrinsically contested. It broadly refers to the European Union's capacity to act independently in security and defence matters without undue reliance on

external actors (Biscop 2022; Howorth 2020). Yet interpretations diverge: for some, it implies full operational independence from NATO and the United States; for others, it entails enhancing European agency within a reinforced transatlantic alliance (Fiott 2022). Strategic autonomy spans operational, political-strategic, industrial, and normative dimensions, each evolving unevenly and often generating internal tensions: advances in industrial capability, for instance, may outpace political consensus, while operational readiness can be undermined by normative divergences among member states. While NATO's security guarantees were indispensable during the Cold War, they also entrenched structural dependencies that would later constrain Europe's autonomous capacity. Throughout both the bipolar and post-bipolar periods, recurring instability along Europe's periphery revealed the limitations of strategic dependence and underscored the need for autonomous crisis management capabilities (Howorth 2020). Yet institutional responses—from the 2003 European Security Strategy (ESS) to the establishment of the European Defence Agency (EDA) in 2004 and the formalization of the CSDP under the 2009 Lisbon Treaty—reproduced a fundamentally intergovernmental logic. Divergences in threat perceptions, strategic cultures, and defence-industrial interests consistently impeded the emergence of a cohesive security identity (Howorth 2012). Formal structures matured, but deeper integration remained hostage to national sovereignty sensitivities. Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 exposed the fragility of prevailing assumptions regarding a pacified European security order, prompting a recalibration of European strategic thinking. The 2016 European Union Global Strategy (EUGS) articulated a more pragmatic vision of principled engagement, marking a departure from the optimism of the 2003 ESS, which had linked European security to global democratic proliferation (Biscop 2014; 2022). New instruments such as the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD) and the reconfigured Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) emerged to routinize cooperation and foster an embryonic "community of practice" (Rutigliano 2023). This strategic reorientation necessitated both institutional adaptation and a reconfiguration of Europe's fragmented defence-industrial base. The 2016 European Defence Action Plan, the European Defence Fund (EDF) under Regulation 2021/697, and the 2021 European Peace Facility (EPF) were pivotal steps aimed at consolidating industrial capabilities and enhancing external influence. The systemic shock of Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion accelerated the transition from structural preparation to operational consolidation. In response, the Strategic Compass for Security and Defence, adopted in 2022, provided a comprehensive roadmap, integrating threat analysis, capability targets, crisis preparedness, and scenario planning (European Commission 2023). Denmark's decision to end its defence opt-out, along with the 2024 launch of the European Defence Industrial Strategy (EDIS) and the European Defence Industry Programme (EDIP), further consolidated political consensus and industrial ambitions. The Strategic Compass also reintroduced the previously contested concept of supranational military integration. Although the ambition for a common European army traces back to the failed European Defence Community (EDC) Treaty of 1952, it had re-

remained dormant until the disruptions triggered by Russian aggression. The creation of the European Union Rapid Deployment Capacity (EU RDC) -a modular force capable of projecting up to 5,000 troops across land, air, and maritime domains- represented a notable development in operational capabilities. The first live exercise (LIVEX), conducted in Spain in 2023, demonstrated the Union's growing military readiness. Nonetheless, significant challenges remain. Achieving strategic autonomy demands not only political consensus but also overcoming divergences in operational capabilities, industrial coordination, and normative cohesion. In an era of chronic instability at Europe's borders, questions regarding the legitimacy and effectiveness of a common European security posture have acquired increasing prominence both within policy agendas and in public debate across the Union.

## **2.2 Behavioral and digital innovations in public institutional communication: challenges for the CSDP**

Section 2.1 showed how institutional structures have evolved. Now, strategic communication in the CSDP is strained by the behavioral-digital turn. Policies no longer just deliver public goods; they also signal values and legitimacy (OECD, 2021; Sibony & Alemanno, 2015). In areas like environmental policy or security, framing can be as important as substance. Public institutional communication thus plays an increasingly vital role in enhancing epistemic accessibility and fostering democratic accountability (Belluati & Marini 2019; D'Ambrosi 2019; De Vreese 2003; Lovari & Ducci 2022). At the same time, the integration of behavioral insights (BI) and digital technologies into public communication raises critical normative concerns. While behavioral tools aim to improve governance outcomes by tailoring information to cognitive and emotional patterns, they also risk drifting into forms of manipulative steering. Particularly in security and defence contexts-characterized by technical complexity, strategic ambiguity, and high emotional salience-the use of behavioral communication strategies can subtly constrain public deliberation, challenging fundamental democratic principles of transparency, contestability, and informed consent (Zuboff 2019; 2022). These concerns are compounded by broader transformations in the institution-citizen interface. Digitalization has profoundly reshaped communication logics: networked information flows, algorithmic curation, and participatory platforms have expanded arenas of contestation while complicating coherent narrative construction. Disinformation dynamics have further eroded trust, positioning strategic communication at the heart of effective governance (Belluati & Caraffini 2015; Featherstone 1994; Norris 2011; Pasquino 2012). Within this evolving context, the COVID-19 pandemic marked a critical juncture. Evidence highlights that simplifying complex content and building trust became essential to governance effectiveness during the crisis (Alfonsi *et al.* 2022; European Environment Agency 2016; OECD 2017; 2021; Osborne and Thaler 2010; Smillie & Scharfbillig 2024). Behavioral insights were systematically deployed to enhance the resonance and persuasive capacity of public institutional communication, leveraging citizens' sensitivity to information framing (Ent-

man 1991; 1993; Nelson *et al.* 1997). However, the strategic use of BI is not without risks. Nudging, as originally theorized by Thaler and Sunstein (2008), seeks to guide individuals toward welfare-enhancing decisions while preserving freedom of choice. Yet in high-stakes sectors like security and defence, where strategic narratives are highly normative and emotionally charged, the boundary between legitimate persuasion and non-transparent influence becomes precarious. Without robust ethical safeguards, there is a tangible risk of privileging compliance over genuine democratic engagement, entrenching epistemic asymmetries and marginalizing dissenting voices. Thus, while communication innovations have expanded the effectiveness and reach of institutional action, they need to be critically assessed for their broader impact on democratic legitimacy. Within the CSDP, where public engagement remains relatively low compared to other EU fields, the cultivation of legitimacy through transparent, contestable, and epistemically plural communication strategies is not simply desirable-it is increasingly strategic. The next section explores how public opinion and epistemic intermediaries shape the evolving sense-making environment of European security and defence integration.

### 2.3 Public opinion, epistemic intermediaries, and the construction of CSDP legitimacy

Public opinion has historically occupied an ambiguous role in the development of the European Union's CSDP. Early analyses, notably Posen's (2004) characterization of the EU as composed of "unmartial publics", portrayed European societies as culturally predisposed toward pacifism and strategic disengagement. This thesis of European exceptionalism was further elaborated by Schilde *et al.* (2019), who emphasized normative aversion to military engagement as a structural feature of the European integration project. However, this narrative has been increasingly contested by empirical evidence. Longitudinal Eurobarometer surveys reveal that public support for a communitarian approach to defence integration has remained consistently high-hovering around 70% since the 1990s (*Ibidem*). External shocks, particularly Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, have further catalyzed public demand for a more coherent and assertive EU security posture (Thomson *et al.* 2023). Yet the depth and resilience of this support remain subject to debate. Scholars such as Wagner (2005; 2006) and Tournier (2004) caution that what appears as broad endorsement may in fact reflect a "permissive consensus"-numerically robust yet normatively shallow-rendering it vulnerable to elite contestation and political volatility, as theorized by Hooghe and Marks (2009). Recent analyses by Borri *et al.* (2024) underscore that, while public attitudes toward CSDP integration are broadly favorable, national policy makers remain cautious, acutely aware of the risks of activating latent ambivalences through overly assertive integration strategies. These concerns reflect broader uncertainties surrounding the volatility of public opinion in security domains, where citizen knowledge tends to be limited and opportunities for sustained democratic deliberation remain underdeveloped. Understanding the evolving perceptions of European citizens regarding the CSDP is thus essential, not only for delineating the



boundaries of political feasibility but also for identifying opportunities to construct a more democratically anchored security framework. European institutions have increasingly sought to reframe public opinion from a potential constraint into a strategic resource. Communication efforts now aim to leverage favorable public attitudes to legitimate deeper integration initiatives. As the literature suggests (Manigart 1986; 2003; Rokkan 1960; Schilde *et al.* 2019), public sentiment and media framing have evolved from passive background conditions into dynamic forces actively shaping the lifecycle of security and defence policies. Nevertheless, communicating about the CSDP presents unique challenges. Security and defence issues are not only highly technical but also normatively charged, complicating direct engagement with citizens. In this context, the role of epistemic intermediaries becomes indispensable. The concept of epistemic intermediaries captures a specific category of actors who mediate between complex institutional knowledge and the broader public sphere. Unlike traditional experts, who primarily produce specialized knowledge, or communicators, who merely disseminate predefined narratives, epistemic intermediaries engage in interpretative and translational labor. They selectively frame, simplify, and emotionally calibrate security and defence information, shaping how such knowledge is understood and contested by the public (Boswell 2009; Radaelli 1999; 2017). Their agency is not neutral: epistemic intermediaries operate within fields of power, negotiating between institutional priorities and democratic demands for transparency and contestability. However, epistemic intermediaries should not be treated as a homogeneous category. They vary significantly in their degree of institutional alignment, critical autonomy, and communicative strategies. Some function as near-extensions of institutional narratives, selectively framing information to reinforce official policy objectives. Others maintain a degree of critical distance, interpreting and contextualizing security information in ways that may introduce pluralism and contestation into the public sphere. Intermediaries operate along a continuum ranging from “policy-aligned brokers” to “critical translators”, reflecting diverse epistemic and political commitments (Boswell 2009). In the context of the CSDP, such intermediaries—including policy advisors, legal officers, military planners, and strategic communicators—play a pivotal role in constructing the epistemic and normative boundaries within which European security and defence policies are debated, accepted, or resisted. Their communicative practices are embedded within broader strategic dynamics, particularly acute in the security and defence domain where secrecy, urgency, and normative contestation intersect. Rather than merely facilitating understanding, intermediaries may selectively frame narratives that align with institutional priorities or political agendas. Their translational labor thus acquires a political dimension, influencing which interpretations of the CSDP become dominant, legitimate, and actionable. This dynamic introduces a potential for the reproduction -and at times amplification- of institutional biases, raising critical concerns about transparency, contestability, and pluralism within the evolving communicative architecture of European security governance. In an era characterized by chronic uncertainty, fragmented publics, and contested legitimacy, the communicative agency of epistemic

intermediaries is central to the resilience of the CSDP. Institutional robustness alone is insufficient. The transparency, quality, and contestability of communicative practices are equally vital for ensuring that European security governance remains responsive, credible, and democratically anchored. This study advances this understanding by examining how CSDP insiders perceive, frame, and transmit knowledge about European security and defence, and by analyzing the broader implications for the legitimacy and effectiveness of the European Union's security and defence integration project. In doing so, it addresses critical gaps in existing research concerning the interplay between strategic communication, public opinion, and epistemic mediation in shaping the evolving contours of European strategic autonomy.

### 3. Methodology

This study investigates European experts' perceptions and knowledge of the CSDP, treating their perceptions as *proxies* for understanding how knowledge about the CSDP is framed and mediated through public institutional communication. While the research does not directly analyze the discursive content of expert communication, it employs the perceptions of epistemic intermediaries as an indirect but analytically valuable lens through which to explore how institutional narratives are internalized, mediated, or contested within professional networks. A quantitative research design was adopted, drawing methodological inspiration from established instruments such as the Eurobarometer and the European Social Survey, while adapting their operational frameworks to the specificities of a highly specialized audience. Data collection was conducted through an online survey disseminated via a purposive snowball sampling strategy, targeting individuals directly involved in European security and defence affairs. Initial seeds were recruited from research centers, think tanks, universities, ministries of defence, and other relevant institutional and non-institutional settings. All 27 EU member states' ministries of defence were contacted to maximize coverage across public authorities. The initial sample was constructed through a multi-step process that combined prior field knowledge with systematic outreach strategies. First, a literature review helped identify key individuals, institutions, and themes within the CSDP domain. This was followed by targeted searches using commercial search engines, employing keywords such as "Defence", "Research", "Centre", and "Think Tank". In parallel, scholarly databases such as Scopus were systematically queried to cross-reference relevant keywords, authors, and institutional affiliations. Additional sources included institutional reports and official documentation. To complement these efforts, the researchers also relied on their professional networks, using platforms such as LinkedIn and issuing targeted invitations to consultants and private-sector experts with demonstrated experience in European security and defence policy. This dual recruitment strategy was designed to broaden the scope of epistemic coverage and mitigate the self-reinforcing biases typically associated with snowball sampling. Nonetheless, several limitations need to be acknowledged. Snowball sampling, by

design, can introduce biases related to network proximity and professional homogeneity, potentially leading to an overrepresentation of institutionally aligned or like-minded individuals. Despite efforts to diversify the pool, the final sample of 129 respondents shows a marked concentration from specific national contexts, particularly Italy (62%). This geographic skew may reflect both the researchers' institutional positioning and unequal access to expert networks across the EU. Additionally, the absence of a probabilistic sampling frame precludes statistical generalizability. The findings should therefore be interpreted not as representative of the entire population of European defence experts, but as analytically instructive insights drawn from a strategically relevant, though non-exhaustive, segment of the epistemic community. Future research would benefit from employing stratified or quota-based sampling designs, expanding geographic reach, and incorporating comparative perspectives between expert and citizen populations to enhance external validity. The notion of "expert" was operationalized following Christensen's (2021) conceptualization, identifying individuals with scientific, academic, or professional expertise relevant to policy-making. Eligibility required a minimum of three years of direct engagement -through research, professional practice, or advisory roles- with security and defence issues. This criterion was clearly communicated at the beginning of the survey to ensure the self-selection of qualified participants. The survey instrument collected demographic and background information, assessed respondents' self-perceived knowledge of the CSDP, and explored their perceptions regarding the policy's communication, accessibility, and legitimacy. All questionnaire items are reproduced in full in appendix A (*authors sent the questionnaire to the editors*). To ensure conceptual clarity and internal consistency, the questionnaire underwent a pre-test phase involving three external experts familiar with the CSDP domain. Their feedback led to minor refinements in question wording and sequencing, enhancing the instrument's reliability without altering its analytical structure. Data collection took place between February 14 and April 30, 2024. The period was marked by significant developments in the EU's security landscape, including the launch of the EDIS and ongoing political responses to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. This timing was strategically chosen to capture expert perceptions in a moment of heightened policy salience and evolving communicative demands. Focusing on epistemic intermediaries, rather than the general public, aligns with the theoretical orientation of this study. The aim is not to measure patterns of mass reception but to illuminate the communicative infrastructures through which legitimacy in EU security governance is constructed during a formative phase. By privileging the perspectives of those who interpret, filter, and reframe institutional messages, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how strategic narratives in defence are legitimized -or contested- within elite communicative environments.



#### 4. Findings and discussion

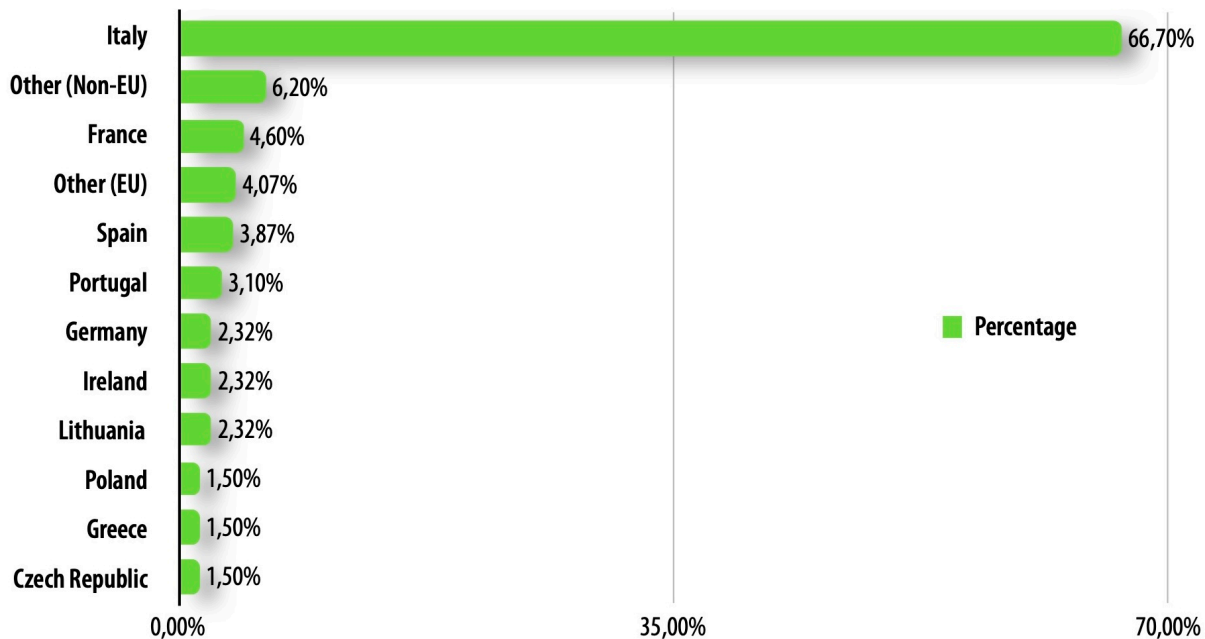


Figure 1. Geographic distribution of survey respondents by nationality

Data was collected from 129 respondents from 16 EU countries. 6.2% have an extra-European nationality. Among all of the respondents, almost all of them currently live within the European Union, in particular in Italy and Belgium (62% and 8.5%, respectively). By including an 'extra-EU' response option, the research acknowledges the increasingly transnational nature of security and defence policy expertise. Although the implications of this dimension are not fully explored in this study, it highlights potential dynamics extending beyond the EU framework and suggests avenues for future research. Moving beyond this brief aside, the analysis of the sample reveals that men and women respectively comprise 62.8% and 36.4% of the sample, with a small minority opting not to disclose their gender or identifying with non-binary gender forms. Participants indicated their age to be between the 25-39 years (62.8% of the sample). Overall, the sample's educational profile is characterized by a high level of education: approximately 29% of the sample holds a second-level master's degree, and around 23% has obtained a Ph.D. qualification. In line with this, the majority of the sample reported their employment status as student (34.1%) and non-managerial white-collar worker (30.2%).

Approximately 54.3% of respondents indicated that they are currently employed by institutions or organisations focused on the study and analysis of European issues, such as research centers, universities, and think tanks. This item was designed to distinguish between individuals who are professionally and actively engaged with European affairs at the time of data collection and those whose engagement may derive from previous academic training, professional experience, or consultancy roles, but who nonetheless possess relevant expertise. This differentiation was necessary to capture a broader spectrum of epistemic intermediaries, including those operating

at the margins of formal institutional settings. It thus allows for the positioning of participants along a continuum of expertise.

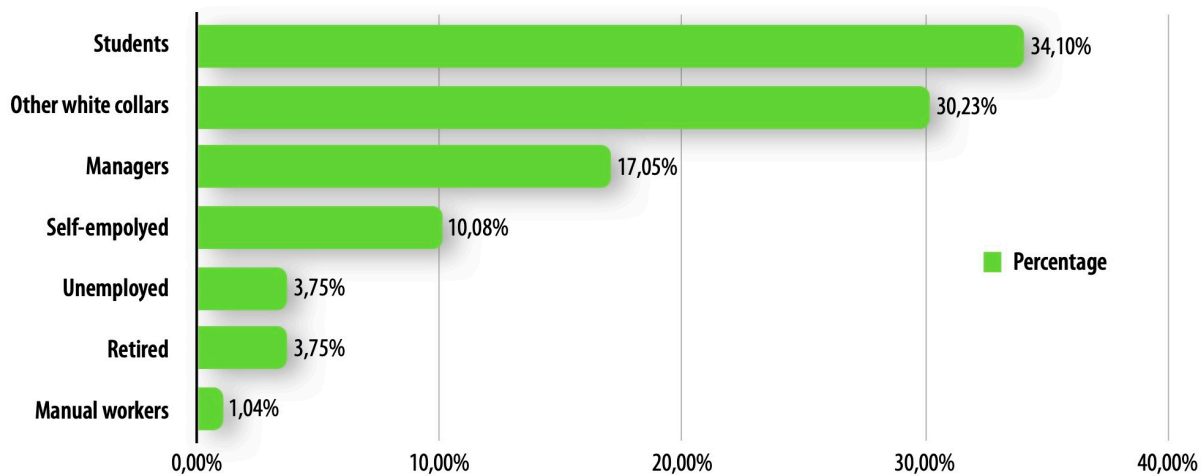


Figure 2. Respondents' professional backgrounds

Furthermore, the media consumption habits of participants are recognized as a significant factor in shaping public opinion toward policies, as posited by agenda-setting theory, which explores how media exposure influences individual attitudes and knowledge structures (McCombs & Shaw 1972). Accordingly, the first section of the questionnaire asked respondents to indicate the channels they most frequently use to stay informed about the CSDP. In line with established research on multichannel media consumption, a comprehensive strategy was employed that incorporated a diversified array of information channels to ensure robust data collection (Tables 1, 2).

Most used sources of information for CSDP	Percentage
Institutional channels (ministerial websites, etc.)	30,2
Scientific journals, online or printed	22,5
Social networks and online blogs	18,6
Printed or online newspapers	10,1
I do not seek information on European Common Security and Defence Policy	7,7
General magazines, online or printed	4,6
Cable or internet television	3,9
Other	1,5
Radio, including podcast	0
I do not know	1,1

Table 1. Primary information sources used by respondents to access CSDP-related content

Among the respondents surveyed, institutional channels - such as ministerial websites and official EU platforms - emerged as the

primary source of information on the CSDP, cited by approximately 30% of participants. Scientific publications, both in print and online formats, constituted the second most

frequently used source, informing 22.5% of the sample. Notably, social media platforms followed closely, with 18.6% of respondents indicating that they relied on these channels to stay updated on CSDP-related developments. This distribution points to a hybrid information environment in which formal institutional outputs coexist with academic discourse and emerging digital ecosystems. These data suggest that institutional channels and scientific publications constitute the primary epistemic infrastructures through which expert knowledge of the CSDP is both framed and accessed, thereby reinforcing the technocratic disposition of European Union communication in defence affairs. This pattern reflects not only a preference for first-order sources -such as legislative texts, official communiqués, and white papers- but also a broader logic of authority that privileges institutional proximity and formalized expertise. Scientific literature, particularly peer-reviewed journals and policy reports, emerges as a secondary yet significant vector for reinforcing pre-existing knowledge regimes and legitimizing interpretive frameworks. The role of digital platforms, while more ambivalent, warrants closer attention. The use of social networks among respondents -many of whom possess substantial professional experience in security and defence- suggests a shifting communicative ecology in which traditional boundaries between institutional and informal knowledge circulation are increasingly porous. On professional platforms such as LinkedIn, epistemic communities tend to self-organize into semi-public arenas for knowledge exchange, policy dissemination, and reputational signaling.

These environments operate simultaneously as arenas of visibility for research centers and think tanks, and as discursive echo chambers where thematic affinities amplify selected narratives (Terren & Borge 2021; Colleoni *et al.* 2014). In this hybrid setting, social media assumes a dual role: it functions as a space for reflexive professional dialogue while also replicating the algorithmic biases and selective exposure dynamics that characterize contemporary information ecosystems. The expert reliance on such channels thus reveals a subtle tension between the search for epistemic credibility and the risks of cognitive homophily and communicative fragmentation. Only 10% of respondents reported relying on printed or online newspapers as a primary source of information on the CSDP, while a noteworthy 7.7% indicated that they do not seek information on the topic at all. This latter finding was somewhat unexpected, particularly given the purposive sampling of individuals engaged in European security and defence. Nevertheless, its inclusion proves analytically valuable, as it captures a segment of experts who, despite their professional involvement in CSDP -related domains, do not actively engage with external information sources on the subject. While this phenomenon merits further investigation- particularly in relation to issues of information saturation, institutional knowledge dependence, or role -specific information asymmetries- it lies beyond the scope and objectives of the present study.

In a symmetrical manner, table 2 presents the sources least relied upon by the epistemic intermediaries involved in the study to gather information about the CSDP.

The least used sources of information for respondents to stay informed about the CSDP include cable or internet television (18.6%), social networks (17.8%) and radio and podcasts (10.9%). Although radio/podcasts never appear as anyone's most-used

Less used sources of information for CSDP	Percentage
Cable or internet television	18,6
Social networks and online blogs	17,8
Radio, including podcasts	10,9
Printed or online encyclopedias	9,3
General magazines, online or printed	7,7
Institutional channels (ministerial websites, etc.)	7,7
I do not seek information on European CSDP	7,0
Scientific Journals, online or printed	5,4
Printed or online newspapers	4,6
I do not know	3,1

Table 2. Information sources least used by respondents to access CSDP-related content

gies of epistemic intermediaries. Understanding that divergence is a crucial avenue for future research. This constitutes a critical area for further research, particularly in terms of understanding the differential media ecologies that shape expert versus citizen knowledge of European security and defence issues. The data reveal a nearly symmetrical division in the sample regarding the use of social networks as a source of information about the CSDP: 17.6% of respondents explicitly reject social networks for this purpose, while 18% identify them as a primary source. This polarization suggests that, even within epistemic intermediary communities, social networks are highly contested spaces in terms of informational legitimacy. On the one hand, a segment of experts appears willing to integrate social media into their informational practices, likely leveraging platforms for rapid updates, professional networking, and access to institutional outputs. On the other hand, an almost equivalent segment remains skeptical, possibly due to concerns about information reliability, disinformation risks, or perceived epistemic noise. This internal fragmentation highlights a broader tension between the opportunities offered by digital environments for knowledge dissemination and the enduring need for information control and validation in sensitive policy domains like security and defence. It also reflects the differentiated trust architectures that characterize contemporary communicative ecosystems, where experts selectively curate their exposure to digital content based on perceived credibility and strategic relevance. Moreover, approximately 7% of the respondents reported that they do not seek information on the CSDP at all. This finding, although concerning a minority of the sample, is nonetheless significant given the expert profile of the participants. It suggests that even within epistemic communities ostensibly engaged with European security and defence issues, informational disengagement or selective ignorance may occur. This phenomenon may reflect several underlying factors: high levels of institutional trust that reduce the perceived need

source (0 % in Table 1), 10.9 % of experts still list them among their least-preferred outlets (Table 2), indicating that while no one ranks them first, a notable minority ranks them near the bottom. This finding is especially striking given the boom in security-and-defence podcasts since 2022: the expert class surveyed here simply isn't following that trend. It remains an open question whether these formats are more popular among the general public—a potential bottom-up dynamic that would contrast with the media ecologies

for external information, overreliance on tacit knowledge acquired through professional practice, or strategic disinterest in certain policy domains. Further research would be necessary to unpack these dynamics. Overall, these results provide critical insights into the cognitive self-positioning of epistemic intermediaries regarding European security and defence, offering a deeper understanding of potential knowledge gaps and perceptions of communicative sufficiency. In this context, table 3 focuses specifically on the respondents' self-assessed knowledge about the CSDP. It presents the results from the survey section dedicated to evaluating how participants perceive their own level of information concerning the CSDP, their familiarity with procurement processes, and their assessment of the quality and accessibility of information related to defence topics.

Question	Mean (scales always from 1 to 7)	Working within an institution specializing in European Union issues	Not-working within an institution specializing in European Union issues
Self-rating knowledge of EU affairs	4.95	5.12	4.69
Importance of knowing CSDP	5.53	5.62	5.42
Self-rating informed about CSDP	4.41	4.6	4.20
Self-rating informed about common procurement in defence	3.89	4.1	3.68
Prioritizing being informed on national defence over EU defence (inverted question, higher value represent tendency toward the national sphere)	4.53	4.47	4.59
Sufficiency of information on security and defence provided by EU institutions	2.89	2.93	2.83
Accessibility of information about common security and defence	4.01	4.01	4.12
Accessibility of information about common security and defence delivered by EU institutions	3.53	3.44	3.64

Table 3. Respondents' self-assessment of knowledge, policy priorities, and perceptions of public institutional communication on the CSDP

The participants tend to rate the importance of knowing the CSDP highly, with a mean score of 5.53. This consciousness toward the CSDP is partially reflected by the knowledge they self-rate, at 4.95, and on how much they consider themselves as informed on the topic, with a mean value for the entire sample of 4.41. Tendentially, for the three items, the sub-sample of people working into institutions related to EU affairs have always some decimal points more as mean, while people outside of this sub-sample have instead an opposite effect.

Notably, the lowest reported value (2.89) corresponds to the respondents' perception of the sufficiency of information provided by EU public communication on



security and defence topics. Similarly, the mean value regarding the perceived accessibility of information disseminated through EU institutional channels also reflects a degree of criticality (3.53), highlighting the fragility of EU public institutional communication in this policy area. Furthermore, a significant gap emerges between respondents' self-assessed knowledge of general aspects of European policy and their familiarity with more technical dimensions, as illustrated by the example of defence sector procurement, which registered a lower mean score (3.89). This disparity underscores the challenges associated with communicating complex and technical aspects of the CSDP, even among professionally engaged intermediaries.

Moreover, regarding their self-assessment of knowledge about the CSDP, respondents revealed a greater tendency to be informed about national security issues rather than on EU ones (mean score: 4.53), indicating a stronger emphasis on the national dimension. The disparity between general policy knowledge (4.41) and specialized knowledge -particularly in areas such as defence procurement (3.89)- is also noteworthy. This suggests that, even among experts, familiarity with technical and operational aspects of European defence remains limited. Despite a general consensus on the need for enhanced coordination and cooperation at the European level, defence and security issues continue to represent a contentious domain among participants. Specifically, when security is framed broadly (mean score: 4.97), respondents exhibit a higher degree of support compared to when the frame explicitly emphasizes defence. Furthermore, approximately half of the respondents consider defence to be primarily a national responsibility, contending that it should remain under the authority of individual member states rather than being centralized at the EU level. In contrast, economy (5.91) and environment (5.22) emerge as the most pressing issues on which EU institutions should focus their efforts (Table 4).

Issues	Total group	Institutional employees	Non-institutional employees
Environment	5.22	5.53	4.83
Security	4.97	5.26	4.62
Economy	5.91	6.34	5.40
Health	4.59	4.83	4.29
Immigration	4.77	4.97	4.53
Other	3.69	3.64	3.76
Defence is a national priority	3.66	3.44	3.92

Table 4. Respondents' perceptions of strategic policy priorities for the European Union

The notion of a unified European military force receives moderate support from respondents, with mean scores of 4.57 and 4.63. In contrast, there is strong consensus regarding the critical role of NATO in ensuring the defence of the European Union, reflected in a higher mean rating of 5.69. This suggests that, in the perception of par-

ticipants, individual European countries would not be capable of effectively responding to emerging security threats without the collective defence guarantees provided by NATO. This sentiment can be partly attributed to the acknowledged inadequacy of military equipment and capabilities across Europe. A pronounced consensus also emerges regarding the need for increased investment in European defence policies and the establishment of more effective collective defence arrangements (mean score: 5.22). In addition, participants express agreement that defence decisions should be collectively determined by the European Union and its member states through structured and coordinated mechanisms (5.26). These findings point to a strong demand for enhanced European-level coordination and cooperation in defence policy-making, emphasizing the necessity of greater collaboration among member states. Furthermore, a significant majority of participants supports the idea that citizens should be afforded greater opportunities for consultation and involvement in decision-making processes related to the CSDP (4.79). However, despite this positive attitude toward citizen involvement, respondents rate the European Union's current ability to empower citizens in this domain relatively low (2.93), indicating a substantial gap between the perceived desirability of citizen participation and its practical implementation.

## 5. Conclusions

This study has examined how experts embedded within the governance ecosystem of the CSDP perceive, access, and evaluate institutional communication on European defence. By focusing on epistemic intermediaries -actors positioned between institutional narratives and public opinion- the analysis contributes to a growing literature interrogating the communicative foundations of EU legitimacy in a post-crisis security environment. The findings reveal a structural tension: while experts broadly support deeper integration in security and defence, they also express critical skepticism about the accessibility, sufficiency, and clarity of EU-level communication in this domain. Self-assessed knowledge of general EU affairs tends to exceed familiarity with more technical components-such as defence procurement-highlighting a cognitive asymmetry that persists even among policy insiders. The continued reliance on institutional and scientific sources, coupled with divided attitudes toward digital platforms, reflects a fragmented communicative ecology that both enables and constrains knowledge circulation. These results challenge the assumption that strategic communication in high-stakes policy domains can depend solely on behavioral nudging or digital amplification. Instead, they suggest that the legitimacy of the CSDP increasingly rests on communicative infrastructures that are not only persuasive but also transparent, dialogic, and epistemically plural. The observed gap between institutional intent and perceived clarity underscores the limits of technocratic framing, particularly in policy areas closely tied to identity, sovereignty, and democratic consent. Crucially, the study foregrounds the strategic role of epistemic intermediaries in shaping both the diffusion and contestation of CSDP nar-

ratives. As translators, framers, and sense-makers, these actors do not merely transmit information; they co-produce legitimacy. Future research should further explore the stratified nature of this epistemic field, investigating how institutional proximity, professional socialization, and ideological orientation shape communicative agency within the EU security apparatus. Methodologically, the study offers a proof of concept for expert-centered approaches to public opinion research, while acknowledging its geographic and sample limitations. Future investigations would benefit from broader geographic coverage, longitudinal data, and comparative designs that integrate both citizen and expert perspectives. In an era where geopolitical volatility collides with internal democratic fragility, the EU's ability to sustain trust and responsiveness in security governance will increasingly depend on the credibility of its communication. As the Union transitions from permissive consensus to contested integration, communicative legitimacy can no longer be treated as a secondary concern. It rather represents a core dimension of strategic autonomy. A promising line of further inquiry lies in evaluating how security and defence are framed for broader publics -not only for experts- and how such communication affects citizen understanding, trust, and engagement across diverse media and ideological contexts. This includes examining recent preparedness initiatives, such as the *White Paper for European Defence - Readiness 2030* and the Commission's "resilience kit" launched in 2025 which position security communication within a politically charged symbolic landscape<sup>1</sup>. In this context, public institutional communication may be interpreted either as responsible resilience or as ideologically charged alarmism, exposing the fragility and politicization of public opinion in times of strategic uncertainty.

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<sup>1</sup> Joint Communication from the European Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy outlining the European Preparedness Union Strategy and its action plan of 30 measures to strengthen the EU's capacity to anticipate, prevent, and manage threats and crises of all kinds (JOIN (2025) 130 final, 26 March 2025).

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