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EUROPEAN PUBLIC OPINION ON NATO DEFENCE SPENDING: THE GEOGRAPHIC DIVIDE

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ABSTRACT: *This paper examines the geographic divide in public support for the defence spending increase across European NATO member states. Drawing on triangulated data from NATO's commissioned surveys, the European Commission's Eurobarometer, and independent think tank polling (ECFR, GLOBSEC, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung), the analysis demonstrates a consistent pattern: citizens in countries geographically proximate to Russia exhibit significantly higher support for defence expenditure increases than those in Southern and Western European states. Frontline states such as Poland consistently show majority support for increased budget, while Southern European states such as Italy show markedly lower enthusiasm, with support collapsing to even lower levels when trade-offs with social welfare are made explicit. This divergence correlates strongly with differential threat perception, consistent with Boulding's loss-of-strength gradient theory, though domestic political context, burden-sharing concerns, and notable anomalies – including high threat perception in geographically distant Portugal and relatively low support for increasing spending among frontline Baltic states – introduce significant variations. The findings illuminate the structural tensions underlying Alliance burden-sharing debates.*

KEYWORDS: *NATO, defence spending, public opinion, threat perception, burden-sharing, transatlantic relations*

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INTRODUCTION

The question of fair burden-sharing within the North Atlantic Treaty Organization has animated transatlantic relations since the Alliance's founding in 1949. However, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 transformed this perennial debate from an abstract policy discussion into an urgent strategic imperative. As NATO members committed to an unprecedented defence spending increase – culminating in the June 2025 Hague Summit agreement to target 5% of GDP by 2035 –, the question of whether democratic publics will sustain support for such expenditures has become central to Alliance cohesion.

This paper examines the empirical evidence on public attitudes towards defence spending and threat perception across NATO member states, with particular attention to the geographic patterns that emerge from multiple independent surveys. The analysis reveals a consistent and significant divide: populations in countries closest to Russia demonstrate

both higher threat perception and substantially greater support for defence investment than those in Southern and Western Europe. This finding, confirmed across institutional, independent, and academic sources, has important implications for understanding Alliance dynamics.

The paper proceeds as follows: The next section establishes the theoretical framework, introducing Boulding's loss-of-strength gradient as the explanatory mechanism for geographic variation in threat perception. A discussion of methodology follows emphasising source triangulation to address potential institutional bias. The empirical findings are then presented across multiple survey sources, followed by an analysis of the threat perception explanation for regional divergence. The paper concludes with implications for Alliance strategy and future research directions.

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Public Opinion and Defence Policy

In democratic states, public attitudes constitute a meaningful constraint on defence policy choices. While governments tend to retain considerable autonomy in security affairs, sustained public opposition to military expenditure creates political costs that elected leaders cannot ignore. This relationship has intensified in the post-Cold War era, as defence budgets compete with social spending priorities. Understanding what shapes public support for defence spending is therefore essential for assessing the political sustainability of NATO's capability commitments.

The Loss of Strength Gradient and Geographic Threat Perception

British-American systems theorist Kenneth Boulding's concept of the "loss of strength gradient"[1] provides the theoretical foundation for this analysis. Boulding observed that a nation's military capability diminishes with distance from its home territory, creating geographic gradients in the ability to project power. Scholars have since applied this insight to threat perception, finding that the closer populations live to potential adversaries, the greater their perceived security needs are.

Citizens closer to a perceived threat experience greater salience of security concerns in daily life, receive more intensive media coverage of the threat, and have more direct exposure to its manifestations – whether through historical memory, refugee flows, or observable military posturing.

This generates a clear empirical expectation: public support for defence spending should vary systematically with geographic proximity to Russia across NATO and EU member states. The following analysis tests this expectation across multiple independent surveys to assess the robustness of the relation.

[1] Boulding 1962.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH: SOURCE TRIANGULATION

This analysis employs source triangulation to address potential institutional bias in survey data. Any single polling organization may have institutional interests that affect question framing, sample selection, or the presentation of results. To mitigate these concerns, this paper draws on multiple categories of sources with different institutional perspectives.

The present analysis triangulates findings across multiple survey sources: NATO's Alliance-wide polling, EU Eurobarometer data, independent surveys by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), and GLOBSEC's regional focus on Central and Eastern Europe. The European University Institute's (EUI) "Global Risks to the EU" expert survey complements this public opinion data by capturing how foreign policy professionals assess threat likelihood and impact – offering insight into whether elite and public perceptions align. Convergence across sources with different institutional interests and methodological approaches strengthens confidence in findings, while divergence reveals potential gaps that carry implications for democratic accountability and strategic communication.

In practice, cross-survey comparison reveals both patterns simultaneously: a core geographical gradient confirmed by all sources, and notable differences that are significant from an analytical perspective. These differences are not merely methodological questions – they reflect how the framing of questions, the timing of fieldworks, and the institutional context systematically shape the attitudes measured by the surveys. Framing the threat in personal and emotional terms (as in ECFR surveys) consistently yields lower values than abstract or event-based framing (NATO, Eurobarometer). Questions about spending support that clearly compromise social programmes (ECFR 2024) consistently yield the lowest scores in the dataset. Where surveys differ, the difference is informative.

Public Opinion Surveys

Institutional sources

NATO institutional surveys are the Alliance's commissioned surveys, with sample sizes exceeding 31,000 respondents across all 32 member states. NATO has an institutional interest in demonstrating public support for its policies, which must be considered when interpreting results.

EU institutional sources include Eurobarometer, the European Commission's official polling instrument, which provides standardized surveys across all EU member states with high methodological standards, though questions are framed within an EU institutional context.

Independent think tank survey

The European Council on Foreign Relations, the independent pan-European think tank founded in 2007, conducts regular polling across European states with a generally pro-European but methodologically rigorous approach.

Political foundation survey

The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Security Radar survey, conducted since 2019 by Germany's oldest political foundation (funded by the German federal government), provides representative

public opinion polling across countries of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), including Russia and Ukraine.

Regional specialist survey
GLOBSEC, the Bratislava-based security policy think tank, provides specialized expertise on Central and Eastern European public opinion through its annual Trends surveys.

Expert Perception Survey
The Global Risks to the EU (RISK-EU) survey, conducted annually by the Robert Schuman Centre at the European University Institute and partner institutions, encompasses approximately 500 European foreign policy experts' assessments of threat likelihood and impact.

EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

Public Opinion Data

Institutional surveys
NATO's most recent survey, conducted in April-May 2024 across all 32 Allied countries, captures threat perception through two complementary measures: general favorability towards Russia ("How would you describe your opinion of Russia?") and perceived impact of the Ukraine war on national security ("In your opinion, has Russia's war against Ukraine affected the safety and security of [your country]?"). Alliance-wide, 62% of citizens hold unfavorable views of Russia – a figure that has gradually declined from the immediate post-invasion peak of 68% in April-May 2022 to 66% in 2023 and 62% in 2024 –, suggesting a degree of threat normalization even as negative sentiment remains high. When asked about the war's impact on their countries' security, 62% responded affirmatively (19% "very much", 43% "somewhat"). Substantial variations persist across the Alliance. The frontline and Baltic states register the highest concern: Poland (86%), Lithuania (84%), Latvia (82%), Estonia (80%), Sweden (79%), and Finland (77%) all report significant perceived impact. Romania (76%) and Norway (74%) follow closely, with Denmark and Czechia (72-72%), Germany and Slovakia (71-71%) in the upper-moderate range. At the other end, Slovenia (53%), Greece (55%), Italy (58%), and Spain (60%) show lower concern, while Hungary (61%) and Bulgaria (66%) occupy the moderate range – the latter two notably higher than their respective GLOBSEC (regional survey) responses on direct Russian threat perception, which suggests that question framing around the concrete reality of war may elicit different responses than abstract threat assessment.[2]

The survey asked respondents about their views on national defence spending. Across the Alliance, 76% support maintaining or increasing defence spending, with 41% specifically favoring increases – a four-percentage point rise from 2023 (37%) and just one point above 2022 levels (40%). Meanwhile, support for merely maintaining current levels has steadily declined (38% → 36% → 35%), indicating a hardening of opinion: the overall consensus holds, but within it, sentiment is shifting towards more spending commitments more than two years into the conflict. Country-level data reveals notable patterns. Bulgaria (61%),

[2] NATO Public Diplomacy Division 2024, 11, 15.

the Netherlands (56%), Sweden (55%), Latvia and Germany (54% each), and Poland and Romania (53% each) lead in support for increased spending. France, Belgium, and Denmark cluster around 45%. The Baltic states show variation: Latvia (54%) and Lithuania (50%) register strong support, while Estonia (41%) is more moderate – potentially reflecting baseline satisfaction, given its already-high GDP allocation to defence. Hungary (34%), Slovakia (32%), Czechia (31%), and Slovenia (27%) form a Central-Eastern European cluster with notably lower support, while Italy (29%) and Luxembourg (28%) also show limited enthusiasm. These patterns – contrasting sharply with high-support Bulgaria (61%), Poland and Romania (53% each) – suggest that shared historical legacy matters less than current political orientation and direct threat perception. Countries with governments more sceptical of Western Europe's confrontational posture towards Russia, or those geographically buffered from the eastern flank, show a weaker public appetite for defence spending increase.[3]

At the EU level, Eurobarometer 103 (Spring 2025) shows that 77% of EU citizens view Russia's invasion as a threat to the EU's security, with 73% perceiving it as a threat to their own country[4] – broadly stable since May/June 2023[5] (79% and 75% respectively).

The Nordic states lead decisively: Finland (95% EU-level, 88% national), Sweden (94%, 89%), and Denmark (90%, 83%) form a high-consensus bloc. The Baltic picture is more complex than geography might suggest – Lithuania ranks high (81%, 84%), but Latvia (72%, 72%) and Estonia (73%, 72%) register only at or slightly below the EU average, potentially reflecting threat fatigue or confidence in existing defence arrangements.

Among larger Western members, Germany (81%, 78%) exceeds the EU average on both measures, while France (74%, 68%) and Spain (80%, 74%) show notable gaps between collective and national threat perception. Italy (73%, 69%) sits near the EU average on both.

Central-Eastern Europe reveals sharp divergence: Poland (83%, 85%) aligns with frontline states, with national concern exceeding EU-level perception – a rare pattern suggesting internalised threat. Slovakia (76%, 76%) sits at the EU average, while Czechia (65%, 63%) and Hungary (63%, 61%) fall well below. Romania (69%, 69%) and Bulgaria (56%, 50%) also trail, with Bulgaria showing the lowest threat perception among Eastern members.

Notably, Portugal (91%, 84%), the EU's most geographically distant member from Ukraine, reports among the highest threat awareness, while Cyprus (52%, 30%) shows the largest gap between collective and national perception, confirming that proximity remains influential but not determinative.

Eurobarometer data reveal rising support for EU defence spending, from 66% in May/June 2023[6] to 69% in 2025,[7] alongside a significant geographic realignment.

The Nordic surge is the most striking development: Denmark (+15 to 84%), Finland (+16 to 83%), and Sweden (+14 to 80%) have leapt from average performers to top-tier supporters – a shift likely reflecting their heightened threat perceptions and, for Finland and Sweden, the salience of recent NATO accession.

3 NATO Public Diplomacy Division 2024, 10.
4 European Commission 2025b, T290-T291.
5 European Commission 2023, T260-T261.
6 European Commission 2023, T265.
7 European Commission 2025b, T295.

Core Western members also show significant increases: Germany (+12 to 78%), France (+5 to 67%), and Spain (+7 to 63%) all moved upward, though France and Spain remain below the EU average despite their gains.

The Baltic states show a mixed picture: Estonia surged (+10 to 65%), while Lithuania declined (–6 to 76%), and Latvia also slightly declined (–2 to 67%). Lithuania and Latvia's decline is notable, given their high threat perception – possibly indicating spending fatigue or satisfaction with current trajectories.

Central-Eastern Europe shows fragmentation. Poland remains a top supporter but has declined (–7 to 82%), while Hungary (–5 to 73%) and Czechia (–14 to 50%) also dropped. Slovakia bucks the regional trend with a significant increase (+7 to 58%), though it remains below the EU average. Romania (+2 to 62%) and Bulgaria (+4 to 56%) show modest gains but continue to lag.

Italy (–8 to 57%) stands out as one of the few countries with declining support, reinforcing its position as a reluctant country on increased defence budget. Portugal declined (–14 to 75%) but still remains above the EU average, continuing to punch above its geographic weight.

This northward shift in defence spending enthusiasm – with Nordic and Western European publics now matching or exceeding traditional frontline states – may suggest a maturing of threat perceptions across the EU, though the Central-Eastern fragmentation and Baltic stagnation warrant attention. The most recent data, however, reveal an acceleration that cannot be attributed to evolving Russian threat perceptions. Between October-November 2024 and March-April 2025, EU-wide threat perception remained essentially stable (+1 point for EU-level threat, unchanged for national threat), yet support for increased defence spending jumped 5 percentage points. The divergence is particularly evident in Western Europe: Germany's spending support surged 10 points while threat perception rose only modestly, and Spain (+8), France (+7), Denmark (+9), and Belgium (+9) all saw spending support increase far beyond any corresponding shift in perceived threat. These are the countries most exposed to US burden-sharing criticism – suggesting European publics are responding not only to the Eastern threat but also to growing uncertainty about American security commitments under the new Trump administration.

Yet this surge should not be overstated. A May 2025 Flash Eurobarometer found that when asked where the EU should invest, defence infrastructure ranked just seventh among priorities, selected by only 23% of respondents – far behind health and education (49%), environmental protection (38%), and job creation (31%). The geographic divide persists: frontline states show markedly higher support (Estonia 50%, Finland and Lithuania 46%) while Italy (12%), Bulgaria (13%), and Hungary (14%) remain resistant.[8] This suggests that while the "Trump effect" accelerated defence spending support in principle, translating it into concrete budget prioritisation remains contested.

Independent and foundation surveys

The European Council on Foreign Relations May 2025 survey (conducted by Datapraxis, YouGov, and Norstat across 12 countries) captures threat perception through a direct personal framing: "Generally, in your daily life, how worried are you about your country being attacked by Russia?" This wording elicits responses grounded in lived anxiety rather

[8] European Commission 2025a, 22.

than abstract geopolitical assessment. Poland registers the greatest concern at 65%, consistent with its frontline position and elevated threat perception across all surveys examined. Portugal and Romania (both 54%) follow closely – Portugal's high ranking again defying geographic expectations, as noted in the Eurobarometer data. Estonia (52%) represents the sole Baltic state in the sample. Among Western European powers, Spain (47%) shows notably greater concern than Germany (37%), France (28%), or Italy (27%). Denmark (17%), the sole Nordic country included, registers the lowest concern among EU members surveyed, perhaps reflecting geographic distance and confidence in Alliance protection. Hungary (19%) ranks second lowest – the only Visegrád country besides Poland in this survey – and is consistent with its outlier position across all datasets. The contrast between Poland (65%) and Hungary (19%) is particularly striking given their shared post-communist trajectory and Visegrád membership, underscoring how domestic political context shapes threat perception independently of regional positioning.[9]

The ECFR's May 2024 survey (conducted by Datapraxis, YouGov, Alpha Research, and Norstat across 14 European countries) posed a demanding test of spending support, explicitly framing the question around trade-offs: whether respondents agree that "the war in Ukraine has shown that my country should be spending more on defence, even if that means that we must cut money on other areas like health, education and crime prevention."[10] This conditionality reveals the depth of public commitment beyond headline figures. Poland leads at 53%, followed by Estonia (45%) – the sole Baltic state in the survey. Sweden (41%), the only Nordic country included, shows robust support, as do Germany (40%) and the Netherlands (37%). Czechia (28%), the sole Visegrád country besides Poland, registers more modest support – roughly half of Poland's figure and level with France (28%). Spain (20%) and Italy (9%) trail significantly among major Western economies. Bulgaria (25%), despite its exceptionally low threat perception across all surveys, shows higher spending support than Portugal (21%), Spain, Greece (15%), or Italy. Portugal's position is notable: despite reporting among the highest threat perceptions in both Eurobarometer and ECFR threat data, its public shows limited appetite for trade-off-based defence increases, suggesting that threat awareness does not automatically translate into willingness to sacrifice domestic priorities.[11] Italy's position at the bottom is consistent with its lower concern across all threat measures examined in this analysis. It represents a genuine cross-survey pattern rather than a methodological artifact.

Security Radar 2025, published by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung – a German political foundation affiliated with the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and funded by the federal government –, provides cross-national public opinion data on security attitudes (conducted in late 2024 across 14 countries, with approximately 1,000 respondents per country). The survey asked directly: "In your opinion, is there a country that constitutes a threat for your country?" This open-ended framing – without prompting specific countries – reveals which threats are top-of-mind for respondents. Among EU and NATO members surveyed, Poland (53%) and Latvia (51%) register the highest identification of Russia as a threat,

[9] Krastev – Leonard 2025, 14.

[10] ECFR 2024, 29.

[11] Portugal's paradox – high threat perception but low trade-off support – may reflect the nature of perceived threats. ECFR (Krastev – Leonard 2025, 14.) data show Portuguese respondents also register the greatest concern about nuclear weapons use (85%) and about a third world war (82%) among all countries surveyed. Such existential fears are unlikely to be mitigated by increased conventional defence budgets.

consistent with their frontline positions and elevated concern across all datasets examined. Sweden (38%), which joined NATO in 2024 in direct response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, shows substantial concern. Germany and the UK both register 30%, while France shows notably lower concern at 21%. Italy emerges again as a clear outlier: only 8% identify Russia as a threat, while 45% report that no country constitutes a threat to Italy – the highest "no threat" response among EU members surveyed.[12]

The same survey asked respondents whether "my country should increase its military spending", with results showing substantial shifts since the pre-invasion 2021 baseline. Poland leads at 75%, representing a 6-percentage increase since 2021. Sweden (60%) did not poll in 2021 but is now showing robust support following its NATO accession, and the UK (+11 to 56%) follows. Germany (+16 to 54%) registers the largest shift among major Western European members, while France (+7 to 52%) shows a more modest growth. Latvia (+12 to 49%), the sole Baltic state in the sample, shows more modest support despite its high threat perception – potentially reflecting baseline spending satisfaction. Italy again occupies the bottom position at just 26%, virtually unchanged since 2021 (+2) – suggesting that the war in Ukraine has had minimal impact on Italian defence spending attitudes. However, when respondents were asked to choose between prioritising "economic and social affairs" versus "defence" in government budgets, support for defence dropped sharply across all countries: only Poland (38%) shows substantial prioritisation of defence – the only country significantly above the 29% cross-national average – while Germany falls to 28%, France and Sweden to 25%, the UK to 23%, Latvia to 22%, and Italy to just 17%. This gap between abstract support for spending increases and willingness to accept trade-offs with social programmes represents a consistent pattern across all surveys examined.[13]

Regional survey

GLOBSEC's 2025 Trends survey reveals substantial regional variation in how Central and Eastern European publics perceive Russia as a security threat. Poland registered the greatest concern at 86%, followed by Lithuania (81%), Latvia (76%), and Czechia (74%). Estonia, despite its frontline position, showed somewhat lower levels at 71%. Romania fell in the middle range at 64%, while Slovakia recorded 50%. Hungary and Bulgaria emerged as clear outliers, with only 46% and 30% of respondents, respectively, identifying Russia as a threat – the lowest figures in the region. This distribution broadly reflects geographic proximity and historical experience, though notable exceptions suggest that domestic political context and cultural factors also shape threat perception.[14]

GLOBSEC's 2025 Trends survey found that 73% of respondents across the nine countries agreed that their governments should increase defence spending. Yet significant intra-regional variation exists. Support was highest in Poland (92%) and Romania (86%), followed by Bulgaria (75%) – notably high given Bulgaria's exceptionally low threat perception (30%), suggesting factors beyond immediate threat assessment drive spending attitudes.

[12] Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung 2025, 19.
[13] Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung 2025, 25.
[14] GLOBSEC 2025, 54.

Czechia and Latvia both registered 74%, with Hungary at 71%. Estonia (62%), Lithuania (63%), and Slovakia (63%) clustered at the lower end.[15] The Baltic pattern is striking: despite high threat perception, Estonia and Lithuania show the lowest spending support in the region, potentially reflecting baseline spending satisfaction given their already-high GDP allocations to defence. Latvia, by contrast, aligns with the regional middle. The survey's framing, which referenced military modernization specifically, may also have influenced responses differently across national contexts.

Expert Threat Perception Data

The 2026 Global Risks to the EU survey, conducted by the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies at the European University Institute and partner institutions, provides systematic data on European expert threat perceptions. Among 501 respondents – drawn primarily from academia, think tanks, and policy institutions, with 96% holding advanced degrees – Russia-related scenarios remained central to EU security concerns.

A ceasefire in Ukraine favourable to Russia and new Russian military action in non-NATO neighbouring states both ranked as high-risk scenarios, combining elevated likelihood with significant expected impact. The survey findings indicate that experts view Ukraine's security as intrinsically linked to EU security, assessing that a settlement consolidating Russian territorial gains would reward aggression and signal the EU's inability to shape its own security environment. While direct NATO-Russia military conflict and Russian nuclear use were rated as the highest-impact scenarios in the entire survey, experts considered both to be less likely events.

The survey findings suggest that European experts anticipate prolonged grey-zone confrontation rather than conventional warfare with Russia. For the second consecutive year, respondents identified a high probability of Russian military action against non-NATO neighbours, rating this scenario more likely than a direct clash with NATO, yet nearly as damaging for EU security. Combined with the assessment that full Georgian government alignment with Russian interests is similarly probable, the data indicate that experts expect Russia to continue "redrawing security lines below the threshold of open war with NATO, steadily eroding the security of states on the EU's eastern flank". Hybrid attacks on EU critical infrastructure – including subsea sabotage and power-grid disruptions – ranked as the single most likely threat among all thirty scenarios assessed, with experts expressing doubt that current EU resilience measures are sufficient.[16]

Tables 1 and 2 synthesise the cross-survey results presented in this section, enabling direct comparison of threat perception and spending support patterns across countries and sources.

[15] GLOBSEC 2025, 16, 19.
[16] Anghel 2026, 3, 6.

Table 1 *Threat Perception in European NATO and EU Member States: Cross-Survey Comparison*

Symbol key:
▲ High (≥ 65%)
● Medium (40–64%)
▼ Low (< 40%)
— Not surveyed
† See regional grouping note below

Survey coverage note: This table presents the three surveys with the broadest and most comparable European country coverage. The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Security Radar 2025 (14 countries, late 2024) and GLOBSEC Trends 2025 (9 Central and Eastern European states) are excluded from the comparative columns due to their more limited coverage; their findings are discussed in the Analysis.
Methodological note: Surveys differ substantially in question wording and fieldwork period. NATO 2024 asks about the perceived security impact of Russia's war in Ukraine (abstract, event-framed). Eurobarometer 2025 asks whether the invasion constitutes a threat to the respondent's own country (institutional framing). ECFR May 2025 asks how worried respondents personally are about their country being attacked by Russia (personal, affective framing). Divergence across columns is itself analytically significant: it reflects sensitivity to question design, not merely sampling variation.
† Regional grouping note: Slovenia and Croatia are grouped under Southern Europe on the grounds that their geographic distance from Russia – consistent with Boulding's loss-of-strength gradient – produces a threat perception profile empirically closer to Southern than to Central-Eastern European countries in this dataset.

Country	NATO Audience Research 2024	Eurobarometer Standard 103 Spring 2025	ECFR May 2025
Frontline / Baltic region			
Estonia	▲	▲	●
Latvia	▲	▲	—
Lithuania	▲	▲	—
Poland	▲	▲	▲
Romania	▲	▲	●
Finland	▲	▲	—
Sweden	▲	▲	—
Norway	▲	—	—
Denmark	▲	▲	▼
Central and Eastern Europe			
Czechia	▲	●	—
Slovakia	▲	▲	—
Hungary	●	●	▼
Bulgaria	▲	●	—
Western Europe			
Germany	▲	▲	▼
France	▲	▲	▼
Netherlands	●	▲	—
Belgium	▲	▲	—
United Kingdom	▲	—	▼
Austria	—	▲	—
Ireland	—	▲	—
Luxembourg	●	▲	—

Country	NATO Audience Research 2024	Eurobarometer Standard 103 Spring 2025	ECFR May 2025
Southern Europe †			
Italy	●	▲	▼
Spain	●	▲	●
Portugal	●	▲	●
Greece	●	●	—
Slovenia	●	●	—
Croatia	●	▲	—
Malta	—	●	—
Cyprus	—	▼	—

Sources: *NATO Audience Research 2024 (Q7: "Has Russia's war against Ukraine affected the safety and security of [COUNTRY]?", Apr–May 2024, all 32 allies); Standard Eurobarometer 103 (QD3.2: "Russia's invasion of Ukraine is a threat to the security of [OUR COUNTRY]", Mar–Apr 2025, all EU member states); ECFR/Datapraxis–YouGov–Norstat (May 2025, 12 countries: DK, EE, FR, DE, HU, IT, PL, PT, RO, ES, CH, UK). Thresholds applied consistently: High ≥65%, Medium 40–64%, Low < 40%*

Table 2 *Support for Increased Defence Spending in European NATO and EU Member States: Cross-Survey Comparison*

Symbol key:
▲ High (≥ 65%)
● Medium (40–64%)
▼ Low (< 40%)
— Not surveyed
† See regional grouping note below

Survey coverage note: As in Table 1, only the three broadest coverage surveys are included. The FES Security Radar 2025 and GLOBSEC Trends 2025 are excluded due to limited country coverage, but are discussed in the Analysis.
Methodological note: The three surveys measure different dimensions of spending support. NATO 2024 asks whether national defence spending should increase (direct national commitment). Eurobarometer 2025 asks whether more money should be spent on defence at the EU level (supranational framing – systematically produces higher values than the other two). ECFR 2024 applies an explicit trade-off condition: support for spending more even if it requires cuts in health, education, and crime prevention (systematically produces the lowest values across all countries).
† Regional grouping note: Same logic as in Table 1. Slovenia and Croatia are grouped under Southern Europe.

Country	NATO Audience Research 2024	Eurobarometer Standard 103 Spring 2025	ECFR 2024 (trade-off condition)
Frontline / Baltic region			
Estonia	●	▲	●
Latvia	●	▲	—
Lithuania	●	▲	—
Poland	●	▲	●
Romania	●	●	—
Finland	▼	▲	—

Country	NATO Audience Research 2024	Eurobarometer Standard 103 Spring 2025	ECFR 2024 (trade-off condition)
Sweden	●	▲	●
Norway	●	—	—
Denmark	●	▲	—
Central and Eastern Europe			
Czechia	▼	●	▼
Slovakia	▼	●	—
Hungary	▼	▲	—
Bulgaria	●	●	▼
Western Europe			
Germany	●	▲	●
France	●	▲	▼
Netherlands	●	▲	▼
Belgium	●	▲	—
United Kingdom	●	—	▼
Austria	—	▲	—
Ireland	—	▲	—
Luxembourg	▼	▲	—
Southern Europe †			
Italy	▼	●	▼
Spain	▼	●	▼
Portugal	●	▲	▼
Greece	▼	●	▼
Slovenia	▼	●	—
Croatia	▼	▲	—
Malta	—	●	—
Cyprus	—	▲	—

Sources: *NATO Audience Research 2024 (Q6: "Your country should spend more on defence", Apr–May 2024, all 32 allies); Standard Eurobarometer 103 (QD3.5: "More money should be spent on defence in the EU", Mar–Apr 2025, all EU member states); ECFR/Datapraxis–YouGov–Alpha Research–Norstat (2024, 14 countries: PL, EE, SE, DE, NL, GB, CZ, FR, BG, CH, PT, ES, GR, IT)*

ANALYSIS

Summary of Regional Patterns

The empirical data reveal consistent patterns in both threat perception and defence spending support, though the relationship between the two is not always straightforward.

Threat Perception: Across all surveys, threat perception follows a broadly geographic gradient, with proximity to Russia serving as the primary, though not sole, determinant.

Poland and the Baltic states consistently register the highest threat perception, forming a coherent frontline cluster. Nordic states have converged towards this high-threat group, with Finland and Sweden now leading EU-wide threat perception – a pattern reflecting both geographic exposure and the salience of recent NATO accession.

Core Western European states – Germany, France, the Netherlands, and Belgium – occupy a middle position. Germany consistently exceeds the EU average on threat perception, while France shows more moderate concern, with a notable gap between EU-level and national perception.

Southern Europe divides into two patterns. Italy, Greece, and Slovenia form a lower-threat, low-spending cluster consistent with the geographic gradient. Spain, however, registers threat perception at or above EU averages yet maintains low spending support – resembling Portugal's paradox rather than Italy's consistent disengagement.

Central-Eastern Europe reveals sharp internal divergence. While Poland anchors the high end, Hungary and Bulgaria consistently register lower threat perception than their geographic position might suggest. Czechia and Slovakia occupy an intermediate position, while Romania aligns with the regional middle (although its results are not consistent across different surveys).

Portugal emerges as a consistent geographic anomaly, recording among the highest threat perception figures despite being the EU member most distant from Ukraine.

Defence Spending Support: Support for increased defence spending broadly tracks threat perception but with important divergences, particularly when trade-offs with social programmes are made explicit.

On headline measures, Poland consistently leads, followed by Romania and, following a dramatic surge, the Nordic states. Germany has also moved into the high-support tier. The Netherlands and Belgium show strong headline support, though a more moderate commitment to trade-offs. Bulgaria registers relatively high support despite its low threat perception.

France, Estonia, and Lithuania occupy a moderate middle range. Italy, Spain, Slovenia, and Greece anchor the bottom across most spending measures – though Spain's low spending support notably contrasts with its above-average threat perception.

Trade-off framing dramatically compresses support across all countries. When surveys asked whether defence should be prioritised over health, education, and social programmes, only Poland maintained significant support. All other countries, including high-threat states, showed substantial drops, with Italy falling to single digits.

Threat-Spending Relationship: In most cases, threat perception and spending support move together. Poland exemplifies the expected pattern: highest threat perception corresponds with highest spending support. Italy represents the inverse: consistently lowest on both dimensions.

However, several anomalies complicate simple correlation:

The Baltic paradox: Despite registering among the highest threat perception in Europe, Estonia and Lithuania show the lowest spending support within the Central-Eastern European cohort – potentially reflecting baseline spending satisfaction given their already-high GDP allocations to defence.

Bulgaria's inverse anomaly: low threat perception yet significant support for spending. Hungary: low threat perception relative to geographic position, with moderate headline spending support, but notably low willingness to prioritise defence over social spending.

These anomalies suggest that while geographic proximity establishes a baseline, domestic political context, baseline spending levels, and question framing introduce significant variations that a simple gradient model cannot fully capture. A cross-survey comparison further reveals that divergence between sources is itself analytically meaningful: the same country can register a high score on a question related to an abstract security impact (NATO 2024), a medium score on an institutional threat framing (Eurobarometer), and a low score

when asked about personal worry regarding a Russian attack (ECFR 2025). This is not necessarily due to incoherent attitudes, but rather to the fact that different framings tap different dimensions of threat salience. Similarly, spending support figures are systematically higher when the question refers to EU-level expenditure than when it requires an explicit trade-off with domestic social programmes. These framing effects do not undermine the geographical pattern; rather, they clarify its limits. The following section examines the substantive dynamics in detail.

The Threat Perception Explanation

The empirical findings reveal a consistent geographic pattern: populations in countries proximate to Russia demonstrate substantially higher threat perception and support for defence spending than those in Southern and Western Europe. This aligns with Boulding's loss-of-strength gradient theory, which suggests that perceived threats diminish with distance from potential adversaries.

However, the relationship is not deterministic. Several cases reveal how intervening factors – burden-sharing concerns, domestic political context, and political leadership – modify the baseline geographic relationship.

The Baltic Paradox: Burden-Sharing Fatigue within High Threat Awareness

The Baltic states present a striking paradox. Despite their frontline exposure to Russian threats – Estonia and Latvia share direct borders with Russia, while Lithuania borders Belarus and Kaliningrad –, public support for increased defence spending ranks consistently lower than in other frontline states across multiple surveys. NATO and GLOBSEC data show Latvia at the highest support among Baltic states, with Lithuania moderate and Estonia the lowest. Eurobarometer shows a slightly different ordering, with Lithuania leading and Latvia moderate, though Estonia remains at the bottom across all sources. GLOBSEC's regional data place all three well below Poland and Romania. The pattern is permanent regardless of the survey source: the Baltics show lower enthusiasm for spending increases than their geographic exposure would predict.

This pattern cannot be attributed to low threat perception. Baltic governments have been among NATO's most vocal advocates for strengthening collective defence, and in May 2025, the defence ministers of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania issued a joint communiqué reaffirming their commitment to increase defence spending to 5% of GDP from 2026. Estonia specifically committed to allocating approximately 5.4% of GDP annually to defence from 2026 to 2029.[17]

The more plausible explanation lies in burden-sharing fatigue. The Baltic states already allocate among the highest GDP shares to defence in the Alliance, and the fiscal strain of further increases has become contentious. Before the 2025 NATO summit, Estonian Finance Minister Jürgen Ligi described the 5% target as "a nightmare, from a financial point of view," requiring "significant cutbacks in several areas".[18] Baltic citizens recognise the threat but question whether they should sacrifice further while wealthier Western allies underperform. The Baltic anomaly thus reflects not low threat perception but the distributional politics of Alliance burden-sharing.

[17] Estonian Ministry of Defence 2025.

[18] Antonov 2025.

Hungary and Slovakia: Domestic Political Framing of Threat Perception

A different pattern emerges in Hungary and Slovakia. Both countries are buffered from Russia by Ukraine, so the gradient model predicts somewhat lower threat perception. Eurobarometer shows Hungary (61%) well below the EU average (73%) in national threat perception. Slovakia presents a more complex picture: Eurobarometer places it at 76%, slightly above the EU average, while GLOBSEC records just 50% identifying Russia as a threat – a divergence likely reflecting question framing, with Slovaks acknowledging the Ukraine war's impact but fewer spontaneously naming Russia itself as threatening.

The cross-survey pattern suggests threat perception in these countries is actively shaped by domestic political discourse, not merely reflecting geographic position. Both the Orbán and Fico governments have framed support for Ukraine as competing with domestic priorities and initially resisted NATO spending initiatives. Before the June 2025 Hague Summit, Prime Minister Fico criticised the 5% target, stating that "Slovakia has other priorities than armament in the coming years".[19] In December 2025, Hungary, Slovakia, and Czechia jointly opted out of the EUR 90 billion EU loan to Ukraine,[20] with Viktor Orbán framing financial support as a burden to spare future generations.[21]

Media environments reinforce these positions. GLOBSEC's 2024 country reports found that in Slovakia, more respondents blame the West or Ukraine for the war (51% combined) than Russia (41%).[22] In Hungary, support for Ukraine's EU and NATO membership was lower among those who trust mainstream media (18%) than among the general population (36%)[23] – the opposite of the pattern elsewhere in Central-Eastern Europe, suggesting that media framing in Hungary shapes attitudes differently than in neighbouring countries. These patterns persisted in 2025 data, with Hungary consistently registering threat perception well below regional averages and Slovakia showing divergent results depending on question framing.

Geographic Distance: Confirmation and Outliers

Southern European cases partially confirm the geographic gradient, but with important variation. Italy registers the lowest threat perception and spending support among major EU powers across all surveys, illustrating how distance can produce genuine security disengagement despite elite Alliance commitments. Spain presents a more ambiguous case: threat perception sits at or above the EU average, yet spending support remains among the lowest in Western Europe. Prime Minister Sánchez was the only NATO leader to openly reject the 5% target at the Hague Summit, writing to Secretary General Rutte that Spain "cannot commit to a specific spending target in terms of GDP" and calling the proposal "unreasonable".[24] Spain thus fits the high-threat, low-spending pattern – distinct from Italy's consistent disengagement on both dimensions.

Portugal and Bulgaria remain the clearest outliers to any simple geographic model. Portugal records among the highest threat perceptions in Europe despite being the EU member most distant from Ukraine; yet it shows a limited appetite for trade-off-based spending

[19] Reuters 2025.
[20] European Council 2025.
[21] Miniszterelnok.hu 2026.
[22] GLOBSEC 2024.
[23] Szicherle 2024.
[24] Blackburn 2025.

increases. Bulgaria presents the inverse anomaly: the lowest threat perception in Central-Eastern Europe coincides with significant spending support. These cases confirm that geography provides a baseline but cannot explain all variations – domestic political context, historical factors, and question framing have significant independent effects.

Synthesis: A Multi-Factor Model

The empirical findings point towards a multi-factor model. Geographic proximity establishes a baseline: distance reduces threat salience, proximity elevates it. Italy confirms this gradient; Poland anchors the high end.

Several factors modify this baseline. Burden-sharing concerns suppress spending support even where threat perception is high, as the Baltic case demonstrates. Domestic political discourse can push threat perception below geographic expectation (Hungary, Slovakia) or activate latent potential (the Nordic surge following NATO accession). Question framing moderates absolute levels everywhere: trade-off questions reveal that even threat-aware publics resist sacrificing social security.

While geography provides the primary explanatory variable, the full picture requires attention to domestic politics, burden-sharing equity, media environments, and political framing.

CONCLUSION

This paper has demonstrated that public support for defence spending varies significantly across NATO member states in a geographically patterned manner, with countries proximate to Russia exhibiting substantially higher support than Southern and Western European states. This finding is robust across NATO surveys, Eurobarometer, ECFR, FES Security Radar, and GLOBSEC data. The convergence of evidence from sources with different institutional interests strengthens confidence in the underlying pattern.

This divergence creates significant challenges for NATO's burden-sharing objectives. The June 2025 Hague Summit's agreement on an elevated GDP-based target exposed these fractures. As documented in the preceding analysis, Spain openly rejected the target, while Hungary and Slovakia initially expressed disapproval, with all three governments framing defence spending as competing with domestic priorities.

For the Alliance leadership, the challenge in achieving convergence is substantial. It would necessitate alignment not merely on spending targets but also on shared threat perceptions that would render such targets politically sustainable across diverse domestic contexts. The consistent finding that trade-off framing reduces support across all countries – even those with high threat awareness – underscores the depth of this challenge: fiscal constraints and social spending priorities compete with defence commitments regardless of geographic position. The divergence documented here suggests that unified spending expectations may face persistent friction due to fundamentally different public understandings of threat, burden-sharing equity, and national priorities.

Finally, intra-alliance threat perception may itself warrant scholarly attention. Recent tensions over US commitments in Europe and the United States' intentions with Greenland illustrate how alliance cohesion can be challenged from within, representing an emerging research frontier with implications for both scholarship and strategic communication.

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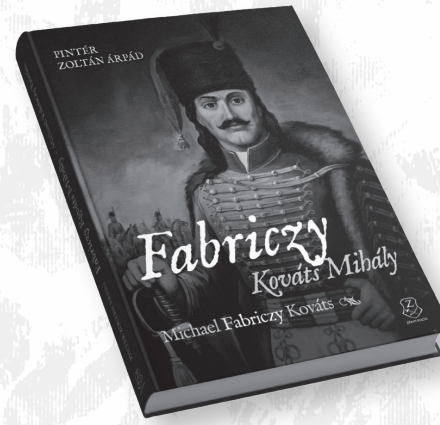
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MICHAEL FABRICZY KOVÁTS

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