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Deterrence Without Federation?

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DETERRENCE WITHOUT FEDERATION?

NEW DATA SHED LIGHT ON PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR EUROPEAN NUCLEAR WEAPONS AND POLITICAL INTEGRATION

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Abstract

The resurgence of great-power conflict and the return of Donald Trump to the U.S. presidency have reignited debate over European nuclear autonomy. Using new survey data collected across six European countries in April 2025, this study investigates public support for a European nuclear deterrent independent of the United States, and its relationship to preferences for broader EU political integration. Results reveal majority support for a joint EU nuclear arsenal in all surveyed countries—most strongly in France and Poland—despite continued reluctance to endorse a European federal state. These findings expose a foundational dilemma: while Europeans increasingly favour powerful common instruments for security, they are hesitant to accept the political union such instruments would require. Statistical analysis shows that support for deterrence correlates with gender, age, political ideology, and identity, with European identification proving a strong predictor of consistent support for both nuclear and political integration. The article concludes that while crisis may foster functionalist backing for EU strategic capabilities, it does not yet generate momentum for constitutional transformation—suggesting the EU may face increasing pressure to deliver collective security in a context of limited political mandate.

Keywords: European Union, nuclear deterrence, public opinion, federalism, strategic autonomy, survey research

Introduction

The spectre of nuclear weapons is back haunting Europe. During the Cold War, Europeans used to live under the permanent threat of a potential nuclear confrontation between the Soviet Union, which stationed tactical and intermediate nuclear weapons on its eastern borders, and NATO, which counted several nuclear- capable countries (the US to start with, but also France, the UK, and a number of other countries where the US stationed nuclear weapons; even though, de jure, these warheads remained under American control, de facto the hosting national governments could plausibly commandeer them in case of need). After the end of the Cold War, the risks of nuclear confrontation in Europe decreased dramatically until the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. In this context, many speculated whether the Russian dictatorship under control of Vladimir Putin would have made use of tactical nuclear weapons to scare off Western support to Ukraine and attempt to reverse the negative battlefield performance of the Russian land army. While details about this are scarce, analysis by Kuhn (2025) and others indicated that Russia came close to commit to a decision of a symbolic nuclear use, but was persuaded to back down by resolute American and Chinese pressure.

With the return of Trump to the White House for a second term, the proximity between Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin and the growing rhetoric of American "withdrawal" from Europe bring back the issue of nuclear protection of the EU's eastern borders and avoiding uncontrolled proliferation of nuclear armaments, a situation known as "European nuclear trilemma" (Gilli and Nicoli 2025).



The question of rethinking nuclear deterrence in the eventuality of a loss of credibility of the American guarantee has cut across academic analysis (Adamsky, 2018; Fayet et al. 2024, 2025; Cameron, 2025; Gilli and Nicoli 2025) as well as government-level discussions (Macron as reported by DW, 2025; Tusk as reported by Politico, 2025; Kofod 2025[1]).

Several potential ways of organizing an independent European Nuclear deterrent have been put forward; in Gilli and Nicoli (2025) we provide a systematic comparison of most of these options. All of them, however, require substantial political will to proceed. Even though strategic research shows that nuclear weapons are a key factor in ensuring global stability, they supposedly remain highly controversial, not only due to their destructive capacity and the threat of retaliation they entail, but also due to the large costs they entail, from development, to stockpiling, to delivery (see Gilli and Nicoli 2025 for an assessment of the costs of developing an European Nuclear Arsenal).

Moreover, legal and political barriers remain: many EU countries are part of non-proliferation agreements; existing nuclear powers, such as France, are willing to extend a security guarantee but are much less willing to share control, which creates inherent credibility risks; and until prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the public opinion seemed to clearly against nuclear weapons (Fihn, 2018). This uncertainty, coupled with the messaging coming from Washington, increases the risk that Russia might make a move on a NATO country, for instance a Baltic country such as Lithuania (critical for the Suwalki gap separating Kaliningrad, the former German city of Koningsberg and today a Russian military exclave, from Belarus) or Estonia, which hosts a large minority of Russian-speaking citizens. In such scenario, any territorial gains would be either achieved through the use, or backed by the threat of the use, of tactical nuclear weapons, to which European countries have no counters should the US refuse to back them up.

Who supports a European nuclear deterrent?

This scenario is not just theoretical, but is perceived as real threat among several EU members, including the Nordic countries. A critical element, however, remains the degree of political feasibility and public support. Do Europeans support the construction of a common nuclear arsenal? A few studies have attempted to address this question in recent times.

Whether European political support is sufficient to advance both a common nuclear deterrent and broader military and political integration remains uncertain.

Public opinion strongly favours conventional military cooperation within the EU, including even far-reaching, quasi-federal arrangements (Burgoon et al. 2023; Nicoli et al. 2025; Hoffmann 2024; Eurobarometer, 2025). Yet it is not clear whether such support extends to nuclear matters. Evidence regarding public attitudes toward nuclear deterrence is relatively scarce. For instance, a 2018 YouGov survey commissioned by the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) found widespread opposition among respondents in Italy, Belgium, Germany, and the Netherlands to hosting American nuclear weapons under NATO's nuclear sharing framework — though the question wording may have been somewhat biased (Fihn, 2018). Similarly, a 2022 YouGov poll identified comparable levels of disapproval of nuclear weapons among adults in the United Kingdom (YouGov, 2022).

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More recent data paint a more complex picture. Onderco (2024) reports that while German citizens remain strongly opposed to the use of nuclear weapons, they tend to support their presence on national soil due to perceived deterrent benefits. Meanwhile, a February 2025 online poll by UCE Research involving over 1,000 Polish adults showed that more than half of respondents favoured the deployment of nuclear weapons in Poland as part of a nuclear sharing arrangement (Onet, 2025).

Despite these national insights, comprehensive data on attitudes toward EU-level nuclear instruments remain sparse—especially following Donald Trump's return to the U.S. presidency.

To help fill this gap, IPSOS conducted a representative survey in late April 2025 across Germany, Italy, France, Poland, Spain, and the UK. The results show broad support for an independent EU nuclear deterrent, with absolute majorities in all surveyed countries (see Table 1). Nevertheless, genuine European-level initiatives in the nuclear domain are inseparable from the broader project of political integration within the EU—a prospect for which public support, even among the same respondents, appears to be markedly more limited.

Table 1: level of support for EU-level nuclear deterrence

Are you in favour or against a EU joint nuclear deterrent, independent of the United States?

	Italy		Germany		UK		France		Poland		Spain		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Against	205	13.67	302	20.08	144	9.6	176	11.57	151	10.06	144	9.6	1122	12.43
Neutral	515	34.33	450	29.92	451	30.07	390	25.64	411	27.38	452	30.13	2669	29.57
In favour	780	52.00	752	50.00	905	60.33	955	62.79	939	62.56	904	60.27	5235	58.00
Total	1500		1504		1500		1521		1501		1500		9026	

Source: IPSOS/Politecnico di Torino data (end of April 2025).

The data presented in Table 1 provide a clear and striking indication of broad public support across major EU countries for a joint European nuclear deterrent independent of the United States. With 58% of respondents overall expressing support, and absolute majorities in all six surveyed countries—including traditional Atlanticist nations like the UK and Poland—these results suggest a significant shift in public opinion toward a more autonomous European defense posture.

National differences are nonetheless visible. Support is strongest in Poland (62.56%) and France (62.79%), both countries with distinct nuclear and security cultures—France as the EU's only current nuclear power, and Poland as a frontline state deeply concerned about regional security. Even in Germany, historically cautious on military issues and particularly sensitive to nuclear questions, a majority of respondents (50%) favour an EU nuclear deterrent. Levels of opposition remain modest across all countries, never exceeding 22%, with the highest being in Germany.

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These results gain added significance when viewed in light of the broader debate discussed above. While earlier surveys — such as those by ICAN (2018) and YouGov (2022) — showed widespread public scepticism or outright opposition to national-level nuclear hosting or weapons use, the current IPSOS data suggest that attitudes toward nuclear deterrence may be more favourable when framed within a European, rather than national or American-led, context. Moreover, Onderco's (2024) finding — that Germans oppose nuclear use but accept basing as a deterrent — resonates with this broader readiness to back collective instruments perceived as stabilizing.

However, our data provide some realism when it comes to the political preconditions for nuclear integration. Support for an EU-level nuclear capability may not be synonymous with enthusiasm for deeper political integration, which such an instrument would inevitably require. In this sense, while public opinion may favour the idea of nuclear autonomy in principle, the institutional and political foundations needed to make such a project viable may face more substantial hurdles.

Table 2: level of support for a European federal state

Are you in favour or against the following statement? "In the near future, the EU should be a federal state

	Italy		Germany		UK		France		Poland		Spain		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Against	259	17.26	663	44.08	422	28.13	461	30.31	444	29.58	235	15.67	2484	27.50
Neutral	691	46.07	515	34.24	784	52.27	662	43.52	690	45.97	745	49.67	4087	45.29
In favour	550	36.67	326	21.68	294	19.6	398	26.17	367	24.45	520	34.67	2455	27.20
Total	1500		1504		1500		1521		1501		1500		9026	

Source: IPSOS/Politecnico di Torino data (end of April 2025).

The data in Table 2 reinforce a central conclusion: European public support for strategic integration in the nuclear domain does not translate into equivalent support for deeper political union. While interviewed Europeans share the functional need for collective defence, including on nuclear matter, they do not translate such need into willingness to share sovereignty to make joint deterrence possible.

Across the six surveyed countries, 58% of respondents supported the creation of a joint EU nuclear deterrent (Table 1), while only 27.2% favour turning the EU into a federal state (Table 2). In contrast, 45.3% remain neutral, and 27.5% are explicitly opposed.

This gap is relatively small in Germany, where a narrow majority supports a nuclear deterrent (50%) and a similar share (44.1%) actively opposes federalisation, while only 21.7% favour it. The UK presents a similar paradox, 60.3% support an EU nuclear deterrent, yet only 19.6% support federalization (even though, considering that the UK is a nuclear power outside the EU, this is likely understandable). In Poland, too, over 62.5% favour nuclear integration, but just 24.5% are in favour of a federal European Union.

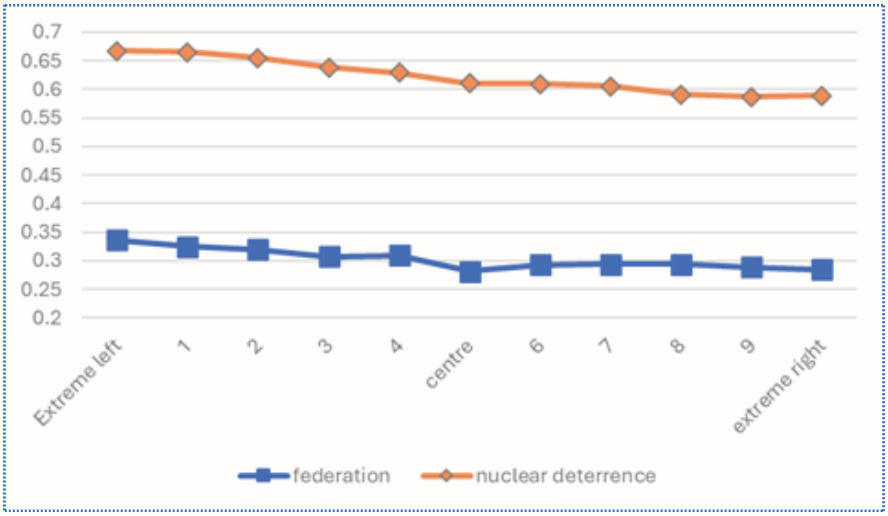
Who supports a European nuclear deterrent?

Only in Spain and Italy do we see somewhat closer alignment, with 52% and 60.3% respectively backing nuclear deterrence, and a relatively larger share (34.7% and 36.7%) supporting federalization rather than actively rejecting it. However, even here, neutrality and opposition to political integration remain substantial. This divergence suggests that the public distinguishes between functional cooperation on defence — especially in response to external threats — and institutional integration involving shared sovereignty and federal governance. Citizens may view a European nuclear deterrent as a necessary protective measure, particularly given renewed geopolitical instability (e.g., the return of Donald Trump or Russia's assertiveness), but remain sceptical of transferring broader political authority to the EU.

Our data unveil a critical political dilemma: the feasibility of common strategic instruments like an EU nuclear deterrent likely depends on institutional frameworks that publics are not yet ready to endorse, even if the instrument itself is met with enthusiasm. Bridging this gap between security ambitions and political structures remains one of the EU's most fundamental integration challenges.

What predicts these attitudes? In general, statistical analysis suggests that right-leaners and female respondents are significantly more likely to be relatively less in favour of both joint deterrence and federalization. However, left-right positioning is considerably stronger in predicting lower support for joint deterrence than federalization (Figure 1), accounting for up to 10 percentage points drop in support

Figure 1- predicted levels of support for policy, by left-right positioning



Source: IPSOS/Politecnico di Torino data (end of April 2025).
Note: the regression estimates used to produce the plots are available upon request.

Conversely, young age and being male significantly increase probability of support for both policies. Unsurprisingly, British respondents are significantly more likely than their EU peers to end up supporting a joint deterrent even in the absence of a political federation, while Italian respondents are those most likely to yield consistent political positions (i.e., supporting either both a federation and a joint deterrent, or neither).

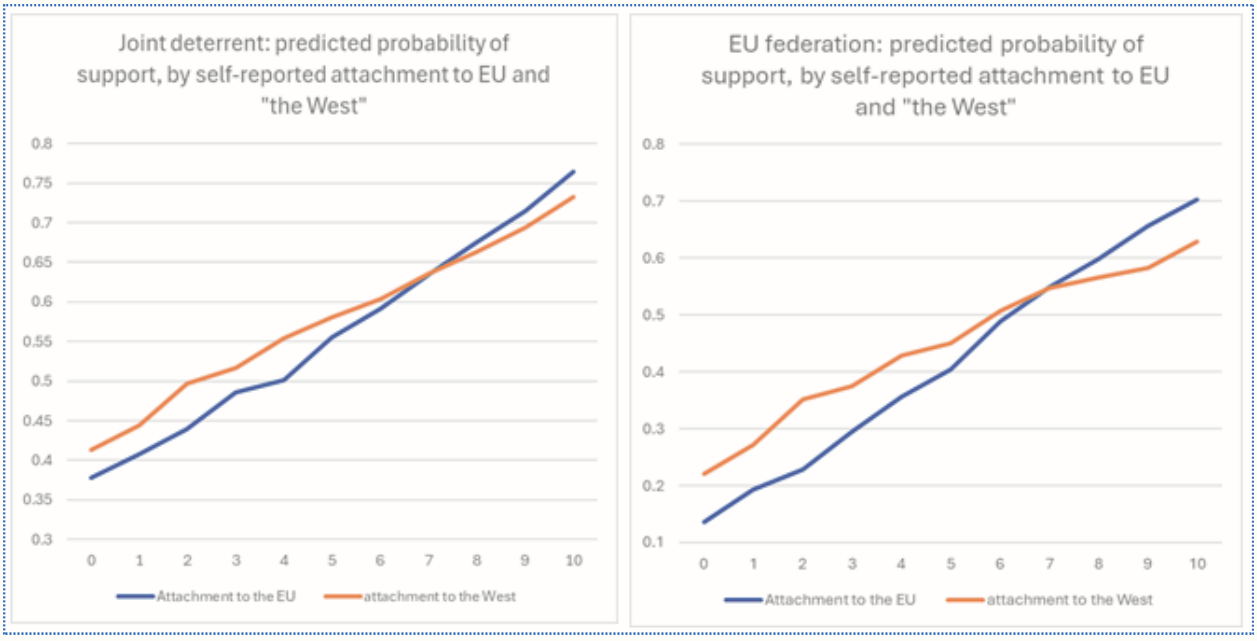
Who supports a European nuclear deterrent?

A main determinant of support for political and military integration is the degree of European identification (Nicoli, 2017; Nicoli et al. 2020; 2023; 2024). Typically, identification can be seen as an evaluation of one's identity, or through the lenses of emotive attachment to a polity (Kuhn and Nicoli 2020); typically, both forms of identification respond to policy changes (Negri et al. 2020) and to crises (Nicoli et al. 2024). We look into both forms of identification to determine their impact on support for both nuclear deterrence and federalization.

From an evaluative standpoint across all countries, exclusive nationalists (respondents who reject any multilevel identity and see themselves only as citizens of their own country) are on average about 13% less likely to support a joint deterrent, and about 10% less likely to support federation; however, they are about 5% more likely than respondents with multilevel identities to hold consistent views – that is, if they support a nuclear deterrent, they also support federalization, and the other way around.

Next, we assess the role played by emotive levels of attachment, a second measure ofcommon identity. Here, the effect is stark. We can measure both attachment to Europe and to the West more broadly (figure 2). Importantly, our data show that while both attachment to Europe and to the West more broadly are important predictors of both support for joint nuclear deterrence and European federation (not last because attachment to Europe and to the West are significantly correlated), some differences exist. Notably, and reasonably so, attachment to Europe is a considerably stronger predictor of support for European federation than attachment to the west (Figure 2, right panel), while the differences between these two are not significant when it comes to predicting support for joint nuclear deterrence.

Figure 2- probabilities of policy support, by level of attachment to polity



Source: IPSOS/Politecnico di Torino data (end of April 2025).
Note: the regression estimates used to produce the plots are available upon request.

Conclusions

The observed preference for a joint European nuclear deterrent, despite limited support for EU federalisation, likely reflects the impact of perceived external threats rather than a genuine shift toward deeper political integration. Federalization, in this perspective, can be seen as a “cost” in terms of sovereignty share, a cost only few citizens are willing to afford. Nonetheless, support for nuclear integration follows the well-known patterns that scholarly literature has typically identified for other policy areas, suggesting that citizens no longer see nuclear armaments as a ‘taboo’ that should never be broken, especially in the context of a multilateral organization such as the European Union.

In times of heightened insecurity — such as the resurgence of great power rivalry, renewed war on the European continent, and the uncertain reliability of the US security guarantee under a second Trump presidency — citizens may prioritise immediate protective measures over long-term institutional reform. The data suggest that support for nuclear deterrence emerges not from a broad federalist ambition, but from a pragmatic response to crises: publics are willing to endorse powerful common instruments when they appear necessary for security, even if they remain wary of the political integration such instruments would ultimately require. In this sense, crisis may act as a catalyst for functional support, but not yet for constitutional transformation.



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