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Citizens in the turmoil of world politics: Finns' foreign and security policy expectations two years after joining NATO

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Introduction

In this report, we examine Finns' security and defense policy expectations two years after the ratification of Finland's NATO membership. The report is part of the research project "*Dynamic Support for Security and Defense Policy (NATOpoll)*," funded by the Kone Foundation (2023–2026), in which the same respondents are interviewed at regular intervals to examine the development of their views. The first survey was conducted before the Vilnius summit in June 2023 (Amadae et al. 2023; Wass et al. 2023), the second during the 2024 presidential elections (Amadae et al. 2023; Wass et al. 2023), and the third just before the 2024 European Parliament elections (Amadae et al. 2024; Wass et al. 2024). The data used in this review was collected between March 12 and 14, 2025 (see appendix 1).

During the first two years of Finland's NATO membership, the global geopolitical landscape has undergone significant changes. The shift has been reflected in both the internal power dynamics of the Alliance and Finland's national security policy. To ensure the democratic legitimacy of foreign and security policy, it is essential to understand how citizens perceive Finland's decisions and changes in the security environment and what they expect from political decision-makers. Has support for NATO and the readiness for Finland to take an active role in the Alliance remained as strong as before, even though the public discussion on the Alliance, particularly its security guarantees, has shifted significantly since the time of Finland's membership application and ratification? Are Finns prepared to continue supporting Ukraine both until peace is reached, on terms acceptable to Ukraine, and through the long reconstruction process that follows? What actions should the EU and Finland take to strengthen both European and national defense capabilities? How should Finland's foreign and security policy be led? What kind of foreign policy agency should Finland develop in the coming years? Finally, what does value-based realism mean in practice as the foundation of Finland's foreign and security policy?

The thermostat model, widely used in political science (Wlezien 1995), posits that public opinion shifts dynamically in response to the political environment, policy decisions, and the framing of those policies. Politicians attempt to shape such frames through rhetorical, symbolic, and performative strategies (Baumgartner and Jones 1991). In a constantly shifting security situation like the present, citizens' views can be expected to change even in the short term. Politicians also monitor the development of citizens' views and take them into account when weighing different policy options (see Ahrens 2024; Walgrave and Soontjens 2023). Likewise, citizens are prepared to be flexible in their opinions if parties reframe their policies accordingly (e.g., Nemčok et al. 2025), underscoring the need for a systematic examination of public opinion.

Finland submitted its application for NATO membership in May 2022, only a few months after Russia launched its full-scale war of aggression against Ukraine. This decision was preceded by a rapid shift in public opinion towards supporting Alliance membership, which was seen in public discourse as a necessary and effective deterrent against the Russian threat (Forsberg 2024; Koskimaa and Raunio 2024; Weckman 2023). Both decision-makers and citizens saw NATO membership as a continuation of Finland's post-Cold War foreign and security policy, and as a response to Russia's imperial ambitions (Kaarkoski et al. 2024). NATO membership was subject to high expectations and was framed as completing Finland's anchoring in the Western alliance system, a process already strengthened through EU membership (Forsberg 2023). Because of delays by Turkey and Hungary,

ratification took seven months. Finland officially joined NATO on April 4, 2023, in an accession ceremony held in Brussels.

Perhaps the most significant shift in world politics during Finland's NATO membership has been the re-election of Donald Trump as president of the United States. Trump's initiatives regarding the peace processes in Ukraine and the Middle East, the imposition of import tariffs even higher than expected and the likely ensuing trade war, threats directed at Canada, openly declared ambitions to take control of Greenland and the Panama Canal, the dismantling and purging of the civil service, as well as the termination of programs promoting diversity and equality, are examples of a policy in which geoeconomic interests are entangled with culture wars, resulting in a complex and unpredictable chain of potential consequences. The doctrine of the Trump administration combines traditional geopolitical views, focused on hegemonic centers formed by great powers like the United States, China, and Russia, their dependent spheres of influence, and a forward-deployed presence (e.g., McKeil 2023), with more recent approaches that emphasize the primacy of domestic affairs. It pursues these aims through the direct exercise of power in the form of presidential executive orders, bilateral, transactional negotiations that bypass traditional diplomatic and institutionalized channels, and the centralization of initiative and implementation processes and influence over public opinion in the hands of the president's inner circle. Disregard for the rule of law and direct attacks on the judicial system have raised concerns about the gradual dismantling of the entire democratic governance structure in the United States (Tribe 2025).

The "Project 2025" program, published in April 2023 by the thinktank The Heritage Foundation, identifies the transformation of the entire international economic policy system as a central ambition of the United States. Although Trump publicly distanced himself from the program's objectives during his election campaign, he has, after taking office, pursued them systematically. The approach has included withdrawing the United States from international organizations and commitments, such as the World Health Organization and the Paris Climate Agreement, as well as imposing sanctions on the International Criminal Court. The same orientation is evident in the exclusion of the European Union as a negotiating partner and in the framing of it as a trade rival seeking to take advantage of the United States (Politico 2025b).

Building on the familiar slogan from Trump's first term, "America First," the current approach places even greater emphasis on pursuing policy goals independently, without relying on allied support. To sustain its position as a global superpower, the United States faces increasing pressure to balance and prioritize its international commitments. The long-term effort to reduce dependence on China, first initiated under the Obama administration and now combined with Trump's focus on countering Chinese power in the Indo-Pacific, has raised critical questions about the credibility of U.S. security commitments to its allies in times of crisis (Mikkola et al. 2025). Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth have assured Europe that the United States remains committed to NATO, which is a more conciliatory message than President Trump's statements. The partly inconsistent messages reflect, on the one hand, internal tensions within the administration regarding the importance placed on transatlantic relations and, on the other, the fact that the administration is communicating its desires simultaneously to both domestic voters and the international community.

The shift in U.S. NATO policy reflects a move towards assessing alliance relationships through a transactional cost-benefit lens. Rather than viewing NATO as a strategic platform for sustaining

American influence, the Alliance is increasingly portrayed as a financial burden. As a result, the Trump administration has shown little willingness to continue funding Europe's defense at previous levels. This shift is evident in repeated warnings that the United States may withhold support from member states that it considers insufficiently invested in their own defense. The Trump administration has repeatedly called for raising defense spending to five percent of GDP (Foreign Affairs 2025). These demands have also triggered debates within NATO over how defense expenditures should be defined and measured. For instance, current accounting practices exclude the costs of conscription, which means that part of Finland's actual contribution goes unrecognized, an issue widely regarded within Finland as a shortcoming that should be addressed (Kaitila and Määttänen 2021; Yle 2025b).

Re-evaluating how defense spending is calculated has drawn attention to the differing security needs among member states. In European policy discussions, there have been calls to broaden the definition of defense expenditure to better account for the range of threats faced by NATO and EU countries. For many Mediterranean states, migration is seen as a more pressing concern than the threat posed by Russia, and in recent years migration has increasingly been framed as a security issue comparable to military threats (Charlotte 2024). Spain and Italy, for instance, have proposed that projects related to border control and climate change mitigation be classified as defense spending in the context of developing new EU-level funding mechanisms (Reuters 2025). A new target level for defense expenditure will be decided at NATO's summit in The Hague in June. Notably, even the United States, with a current spending level of 3.4 percent (2024), does not meet the threshold it demands from other allies (NATO 2024b). A substantial increase in defense spending may also prove difficult to align with the U.S. domestic agenda of reducing the size of the federal government.

The Trump administration has also made an almost complete reversal in its Ukraine policy. The aim of achieving a rapid peace through negotiations with Russia and by pressuring Ukraine, combined with an unwillingness to commit to guaranteeing Ukraine's security, has pushed the European Union to urgently find new ways to increase its support for Ukraine. The United States has provided Ukraine with just under €40 billion in annual aid, with slightly more than half allocated to military assistance (Kiel Institute for the World Economy 2025b). The European Union's realized support is roughly the same in total volume, although its military contribution is lower, amounting to €17 billion. Replacing the full U.S. contribution would require the EU to double its current support, raising it from 0.2 percent to just over 0.4 percent of the member states' combined GDP. EU funds that have already been approved, but not yet distributed, would be sufficient to cover the U.S. share for approximately one year.

Financial resources are therefore not the primary barrier to increasing support for Ukraine. The more pressing challenge concerns the replacing of U.S. military assistance, particularly in terms of the most demanding capabilities. According to some estimates, the need to substitute for the operational capacity of nearly 100,000 U.S. troops currently stationed in Europe, together with an additional 200,000 troops expected to be deployed in a crisis under NATO's defense plans, would require a permanent increase in European defense spending of approximately 1.5 percentage points, raising it from just under two percent to nearly 3.5 percent of GDP (Kiel Institute for the World Economy 2025a). However, the required financial investment may be significantly larger. Due to the differing defense arrangements among NATO member states, the development and construction of shared capabilities is difficult. The development of forces, capabilities, and interoperability is slow and

expensive. The greatest uncertainty concerns whether the U.S.-based threat of deterrence is credible enough to prevent Russia from considering a victorious war against Europe as possible.

With the Trump administration, the United States increasingly appears to Europe not as a trading partner and security-guaranteeing ally but as a challenger, one that is willing to criticize even the domestic policies of European states. Europe seeks to respond to the situation by defending its own value base, by increasing its autonomy in the production of strategically critical raw materials, technologies, and infrastructure, and by strengthening its foreign and security policy agency. According to a white paper published in mid-March 2025, the EU is directing a total of 800 billion euros in additional spending towards defense, 150 billion of which would come from the new “Safe” instrument funded by Commission-issued debt, while 650 billion would be the member states’ own investments in arms and defense (European Commission 2025). The Commission also proposes that defense expenditures be excluded from the EU’s fiscal rules.

The rapid increase in defense spending places a significant burden on the economies of the member states at the same time as the import tariffs imposed by the United States shake the entire global economy. For the time being, the production capacity of Europe’s defense industry is so limited that increasing defense procurement would further deepen the EU’s dependence on the United States. Reducing dependence on American defense materials would require substantially greater investments in the European defense industry and technology. Strengthening the nuclear arsenals of European nuclear powers would likewise require significant financial investments, and it remains unclear whether France’s initiative to extend its nuclear deterrence to cover allies would entail changes to its nuclear forces or overall strategy. In addition, Europe faces pressure to compensate for the United States’ withdrawal from humanitarian crisis aid and development cooperation projects, in which China is rapidly expanding its involvement.

The question of additional defense investments deeply divides the member states. Understandably, the desire and perceived necessity to invest in defense is greatest in regions where security threats are experienced most concretely. This fact is also reflected in the rapidly spreading discourse on “frontline states” (e.g., Jääsaari 2025). Especially the eastern member states of the Union have already significantly increased their spending. At the forefront is Poland, with defense expenditure exceeding four percent of its gross domestic product (NATO 2024b). The decisions of the major NATO countries are all crucial to the overall picture. For instance, Germany’s spending has already risen from 1.5 percent to two percent. The government coalition currently being formed has expressed its willingness to substantially raise defense expenditures. To enable this change, it also agreed to amend the so-called “debt brake” enshrined in the constitution, which limits public budget deficits, so that it would no longer impose a practical restriction on the growth of defense spending. Loosening the debt brake would allow for an increase in expenditures in the coming years through debt financing, enabling Germany to avoid an immediate need to cut other expenditures or raise taxes.

Germany’s starting point of moderate indebtedness makes it possible to take on additional debt without affecting the country’s creditworthiness. Yet, endless additional spending cannot be financed by debt, even in Germany: eventually either taxation must be increased or other expenditures reduced. In other EU countries, debt financing is also a likely way to initiate increases in defense spending. However, the countries’ capacities to take on additional debt vary considerably. Among the major states, the most difficult situations are found in Italy and Spain. Their defense spending levels are still

clearly below NATO's minimum target of two percent. At the same time, both countries, especially Italy, carry high levels of public debt. France likewise has a high level of public debt. It is also a country with exceptionally high public expenditures and high taxation, making it difficult to significantly raise tax levels. On the other hand, cutting other expenditures is difficult everywhere.

In terms of the political acceptability of Europe's defense dimension, it would also be problematic if the situation were to escalate into the "guns versus butter" scenario envisioned by NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte (see Politico 2025a), in which investments in defense and welfare would be pitted against each other (Fay 2020). From a historical perspective, the welfare state and the defense state have been built side by side, whereby increases in defense spending have appeared socially and democratically sustainable (Eloranta et al. 2025; Obinger et al. 2018). However, this implies a stronger public sector and a greater role for the state, something not necessarily sought after from the perspective of right-wing governments (see Wass 2025).

The differing circumstances of EU member states has inevitably led to a discussion about whether the increase in spending should be financed jointly. In practice, this concerns a common debt, the repayment of which member states would participate in according to their ability to pay. The Commission's proposal for a joint borrowing of 150 billion euros is a starting point for such an arrangement, albeit on a small scale and in the form of loans granted to member states rather than direct subsidies.

However, the political debate on common financing is likely to differ significantly from that held during the euro crisis or the COVID-19 pandemic. The countries currently facing the most immediate threat are in the eastern part of the Union and have already made significant investments in their own defense. Of those countries, only Finland has taken on significant debt. Even more important, however, are the savings generated through joint financing in the development of shared and interoperable capabilities. The effort to reduce dependence on the United States especially requires the replacing of those systems where such dependence is currently high. It demands both significant development work and investments in production capacity.

The development of new weapons systems is expensive, and the costs can be reduced by centrally directing resources. Similarly, it is logical to strengthen through joint financing those systems that require substantial financial resources from a single country and where there is a strong common interest. Airlift capacity and space-based systems are examples of such domains. In addition, joint financing can be used as an incentive to harmonize weapons systems. The European Commission, led by President Ursula von der Leyen, has encouraged member states to direct increasing defense investments towards European production. One potential issue is that the new capacity might not be of the highest quality available if the purchase is heavily influenced by the desire to support the European defense industry and its strategic autonomy (Mejino-López and Wolff 2024). This tension could place Finland, which has made significant arms purchases from the United States and Israel in recent years, in a difficult position: a small country cannot afford to buy the second-best products (Helsingin Sanomat 2025).

There are inherent difficulties in organizing common financing, stemming from the fact that the EU is not comprised of the same group of countries that contribute significantly to the organization of common defense. An effective European defense without substantial U.S. participation requires the

inclusion of the United Kingdom. NATO member states such as Norway and Turkey are also natural parts of Europe's shared defense. On the other hand, neutral states such as Austria and Ireland, and particularly Hungary and Slovakia, which lean towards Russia, will not likely be willing to increase shared resources for defense.

This situation suggests that either the EU's decision-making rules regarding security policy must be changed or else the strengthening of collective defense needs to be realized in some way through a coalition of the willing. As an actor operating outside existing permanent structures, coordinating a coalition of the willing that involves both the EU and NATO is a complex task that will require a variety of organizational effort. One option for coordinating cost-effective armament efforts by a coalition of the willing outside the EU is to form an intergovernmental arrangement resembling the European Stability Mechanism (Wolff et al. 2025).

Altogether, most of the additional defense expenditure will fall directly on the member states themselves. The minimum target of 1.5 percentage points of EU member states' GDP is, at the same time, one and a half times the size of the entire EU budget. Moreover, it concerns a permanent or very long-term increase in the level of expenditure, which cannot be indefinitely covered by debt. It is unlikely that member states will reach unanimity on a 150 percent increase in the EU's annual expenditures in the next Multiannual Financial Framework, which begins in 2028. The increase in expenditure is also constrained by the fact that the repayment of the joint debt taken under the Recovery Fund will begin at that time.

Additional problems arise from the possibility of Europe falling behind in technological fields critical for economic growth and the generation of military capabilities. All the largest technology companies are American. A report published by Mario Draghi published in September 2024 (European Commission 2024b) outlined a broad program to boost Europe's economic growth; the new Commission has incorporated several proposed elements into its work program. Many of the objectives, though, such as the significant easing of various economic regulatory constraints, are controversial. The same applies to the proposals in Draghi's report regarding greater centralization of economic governance and the pooling of common resources for purposes beyond defense.

On a general level, there is broad consensus on many of the issues, but practical solutions quickly lead to disagreement, which is particularly evident in discussions about the Capital Markets Union and more broadly the development of the internal market. The 20 percent import tariff imposed by the United States on EU countries in early April 2025 also increases the risk of recession in Europe, especially in those member states for which the United States has been a key trading partner. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen immediately declared the EU's readiness to respond with counter-tariffs.

The construction of an autonomous European defense dimension also involves several fundamental questions that require decisions. It is essential to determine whether the European pillar of defense is to become, over time, the primary means of strengthening defense, with the transatlantic relationship playing a supporting role, or whether the aim is to continue with the current arrangement, in which cooperation between NATO and the EU complements rather than challenges the primacy of the transatlantic relationship as the ultimate guarantor of security (Iso-Markku 2024). The point of departure of a report published by President Niinistö in October 2024 was still that NATO is the

backbone of EU defense and that no competing arrangements should be established alongside it (European Commission 2024b). In the speeches made by European leaders as they frequently convene to discuss the issue, the concepts of “NATO’s European pillar” or a “European NATO” have repeatedly surfaced, but their precise definition remains unresolved (see FIIA Forum 2025).

The construction of an EU defense union may generate friction within NATO and in transatlantic relations. Tensions over the distribution of defense burdens between allies and the allocation of U.S. capabilities and their costs have been observed since the Alliance’s founding in 1949. Especially after the Federal Republic of Germany joined NATO in 1955, the United States began emphasizing in its NATO policy the need for a more balanced burden-sharing between European allies and the U.S. (Koivula and Ossa 2022). However, this has been more a matter of cost-sharing than an expectation that Europeans would develop their defense capabilities independently of the United States, something the U.S. has systematically opposed (Ossa 2025).

The division of labor within NATO has emphasized the unique role of the United States and the ultimate dependence of European allies on U.S. military power and security guarantees. Among Europe’s major countries, the United Kingdom and the Federal Republic of Germany supported this approach until 2025. Finland’s position has consistently aligned with that of the United Kingdom and Germany. It is unlikely that the United States will cease to view the development of a truly independent European defense capability as a negative trajectory. It prefers a solution in which European initiatives complement, but do not challenge, the United States’ superior military capabilities in Europe and its surrounding regions.

The EU’s role in promoting the negotiation process between Ukraine and Russia has thus far been rather limited. The Trump administration did not include the EU’s High Representative in the negotiations it facilitated, which led Europe to strengthen its internal coordination channels. The EU and the United Kingdom have actively formed a shared situational awareness, objectives, and long-term defense cooperation with Ukraine. Key issues under consideration include ceasefire monitoring and the EU’s military presence in Ukraine. The EU’s joint sanctions policy towards Russia and the impact of U.S. actions on it have also required the formulation of positions, as has the use of Russia’s frozen currency reserves for Ukraine’s reconstruction. The EU also officially launched accession negotiations with Ukraine at the first intergovernmental conference in June 2024 (European Commission 2025).

Overall, the balance of power in world politics is gradually shifting from Western-led liberalism towards authoritarian governance, the central tools of which include the control of raw materials, supply chains, and transport routes combined with the steering of public opinion through instruments enabled by digitalization. At the same time, the distinctions between democratic and authoritarian systems are narrowing, as democratic systems undergo internal authoritarianization, challenging the division between “the West” and the non-Western world (Buzan 2025). Trump’s autocratic style of governance does not necessarily weaken the United States’ soft power (see Nye 2025). Rather, it finds resonance in far-right political groupings within Europe (Vuorelma 2020). Whereas the left-liberal West emphasizes minority rights, the far-right West is built on anti-immigration sentiment (Vuorelma 2025).

The global order no longer appears as a fixed structure between competing poles. Instead, unexpected alliances may form based on assessments of needs and cost-benefit calculations (Blanchard and Pisani-Ferry 2025). The trend is thus towards greater diffusion, where trust in a rules-based order has eroded and no clear leading state or driving coalition of great powers can be identified. Rules-based governance and multilateralism may, in the future, become organized thematically, functioning, for instance, in relation to climate policy, even as they simultaneously erode in other policy areas. The surrounding turbulence in world politics also compels Finland to reassess its foreign and security policy orientations. According to the Government Report on Foreign and Security Policy, approved by the Parliament of Finland in December 2024, Finland's security is based on three pillars: a strong national defense capability as part of NATO's deterrence and defense, memberships in the EU and NATO, and strengthening bilateral foreign, security, and defense cooperation with key allies and partners (Finnish Government 2024b).

In the Defense Report submitted to the Parliament of Finland in December 2024, preparedness against Russia, identified as the primary threat, is based on strengthening national defense capability, NATO's deterrence, defense cooperation, and comprehensive national defense (Finnish Government 2024a). The message from the President of the Republic and the government has been reassuring, emphasizing the United States' commitment to NATO and bilateral defense cooperation with Finland. However, information has emerged about so-called Plan B preparations within Finland's foreign and security policy leadership for a situation where the United States would no longer commit to NATO and the security guarantees under Article 5. Pesu and Wallenius (2025) suggest that such a Plan B could be based on strong Nordic defense combined with the support of a militarily strong United Kingdom, which has a clear security interest in Northern Europe.

Concrete measures to strengthen defense capability and deterrence were made public by the Finnish government in early April, when it decided to initiate preparations to withdraw from the Ottawa Treaty banning anti-personnel mines, following the example of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland. Additionally, the government will increase defense spending to three percent by 2029. This means a significant increase in annual expenditures: by 2029, expenditures would be approximately three billion euros higher than previously estimated. The new spending needs are mainly directed at improving the equipment and capabilities of the army. The Minister of Finance also noted that, in the longer term, new procurements will have to come at the expense of other budgetary items, as the government does not wish to increase public debt.

The decisions being made demonstrate that Finland takes seriously not only the security threat posed by Russia but also the changing role of the United States in NATO and in Euro-Atlantic relations (Mikkola et al. 2025). In addition to fighter aircraft procurements, the defense agreement between Finland and the United States, which entered into force in September 2024, has been a key component of Finland's goal to bind the United States more strongly to the security of Northern Europe (Salonius-Pasternak 2024). The bilateral relationship with the United States has been particularly important for Finland following Russia's attack on Ukraine. President Stubb's visit to President Trump's Florida estate was widely interpreted as a sign of continued close relations. Informal bilateral "golf diplomacy" may also serve to advance the EU's shared objectives (Yle 2025a). At the same time, it underscores the president's increasingly prominent role as the figurehead of Finland's foreign and security policy, both in institutionalized arenas and in more informal settings, such as coalitions of the willing and bilateral negotiations.

For Finland, the uncertainty surrounding security solutions reliant on the United States, combined with the unfinished state of the European security architecture, means a deepened understanding of the necessity of sufficient national preparedness. An increasingly strong investment in traditional security may gradually transform Finland's national self-image from that of a peace broker and advocate of nuclear disarmament and, at the same time, exclude certain other policy frameworks, such as viewing climate change and biodiversity loss as part of a sustainable foreign and security policy (Kotimaa 2025).

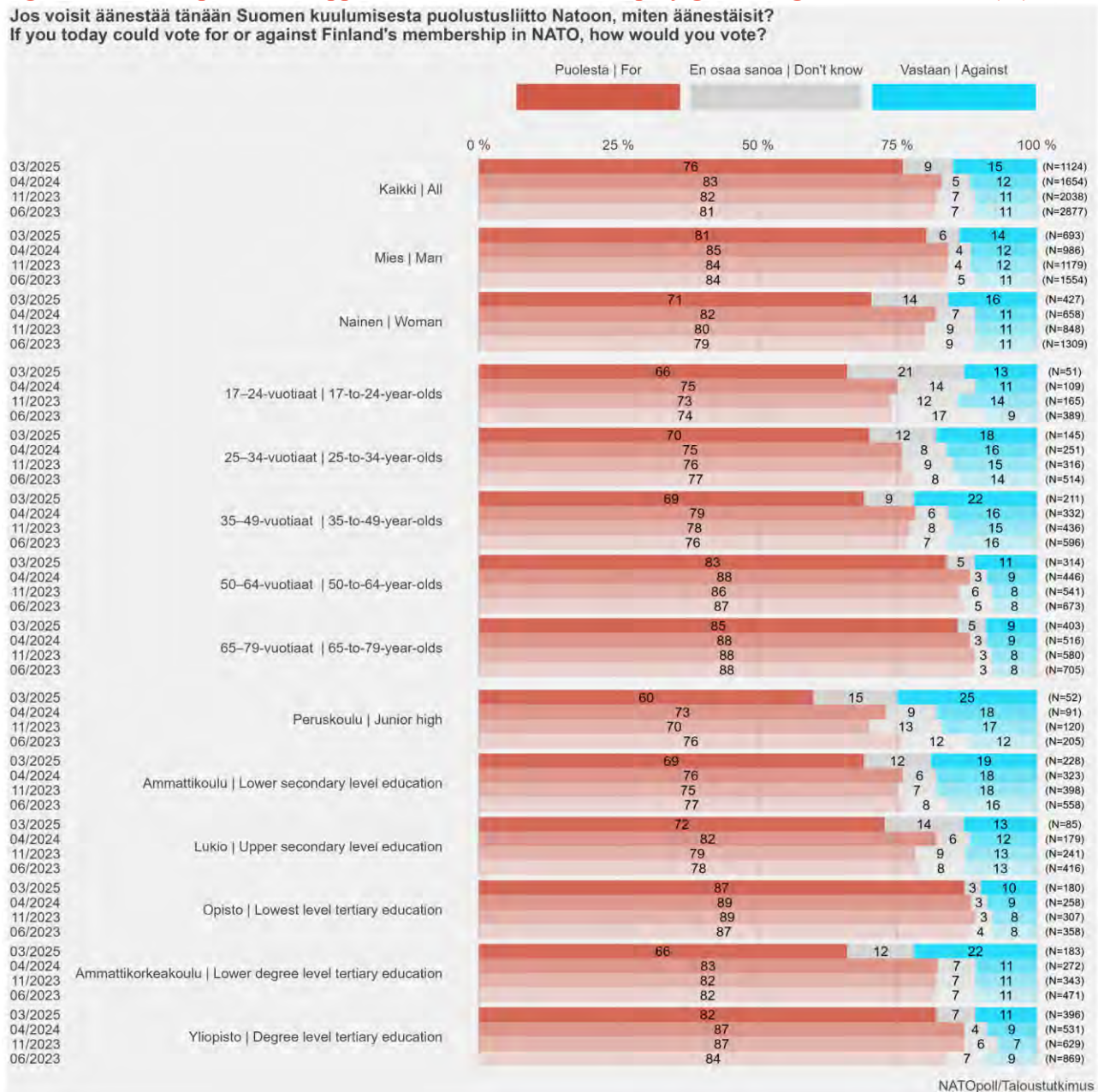
Finland's characteristic tradition of achieving consensus in foreign and security policy often also inhibits critical discussion of widely shared goals (Vuorelma 2024; Wass 2023). According to the Government Report (2024b), Finland's foreign and security policy is based on value-based realism. As defined in the report, this means that Finland adheres to values it considers essential and important, such as democracy, the rule of law, international law and human rights, peace, equality, and non-discrimination. At the same time, Finland is prepared for dialogue even with countries that do not share its views and values.

As a new doctrine of foreign and security policy, value-based realism provides flexibility in Finland's positioning amid rapidly developing situations. In practical decisions, such as arms procurements, votes in the UN, and promoting the bilateral relationship between Finland and the United States through, for instance, icebreaker deals, various situations may arise that require choosing one side over another. Foreign policy leadership must provide extensive justification and articulation to ensure that the choices made are perceived as legitimate. Value-based realism as the foundation of foreign and security policy is a multifaceted whole and communicating it clearly to voters requires considerable effort.

Development of support for NATO membership

We begin by examining the development of support for NATO membership among Finns based on socioeconomic status (figures 1a and 1b), political orientation (figure 1c), and party affiliation (figure 1d). The basis for comparison consists of survey data that we collected in June 2023 (n = 2,877) and November 2023 (n = 2,038). The most recent survey, conducted in April, was answered by 1,654 Finns (57%) from the original respondent pool. The surveys have been weighted so that each constitutes an independently representative sample of the Finnish population (see appendix 1). The formulation of the questions is the same as used by NATO in some of its own public opinion surveys (see, e.g., NATO Audience Research 2023). In parallel with this assessment, NATO surveys also regularly include a question about whether respondents would vote in favor of remaining in NATO or withdrawing from the Alliance if a referendum were held now.

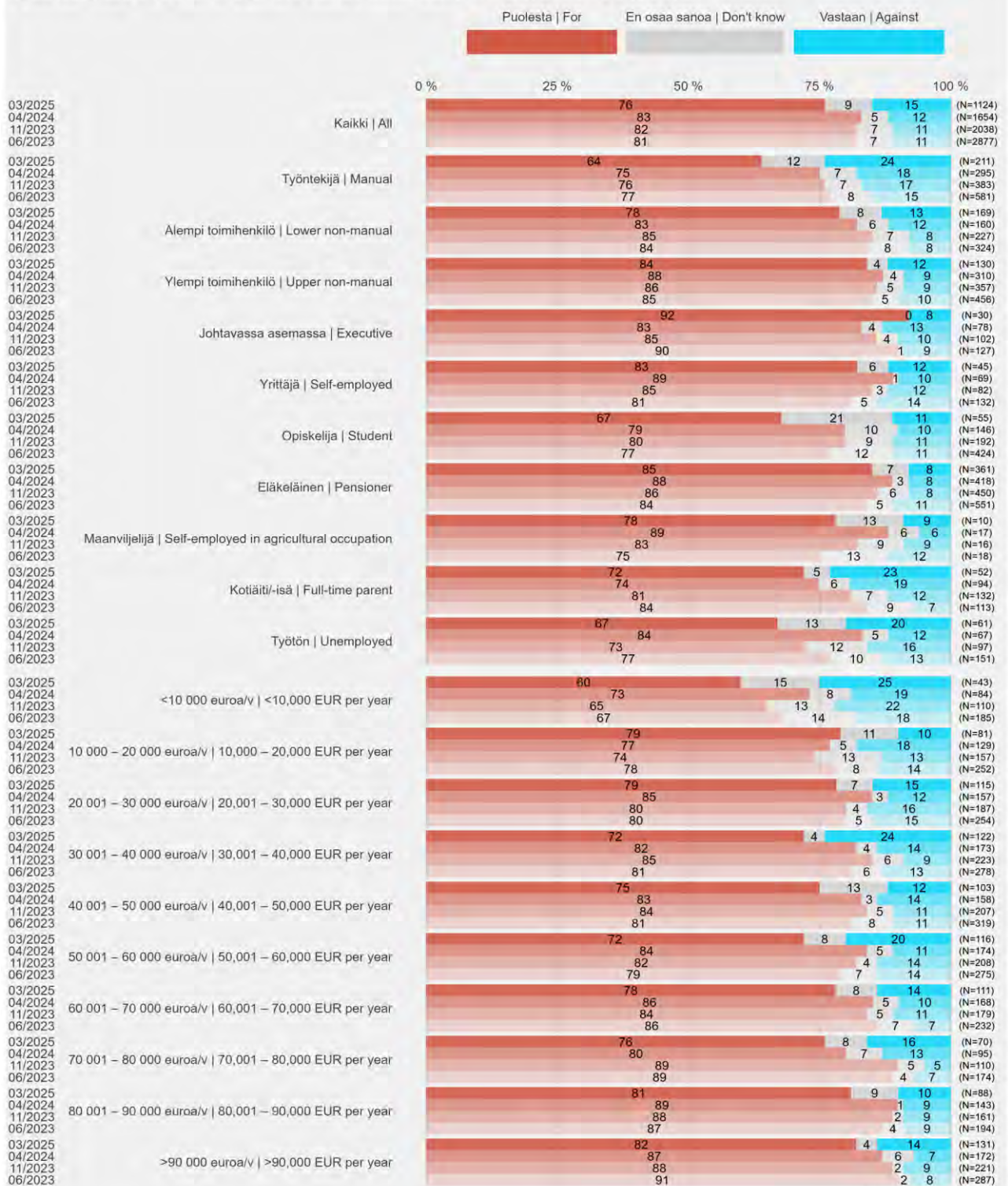
Figure 1a. Development of support for NATO membership by gender, age, and education (%).



In NATO's most recent survey, conducted in April–May 2024, support for NATO remained at the same level compared to the situation one year earlier. On average, 70 percent of citizens in member countries would vote to remain in NATO, 14 percent would vote to leave, and 17 percent were undecided (NATO Audience Research 2023). Immediately after joining NATO, Finland ranked among the top member states in terms of citizens' attitudes towards the Alliance. In general, public attitudes towards NATO have been more positive on average in the newer member states than in the older ones.

Kuvio 1b. Development of support for NATO membership by occupational status and income (%).

Jos voisit äänestää tänään Suomen kuulumisesta puolustusliitto Natoon, miten äänestäisit?
If you today could vote for or against Finland's membership in NATO, how would you vote?



NATOpoll/Taloustutkimus

Figure 1a shows that support, which had remained at the same level throughout the entire membership period, has declined by a total of seven percentage points compared to April 2024. The decline has been significantly steeper among women than men. It is also noteworthy that the drop in support has been particularly concentrated among the youngest respondents and those in lower education and income groups, whereas the change has clearly been more moderate among the oldest, most highly educated, and higher-level professional groups (figures 1a and 1b). It appears that the differences in NATO support between educational groups observed in earlier studies (Weckman 2023) may be becoming more pronounced. Nevertheless, the overall level of support remains relatively high.

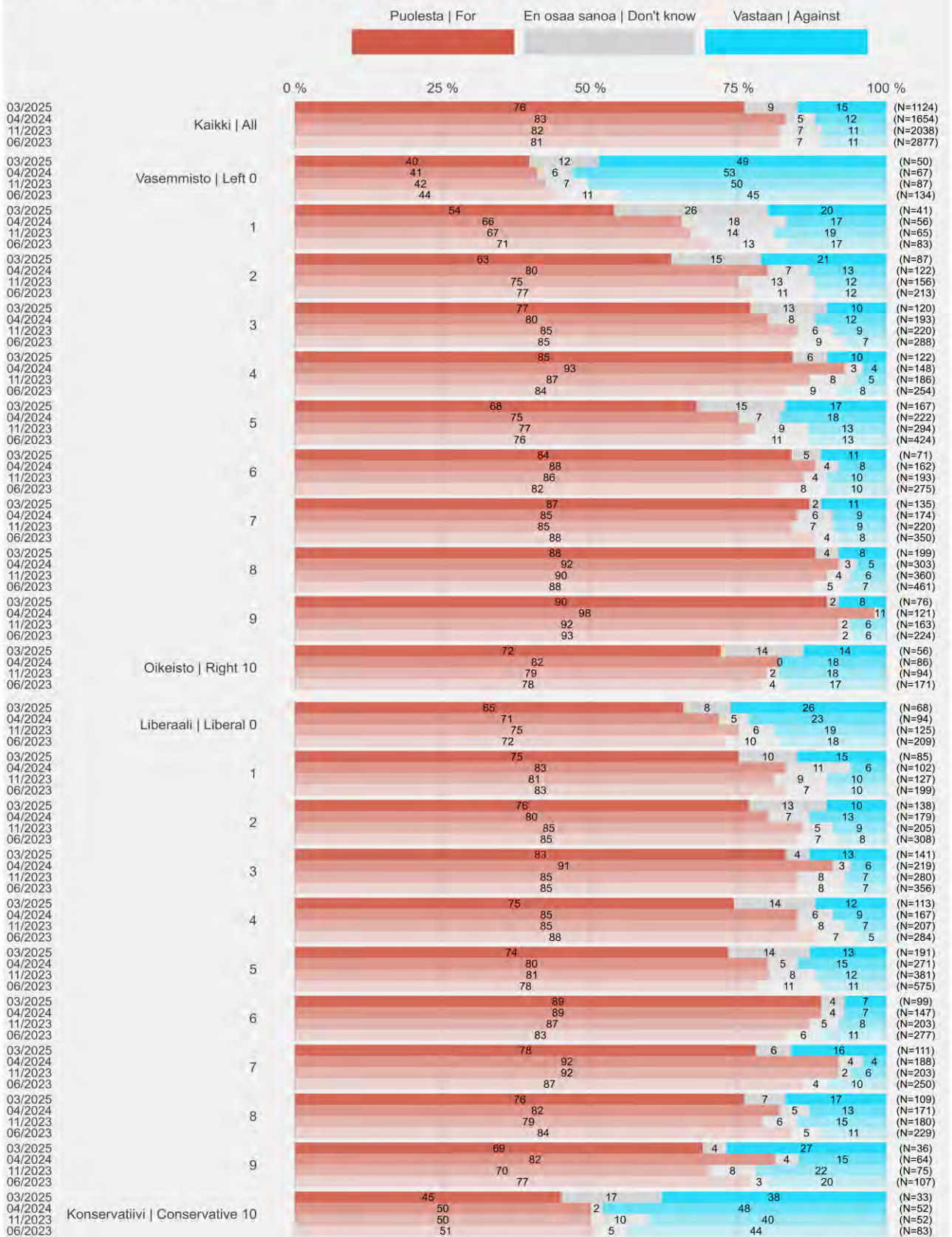
As before, attitudes towards NATO continue to distinguish Finns based on political orientation. Support remains highest among those who identify as right wing, although it has also declined in that group (figure 1c). Thus, polarization has slightly eased. The most negative attitudes are found among those who place themselves at the most conservative end of the spectrum, but even among those who consider themselves quite liberal, there are clearly fewer NATO supporters than on average. Among conservatives, the decline in support has been more moderate than among liberals.

Attitudes towards NATO membership do not divide voters along the government-opposition axis, as there is considerable variation within both camps (figure 1d). Among National Coalition Party voters, virtually all still support Finland's NATO membership. Support is equally high among the Swedish People's Party voters (96%). In contrast, among the government's partners, voters of the Finns Party (81%) and Christian Democrats (69%) are clearly more critical. However, support among Finns Party voters appears to be increasing, suggesting that, under the current security conditions, military alignment has begun to seem justified.

Regarding opposition parties, Social Democratic Party voters are quite pro-NATO. The largest declines in support have occurred among Green League (-13 percentage points) and Left Alliance (-12 percentage points) voters, fewer than half of whom, for the first time, now support membership. Overall, it appears that those who were initially cautious about Finland's NATO membership have responded strongly to the Trump administration's positions on the Alliance, whereas those who supported membership from the outset continue to think that Finland's accession to the Alliance was the right decision.

Figure 1c. Development of support for NATO membership by political orientation (%).

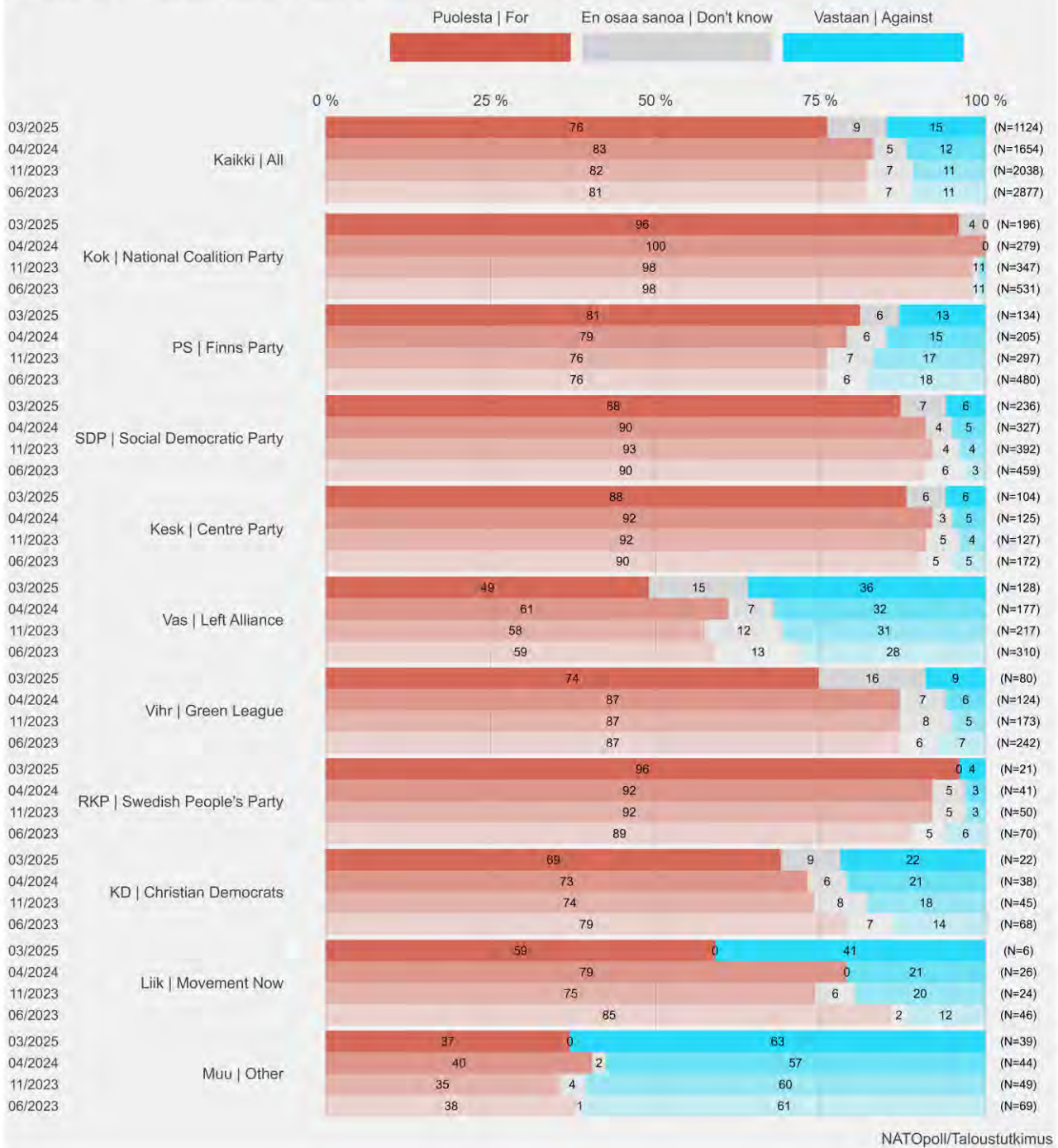
Jos voisit äänestää tänään Suomen kuulumisesta puolustusliitto Natoon, miten äänestäisit?
If you today could vote for or against Finland's membership in NATO, how would you vote?



NATOpoll/Taloustutkimus

Figure 1d. Development of support for NATO membership by party choice (%).

Jos voisit äänestää tänään Suomen kuulumisesta puolustusliitto Natoon, miten äänestäisit?
If you today could vote for or against Finland's membership in NATO, how would you vote?



NATOpoll/Taloustutkimus

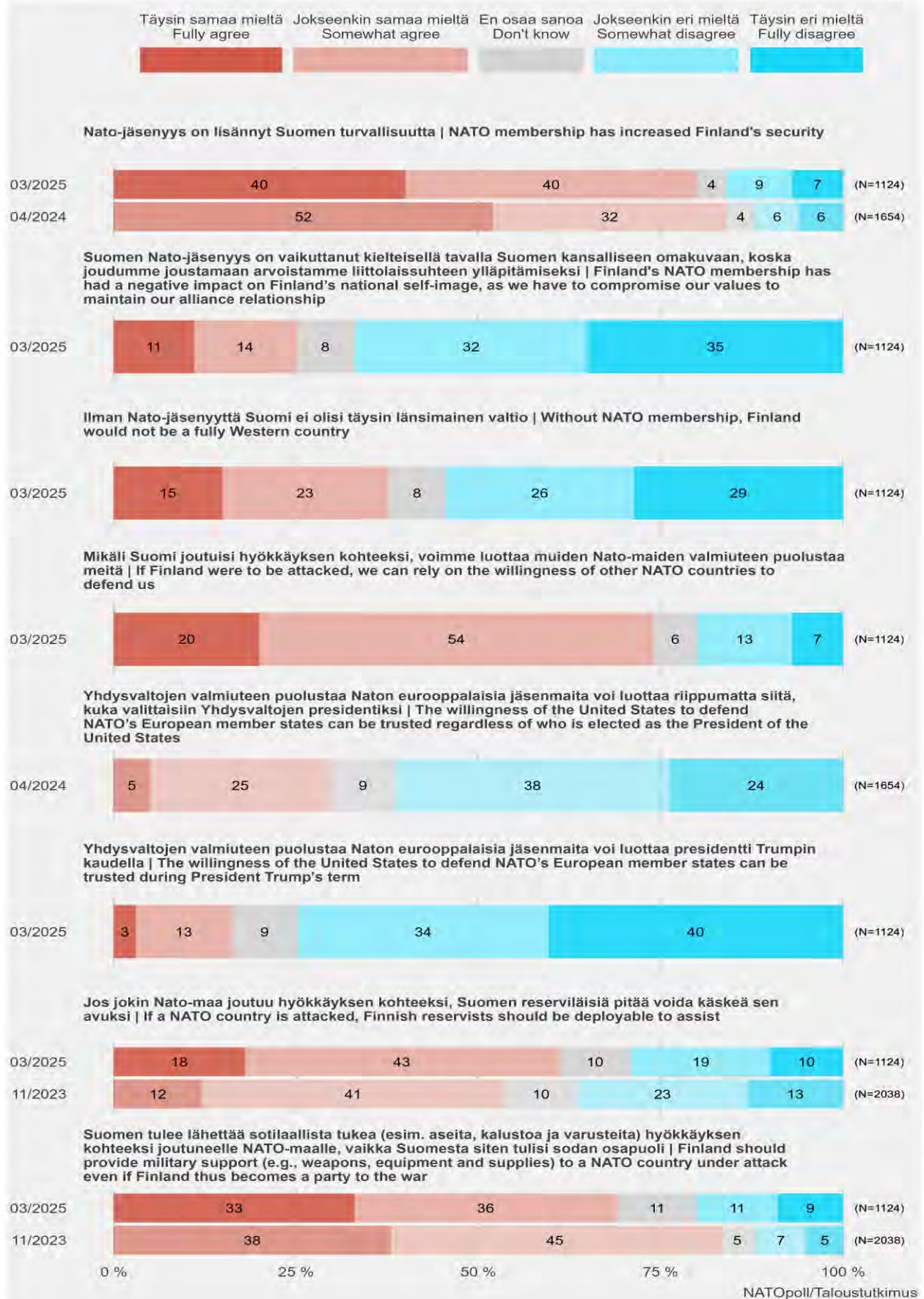
Perceptions of the significance of NATO membership and Finland's role in NATO

Table 2 shows Finns' views on NATO membership as one of the key pillars of Finland's security apparatus. A large majority of citizens (80%) still think that joining NATO has increased Finland's security, and trust in NATO's security guarantees also remains strong: 74 percent are convinced that other NATO member states would be willing to defend Finland if it were attacked. However, this level of confidence does not extend to the United States. The strong reservations concerning U.S. commitment, already evident in spring 2024, have only intensified following the realization of Trump's second term. The Trump administration's messaging that NATO should not rely on the United States has clearly been widely absorbed, as only 16 percent now trust in the United States' willingness to defend NATO's European member states. The drop from the previous year's estimate is notably steep (-14 percentage points).

Finland's desire to contribute to the Alliance's collective defense remains strong, particularly in terms of sending reservists to a NATO member state under attack. The share of those willing to send such support has even clearly increased compared to the situation one year ago (61% vs. 56%). This change underscores Finland's early emphasis, upon joining, on the desire to be a producer of security in NATO rather than merely a consumer of it (see Wass 2024). On the other hand, when the provision of military support becomes concretized as involvement in a war as a belligerent, the willingness to contribute to collective defence is now significantly lower than in spring 2024 (69% vs. 83%). This observation may partly reflect fears of the consequences of NATO being weakened by a potential U.S. withdrawal.

NATO is also linked, in terms of national self-understanding and imagery, to Finland's ontological security, namely its state identity as a security provider. Only a small number of respondents are convinced that NATO membership has required compromising the state's values for the sake of maintaining allied relations in a way that has negatively affected Finland's national self-image. Most respondents feel that quite the opposite is the case. Nearly 40 percent also view NATO membership as an important part of Finland's positioning within "the West" or Western identity.

Figure 2. Perceptions of the significance of NATO membership and Finland's role in NATO (%).



Support for Ukraine, advancing the peace process, and enhancing reconstruction

Figures 3a and 3b examine views on what would constitute a just peace in Ukraine, how such a peace should be promoted, and what actions it requires from the EU. A key finding is that Finns strongly support providing continued assistance to Ukraine. As many as 85 percent think that EU countries must support Ukraine's defensive struggle through economic aid and arms deliveries until peace can be achieved on terms acceptable to Ukraine itself.

The willingness to finance continued assistance by means of a joint loan has also slightly increased compared to one year ago, and now a majority of people (54%) support the need to incur common debt for that reason. On the other hand, reflecting Finland's tight economic outlook, the willingness to increase EU membership fees to support Ukraine and to fund joint arms production has slightly declined over the past year (69% vs. 64%). In terms of public opinion across Europe, Finns position themselves clearly as stronger supporters of Ukraine than the EU average. According to the Eurobarometer collected in October 2024, 68 percent of EU citizens supported providing economic aid to Ukraine and 58 percent supported funding arms procurement and deliveries (European Union 2024).

When it comes to potential peace negotiations, an interesting tension emerges between realism, on the one hand, and respecting Ukraine's territorial integrity and self-determination on the other. Half of respondents (52%) are of the opinion that a peace requiring even significant concessions is a better option than the continuation of war. However, 80 percent do not find it acceptable that Russia would be allowed to keep the territories it has occupied as a condition for a peace agreement. Similarly, 67 percent feel that the United States has no right to prevent Ukraine from initiating the NATO membership process as a condition for concluding peace.

Finns also strongly support pressuring Russia to accelerate negotiations. Nearly three out of four citizens (73%) want the EU to continue its sanctions policy against Russia regardless of the actions of the United States. The autumn 2024 Eurobarometer also showed substantial European support (71%) for sanctions targeting the Russian government, companies, and citizens (European Union 2024). There is also near-unanimous agreement (87%) that Europe should use the frozen Russian currency reserves to support and rebuild Ukraine. Ensuring Ukraine's security after a potential peace agreement is also considered important. The idea of a coalition of the willing, which would include representatives from EU countries, the United Kingdom, Norway, Turkey, Canada, and Australia engaging in negotiations to station troops in Ukraine after reaching a peace agreement has received broad support (72%). However, Finland's participation by sending its own troops is significantly more divisive: 52 percent support it, 31 percent oppose, and nearly one in five (17%) have no opinion, illustrating quite well the complexity of such decisions.

Ukraine's possible EU and NATO membership, with relaxed criteria, also divides opinion in Finland. EU membership is supported by 46 percent, and NATO membership by 41 percent. A third controversial issue concerns the reestablishment of political relations between Finland and Russia after a peace agreement has been reached. Finland's president also raised this point in a press conference held at the end of March 2025, noting that political relations with Russia will reopen at some point (Yle 2025d). Background data from the survey shows that this prospect receives significantly more support among voters of the Centre Party (52%), the Social Democratic Party

(49%), and the Left Alliance (47%) compared to those who vote for the National Coalition Party (32%).

Figure 3a. Support for Ukraine, advancing the peace process, and enhancing reconstruction (%).

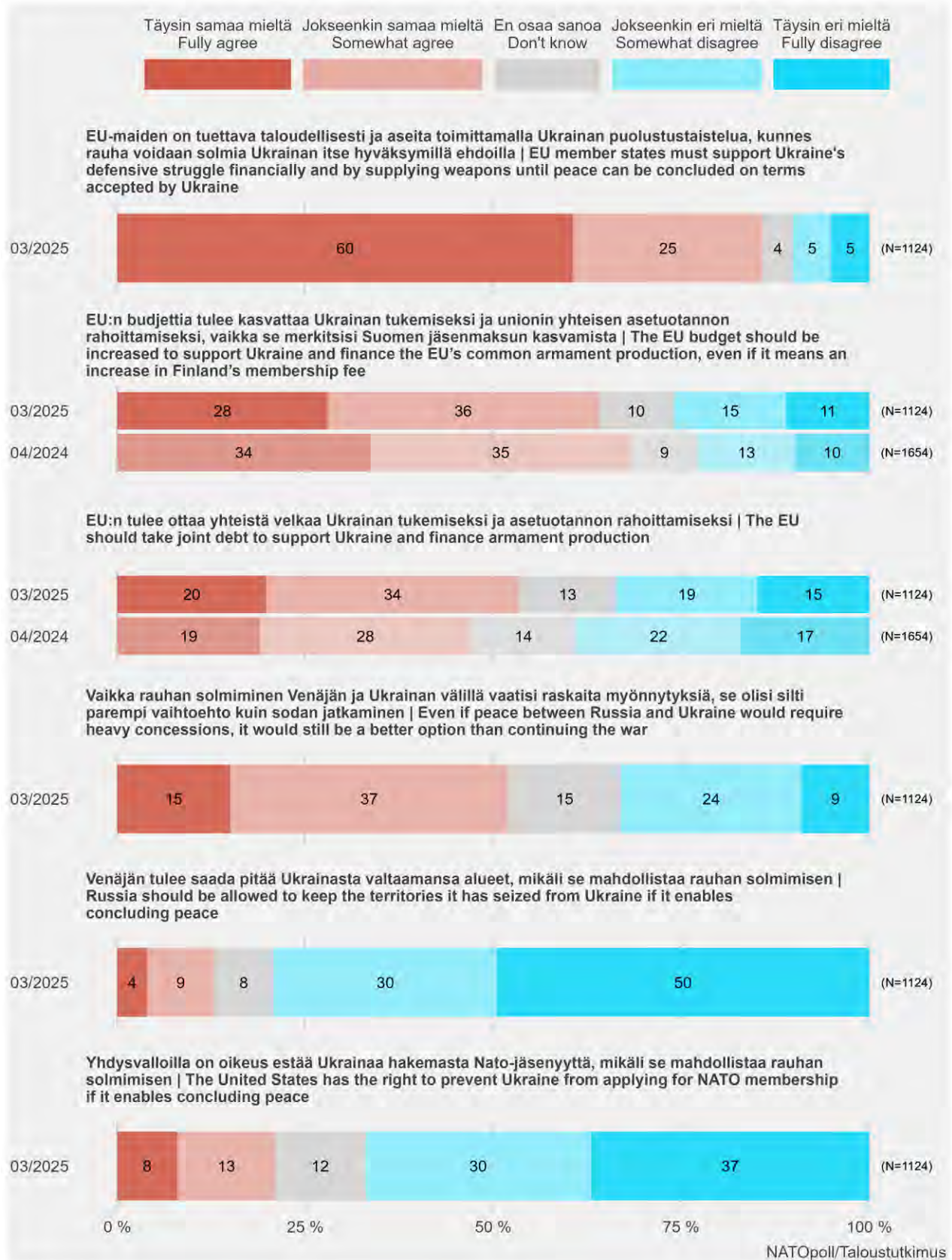
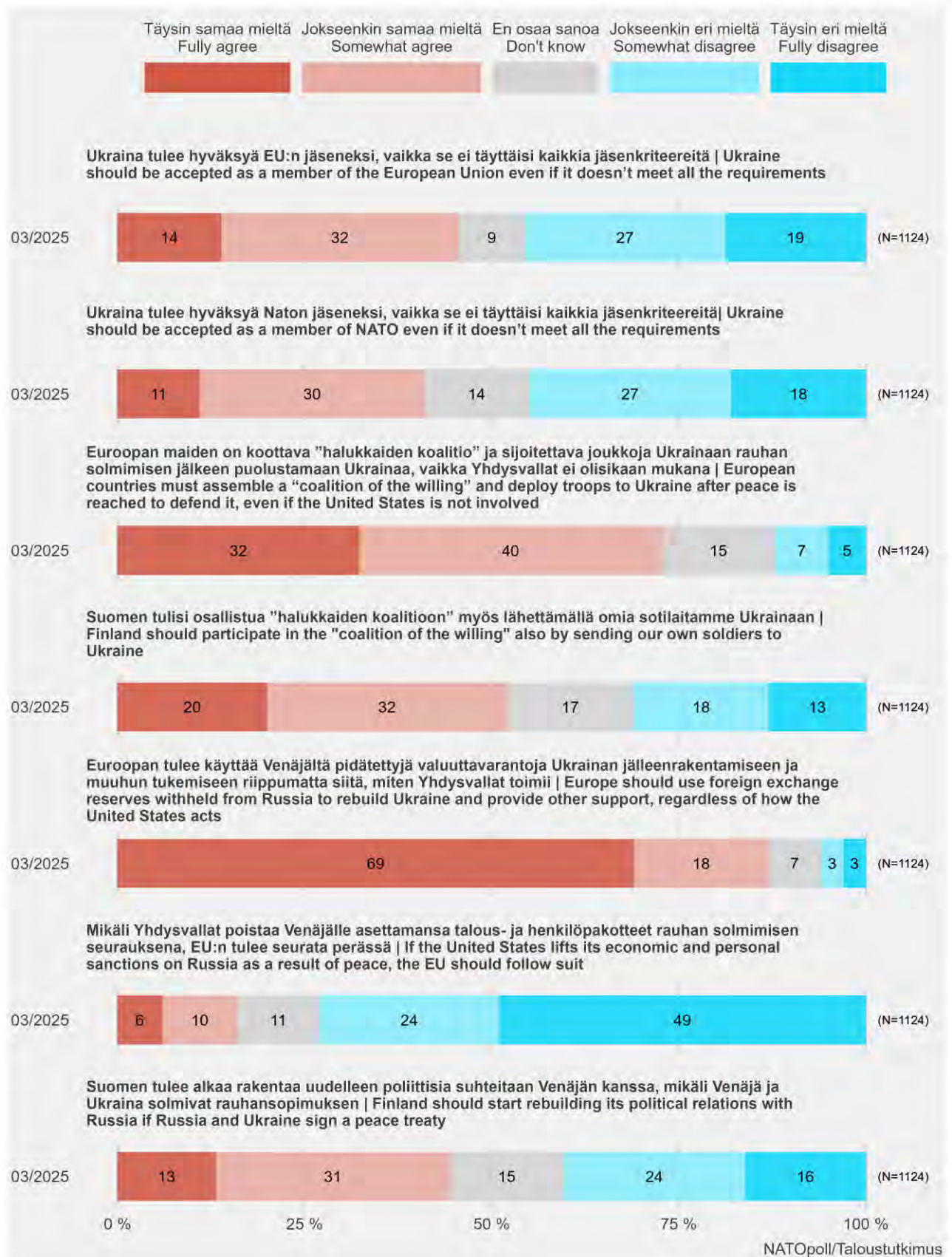


Figure 3b. Support for Ukraine, advancing the peace process, and enhancing reconstruction (%).



Readiness to strengthen European and national defense

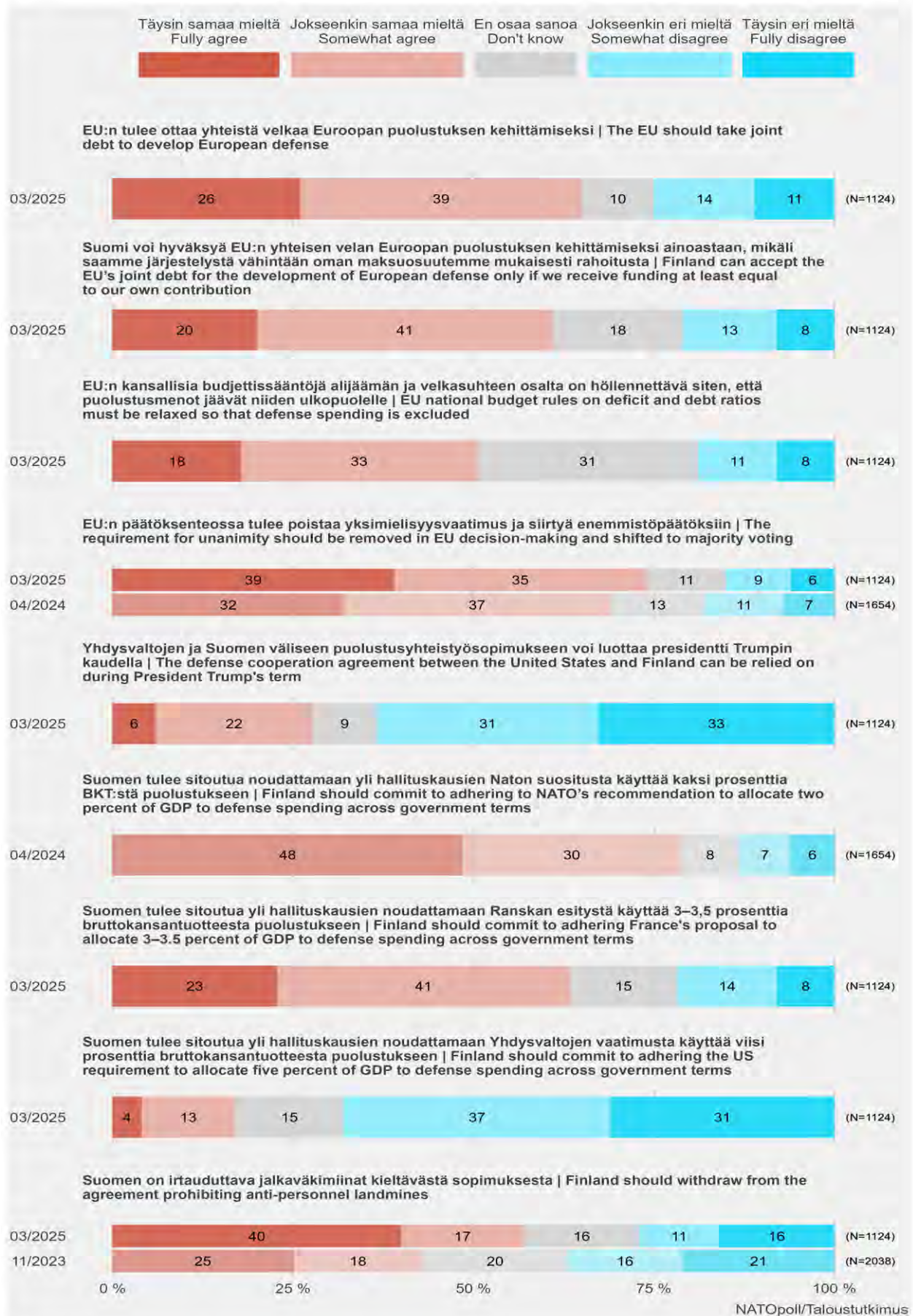
Figure 4 examines views on measures to strengthen European and national defense. Two-thirds (65%) approve of joint borrowing to develop European defense, an even more positive attitude than in the case of support for Ukraine and arms production (54%; see figure 3a). Background data reveals that even among National Coalition Party voters, who have traditionally been highly reserved towards incurring common debt, support for such borrowing for defense purposes is above average (75%), and nearly half (42%) of Finns Party voters are also in favor of it. On the other hand, many (61%) want to ensure that Finland receives at least its proportional share of the funding under such an arrangement.

Likewise, a majority of citizens (51%) support excluding defense spending from the EU's national budgetary rules regarding deficits and debt ratios. According to the EU's founding treaties, decisions on the EU's foreign, security, and defense policy require unanimity among member states. In spring of 2022, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's war of aggression, the major member states France, Germany, and Italy raised the need to revise the treaties to allow for qualified majority voting (Yle 2022). Under such a system, a proposal would need the support of 55 percent of member states representing at least 65 percent of the EU's population. At the time, Finland opposed the proposal along with twelve other small member states.

However, four-fifths (74%) of Finnish citizens now support a shift to qualified majority voting, and the share has increased since last year (+5 percentage points). Although the question was not explicitly linked to security policy, it can be assumed that internal tensions over decisions about Ukraine aid packages and other support measures have made the rigidity of the EU's decision-making structures apparent to citizens. Regarding national security, trust in the bilateral Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA) concluded with the United States during the Trump administration is strikingly low (28%). Finns appear to have internalized, for example, researcher Keir Giles's (2024) pessimism about the practical significance of bilateral defense agreements for European security. This mistrust is also reflected in the readiness to increase national defense spending. Whereas in spring 2023, 78 percent of people were willing to commit across electoral terms to NATO's recommendation of spending two percent of GDP on defense, now 64 percent are prepared to raise the share to 3–3.5 percent, as proposed by French President Macron. Notably, this data was collected prior to the Finnish government's decision in early April to propose increasing defense spending to three percent by 2029.

Research shows that voters often adjust their positions in line with the decisions of the party they support, something also observed in Finland (Nemčok et al. 2024, 2025). The already high levels of support, especially among National Coalition Party (84%) and Finns Party (77%) voters, can therefore be expected to increase even further. By contrast, the five percent level proposed by President Trump already during his election campaign is considered too high by a clear majority of citizens (68%). The government's decision to begin preparations to withdraw from the Ottawa Treaty banning anti-personnel landmines now has clear majority support (57%). At the end of 2023, fewer than half of people (41%) supported this view. Landmines are a clear example of the shift in Finland's security policy climate, as only a few years ago a decision to withdraw from the Ottawa Treaty would have been politically difficult to implement (Vastapuu et al. 2024, p. 4447). However, the issue strongly divides citizens along the left-right ideological spectrum.

Kuvio 4. Perceptions on strengthening European and national defense capabilities (%).



Support is lowest among Left Alliance (22%) and Green League (31%) voters, whereas Finns Party supporters are almost unanimously (92%) in favor of withdrawal. There is also a notable gender difference: 74 percent of men support withdrawal compared to 40 percent of women. The gendered attitudes toward anti-personnel landmines interestingly reflect the gendered nature of security perceptions in Finnish society as a whole. Anti-personnel landmines have been seen as linked to a masculine and technostrategic conception of war (Enloe 2000; Vastapuu et al. 2024, pp. 41–42).

Attitudes towards nuclear weapons policies

Figure 5 illustrates the change in Finnish attitudes toward nuclear weapons policy following NATO membership. NATO members are not obligated to participate in the Alliance's nuclear weapons activities. Instead, the degree and scope of participation are determined by each state individually. Members may, for example, take part in decision-making on NATO's nuclear weapons policy, participate in nuclear exercises and planning, offer their air force capabilities as delivery platforms for nuclear weapons, and provide bases for the deployment of nuclear weapons (Alberque 2022). Finland's current Nuclear Energy Act prohibits the import, possession, and detonation of nuclear weapons on Finnish territory, thus restricting potential NATO-related nuclear operations within Finland or its airspace (Juntunen et al. 2024). Consequently, Finland now faces the question of whether to amend or retain the current nuclear-related provisions as part of a comprehensive reform of the Nuclear Energy Act (Demokraatti 2024).

Political decisions related to nuclear weapons have, because of NATO membership, become part of the national political discourse (Juntunen and Rosengren 2024). The government's foreign and security policy report's formulations concerning nuclear weapons have sparked controversy in parliament. When it became known that Finland would participate in NATO's annual Steadfast Noon nuclear exercise, the Left Alliance demanded a value-based debate in parliament. The ethical questions associated with nuclear weapons have remained largely unchanged for decades. Deterrence credibility against another nuclear power requires at least a perceived possibility of nuclear weapons use. At the same time, the threat of using such weapons raises unresolved ethical and moral questions (Nye 2023; Quinlan 1997). What remains to be assessed is whether the measures taken are sufficient for preventing war and whether they align with national values.

Traditionally, ethical stances on nuclear weapons fall into three basic categories: a) the use of nuclear weapons is wrong, and their mere existence is wrong, b) the use of nuclear weapons may be justified, and therefore their existence for deterrent purposes is justified, and c) the use of nuclear weapons is wrong, but their existence for deterrent purposes is justified (Quinlan 1987). Nuclear weapons policy will therefore likely remain, like other value-laden issues, a divisive factor in Finland's political landscape. On the other hand, recent findings from the United States and India show remarkably high levels of acceptance of potential nuclear weapons use by both national governments and their allies (Schwartz 2024).

As a result of the policies pursued by the Trump administration, concerns have grown about the U.S. commitment to Europe's defense and the credibility of NATO's security guarantees, prompting renewed discussions about strengthening Europe's nuclear deterrence capacity. Germany's future chancellor, Friedrich Merz, initiated a debate in early 2024 about enhancing the United Kingdom's and France's nuclear deterrents as more credible protection for Europe (The New York Times 2025).

At the same time, a parallel debate emerged in the Nordic countries regarding a Nordic nuclear deterrent, which would draw upon the expertise developed during Sweden's Cold War-era nuclear weapons program (Kibsgaard 2025; Yle 2025c). According to this view, while a European option would have limited capabilities and might face similar credibility issues as the U.S. deterrent, the cultural and geographical proximity of the Nordic countries could make a shared nuclear umbrella a more sustainable alternative.

Among respondents, three basic orientations toward nuclear deterrence can be identified. They can be typified as support for allied-based nuclear deterrence, endorsement of the idea of adopting a nuclear deterrent, and opposition to nuclear deterrence. The largest group supports the practice of NATO's nuclear deterrence by participating in nuclear exercises (52%) and permitting the transit of nuclear weapons through Finnish airspace (46%), and in parallel, favors strengthening a European nuclear deterrent (57%). Approximately one-third is positively inclined towards acquiring a Nordic nuclear weapon (36%) and stationing nuclear weapons on Finnish soil (28%). A similarly sized group, however, opposes participation in NATO's nuclear exercises (35%) and the strengthening of a European nuclear deterrent (30%).

The most significant change has occurred in attitudes toward the deployment of nuclear weapons on Finnish soil. Although only slightly more than a quarter (28%) now support it, this share has doubled compared to the initial assessment point immediately after Finland's NATO membership was ratified in summer 2023. Regarding the transit of nuclear weapons, public opinion has also shifted markedly in a more pro-nuclear direction within less than two years (27% vs. 46%). Attitudes towards nuclear weapons are highly gendered, though. Among men, 62 percent would allow transit and 42 percent deployment, whereas among women the corresponding figures are 32 and 14 percent. Politically, attitudes towards nuclear deterrence divide the right, which is more supportive, from the left, which is more critical, but there is more variation between conservatives and liberals than along strict party lines.

The results reflect a current climate in which a majority of people still view NATO membership as a central solution to the deteriorating security environment. At the same time, there is increasing uncertainty about the United States' commitment to Article Five and thus about the credibility of NATO's deterrent. In this context, even a significant shift in Finland's security policy, such as the proposal to develop a Nordic nuclear weapon, may find some level of acceptance. At the same time, as in other NATO countries, part of Finland's population is unlikely to accept a security policy based on nuclear deterrence due to ethical concerns.

Figure 5. Attitudes towards nuclear weapons policies (%).

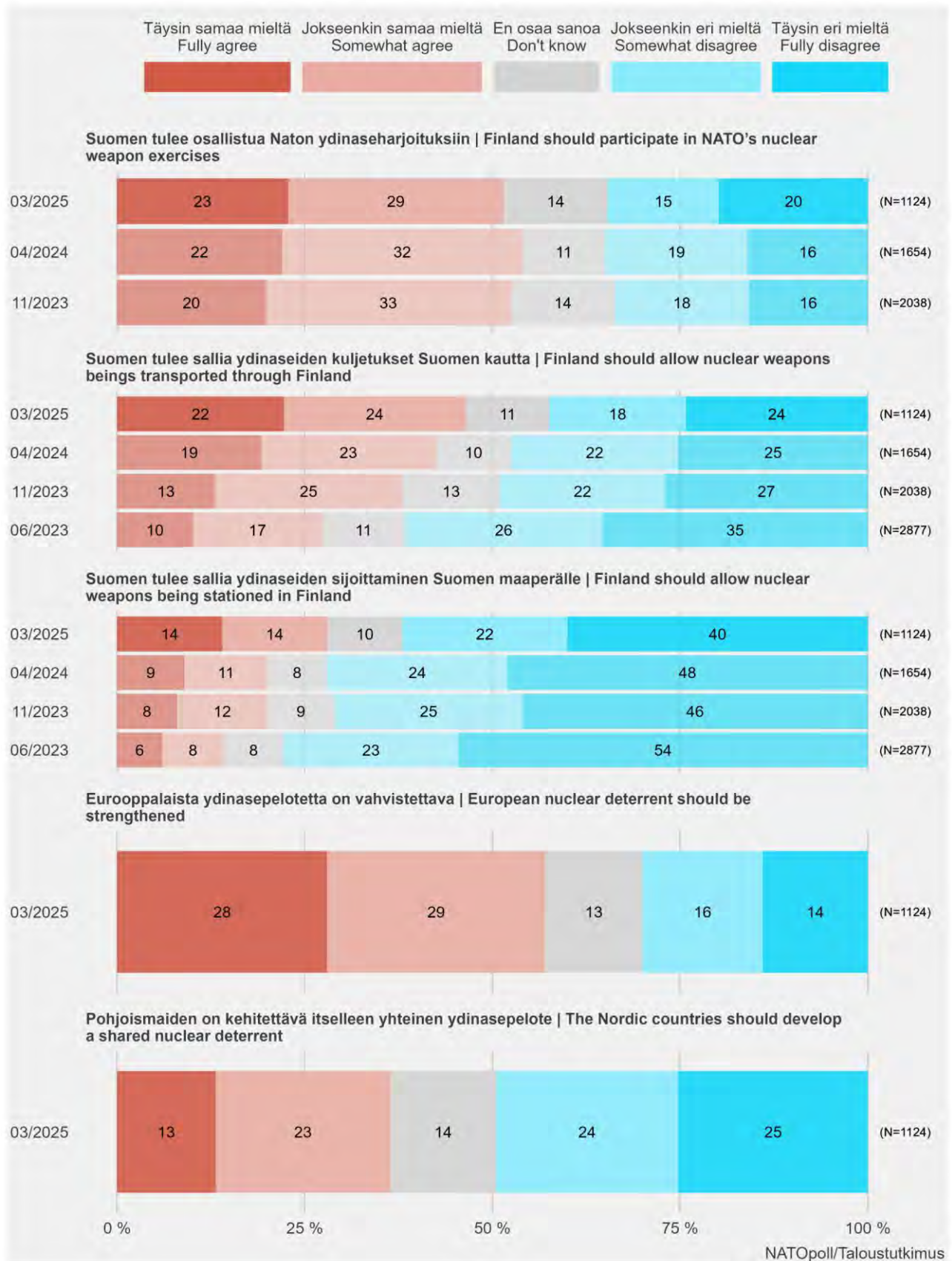


Figure 6 indicates citizens' expectations regarding foreign and security policy leadership. The issue of leadership has gained salience following Finland's NATO membership. Finland employs a model of foreign and security policy leadership that is atypical in the European context: the president leads foreign policy in cooperation with the government. This practice has once again raised questions about the division of labor between the president and the prime minister in foreign policy matters.

In international comparisons, presidential popularity and limited powers are generally correlated (Kujanen 2024), but Finland is characterized by highly popular presidents, with a significant portion of citizens wanting to see the president's powers strengthened (Haavisto 2023). The practice initiated at the end of President Sauli Niinistö's term, whereby the president represents Finland at NATO summits, has continued under President Alexander Stubb. During Stubb's term, the president has appeared at numerous official and informal events alongside the Nordic prime ministers, which has sparked public discussion about the interpretation of the Finnish Constitution concerning foreign policy leadership.

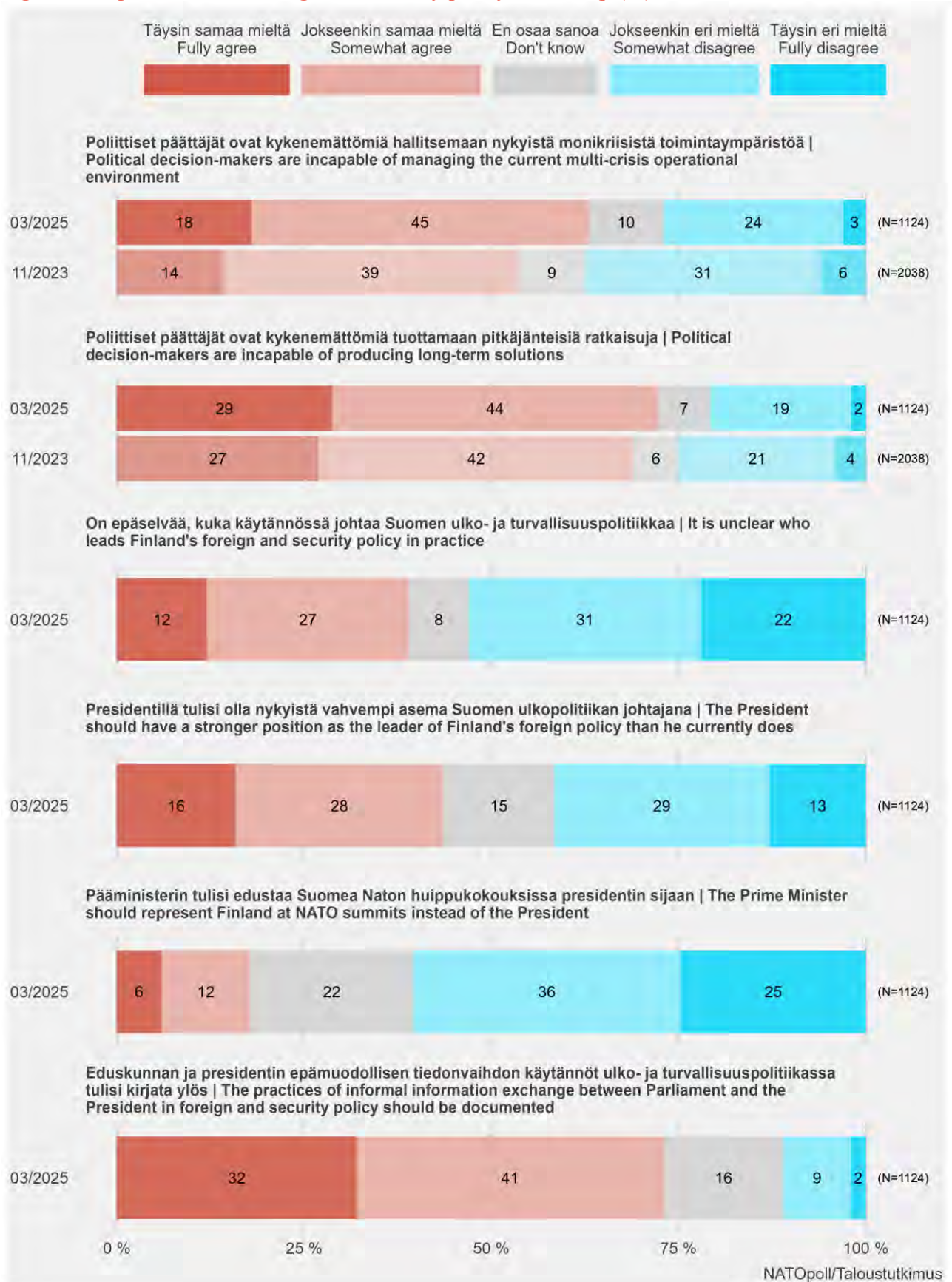
Finland's NATO membership has also highlighted the issue of communication between the president and parliament in a context where parliament's right to information is not codified in Finnish legislation. President Stubb has proposed that the informal communication practices between the president and parliament be formally recorded so that they become a stable part of the flow of information, independent of the individuals currently holding office.

The task of providing foreign and security policy leadership is especially demanding in a rapidly developing operational environment. Citizens' trust in politicians' ability to manage the current multi-crisis environment is remarkably low (27%) and has clearly decreased since the end of 2023 (–10 percentage points). Likewise, only one-fifth of people think that politicians are capable of making good long-term decisions. A notable proportion of citizens (39%) also perceive Finland's foreign and security policy leadership structure as unclear.

By contrast, the idea of strengthening presidential leadership divides Finns roughly in half: 44% would like to strengthen the president's role, while 42% are of the opposite view. The division along party lines largely reflects historical cleavages: those on the political right have traditionally supported strong executive power, while those on the left have emphasized the role of parliament. On the other hand, a president elected through direct popular vote aligns well with the right-wing populist ideal of a strong leader who is willing to bend the rules when necessary (Wass and Tiihonen 2023). Support for strengthening the presidency is highest among supporters of the National Coalition Party (61%), the Finns Party (53%), and the Centre Party (48%) and lowest among Left Alliance supporters (23%).

President Stubb's campaign emphasis on being a "NATO President" as opposed to an "EU Prime Minister" appears to resonate widely with public sentiment (61%). There is also broad support (73%) for formally codifying information-sharing practices between parliament and the president, at least as socially binding norms.

Figure 6. Expectations for foreign and security policy leadership (%).



Figures 7a–7d present, in order of importance, the weight that citizens assign to various foreign policy tasks. The tasks are derived from Finland’s foreign and security policy report. The broad task field includes traditional “hard” security themes, such as the fight against terrorism and international crime, as well as “soft security” sectors, such as combating climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution, as well as promoting development cooperation (see, e.g., Scheffran et al. 2012) and roles related to the international community. The differences in emphasis reflect previous findings (Amadae et al. 2023; Wass et al. 2023) on the diversity of Finnish security needs: a wide array of very different tasks is regarded as extremely important. Citizens’ valuations show a clear division between hard and soft security issues and between “Western” and global priorities. For instance, 80 percent regard securing critical supply chains as extremely important, while 71 percent say the same about countering cyberattacks and disinformation. In contrast, combating biodiversity loss (50%) and climate change (45%), as well as arms control and disarmament (33%), are seen as less important.

Cooperation with other Nordic countries is extremely important to 80 percent of Finns, while providing humanitarian aid in disaster zones (40%) and promoting a solution to the Israel–Palestine conflict (32%) are considered significantly less central. The lowest levels of importance are assigned to development cooperation and cooperation with the BRICS countries and other emerging economies. Only 52 percent of people consider development cooperation to be very or somewhat important. Among Finns Party supporters, the proportion is as low as 12 percent, while among Green League supporters it is as high as 93 percent, clearly reflecting the value-based divisions within Finnish society (Kestilä-Kekkonen et al. 2024).

Overall, the findings support the interpretation of prior studies that the Finnish attitude climate has become increasingly militarized (Kotilainen and Vastapuu 2024; Vastapuu et al. 2024). Military values, armed security, and realist thinking have moved to the center of foreign policy, while previously central values like human rights, the rule of law, and idealism have been pushed aside (Hast and Kotilainen 2022; Hast and Kotilainen 2024). Background data also reveals generational differences: older respondents emphasize preparedness, while younger ones support an active and broadly defined foreign policy.

Figure 7a. Expectations for the foci of Finland's foreign and security policy (%).

Miten tärkeänä pidät sitä, että Suomi keskittyy ulko- ja turvallisuuspolitiikassaan seuraaviin tehtäviin?
How important do you think it is that Finland focuses on the following tasks in its foreign and security policy?

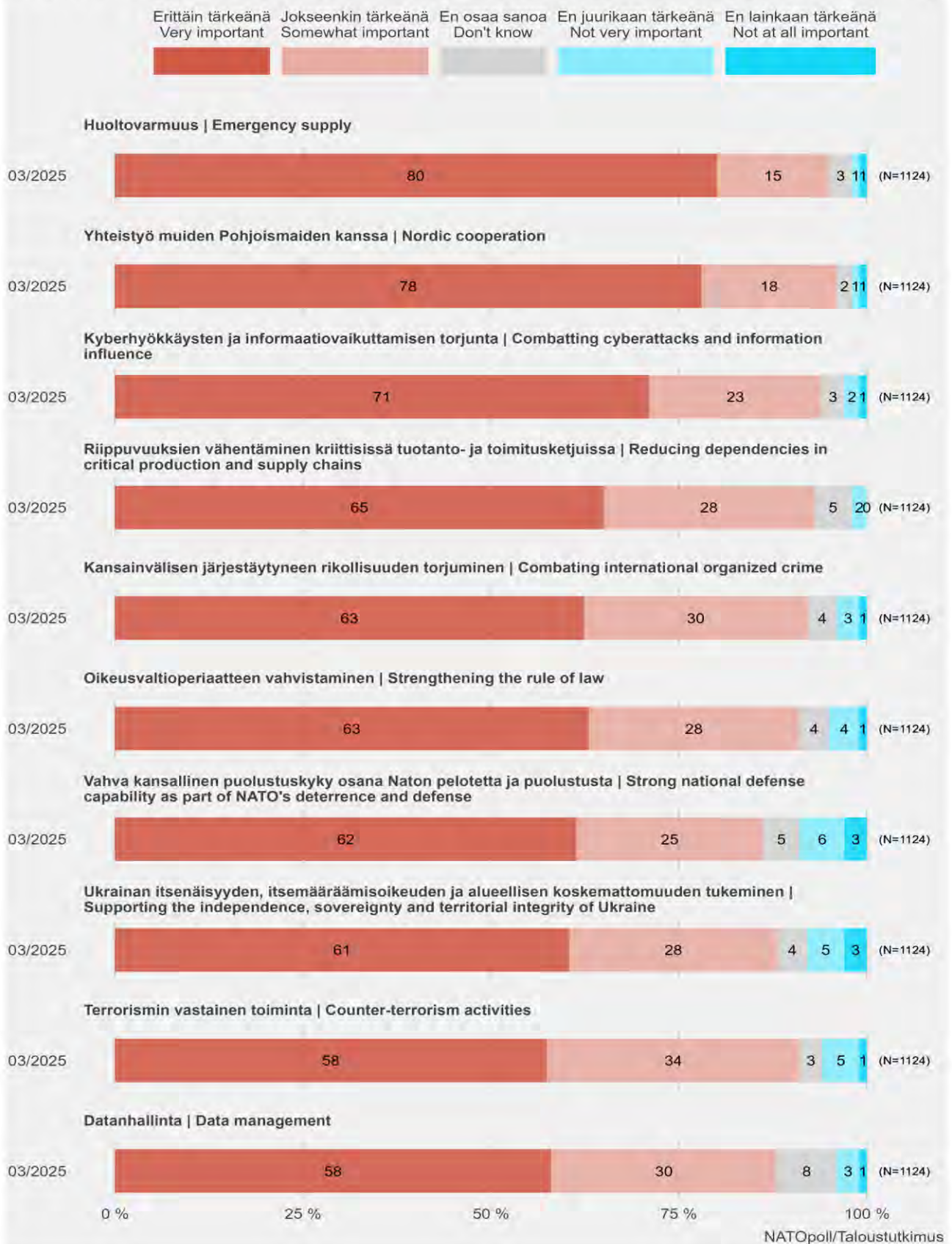


Figure 7b. Expectations for the foci of Finland's foreign and security policy (%).

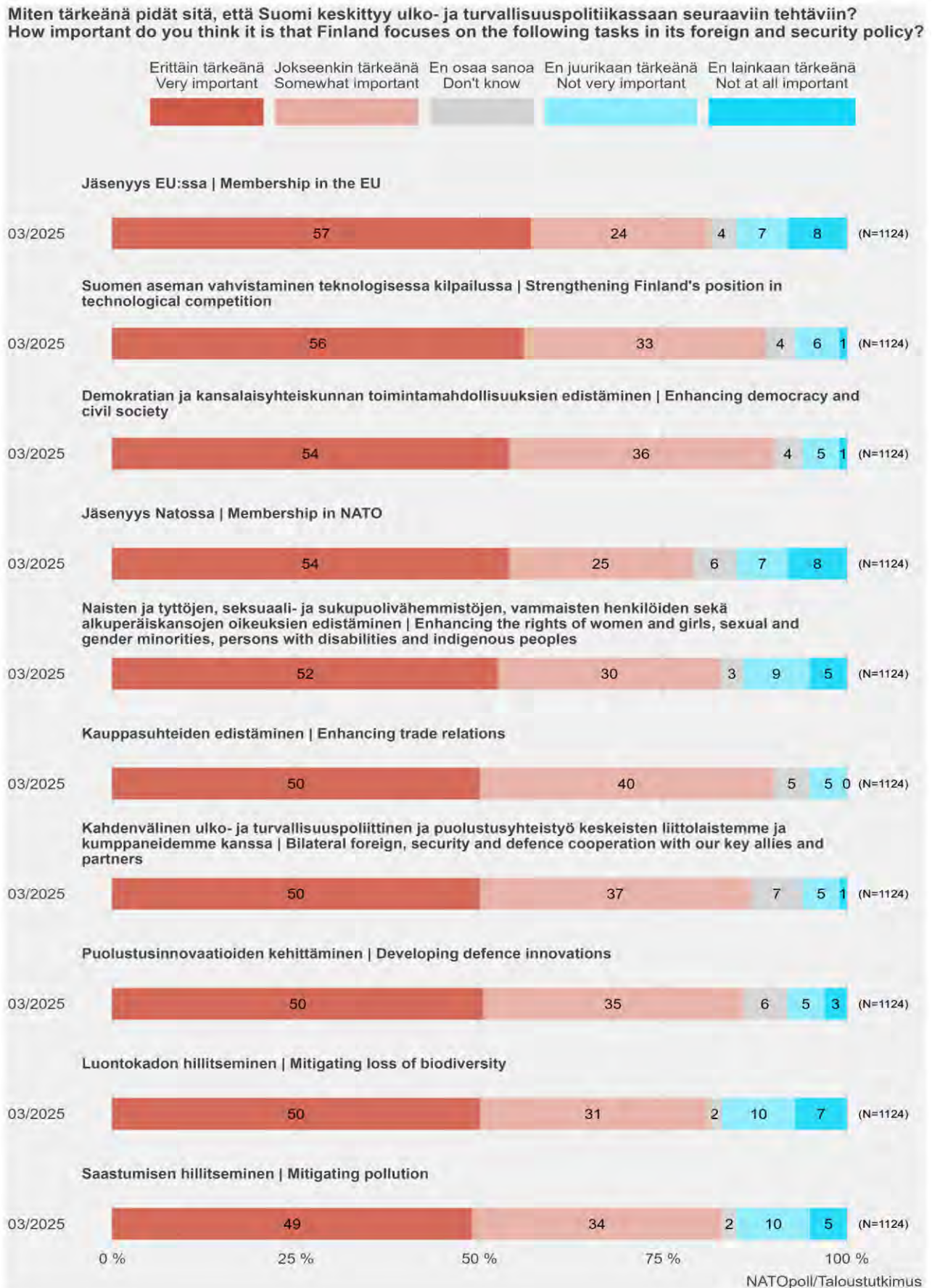


Figure 7c. Expectations for the foci of Finland's foreign and security policy (%).

Miten tärkeänä pidät sitä, että Suomi keskittyy ulko- ja turvallisuuspolitiikassaan seuraaviin tehtäviin?
How important do you think it is that Finland focuses on the following tasks in its foreign and security policy?

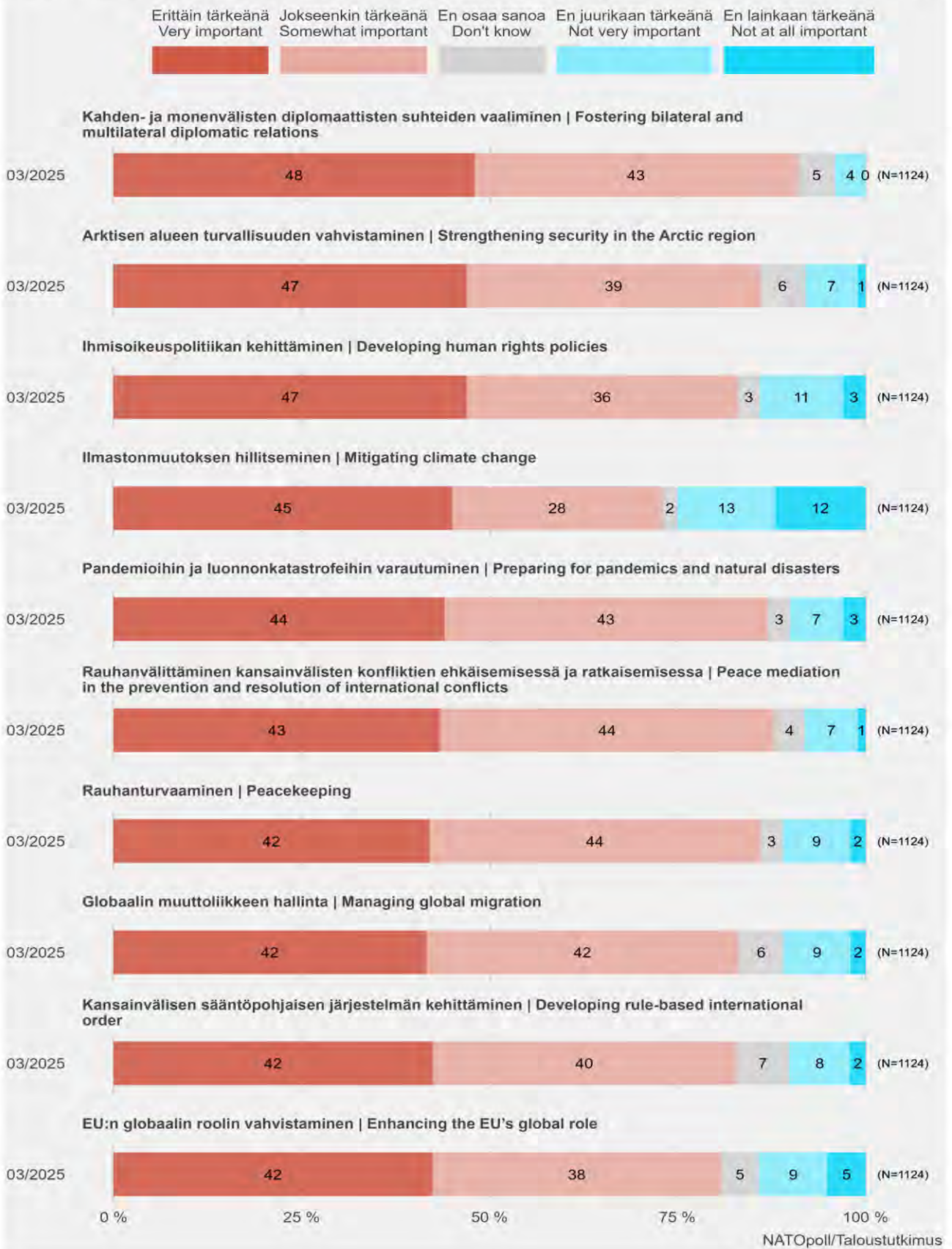
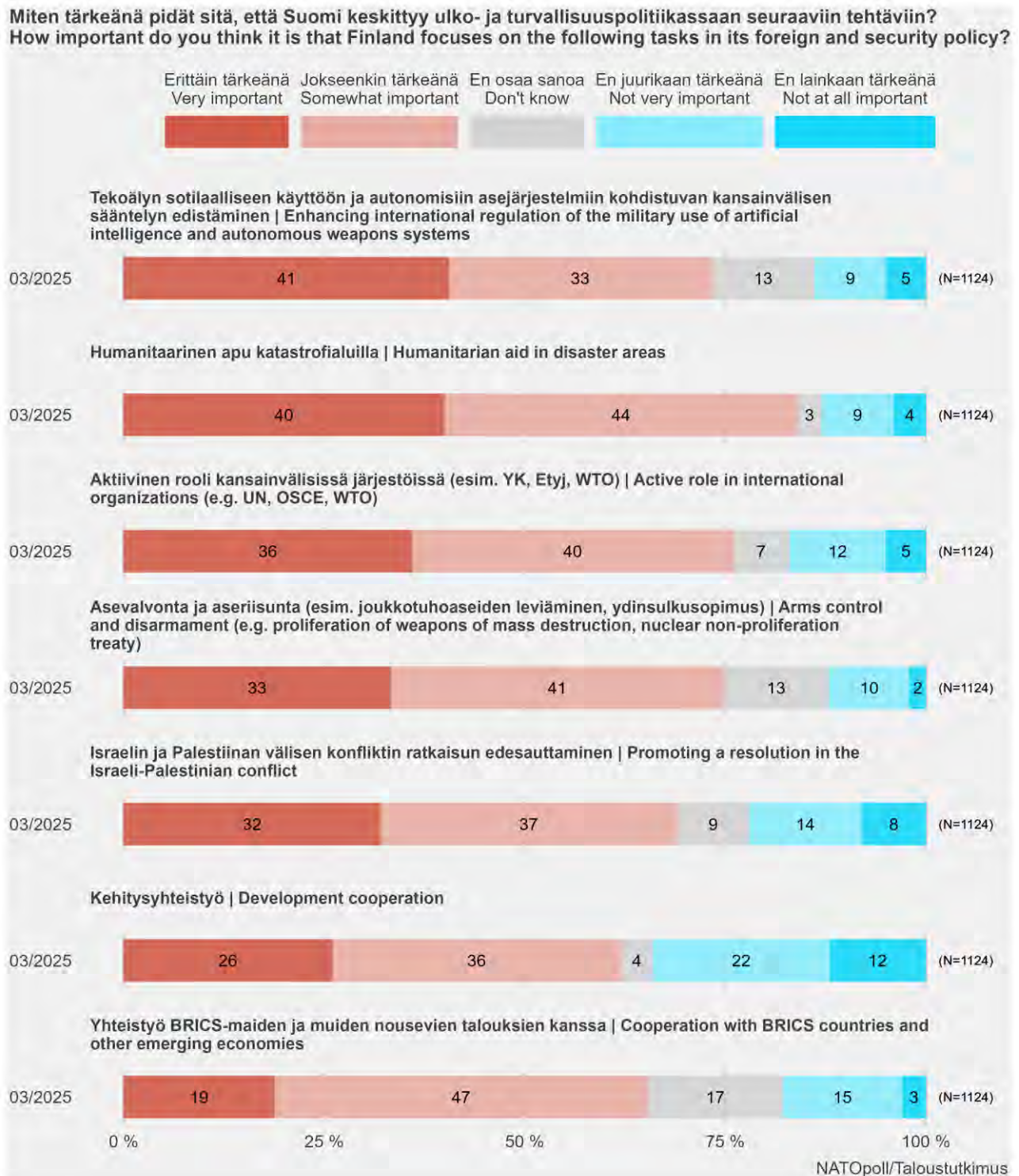


Figure 7d. Expectations for the foci of Finland's foreign and security policy (%).



One particularly interesting dimension in the results concerns the importance of the Arctic region (figure 7c). The strategic role of the Arctic has grown due to climate change, the exploitation of natural resources, and great power politics. The melting of polar ice is opening new maritime routes and facilitating access to energy and mineral resources, which in turn is attracting non-Arctic states to the region. China has defined itself as a “near-Arctic state” and has incorporated the Arctic into its national security strategy (Kopra et al. 2023). It has increased its infrastructure investments and

scientific activities in the region, aiming to establish a long-term foothold with a future military presence also in mind.

Simultaneously, Russia has reinforced its armed presence, developed its infrastructure, and intensified military exercises, especially along the Northern Sea Route (Panschin 2023). The United States has also shown growing interest in the area. Donald Trump's repeated remarks about acquiring Greenland and negotiations concerning the purchase of Finnish icebreakers reflect efforts to strengthen its logistical and strategic presence in the Arctic environment.

For Finland, interest in the Arctic entails increasing international attention and opportunities to influence the region's future as an Arctic expert and a technological actor. Finnish public opinion underscores the significance of the Arctic: 80 percent regard security of supply as extremely important, while 47 percent consider strengthening Arctic security a priority and 45 percent emphasize the importance of combating climate change. The Arctic region is thus emerging as a nexus where security, climate, and economic policies increasingly intersect. Finland's role as both an actor and a promoter of regional stability is also becoming more pronounced in the area.

Attachment to value-based realism

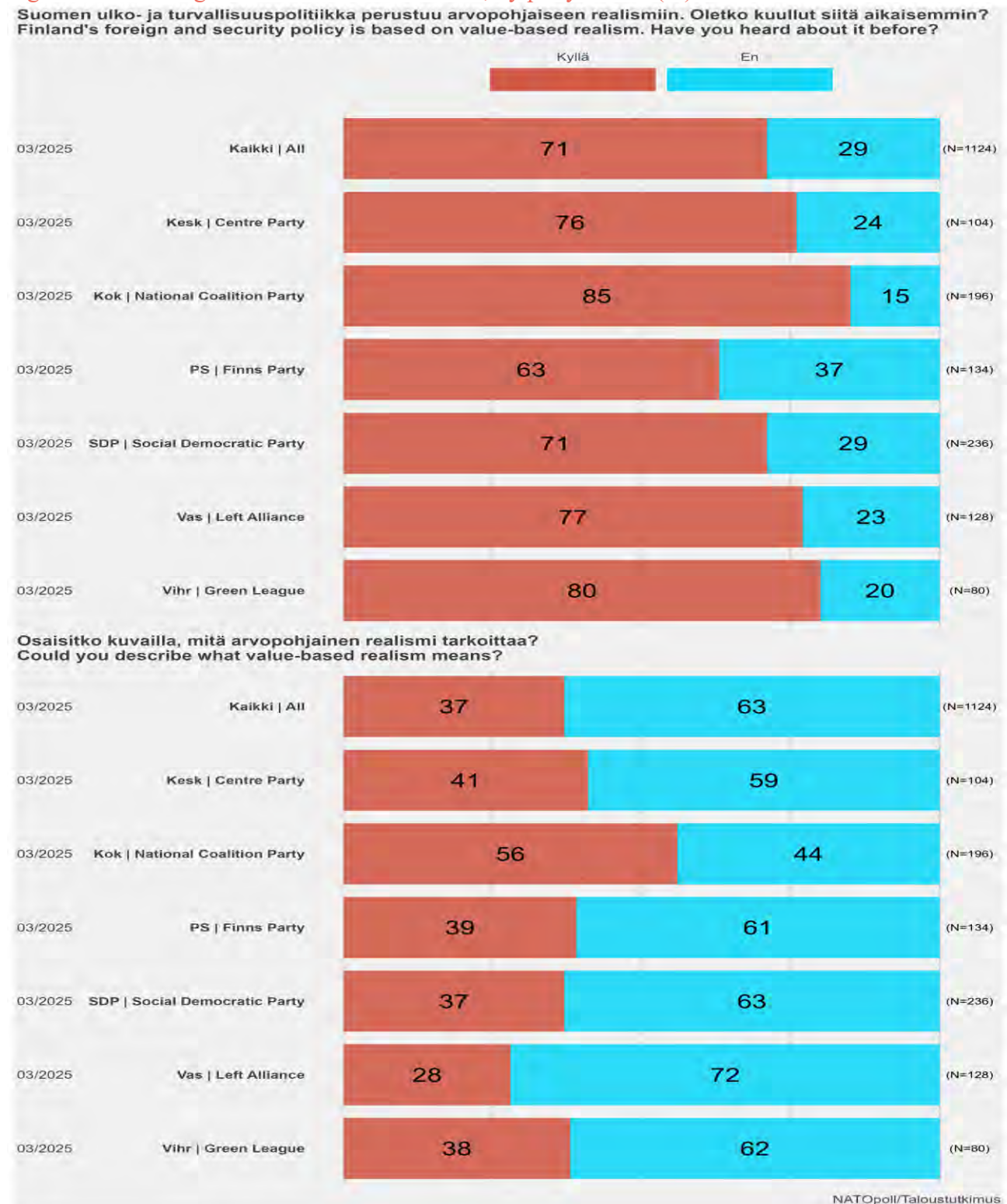
Under President Stubb's tenure, the concept of value-based realism has emerged as the guiding principle of Finland's foreign and security policy. The term, frequently used by President Stubb himself, refers to Finland's commitment to promoting values central to the country while simultaneously maintaining interactions with actors that represent differing value systems. Value-based realism has been enshrined in the Government Report on Foreign and Security Policy (Valtioneuvosto 2024), thus serving as the official foundation of Finland's foreign policy.

In Stubb's own definition, value-based realism rests on three pillars: Euro-Atlanticism, support for Ukraine, and Finland's global influence (Helsingin Sanomat 2024a). Euro-Atlanticism refers to Finland's EU and NATO membership, which provide both a value-based connection and tangible security. Support for Ukraine, in turn, reflects the defense of Western values, and according to Stubb, it is in Finland's national interest that Ukraine wins the war. The third pillar, global influence, emphasizes relations with the Global South and East, including states that do not share Finland's values. As the president has put it, value-based realism gives Finland's foreign policy a framework within which to operate. Individual issues, however, can certainly be subject to debate (Helsingin Sanomat 2024a).

The concept of value-based realism has faced criticism, particularly from the political left, for being both vague and ambiguous on the one hand, and excessively pragmatic on the other, risking a harsh juxtaposition between values and national interests. It has been perceived as reflective of Cold War-era opportunism, where foreign policy rhetoric and practical decisions often existed in separate realities (Helsingin Sanomat 2024b). President Stubb has responded to the critique by emphasizing that value-based realism enhances Finland's foreign and security policy maneuverability in a time of global transformation (Helsingin Sanomat 2024a). The concept is also connected to a broader international discourse on the challenges of realism as a foreign policy doctrine (e.g., Ralph and Gaskarth 2025). From a theoretical standpoint, the concept is tension-filled: in the field of international relations, realism and liberalism represent fundamentally different views on state

behavior. Realism emphasizes power struggles and national interests (power values), while liberalism strives for international law and solidarity (justice values) (see Crawford 2000). Value-based realism attempts to reconcile these perspectives but runs the risk of failing to resonate consistently with either camp (Huttunen 2024). It may also enable policy formulations that contain elements that are difficult to reconcile.

Figure 8. Knowledge about value-based realism, by party choice (%).



In the early stages of President Stubb's term, Finland has already faced several foreign policy situations requiring a balancing act between such values as human rights, democracy, and the rule of law and the imperatives of political realism. Such situations include the parliamentary passage of a border security law deemed incompatible with Finland's international treaty obligations and EU law, the country's relationship with the United States under the rule of President Trump, who is challenging the rules-based international order, and the war between Israel and Hamas, which has demanded a coherent and consistent position from Finland and rendered Finnish arms procurements from Israel politically controversial.

Figure 8 shows citizens' familiarity with the concept of value-based realism. The concept is widely known (71%), but only a little over a third (37%) say they could explain its content. Reflecting the political background of President Stubb, familiarity with the concept is highest among voters for the National Coalition Party. In figure 9, value-based realism is approached through the lens of concrete policy choices. Respondents were randomly divided into three groups. The first group was only told that Finland's foreign and security policy is based on value-based realism. The second group also received a definition of "value-based": "adhering to important and central values, such as democracy, the rule of law, international law and human rights, peace, equality, and non-discrimination." The third group, in turn, was given the meaning of "realism": "Finland is ready for dialogue even with countries that do not share our views and values." Respondents were then asked to evaluate Finland's preferred course of action in twelve hypothetical situations using a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 indicated compromising on values to solve problems and achieve other goals and 10 signified full commitment to value adherence.

The key finding is that citizens tend to strike a balance between values and realism. They are more willing to compromise on values when it comes to ensuring national security, particularly in relation to securing U.S. support, conducting arms deals with authoritarian states, and restricting asylum rights in response to threats posed by Russia. However, there are clear boundaries: commitment to Nordic cooperation manifests as strong solidarity with Denmark in a scenario where the U.S. continues pressuring Denmark to cede Greenland and demands that Finland take sides. In trade policy, value orientation outweighs security concerns, and it is notable that expanding cooperation with the U.S. is ranked by citizens on par with expanding cooperation with China and Russia. When it comes to the Middle East conflict, Palestinian statehood, and strengthening unofficial diplomatic and trade relations with Taiwan, the Finnish public prefers value-based decisions over interest-based calculations. The provided framings did not differ statistically significantly between groups, although notably the realism frame increased people's commitment to values when applied to the cases of arms procurement and asylum restrictions. Overall, respondents favored moderate positions, suggesting that the internal flexibility of value-based realism aligns well with public expectations for Finland's foreign and security policy doctrine.

Figure 9a. Value-based realism in various policy choices, by group means.

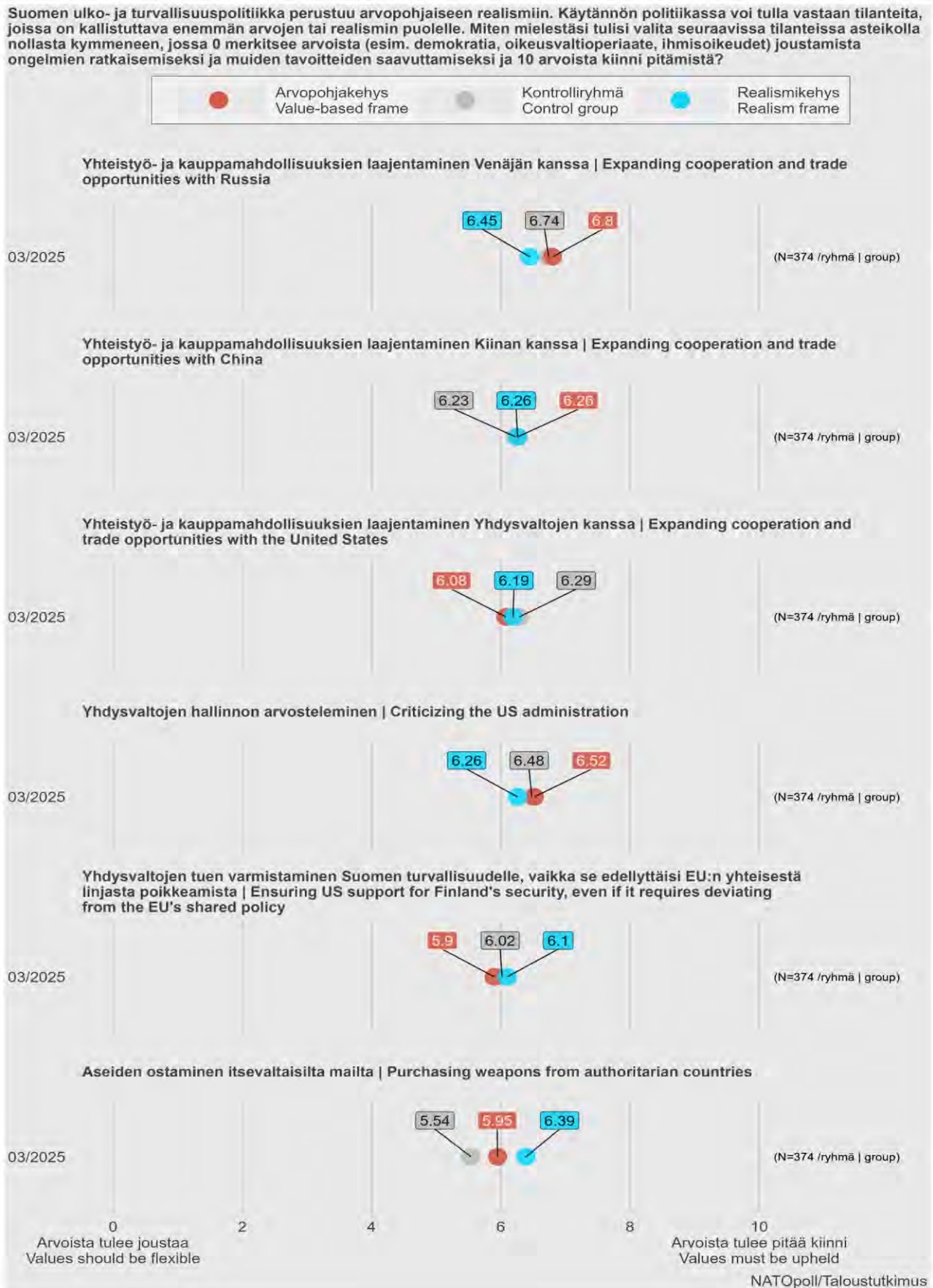
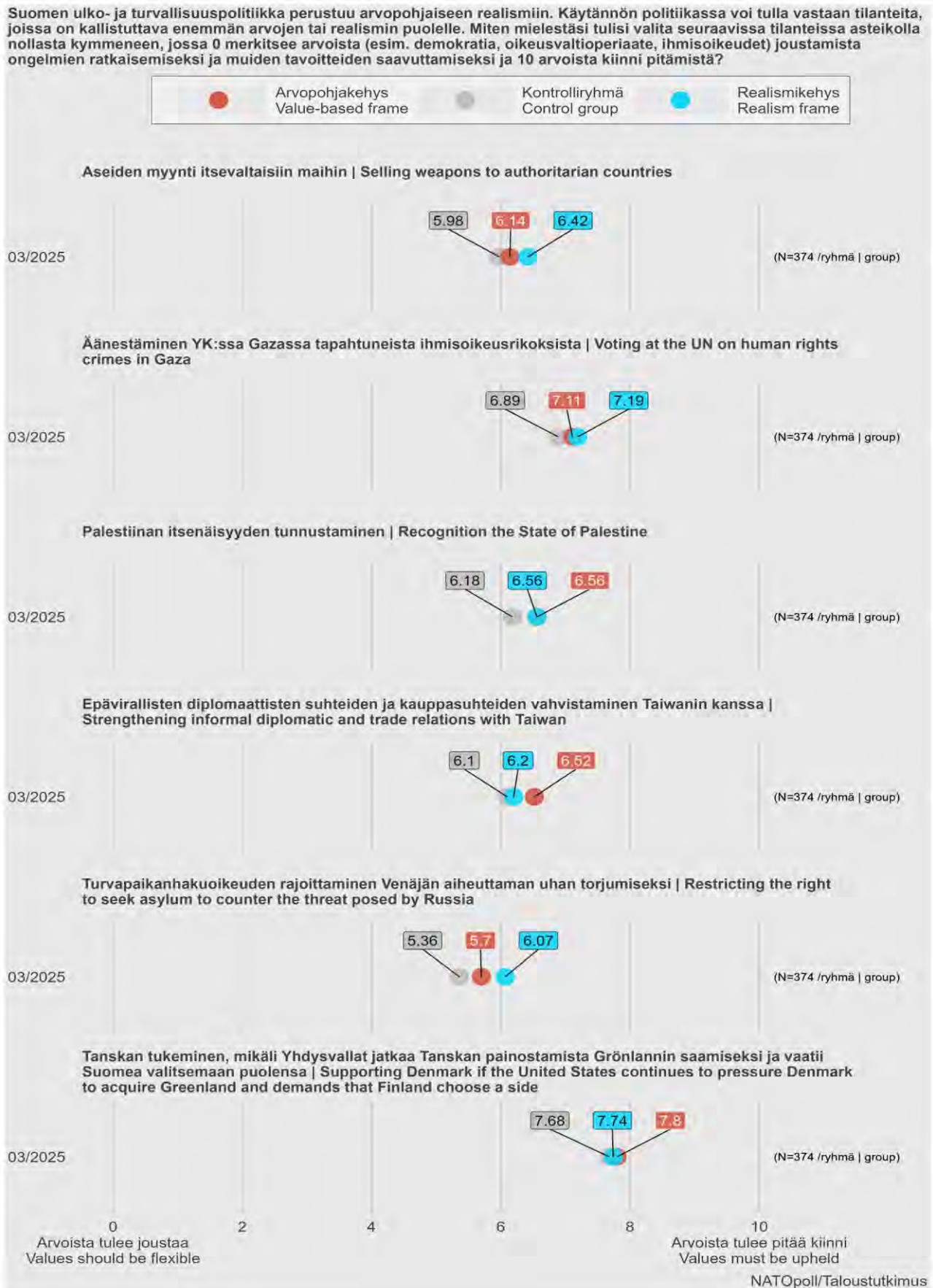


Figure 9b. Value-based realism in various policy choices, by group means.



Conclusions

The first half of 2025 has marked a period of intense reconfiguration in the structures and balances of power in global politics. The unpredictability of the current U.S. administration and President Trump's unprecedented foreign policy initiatives, China's growing economic clout and assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific region, and Russia's ongoing aggression in Ukraine have all contributed to a tightening of the global security environment. The current situation is characterized by a constant state of flux, reactivity, and the need for preparedness. Europe is seeking to assume a stronger role in the defense of its own continent and to find ways to expand the joint financial base of its defense industry. Member states are increasing their defense budgets and exploring ways to increase expenditures without putting security spending and citizens' well-being in direct opposition to one another.

For a small but capable NATO frontline state like Finland, the changing global political landscape and the re-evaluation of Alliance relationships create numerous pressures. Finland's foreign, security, and defense policy is built upon three pillars: the first is its national defense capability, the second is its membership in NATO and the European Union, and the third is its deepening bilateral and multilateral partnerships with key allies. The United States has been a central ally for Finland, especially since joining NATO, but the Trump administration has introduced a degree of uncertainty into this relationship. In its EU policy, Finland has traditionally sought a constructive and active role, as reflected in its close involvement in the coalition of the willing formed to support Ukraine.

Rapidly developing foreign policy situations and new negotiation arenas once again highlight the question of the division of responsibilities between the president and the prime minister in leading foreign and security policy and underscore the need for close communication with parliament. Finns are closely following global political developments, and their accelerating pace raises diverse security needs. Due to increasingly complex interdependencies, global developments broadly affect national, regional, and local levels, and thereby the everyday lives of individuals. Changing circumstances may require policymakers to re-evaluate prior decisions, leading voters to re-assess and potentially revise their own views. A dynamic relationship exists between global events, national decision-making, public discourse, and public opinion. Regular monitoring of voters' perspectives is especially vital under the current, continuously shifting conditions to ensure a democratically sustainable foreign policy.

The findings of our report reveal a clear shift in Finnish attitudes toward security and defense policy during the two years following Finland's accession to NATO. In the current geopolitical context, Finns continue to perceive NATO membership broadly (80%) as strengthening Finland's security. Although support for NATO remains on average remarkably high, it has declined significantly compared to spring 2024 levels among groups that were already initially more reserved about membership. This shift is most evident among Green League (-13 percentage points) and Left Alliance (-12 percentage points) voters. Thus, following an initial national consensus, attitudes towards military alignment are gradually becoming a more divisive issue within Finnish society. Intensifying domestic political polarization in the United States and the growing prominence of voices supporting foreign policy isolationism, and in some cases alignment with Russia, have weakened Finns' trust in the credibility of security guarantees and other commitments made by the United States. This tension, when contrasted with the broad support for NATO, reflects a deepened strategic

awareness among Finns: NATO membership is valued as a security provider, but it is not seen as a comprehensive solution. This divergence highlights a sharpening of the nation's security consciousness and a broader shift toward a multi-layered security architecture in which national and European agencies play an increasingly significant role.

Finns strongly support strengthening defense capabilities both nationally and at the European level. A majority of people favor joint EU borrowing to fund defense development (65%) and support exempting defense investments from current budgetary constraints (51%). These figures signal a willingness to assume financial responsibility for collective defense. There is also visible support for a more autonomous European security architecture, not as a replacement for NATO but as a complement to it. In the view of many Finns, European countries that are investing in their defense capabilities could take on a greater role within the Alliance, which has thus far been largely predicated on the United States' capacity and willingness to militarily defend Europe. The Finnish government's proposals from March to enhance national defense capabilities enjoy solid support among voters: nearly two-thirds (64%) would be prepared to raise the defense budget to 3–3.5 percent of GDP, and a majority (57%) supports withdrawal from the Ottawa Treaty banning anti-personnel landmines. The perceived necessity of landmines for Finland's national defense has consequently significantly strengthened since November 2023, when the issue was first posed to the same respondents (43%).

Public support for Ukraine remains strong: 85 percent believe that the EU must support Ukraine both economically and militarily until a peace agreement can be reached on terms acceptable to Ukraine. This solidarity stems not only from a moral imperative but also from strategic reasoning. Finland's long-term security is closely tied to Ukraine's ability to resist Russian aggression. Public backing for Ukraine's efforts on the battlefield and in reconstruction reflects broad consensus that a lasting peace must be achieved through justice rather than coerced compromise. Our findings also indicate that, as NATO integration progresses, the discussion around nuclear weapons is becoming gradually more open, although it remains cautious. Finnish law clearly prohibits the import, possession, and detonation of nuclear weapons on Finnish territory, but rising geopolitical tensions and new proposals to strengthen a European deterrent could bring this legal position under renewed public scrutiny.

Although only slightly more than one-quarter (28%) of respondents would approve the deployment of nuclear weapons on Finnish soil, this share has doubled since the summer of 2023, when NATO membership came into force (14%). Similarly, support for allowing nuclear weapons to be transported through Finnish territory has grown significantly in less than two years (27% to 46%). Finns expect greater clarity and competence from their political leaders. Public confidence in current political leaders' ability to produce solutions in today's polycrisis security environment (27%) and to implement long-term policy (21%) is alarmingly low. This finding reflects a call for more consistent, transparent, and strategically grounded decision-making in foreign and security policy.

The idea of a "NATO president" has been broadly embraced (61%), but beyond that, changing the division of powers between the president and the prime minister in foreign policy decision-making continues to divide voters. Finland's current foreign policy balancing act is crystallized in the concept of value-based realism. Our findings show that while a clear majority of citizens (71%) recognize value-based realism as the current foreign and security policy line, only a minority (37%) understand what the concept entails. When weighing practical political choices, Finns remain firmly rooted in the principles of democracy and international law. At the same time, there is widespread agreement

that pragmatic engagement with actors who do not share Finland's values is necessary to safeguard national interests in an increasingly unstable world. In matters such as the arms trade or restricting asylum rights in response to threats from Russia, many lean more toward realist considerations over value-based ones. Voters appear to have internalized the logic and trade-offs of value-based realism as it pertains to the foreign policy of a small state.

In terms of foreign policy priorities, the public wants Finland to invest more decisively in hard security. The role of peace mediation, once central to Finland's national self-image, has clearly declined in public esteem, as has the importance of addressing climate change and biodiversity loss as part of a sustainable foreign and security policy. This marks a strong shift towards the militarization of security thinking, even though younger generations favor a broader foreign policy agenda, including deeper engagement with the Global South, BRICS countries, and economic and innovation cooperation as instruments of security-building. Within an environment of heightened concern for security, support remains for peace and international responsibility, as evidenced by the continued backing of Ukraine and upholding international law. This tension suggests that public understanding of foreign and security policy is not strictly framed as a binary between realism and liberalism, or between "hard" and "soft" security, but instead reflects a re-interpretation of their boundaries.

Finns have traditionally adapted quickly to prevailing foreign and security policy frameworks, showing loyalty to the chosen national line and repositioning themselves effectively in response to changing circumstances. The core message of our report is that a comparable process of strategic adaptation is now underway amid the current turbulence in global affairs. NATO membership is seen by most Finns as essential, but not sufficient, for national security. There is widespread support for strengthening European defense, standing firmly with Ukraine, reassessing nuclear policy, and demanding more competent and coherent political leadership. This reflects a robust understanding of global risks and a growing public appetite for a multi-layered, responsibility-driven security policy that pragmatically integrates values with realism.

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APPENDIX 1. Research data

This report is based on four separate survey datasets designed as part of the research project “*Dynamic Support for Security and Defence Policy (NATOpoll)*,” funded by the Kone Foundation (2023–2026). The first survey was conducted by Taloustutkimus during the period of June 8–19, 2023. A total of 2,877 Finnish citizens aged 16–79 responded to the survey. The survey was carried out in Taloustutkimus’s permanent online panel, from which a sample was drawn for this research project by age, gender, and region. The lower response rate among younger age groups compared to older ones was considered in advance by inviting proportionally more of them to participate. In terms of geographical distribution, the panel overrepresents cities and urban areas. Regarding respondents’ socioeconomic status, those with a vocational education and people working in blue-collar jobs are underrepresented. There are also fewer entrepreneurs than their overall share of the total population. These sampling biases were accounted for by weighting the results to match population statistics by age, gender, and place of residence. The margin of error is approximately ± 1.8 percentage points.

We first asked respondents about their stance on Finland’s NATO membership if a referendum were held now. Then, we asked respondents to take a position on eight statements that reflected policies potentially promoted by Finland’s NATO membership. We examined policy frameworks associated with NATO by asking how well respondents felt 11 different descriptions characterized NATO’s agency. In addition, we asked them to evaluate the significance of 11 different security risks to Finland and NATO’s role in countering them. We also asked how much the respondent would personally be willing to pay annually to ensure that Finland’s defense capability is, in the opinion of NATO, the Defense Forces, and experts, credible and sufficiently resourced. At the end of the survey, we presented a wide range of questions measuring respondents’ party preference, political orientation, and social status.

We conducted the second round of data collection during the period of November 10–23, 2023. The survey was targeted in Taloustutkimus’s permanent online panel only at those who had responded in the first round. The survey was completed by 2,038 Finnish citizens aged 17–79, which represents 71 percent of the first-round respondents. Respondents in the second round were weighted to match the first-round respondents by age, gender, and place of residence. The margin of error is approximately ± 2.2 percentage points. Some of the second-round questions were the same as in the first round. Additionally, we included new questions on current security and defense policy themes. Some of the questions were the same as those used in the *Helsingin Sanomat* presidential election voting advice application. We also asked for respondents’ views on the role of the state in carrying out various tasks and their conceptions of democracy. The survey also included a conjoint section, in which respondents were shown two cards at a time, each listing various features of a state’s security environment. The respondent had to choose the state in which they would prefer to live. At the end of the survey, as in the first round, we presented a wide range of questions measuring respondents’ party preference, political orientation, and social status. The questionnaire also included items on national identity.

The third round of data collection was carried out during the period of April 18–24, 2024. As in the second round, the survey was targeted in Taloustutkimus’s permanent online panel only at those who had responded in the first round. A total of 1,654 Finnish citizens aged 17–79 responded to the survey, representing 57 percent of the first-round respondents and 81 percent of the second-round

respondents. Respondents were weighted to match the first-round respondents by age, gender, and place of residence. The margin of error is approximately ± 2.6 percentage points. Some of the third-round questions were the same as in the first and second rounds. There were also new questions about current security and defense policy themes, artificial intelligence, and particularly the European Union's foreign and security policy agency. Some of the questions were the same as those used in Yle's European election voting advice application. We also examined policy frameworks associated with the European Union by asking how well 20 different descriptions reflected the respondents' views of the EU's agency. In addition, we asked respondents to evaluate the significance of 11 different security risks to Finland and the EU's role in addressing them. As in the previous rounds, respondents were finally presented with questions assessing party preference, political orientation, and social status, and they were asked about their party choice in the summer 2024 European elections.

The fourth round of data collection was carried out during the period of March 12–24, 2025. As in the second and third rounds, the survey was targeted in Taloustutkimus's permanent internet panel only at those who had responded in the first round. A total of 1,124 Finnish citizens aged 18–79 responded to the survey, which represents 39 percent of the first-round, 55 percent of the second-round, and 68 percent of the third-round respondents. Respondents were weighted to match the first-round respondents by age, gender, and place of residence. The margin of error is approximately ± 2.9 percentage points. Some of the questions were the same as in previous rounds, and in addition there were new questions about Finland's foreign policy role and the manifestations of value-based realism in practical foreign policy decisions. We also asked respondents to evaluate their own willingness to participate in various national defense tasks. This part of the survey was conducted using an experimental design in which a statement concerning national defense was placed in random order as part of a list of various statements. Respondents were asked to indicate how many of the statements on the list they agreed with. Finally, as in the previous rounds, respondents were presented with questions assessing party preference, political orientation, and social status, and they were also asked about their party choice in the spring's regional and municipal elections.



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