

European Parliament Nuclear Politics:

The Debate within the No-debate

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Since the war in Ukraine erupted in February 2022, there has been a revival of nuclear politics, where Europe has been confronted with the reality of living under nuclear threat. Even though relevant international actors such as NATO and national leaders have introduced the nuclear threat in their different national arenas and integrated it into political agendas, the debate surrounding nuclear deterrence remains in the shadows. The potential of a nuclear threat and the controversy affecting discussions on nuclear deterrence in its different forms, including nuclear weapons, has been limited in the European political context, particularly at the European Parliament (EP) level. This essay provides critical insights into the political nuclear debate within the European Parliament and reflects on its implications for the future of nuclear deterrence in Europe. The research findings suggest that nuclear politics have emerged modestly in the EP since February 2022, revealing how nuclear politics at the European level remain attached to the national competent authorities and other relevant authorities as the NATO scheme rather than at the EP forum.

Keywords: European Parliament, Nuclear Deterrence, Nuclear Politics, Machine Learning, Ukraine

The War in Ukraine: Nuclear Politics coming back to Europe

The tensions between Russia and Ukraine escalated in February 2022, with Russia's full-

scale aggression shocking the world and challenging the international community, experts' views, diplomatic corps and society. Russia's aggression has spanned and exacerbated since it invaded Georgia in 2008 and the following annexation of Crimea in 2014, leading to Russia recognizing the Republic of Crimea and the Federal city of Sevastopol in March 2014. While the effects of the invasion and their implications are unknown, at the global level, there is an escalation of violence and armed conflicts involving nuclear powers, including the nuclear crisis with Iran or the North Korean regime, as examples of raising instability and tensions. One of the most immediate consequences is the comeback of nuclear deterrence, as both sides of the conflict, Russia and, indirectly, Ukraine -through the backing of NATO-can get hold of nuclear weapons. Thus, the war in Ukraine unfolded in a very complex situation with direct or indirect spillover effects towards involved countries that have also reached their strategic alliances, leading the world to figure out and rethink how to live under a nuclear umbrella and the threat of a nuclear war. With the Cold War having ended over three decades ago, few could have predicted that the threat of nuclear weapons use would resurface so prominently. Other regions where existing deterrence conflict dynamics were present, such as South Asia and the Korean Peninsula, were thought to be as much more probable locations for the emergence of a potential nuclear threat than Europe itself (Sethi 2022). This has created a new agenda item in the continent, as the nuclear threat has been soon normalized by different political actors, particularly within the discourses of President Putin's side, flooding newspapers and TV shows with the "*Russian nuclear threat*".

However, the nuclear realm is not new to Europe, as the continent soon became a natural partner of the NATO alliance, with different countries joining the organization since its establishment in 1949. Shortly after, it became a nuclear alliance with a defined nuclear sharing scheme, with the first American nuclear bombs arriving in Europe as soon

as 1954 (NATO 2020). As could be expected, in different periods of war or defined by high geopolitical tensions, the alliance has counted on unanimous support with low public opinion contestation. As von Hlatky and Lambert-Deslandes (2024) showed, low-threat environments are more likely to disenable change on the existing nuclear sharing with NATO, while official statements and public debates are more present in environments that are defined by low-threat periods where political contestation within host states rises (von Hlatky and Lambert-Deslandes 2024).

Regardless of the political contestation within the states, understanding the European Parliament (EP) nuclear debate is mandatory to help gain in-depth insights into the EP's limitations in legislative power on nuclear matters. The importance of the nuclear debate requires an assessment of ongoing discussions in the EP, an issue that this study addresses by looking into how the debate has evolved over the 9th Parliamentarian term (2019-2024) to clarify if any change has occurred since the beginning of the war in Ukraine in 2022 and its current state. While different aspects, including limited legal competencies of the EP on defense and military aspects, limit its openness, a significant lack of clarity affects nuclear powers' capacities, anticipating a low political debate in the EP on this issue. However, due to the geographical proximity and political involvement in the Ukrainian war, even if non-decisive power on nuclear topics depends exclusively on the EP, the study of the nuclear debate in the face of the current normalization of nuclear threats in Europe since the war in Ukraine, it is of interest and relevance.

The European Parliamentarian Nuclear Debate

Politics within the European Union (EU) have considerably evolved since 1993 when Jacques Delors used his famous expression "*non-identified political object*" to describe how the initial customs union rapidly developed into the multidimensional political space

that decades later resulted in its current 27 member states. The European Parliament - as one of its four leading decision-making institutions, along with the European Council, the Council of the European Union, and the European Commission- has a central role in the EU's politics. Accordingly, EP political activity is vital to understanding where political directions are going in the EU.

European politics are marked by the fact that the EU remains more a supranational entity than a federal state; this means that there is substantial diversity within the Union due to its diversity in cultures, histories, economic conditions, and national institutions of member states, bringing to a resulting EU politics that is much more multifaceted and subject to significant complexities when compared to national politics. Notably, the EP is especially intriguing as the European legislators belong to national parties but also to European party groups (Hix et al. 2006). The result of the EP activity depends on multilevel actors and cannot be reduced to a single actor.

In this, the common security and defence policy (CSDP) is part of the EU's common foreign and security policy, which is the frame whereby the Member States develop a common defense strategy, having as the central institutional role the High Representative of the Union for the Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, which represents the Vice-President of the European Commission. This office has been occupied by Josep Borrell since 2019. The Parliament has a minimal role in this policy. As stated by the Treaty on the European Union (TEU), it "*is supportive of EU defence integration and cooperation*" and "*scrutinizes the CSDP and can take the initiative of addressing the VP/HR and the Council*" (Article 36 TEU). It also scrutinizes the CSDP's budget (Article 41 TEU). Twice a year, the Parliament holds debates on the implementation of the CFSP and the CSDP, and it adopts reports: one on the progress of the CFSP, drawn up by the Committee on Foreign Affairs, and one on the progress of the CSDP, written by the SEDE

subcommittee (European Parliament 2024).

Therefore, even if not directly run by the European Parliament, nuclear proliferation and disarmament issues are under its scrutiny. To gain a better understanding on how the EP debate on nuclear politics since the war in Ukraine started in February 2022, the discussions are supported by an empirical framework examining the European debate in the last legislature, - i.e., 9th Parliamentarian Term 2019-2024 - which captures the Ukraine War period. The study focused its attention on the European Parliament archives¹ using data crawling and scrapping methods to narrow down the dataset to be examined. The research sample was limited to the initial identification of documents using the keyword search “*nuclear weapons*” as a maximum exponent power of nuclear deterrence. There was an initial set of 428 documents, with 379 considered valid, after reducing the sample to documents that were either accessible or downloadable, with a reduction of a working sample of 379 documents. Figure 1 below identifies the nature of documents, with technical documents such as Briefings and Studies emerging as the most representative among the sample and offering an overview of the complexity and diversity of different documents available.

¹ Term search was conducted on the Public Register of Documents of the European Parliament: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegistreWeb/search/simpleSearchHome.htm?terms=9&fulltext=%22nuclear%20weapons%22>

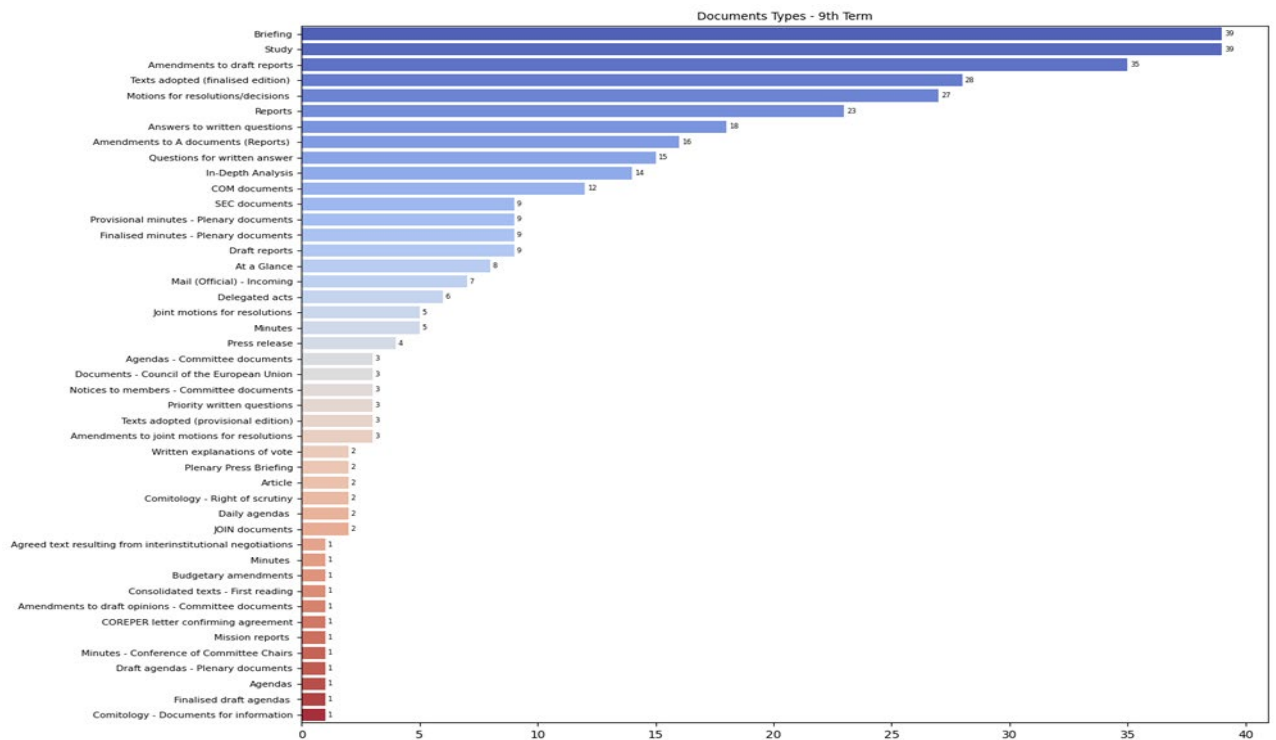


Figure 1: Document type- 9th Parliamentarian Term 2019-2024. Source: Authors (2024).

The methodological framework was structured in different phases to enable a comprehensive and in-depth analysis of selected documents. The first step sought to identify dominant words within the European discourse, as illustrated in Figure 2, where standard techniques and algorithms for data harmonization and text analysis were implemented. The initial frequency search of the top 50-word reveals state, security policy, country, action as dominant words in the European discourse of the examined sample. The results do not offer insights regarding deterrence, nuclear, threat and war, which were considered critical in this study's context and align with the technical nature of the discussions rather than the political topic of the EP.

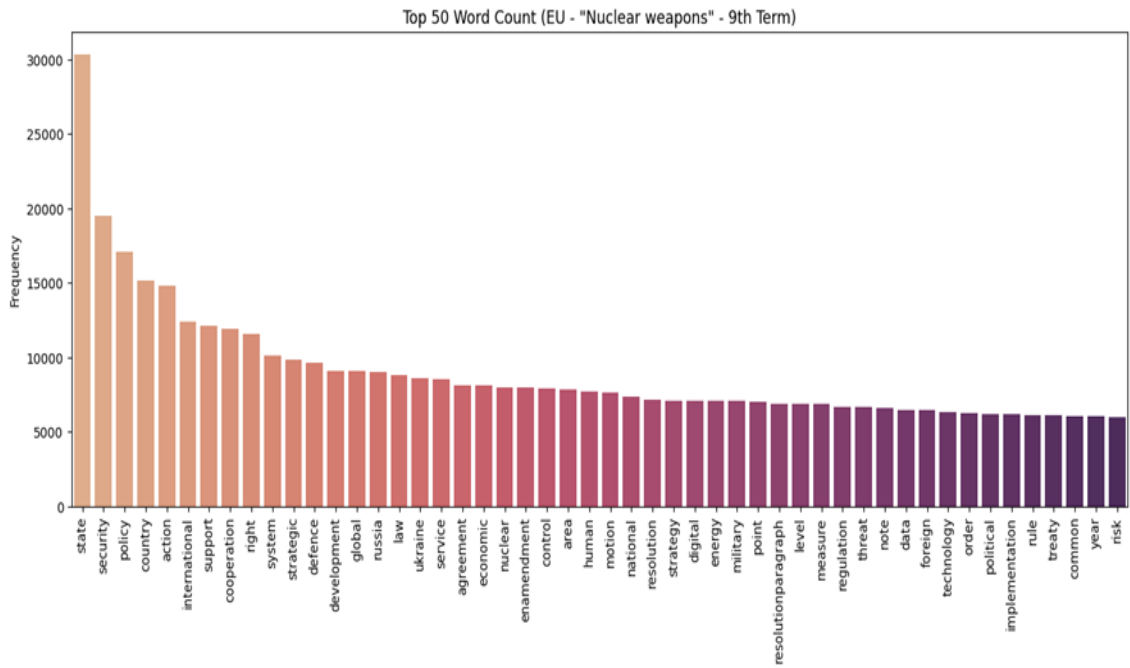


Figure 2. Top 50 Concepts Source: (Authors, 2024).

The next step was to examine and compare the dominant wording with the European Parliament’s own classification of topics by examining EUROVOC documents² with results illustrated in Figure 3 below.

² EuroVoc is the EU's multilingual and multidisciplinary thesaurus. It contains keywords, organized in 21 domains and 127 sub-domains, which are used to describe the content of documents in EUR-Lex. (EUR-lex website)

Critical Reflection

EU politics are unique due to their multidimensionality and particular institutional design. However, while having advanced during the last years, primarily due to the geopolitical earthquake that the war in Ukraine signifies, the common security and defense policy (CSDP) remain attached to the high-level decision bodies of the EU, the European Commission, and member states directives. Despite this, an open parliamentary debate on the nuclear threat was foreseen as the EP is also expected to have a vital design role in politically controlling the CSDP decisions.

A few critical points emerged from analyzing the EP 9th legislature public register of documents on “*nuclear weapons*” search required attention. First, despite being present, the frequency of nuclear aspects remains relatively moderate compared to other political issues and general documents search related to other political domains. Second, documents emerging from *the “nuclear weapons” search tend to be much more technical* than representative of an open parliamentary debate on nuclear matters. Third, further research is needed to evaluate if the debate is also present in other political decision-making institutions to reaffirm whether or not the nuclear debate is limited in the European political arena. Lastly, the nuclear debate has been centred on Ukraine and Russia’s situation, reaffirming that this war is shifting the EU’s geopolitical strategy towards positioning the nuclear and defense topics on its future strategy. Unfortunately, this crucial issue is not reflected in an open EP parliamentary debate, unfolding as a minimal topic within the hype that EU nuclear deterrence politics is confined to each member state’s defense and government authorities. The reality is that nuclear politics

have come to stay as a geopolitical asset of Europe regardless of its openness in the EP signagling that perhaps a more open debate is needed.

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List of figures:

Figure 1. Document type- 9th Parliamentarian Term 2019-2024.

Figure 2. Top 50 Concepts

Figure 2. Eurovoc concepts of the 9th term

Figure 3. EUROVOC Dominant Concepts of the 9th term.

Figure 4. Dominant EUROVOC Concepts for the 9th term.

Figure 5. Keybert WordCloud analysis of the 9th term.

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