



POLICY BRIEF
1/2023

Top gear security: Finns' expectations for NATO membership

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List of content

Introduction	2
Support for NATO membership	3
Views of Finland's role as NATO member	6
Perceptions of NATO's policy missions	8
Perceptions of security threats to Finland and NATO's role in their mitigation	9
Conclusions	11
References	12
Contributors	14
Appendix 1. Research data	15

Introduction

Finland became a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, NATO, in the accession ceremony held in Brussels on April 4, 2023. The ratification process was the fastest in the history of NATO. In just over two months following the Summit in Madrid in June 2022, 28 member states had accepted the accession of Finland and Sweden, who applied at the same time. However, the ratification by Turkey and Hungary took an additional seven months. Neither country has to date accepted the membership of Sweden.

Finland's previous security policy decisions had its membership straightforward in practical terms. Since 1994, the different units of the Finnish Defence Force had participated in NATO's Partnership for Peace programme. Finland's decision to acquire sixty-four F-35 fighter jets from the United States in 2021 finally confirmed not only its military compatibility, but also Finland's willingness to cooperate closely with the NATO countries.

While the preparation work was lengthy, the decision to apply for NATO membership emerged quickly following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. In Finland, as well as in Sweden, opinion polls were relied on to demonstrate the "sufficient popular support" required by NATO. The polls indicated that popular opinion had shifted from opposing the membership, to clearly supporting it, in only a few weeks following the invasion. Therefore, organizing a consultative referendum or a citizen deliberative debate consisting of randomly selected participants was not considered necessary.

The national consensus regarding the necessity of the NATO membership extended to the Parliamentary Elections in the spring of 2023. Even though the views held by parties regarding NATO had fundamentally changed during the past term, questions of security and defence policy did not become central topics of debate in the elections. NATO as an organization is renewing itself and along with Finland's membership new questions, such as those regarding the attitudes towards NATO troops in Finnish territory and nuclear weapons as a part of the security arrangement of the military alliance, will emerge and require a response. However, during the elections, the general assumption appeared to be that the themes related to NATO will not become politicised and therefore are not interesting in the election debates because support for the membership is strong among both candidates and voters.

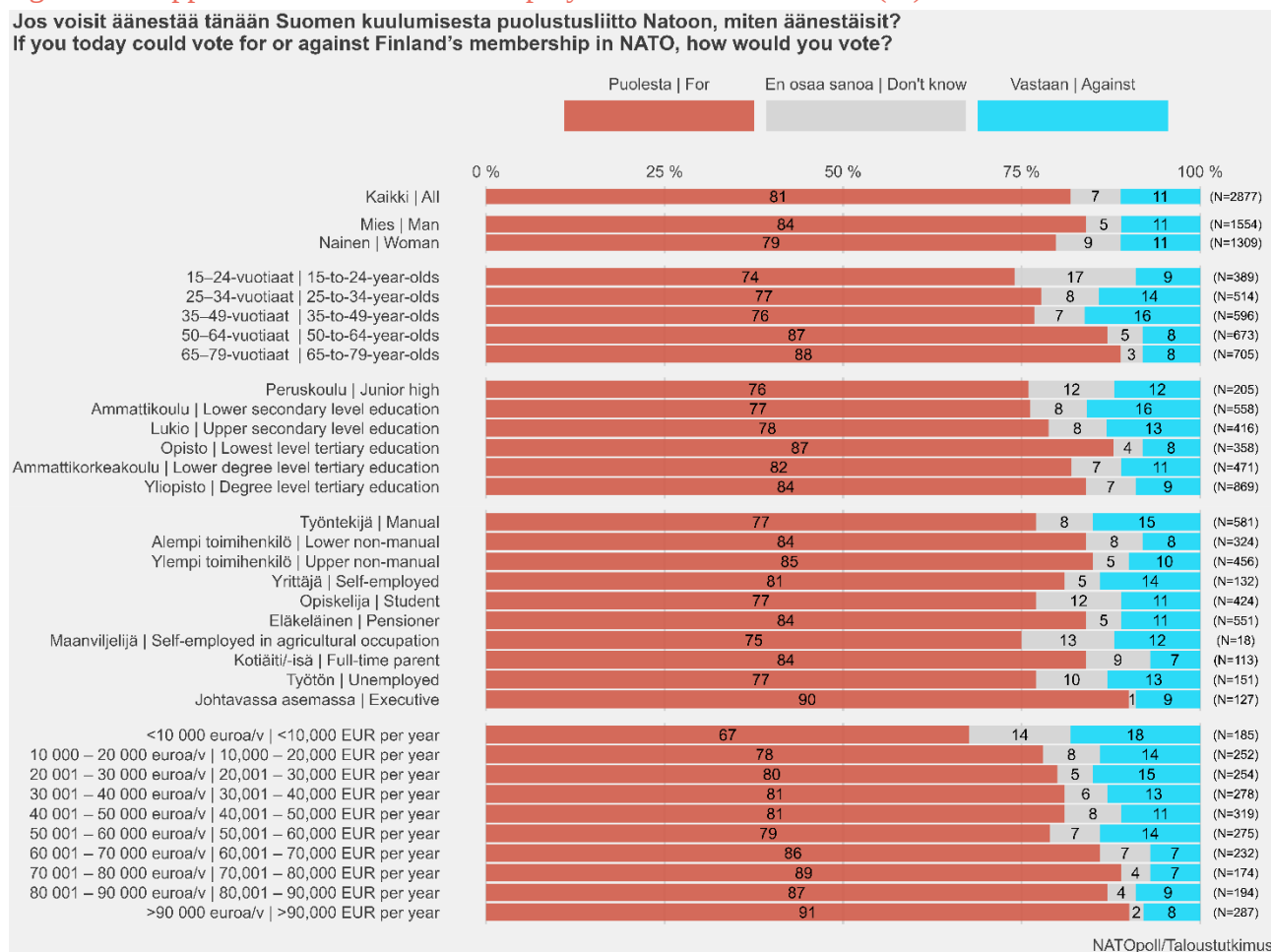
Finland's NATO membership will significantly raise the defence expenditure even though it currently already fulfils the two percent of gross domestic product, recommended by NATO, due to the F-35 fighter purchase. The additional expenses will be from 70M to 100M EUR due to contributing to NATO's joint budget and to sending personnel to NATO's military command structure (Valtioneuvosto 2023a). A survey organized by NATO in 2022 in its member states, as well as in the applicant countries Finland and Sweden, demonstrated that the support to invest in defence was higher than average in Finland. Thirty-eight percent of Finns stated that they were willing to increase defence spending, 49% wanted it to remain the same and 3 percent wanted it to decrease (NATO Annual Tracking Research 2022). These numbers may however change as the plans to significantly cut public spending by the Orpo government, which began its term in June 2023, come into effect. In times of economic austerity, open public debate on the bases of different expenditure items is especially important.

In this policy brief, we examine the expectations of Finnish citizens regarding Finland's NATO membership. The brief is part of the research project *Dynamic Democratic Support for Finnish Defense Policy* (NATOpoll) funded by Kone Foundation, in which the same respondents are repeatedly asked about current topics related to defence policy. The thermostat model (Wlezien 1995) has been widely used in political research. It has identified that public opinion changes dynamically in relation to contemporary politics, as well as to the frames through which politics is interpreted. Politicians in turn seek to control these interpretive frames using different rhetorical, symbolic, and performative means (Baumgartner ja Jones 1991). It is therefore possible that the support for the defence policy decisions made in the spring of 2022 may change significantly as Finland's NATO membership comes into effect. These changes will be affected by how NATO membership is perceived over a longer period of time, how it will shape Finland's future defence and security policy solutions, and what type of a role Finland adopts as a new member of the defence alliance.

Support for NATO membership

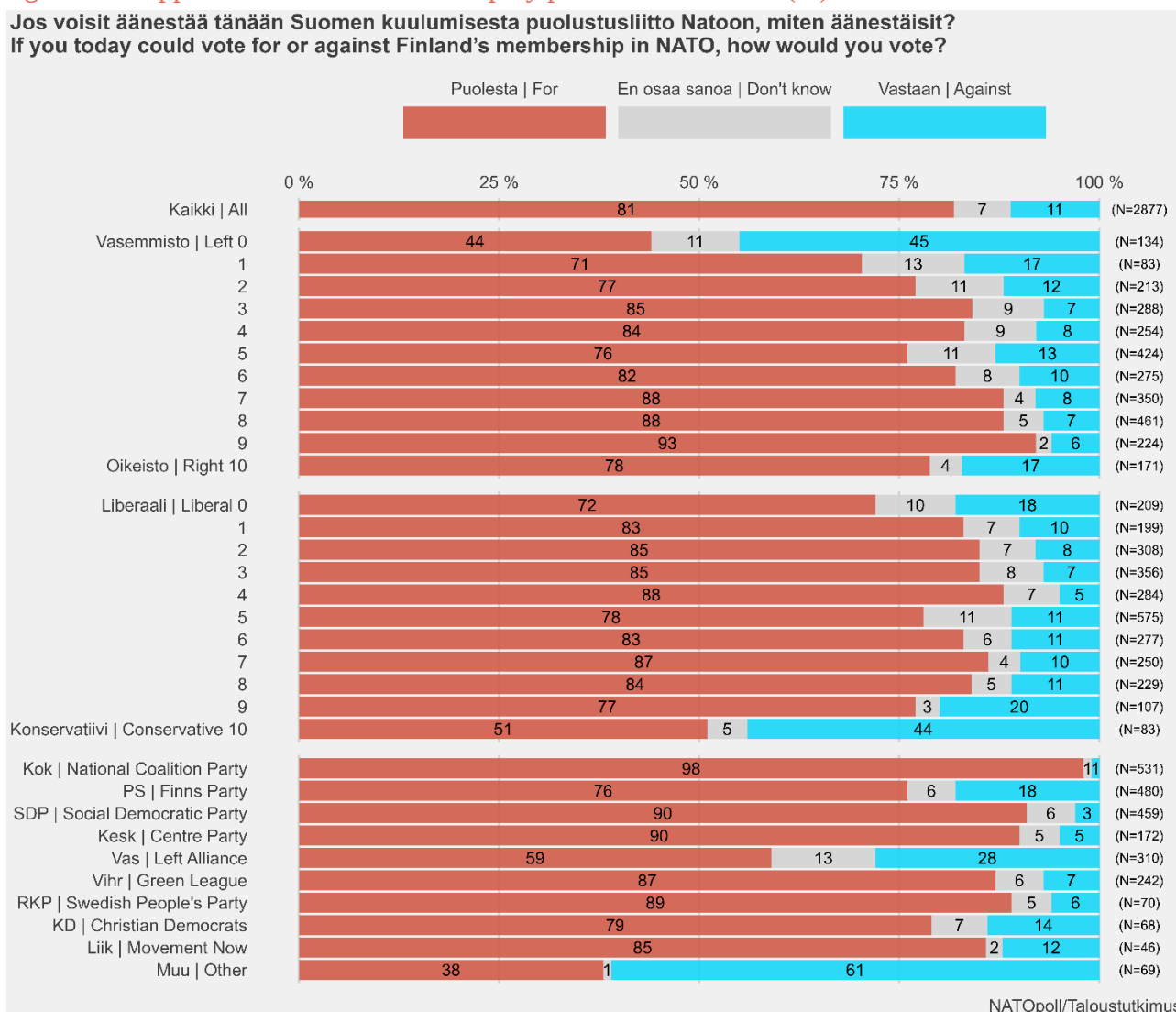
We examine the support for the NATO membership among citizens using different measures of socioeconomic status (figure 1a) and political orientation (figure 1b). The questions are formed in the same way as those used by NATO in its surveys. In NATO's most recent survey, carried out in April 2022, the support for the defence alliance was historically strong: on average, 72 percent of the population in the member states would vote to remain in NATO, 13 to leave, and 14 could not articulate their opinion (NATO Annual Tracking Research 2022).

Figure 1a. Support for NATO membership by socio-economic status (%)



The support for NATO in Finland is notably high compared to the NATO average: four in five would vote for Finnish membership and only one in ten is against it (7% are unsure). The comparison between different groups, however, demonstrates that the attitudes towards NATO are largely linked to socioeconomic status: the highly educated, those in upper occupational groups, and the highest earners demonstrate significantly more positive attitudes towards the membership than those who have completed junior high school education, manual labourers, unemployed people, and citizens at the bottom of the income distribution. This challenges the interpretation that Finnish citizens are united in joining NATO, even though differentiation according to socioeconomic status has also been observable in previous surveys (EVA 2022). It is also noteworthy that the youngest age distribution category is significantly more wary of NATO membership than the oldest (74 % vs 88%). In contrast the differences in support between men (84%) and women (79%) are relatively small.

Figure 1b. Support for NATO membership by political orientation (%)



The views regarding Finland's NATO membership are also divided along the lines of political orientation. Those who identify themselves on the extreme left end (economic dimension) of the left-right spectrum are significantly more critical than all other groups (44% for NATO). Extreme cultural conservatives on the liberal-conservative spectrum are the most critical of NATO (51% for NATO). A similar differentiation, however, is not as straightforward when considering various political parties' support. Out of those who stated that they would vote for the Left Alliance if the elections were held now, only a slight majority (59%) is for NATO membership whereas the corresponding share that vote for SDP (90%) is the same as the Centre Party (90%) and the Swedish People's Party voters.

It is especially interesting that there is significant differentiation within the current government coalition: practically all the National Coalition Party voters support Finland's NATO membership, whereas the share is notably smaller within voters of the Finns Party (76%) and the Christian Democrats (79%). This, for its part, is consistent with the class-related nature of the support for NATO, as the supporters of the latter parties include many voters from lower socio-economic groups (Grönlund and Strandberg 2023). On the other hand, the support for NATO does not appear to be

structured along the cultural liberal-conservative dimension in any significant way, unless we consider that the extremes tend to be the most critical.

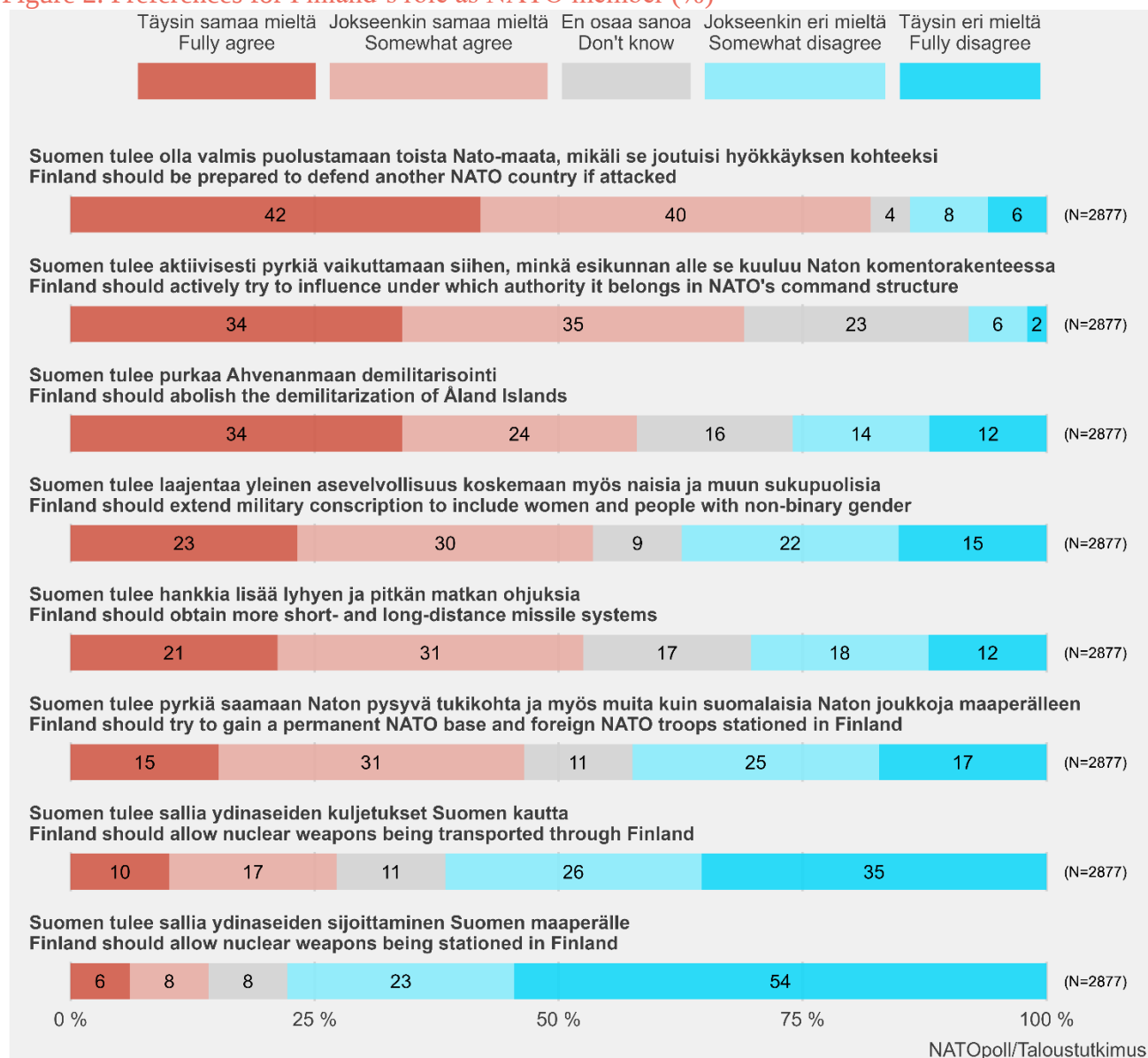
Views of Finland's role as NATO member

We also inquired about the views of the respondents regarding what type of politics Finland should promote as a member of the defence alliance (Figure 2). The first finding relates to the high willingness of Finns to act according to the security guarantees in Article 5. Over four in five (82%) of the respondents consider that Finland should be prepared to defend another NATO country if it were to be attacked. This share is larger than the average in NATO member countries in April-May 2022 (67%), although the results are not entirely comparable as the NATO survey includes the neutral answer option (NATO Annual Tracking Research 2022). Moreover, expanding the military conscription to include women and people with non-binary genders is supported by a majority (53%). The analysis of the survey results finds that this proposal is viewed positively even by the youngest age group (49%), some of whom would be directly affected by this policy (15-24 years old).

In contrast, Finn's attitudes towards nuclear weapons are strongly negative, both regarding allowing nuclear weapons to be transported through Finland as well as being stationed on Finnish territory: the former proposal is opposed by 61 percent and the latter by 77 percent. These attitudes likely reflect on the one hand the nuclear disarmament that Finland has stressed in its defence policy, and on the other hand the awareness that allowing nuclear weapons would require changes to the current legislation. Finland is also a signatory of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, the 1968 treaty that seeks to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons. The strongly critical attitude towards nuclear weapons is interesting when compared to the government programme of the Orpo Cabinet, which states that Finland will expand its knowledge of matters concerning nuclear weapons (Valtioneuvosto 2023, 160). The defence minister Antti Häkkänen has also outlined that the NATO nuclear protection will be a key part of Finland's security policy in the future (YLE 2023b). On the other hand, over half of the respondents (52%) would be prepared for Finland to obtain more short- and long-distance missiles systems.

The abolition of the demilitarization of the Åland Islands, which was brought up by, among others, Member of Parliament Jarno Linne immediately after the Finnish NATO membership came into effect (Helsingin Sanomat 2023), is also supported by the majority (58%). Following its new membership, in Finland a lively conversation has also emerged regarding whether Finland should seek to gain a permanent NATO base and foreign NATO troops in its territory. This question strongly divides opinions: nearly the same share supports and opposes it (46% vs 42%).

Figure 2. Preferences for Finland's role as NATO member (%)

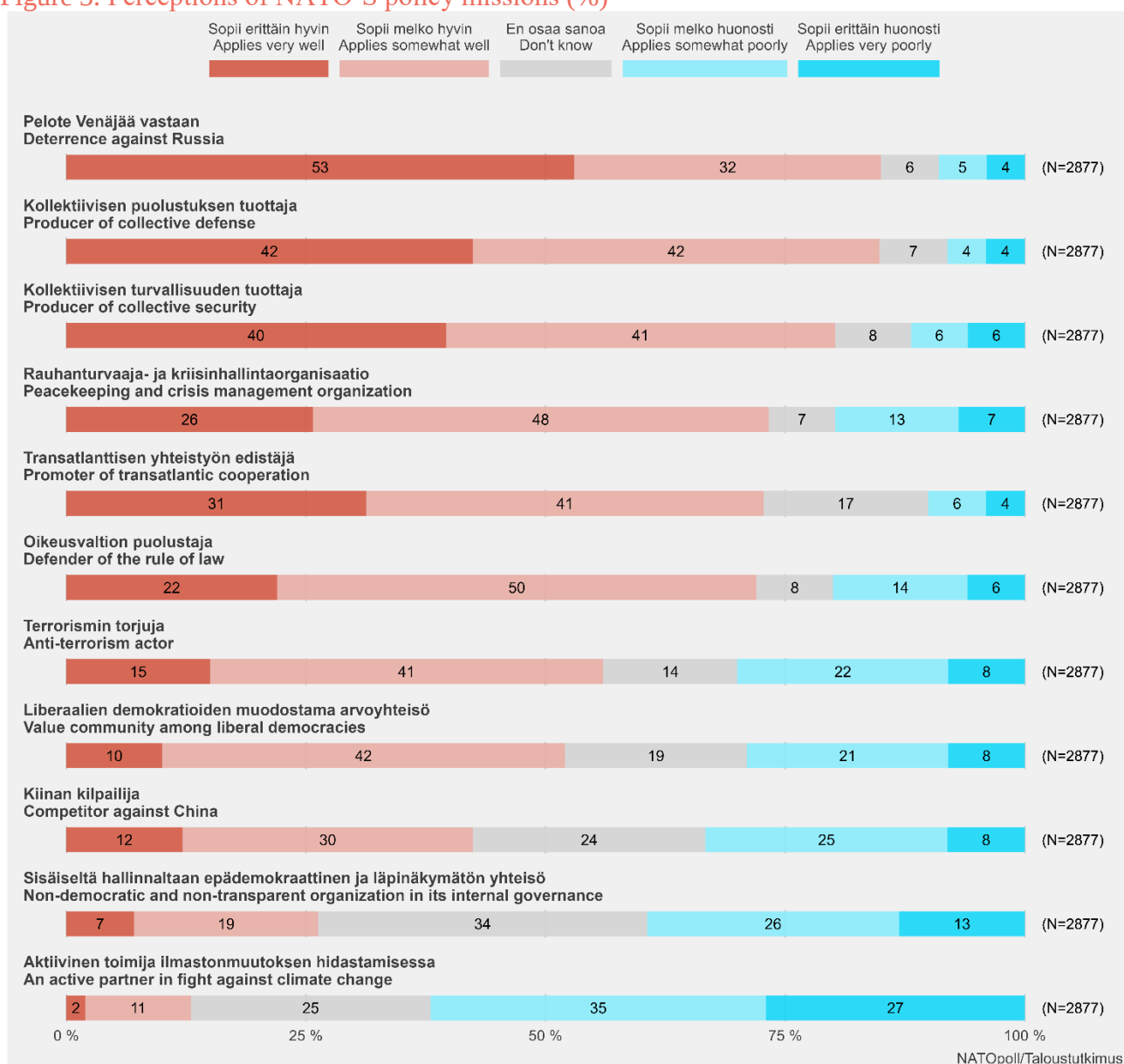


Another question that has received considerable attention relates to the place of Finland within the command structure. Finland would have preferred to be placed under the authority of the US Norfolk, however, following the decision made in the end of May, it was placed in the Brunssum command situated in the Netherlands. Germany and the Baltic countries, among others, are also part of the Brunssum command. Antti Kaikkonen, the defence minister at the time, stressed that no final decision had yet been made and that Finland could still influence the matter (YLE 2023a). The command placement is a multidimensional, and to an extent rather specific, question which is reflected in the relatively high percentage (23%) of the “don't know” responses. Yet, almost 70 percent of the respondents consider that Finland should be an active agent in this matter, which may reflect a larger perception of the type of role that Finland should adopt as a NATO member.

Perceptions of NATO's policy missions

Figure 3 examines the perceptions of the central policy missions of NATO. Since the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s, NATO has determinedly expanded its field of action guided by a broad definition of security, which includes, among others, the strengthening of democratic values and the management and prevention of environmental, technological, and humanitarian crises (NATO 2022b). When viewed against these developments, the responses of Finns seem even surprisingly traditional. NATO is understood primarily as a counterforce to Russia's threat of military aggression (85%) and as a producer of collective defence (84%) and security (81%) as per Article five. Actions of anti-terrorism are seen as a less important mission (56%), which possibly partly reflects the withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021.

Figure 3. Perceptions of NATO'S policy missions (%)



NATO's role as a defender of the rule of law is recognized rather strongly (72%) but only half of the respondents agree with the description of NATO as a value-based alliance among liberal democracies (52%). The latter observation is particularly interesting considering that the public debate during Finland's application period in the spring of 2022 was dominated by a political framework that stressed the value community aspect. It is therefore possible that the actions of Turkey and Hungary to stall the membership of Finland, and particularly Sweden, have raised awareness of the fact that the defence alliance includes member states with a wide range of values and ways of operating.

The fight against climate change is defined as one of the central missions of the defence alliance in the NATO 2030 strategy (NATO 2022c) and accordingly, in the Madrid Summit in 2022, it was referred to as a global security threat that the alliance needs to tackle together (NATO 2022a). However, only 13 percent of the respondents view it as part of NATO's field of action, which is to an extent a demonstration of the lack of knowledge, of which the large proportion of "don't know" answers (25%) is also indicative. The same observation applies to the confrontation between NATO and China. China is mentioned for the first time in the NATO 2030 strategy, and recently US President Joe Biden has actively sought to include the aspect of competition with China in NATO's agenda. Although the new policy stance also affects the bilateral relations between Finland and China (Helsingin Sanomat 2022), only under half of the respondents (42%) consider China to be part of the political framework related to NATO.

One-third of the respondents did not express an opinion on whether the internal governance of NATO is democratic, which is understandable considering that Finland's membership has only recently taken effect. This issue will, however, become relevant in Finland when considering questions such as what kind of action model will be applied while preparing Finland's policy stances, how the division of labour between the president and the government will function in issues directly related to NATO, and how the flow of information to the government will be secured (Helsingin Sanomat 2023a, Raunio 2022).

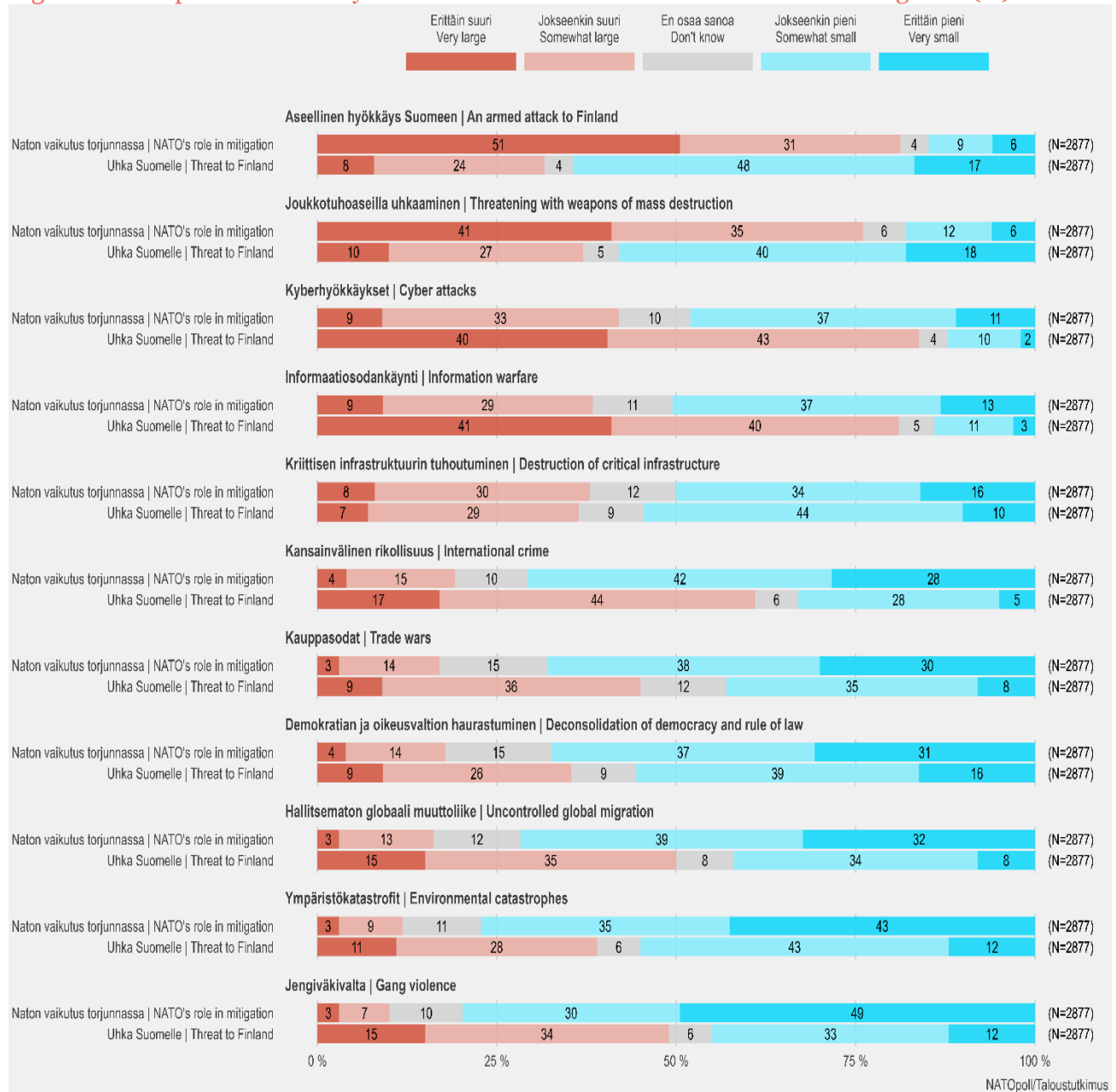
Perceptions of security threats to Finland and NATO's role in their mitigation

Figure 4 presents the security threats perceived by Finns in order of magnitude and the perceived ability of NATO to mitigate them. Eighty-two percent of respondents report their opinion that NATO plays a role in mitigating the risk of an armed attack on Finland, including threats with weapons of mass destruction (WMD) (76%). NATO is understood to be a traditional defence alliance that brings military security to its members. Meanwhile, only a relatively small share of respondents consider that an armed invasion, or a threat of attack with WMD, is a major security concern for Finland (32% and 37%).

The results show a significant tension regarding the fact that the capability of NATO to mitigate the security threats such as cyberattacks (83%), information war (81%) and international crime (61%) that are considered to be the most severe, is understood to be rather limited (42%, 38%, 19%, respectively). The incongruity is particularly evident with regard to international crime: a mere one in five of the respondents considers that NATO has the ability to mitigate it. Uncontrolled global migration worries one in two people, and environmental catastrophes worry thirty-nine percent. However, the role of

NATO in tackling these latter issues is viewed as minor, despite the statements in the NATO 2030 strategy of the importance of addressing climate change. Only a small proportion of respondents recognizes the role of NATO in the mitigation of the deconsolidation of democracy and the rule of law (18%), which appears consistent with only a third of respondents expressing concern about this issue. The responses also reflect a pragmatic understanding that NATO membership is not a solution to national problems, and that its jurisdiction is limited.

Figure 4. Perceptions of security threats to Finland and NATO's role in their mitigation (%).



Conclusions

The views that Finns hold relating to NATO are consistent with the European average. In the summer of 2023, in the context of the prevailing European security situation, NATO is expected to first and foremost provide military security. Additionally, the willingness to implement Article 5 in practice, meaning sending Finnish troops to aid other NATO countries in the case of an invasion, is high. Hence, it appears that in Finland, the basic NATO principle based on reciprocity has been well internalized: to receive the security guarantees, a willingness to defend allies, when necessary, is required. The preparedness of the Finns to take on the responsibility, also illustrated by the willingness to expand military conscription, is consistent with the NATO stance that highlights Europe's ability to act independently (Henttonen and Ossa 2022). On the other hand, Finland is also currently preparing a bilateral security agreement with the United States, of which the visit of US President Joe Biden to Finland in July can be seen as an important step (Helsingin Sanomat 2023c, YLE 2023b).

The attitudes towards nuclear weapons in Finland are almost unanimously critical. Alternatively the possible abolition of the demilitarization of the Åland Islands, which has generated much debate during the past spring, is supported by the majority of the respondents. Setting up a NATO base in Finland and the placement of foreign troops in national territory, however, divides opinion.

It appears that, on average, Finns have relatively little knowledge of other NATO initiatives such as the mitigation of the threats of terrorism or climate change. These functions are, however, central to the strategy that seeks to renew NATO as an organization (NATO 2022c). Therefore, the range of political frames that Finnish citizens associate with NATO is rather narrow, which largely reflects the political and public debates surrounding the defence alliance in Finland. These frames may be expected to change following the Vilnius NATO Summit in July 2023, in which Finland will participate for the first time as a full member of the alliance.

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Albert Weckman is a Doctoral Researcher at The Social Science Research Institute, Åbo Akademi University. His dissertation investigates citizens’ opinions in security policies.

Appendix 1. Research data

This policy brief is based on the survey material that was prepared by the *Dynamic Democratic Support for Finnish Defense Policy* (NATOpoll) research project funded by Kone Foundation and gathered by Taloustutkimus Oy during the period of June 8-June 19, 2023. A total of 2,877 Finns between the ages of 15 and 79 responded to the survey. The survey was conducted through the permanent panel of Taloustutkimus Oy, from which the sample selected for this study was formed according to age, gender, and region. The lower willingness of younger age groups to participate was taken into consideration in the preparation of the survey by inviting more representatives of this age group to participate. Regarding the geographical area aspect, the panel focuses on cities and urban areas. As to the socioeconomic status of respondents, those who had vocational education and those working in manual labour are underrepresented. Moreover, there are less entrepreneurs within the respondents than their share of the population. These material biases were taken to account by weighing these results to correspond with the population statistics on age, gender, and place of residence. The margin of error is approximately +/- 1.8 percentage points.

We first asked respondents to state their stance on Finland's NATO membership if a referendum on the topic were to be held today. Following this, we asked the respondents to express their opinion on eight statements that reflected the possible policies that Finland could promote following the NATO membership. We examined the political frames linked to NATO by inquiring how accurately 11 different statements of NATO's missions described the nature of the alliance as an actor. Additionally, we asked the respondents to evaluate the significance of 11 security threats for Finland, and NATO's role in the mitigation of these threats. We also asked how much the respondents were personally willing to pay annually to assure that Finland's defence capability is credible and sufficiently resourced in the opinion of NATO, the Finnish Defence Forces, and experts (this data will be used subsequently). Finally, the respondents were asked to answer a broad range of questions regarding their political affiliation, ideological orientation, and social status.



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