

The Eurozone Crisis and the CSDP: The Problem of Public Opinion

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JAKOB MCKERNAN, JUL 25 2015

Introduction

On the 6th of October 2009 George Papandreou was inaugurated as the new Greek Prime Minister. A few days after taking office he was forced to reveal a huge hole in the Greek public accounts. Public debt had reached \$410 billion and Greece's yearly deficit was running at 12.7% of GDP, four times the permitted Eurozone limit (Crumley, 2010). This marked the beginning of the financial crisis in Europe and a collapse in public sentiment towards the European Union and its institutions. As public anger flared up across Europe, political integration appeared further away than ever. This essay is concerned with the relationship between public opinion and further political integration.

One important aspect of political integration is the closer alignment of defense policies under the Common Security Defense Policy (CSDP).[1] The most direct effect of the crisis on the CSDP was the decline in defense spending as countries across the EU faced severe budgetary restrictions. The latest available data shows 'during the period from 2006 to 2011, it [defense spending] dropped by € 21 billion or almost 10% and between 2011 and 2012 it reduced further by almost 3%' (European Defense Agency, 2013d). While the EU may perceive funding to be the primary concern of the CSDP, the issue of public support for the CSDP is also of importance and must be considered when attempting to advance European security integration.

Research Question

This paper will examine (a) the importance of public opinion in relation to the integration of Europe's defense and security forces and (b) examine public support for security integration following the Euro-crisis.

Social Significance

The social significance of this paper can be established on two grounds; the role of public opinion in influencing policy decisions at the highest level in the European Union and the importance of security and defense in contemporary Europe.

Matters of defense and security can seem alien and distant to people. They may be dismissed as matters only important to the practice of high-level politics. This is particularly true of Europe, which, in comparison to the rest of the world, has enjoyed a long stretch of peace since the end of the Second World War. However, the recent tensions in Ukraine have served as a reminder that European security cannot be taken for granted. The disjointed reactions of EU member states have been of particular concern. Although progress has been made, disunity has long been a characteristic of EU foreign policy. Foreign policy think-tank *European Council on Foreign Relations* stated in a mid-2011 paper that the EU was split into several camps on its Russia strategy. 'The EU divisions are more complex and surprising than a simple cleavage between old and new member states' (Mahony, 2007). This disunity raises the spectre of a common security policy more than ever and any research into how such a policy will/or will not come about is of social significance.

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Unlike matters of European security, which have only recently been brought back into public consciousness, the influence of public opinion in the European Union has been a matter of contention for some time now. The notion that a democratic deficit exists within the European Union has long been established, and debated. While primarily concerned with the lack of directly elected officials, the concept of a democratic deficit is also concerned with the idea that European citizens are unable to affect policy decisions. Any research investigating this democratic deficit in regards to European security integration is therefore of social significance.

Scientific Significance

As will be shown in the literature review, which follows, there has been significant academic interest in the area of public opinion and security integration. It ranges from broad studies focusing on the need for public support for political action to more specific work focusing on public opinion and how it specifically relates to EU security integration. Naturally a lot of attention has also been paid to the EU crisis and its effect on the political, social and economic life of the EU. However an analysis of post-crisis public opinion as it relates to security integration has not as of yet been undertaken. Conducting such an analysis is the aim of this paper.

Literature Review

Before examining public support for European security integration following the Euro-crisis it is first necessary to establish the importance of public opinion in the formation of security policy. In the early years of the integration process the idea that public opinion concerning matters of high politics was without value was prevalent. Jean Monnet, the father of European integration, 'thought it wrong to consult the people of Europe about the structure of a community of which they had no practical experience' (as quoted in Featherstone, 1994). This view was also reflected in academic literature at the time. The most influential approach was that of a 'permissive consensus' (Lindberg & Scheingold, 1970). In essence, permissive consensus holds that the integration process is of no concern to the public who are happy to 'allow' elites to make decisions on their behalf. The areas of security and defense were seen to be particularly vulnerable to this attitude, as these areas were perceived to have little impact on the lives of ordinary people.

While the concept of 'permissive consensus' dominated both academic and political discourse up to 1990's, revisionists have strongly challenged this position. Crucially for the future development of the CSDP, public opinion is now seen as playing a vital role in policy formation. Klaus Brummer contends that it is important that we consider 'the preferences of Europeans as they could enable or impede the further development of CSDP... high levels of public support could trigger additional efforts in European security and defense or serve as justification for the latter' (Brummer, 2007). Richard Sinnott has emphasized the 'changing attitudes to sovereignty and the role of the state, which can be attributed to growing interdependence and, partly, as a response to a revolution in education and communications (related to globalization)' (Sinnott, 1997). This means that 'policy-makers ignore public opinion at their own peril' (Ibid,). Sinnott has also pointed to the fact that public opinion becomes unavoidable when institutional change requires treaty ratification. This became particularly relevant to the CSDP in 2008 as Irish voters rejected the Treaty of Lisbon. Diagnosing the reasons for the 'no' vote, Sinnott et al. stressed that it was the 'failure to convince or reassure people that the issue of... conscription [among others] was not in the Lisbon Treaty which played a substantial role in the defeat of the ratification proposal' (Sinnott, Elkink, & Quinlan, 2011).

Expanding on this and arguing that 'utilitarian evaluations' play a strong role in the public opinion towards security integration, Harold Schoen maintains that 'elites have a strong incentive to respond to public opinion when making policy decisions' (Schoen, 2008). Kai Oppermann and Alexander Höse also argue that a strong public endorsement of the ESDP [now named CSDP post -Lisbon Treaty] is crucial to its success. Oppermann and Höse believe that 'public opinion will become an increasingly significant constraint on European-level decision-making with regard to implementing and further developing the ESDP' (Opperman & Höse, 2007). This is argued on two necessary pre-conditions – the public 'salience' of issues and the public's 'opportunity structures' to influence foreign policy decision-making.[2]

In sum, if the EU is determined to advance integration in the area of CSDP it must take into account public opinion

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and aim to garner as much public support as possible. Having demonstrated the importance of public opinion in policy formation, this essay will now focus on the public opinion of EU security integration.

When judging public opinion on any subject relating to Europe, the Eurobarometer survey offers the most comprehensive and detailed data. Established in 1973, it boasts one of the largest databases in the world. A cursory glance over Eurobarometer polls would reveal that Europeans appear to be strongly in favour of security and defense integration. When asked whether they were for or against a common defense and security policy among EU countries, 75% said they were in favour of it while only 16% said they would not support such integration (EU Commission, 2006). This result is not an outlier. Support for security integration has been strong and consistent since the beginning of polling on this issue. However, there have been challenges to the usefulness of these numbers when attempting to gauge public opinion.

Sinnott has warned of the dangers of taking these figures at face value. Primarily arguing on the nature of public opinion, Sinnott details how the 'reality of public opinion, as opposed to the indicators of it that are reflected in the polls, have to be discerned and a critical attitude taken when interpreting the data provided by polls.' (Sinnott, 1997) Doing exactly that, Brummer has questioned the validity of support for the EU security and defense policy. Positing that such support is 'superficial' and not 'substantial' (Brummer, 2007). Brummer critically analyses the poll results concluding that there is a significant variance in support across the EU and that further integration is not a priority for European citizens and finally that Europeans are skeptical of the necessity and appropriateness of military intervention (Ibid). Another issue highlighted by Brummer and expanded on by Liesbet Hooghe is that of the divide between 'elite' and 'public' opinion. Hooghe maintains that 'elite' and 'public' opinion is divided in Europe with the public favoring social legislation and elites favoring further erosion of sovereignty through policies such as the ESDP (Hooghe, 2003). Elsewhere it has been argued that such divide in opinion between elites and the public is a crucial factor in the future development of a common security policy (Sojka & Vazquez-Garcia, 2013).

It is therefore evident that when examining public support for security integration it is important to take a critical approach. As it examines Eurobarometer data relating to security integration the analysis section, which follows, will adopt such an approach. Taking the beginning of the crisis as the autumn of 2009, the European commission has published eleven Eurobarometer reports (numbers 72-81). These reports will provide the basis for the analysis.

Analysis

Employing the critical approach to polling data, as exemplified by Brummer, Sinnott, Sojka & Vazquez-Garcia, Oppermann & Höse and Peters, this section will seek to analyze data produced after the beginning of the European financial and political crisis and show how, now more than ever, the EU has failed to establish security and defense integration as an important issue in the mind of the public.

However, in order to provide context to the data relating to the CSDP it is necessary to first briefly examine the change in sentiment towards the EU as a whole since the crisis began. In this area the Eurobarometer has provided the most unambiguous data. The fall in trust in the EU and its institutions is directly linked to the onset of the crisis. Since 2009 the levels of trust have deteriorated every year, apart from 2012, which saw a brief respite. This declining level of trust is mirrored in the attitude to the EU as a whole. As of spring 2013 60% of Europeans had no trust in the EU (European Commission, 2013). These figures are an almost exact reversal of the figures from pre-crisis Europe (2007) as 57% of people had trust in the EU (European Commission, 2007). The dramatic effect of the crisis is also reflected in other polls. A *Pew Research* poll from May 2013 indicated that the number of people who view the EU favorably had fallen from 68% in 2007 to 46% in 2013. The crisis also shaped the parliamentary elections of May 2014, with a huge spike in votes for Eurosceptic parties as well a record low turnout of just 42.5%. It is clear that, following the crisis, European citizens have a wide range of concerns regarding the EU – but how important are concerns in relation to European security and in particular the CSDP?

Kai Brummer has stated 'security and defense issues are far from being primary concerns for Europeans'. To the contrary, they receive only limited attention both on the European level and in domestic politics. In other words, positive appraisals of the EU's role in security and defense do not translate into the ascription of high priority to those

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issues' (Brummer, 2007).

The financial turmoil that has plagued Europe since 2009 has made this observation more pertinent than ever. An analysis of the data bears this out.

Asked what they believed would be the main issues facing their country in the year 2030, a majority of people pointed to the economic situation (23%) and unemployment (20%). Defense/foreign affairs received a mere 4% of the vote (European Commission, 2009). Following the crisis Europeans regarded integration in financial matters and monetary policy as the highest priorities. Support for integration of defense policy dropped first from 18% to 16% and then to 13%. In 2012 it placed 16th out of 20 in a ranking of policies which the public considered salient (European Commission, 2012a). The 'Desired Objectives' section of the Eurobarometer is another indication that European citizens are not overly concerned with the EU expanding its role on the world stage. Predictably enough there has been an increased desire for the development of the EU economy and an improvement in living standards, with the two issues topping the polls. Meanwhile two central concerns of the CSDP, combating global threats and promoting democracy and human rights abroad, dropped to 5 % and 7% respectively (European Commission, 2012a). The following Eurobarometer asked citizens if they would want Europe to become a major diplomatic actor. Previously this was only desired by 5% of people and following the crisis it went down by a further percentage point (European Commission, 2013).

In sum, echoing Brummer's analysis, while security integration has public support it is not considered a priority. Since the crisis begun in 2009, matters of employment, financial stability and monetary integration have all been prioritized. Foreign policy and security integration have remained in a low position or have, in some polls, dropped even further down the list. In the same period areas such as education, energy and social policy all have gained ground and continue to be considered more important than security integration (European Commission, 2011a). Having established the issue of salience it is now time to turn to question of differing levels of support for the CSDP across the EU.

Peters, Brummer and Sojka & Vazquez-Garcia in particular have highlighted this as a problem. In essence while there might be an overall level of support for integration in this area, there has been significant variance in support across the EU. Utilizing data ranging from 1989 to 2004, Peters shows that 'support rates for a common defense policy are not only more volatile [than foreign policy], but EU member state populations also disagree much more strongly about the desirability of a common defense policy' (Peters, 2011). This is also reflected in the *Eurobarometer 66* which concluded that although support was generally high it 'varied considerably from one country to the next' (European Commission, 2007a). Brummer argues that this can be accounted for by accepting differences between EU states concerning 'threat perception (where geography plays an important role) and alliances (e.g., membership in NATO)' (Brummer, 2011).

Perhaps counter-intuitively, it can be contended that recent post-crisis Eurobarometer polls have shown that this has become *less* of a problem. Following the crisis EU Member states seem to agree more strongly on a common defense policy. Nonetheless a core group of countries still remain less enthusiastic than others when questioned about such a policy innovation. The opposition to this policy is higher than the EU average (19%) in five Member States: Sweden (38%), Finland (37%), Ireland (35%), the United Kingdom (32%) and Austria (31%). On the other end of the scale, only 8% of Latvians and 12% of Slovaks would oppose a common defense policy. (European Commission, 2013) Although progress has been made in this regard, the advancement of further security integration will require a broad consensus, and disparities in support could therefore continue to present a problem.

Conclusion

In December of 2013 in a meeting of the European Council the issue of CSDP was on the agenda. They discussed 'how to enhance defense capabilities, strengthen the defense industry and improve the effectiveness, visibility and impact of the CSDP' (European Council, 2013b). These aims all come on the back of what can be considered successes following the establishment of the CSDP under the Treaty of Lisbon. However there are areas of concern, with the problem of salience being chief among them. Brummer concluded in 2007 that 'if Europeans today were to

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pick those topics they cared about most, security and defense issues would clearly rank at the bottom end of the list. Instead, Europeans care first and foremost about their economic and social wellbeing. In other words, strong public backing of ESDP is not identical with the ascription of priority to the issue by Europeans' (Brummer, 2007). The figures from post-crises Eurobarometers show that defense integration remains a fringe interest while other issues such as unemployment and economic wellbeing have become much more important.

If the European Union is seeking to address the aims outlined by the Council it must consider this issue of salience. As Opperman and Höse have argued that the prospects of further developing the ESDP (now the CSDP) will depend increasingly on supportive public opinions in EU member states. This is compounded by the public being presented with 'ample channels of influence to constrain European integration in this field via their respective national governments.' (Opperman and Höse, 2007)

To conclude, if the EU is hoping to further integrate security policies and to push defense policies from an intergovernmental level to a supranational level it must take seriously the issue of public support and salience. While this issue has been raised in the past, the recent financial and political crisis means that it is more pertinent than ever. The rise in euroscepticism and mistrust towards the European Union and its institutions means that an even more concerted effort must be made to establish the required public support for a common security policy. Such an effort could be built on the growth of unity in public opinion on this issue across member states as well as the high levels of overall support for such a policy.

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Endnotes

[1] For the purpose of clarity it is important to establish the different foreign and security policies of the European Union. Firstly, the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) is different to the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). The CSDP's goals are 'to enable the implementation of civilian and military missions to ensure peace-keeping, conflict prevention, and the strengthening of international security and in addition, the Union wants to promote peace, security and progress in the world for the purpose of global governance' (Blanke & Mangiameli, 2013). This CFSP is primarily focused on establishing a coherent diplomatic message emanating from the EU member states. It is the goals of the CSDP that will be the main focus of this essay.

[2] It is important to note here that while agreeing that salience and public influence on policy are important concepts, this paper does not agree with Opperman and Höse in their interpretation of the polling data and will draw on the conclusions offered by Sinnott, Peters, and Brummer.

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