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Public Trust as the Cornerstone of National Security Policy: Legitimacy, Governance, and Risk Management

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ABSTRACT

Trust represents a fundamental pillar of contemporary security policy, influencing decision-making processes, institutional stability, and the effectiveness of security measures at both national and international levels. This article explores trust as a key precondition for the formulation and implementation of security policy, emphasizing its role in relations between states, within security institutions, and between public authorities and society. The analysis focuses on trust as a multidimensional concept encompassing political legitimacy, transparency, accountability, and the credibility of security actors. Particular attention is paid to the consequences of declining trust, including increased social polarization, weakened resilience of democratic systems, and reduced effectiveness of collective security arrangements. The article argues that building and maintaining trust is not merely a normative objective, but a strategic necessity for ensuring long-term security and stability in an increasingly complex and uncertain security environment.Through comparative analysis of selected European states (Finland, Germany, Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary, France, and Estonia), the paper identifies critical determinants of trust, including transparency, institutional neutrality, crisis communication, and historical path-dependence. The findings demonstrate that trust acts as both an input to and an output of security policy, reinforcing legitimacy through reciprocity between citizens and the state.The article concludes that sustained trust-building must be recognized as a strategic dimension of security governance. Trust-based security strengthens societal resilience, mitigates polarization, and enhances adaptive capacity in hybrid threat environments.

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1. Introduction

Public trust has become a decisive variable in the formulation and implementation of national security policy, shaping how legitimacy is perceived and sustained. This paper argues that trust operates as a dual mechanism — both a normative foundation and an operational resource — that determines the resilience and democratic legitimacy of state security systems. Drawing from theories of legitimacy [1,2], securitization [3], and institutional trust [4,5], this study integrates empirical findings from OECD [6], Eurobarometer [7], RAND [8], and NATO StratCom research [9].

In the 21st century, the concept of national security has expanded beyond the protection of borders or military readiness. Security is increasingly understood as a social contract — dependent not only on the state's coercive capacities but on the trust relationship between citizens and their institutions. As Hoffman [10] and Kirchner & Sperling [11] note, security governance has evolved into a multilevel system, in which legitimacy and credibility are prerequisites for effective policy implementation.

In contemporary democracies, public trust operates as political capital [5]. Rather than constituting a primary source of authority, this political capital enables governments to activate, stabilize, and reproduce legitimacy beyond formal electoral mandates, particularly in policy domains—such as national security—where direct democratic oversight is limited. Without this intangible resource, governments struggle to mobilize collective action or enforce compliance with security measures, particularly during crises. The COVID-19 pandemic, hybrid warfare, and digital surveillance debates revealed that trust — not merely technology or force — determines the durability of state authority [6,12].

This article situates trust as a foundational element of national security policy-making, combining theoretical analysis with comparative empirical data from European countries. It asks three interrelated research questions:

How does public trust influence the legitimacy and effectiveness of national security governance?

(1) What institutional and cultural determinants explain variations in trust across states?

(2) How can trust be systematically incorporated into security policy design and evaluation?

By addressing these questions, this study contributes to both theoretical debates on legitimacy [1,2] and practical policy frameworks in the field of security governance [3,13].

2. Theoretical Foundations

2.1. Conceptualizing Trust

Trust has been defined as "a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based on positive expectations" [14]. In political sociology, Luhmann [4] frames trust as a mechanism that reduces social complexity and enables systemic coordination. Within national security, this means citizens delegate authority to state institutions under the presumption of competence and fairness [2].

The literature distinguishes three dimensions of trust relevant for security policy:

- **Interpersonal trust** — confidence in other individuals (e.g., front-line security officers).
- **Institutional trust** — confidence in the reliability and integrity of institutions.
- **Systemic trust** — confidence in the overall framework of governance and law.

Institutional trust serves as the linchpin: it binds citizens to the state through expectations of consistent, rule-based action [17,18]. When eroded, security institutions lose legitimacy, resulting in compliance deficits and societal fragmentation [9].

2.2. Legitimacy and Trust

Max Weber [1] identified legitimacy as the cornerstone of political authority — the belief that power is exercised rightfully. In democratic regimes, the foundational source of legitimacy lies in popular sovereignty and electoral consent. Procedural fairness and performance legitimacy, however, play a crucial role in sustaining and operationalizing this legitimacy over time, particularly in policy areas such as national security where direct electoral control is limited [2,15]. Trust acts as the intermediary that translates institutional performance into perceived legitimacy.

Legitimacy and public trust are analytically distinct but mutually reinforcing concepts. Legitimacy refers to the normative and institutional justification of authority — the belief that power is exercised rightfully and in accordance with accepted rules. Public trust, by contrast, reflects a societal evaluation of how this authority is exercised in practice. While legitimacy constitutes a structural precondition for trust, trust operates as a dynamic mechanism through which legitimacy is continuously reproduced, strengthened, or eroded.

Empirical research [6,19] shows that transparency, accountability, and fairness directly predict public trust in national security institutions. When these conditions falter — e.g., due to politicization or opaque decision-making — citizens' trust collapses even if institutions remain operationally effective [21]. Trust, therefore, is not merely a derivative of performance but a co-determinant of how legitimacy is sustained and perceived.

Figure 1 conceptualizes democratic legitimacy as a normative structure grounded in popular sovereignty, institutional mediation, and the authority of public power.



Figure 1. Model of Democratic Legitimacy (Popular sovereignty → institutions → authority)

2.3. Trust and Security Governance

The **security governance** framework [11,13] emphasizes the horizontal and networked nature of modern security provision. Trust functions here as an organizing principle — fostering cooperation among actors ranging from ministries to local authorities and private partners. Mutual trust enhances **information-sharing, coordination, and adaptive governance** [20].

Conversely, erosion of trust fragments the security architecture. RAND [12] found that trust deficits within multi-agency counter-disinformation units in Europe led to inefficiencies and duplication of efforts. Hence, trust functions as both a lubricant and a stabilizer in governance networks.

2.4. Normative Dimensions of Trust

Beyond instrumental utility, trust carries **normative implications** for democratic accountability. Citizens' trust in security institutions reflects their belief that the state will balance protection with freedom — that the "guardian will not become the oppressor" [5]. As Buzan et al. [3] argue, securitization always involves an act of persuasion; thus, its legitimacy depends on trust in the actor defining the threat.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study employs a comparative qualitative design combining theoretical synthesis with secondary empirical data. It draws on three principal datasets:

(1) **OECD Trust in Government Database (2022–2024)**, providing cross-national trust metrics;
(2) **Eurobarometer Surveys (2019–2023)**, measuring public confidence in police, military, and intelligence agencies;
(3) **RAND Europe & NATO StratCom Studies (2020–2023)**, focusing on trust in security communications and hybrid threat perception.

The selection of cases—Finland, Estonia, Germany, the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary, and France—reflects regional diversity in political culture, governance capacity, and historical legacies. This sample enables examination of both *high-trust* (Nordic) and *low-trust* (Central/Eastern European) environments.

3.2. Variables and Indicators

Three dependent variables operationalize public trust:

(1) **Institutional Capacity (IC):** perceived competence and effectiveness of security agencies.
(2) **Procedural Fairness (PF):** perception of equality before the law and accountability mechanisms.
(3) **Communicative Legitimacy (CL):** transparency and clarity of official communication.

Independent variables include economic stability, corruption indices, media freedom, and exposure to external threats.

The study integrates findings using a trust-governance framework, mapping causal links between institutional behaviour and public confidence [6,17].

3.3. Data Interpretation

Data triangulation ensures validity: quantitative trends are contextualized through qualitative insights from peer-reviewed case studies [18,19]. Pattern-matching analysis identifies recurring mechanisms linking trust to legitimacy. For instance, where security measures align with democratic values and clear communication, trust levels increase [12]. Conversely, opaque or partisan decision-making correlates with erosion of trust.

4. Public Trust and Legitimacy in Security Governance

4.1. The Trust–Legitimacy Feedback Loop

Public trust operates as both a consequence of foundational legitimacy and a precondition for effective security governance. This circular dynamic—termed the trust–legitimacy feedback loop [19] - suggests that citizen confidence enhances compliance, which in turn reinforces the perceived legitimacy of institutions. As Tyler [2] demonstrated, legitimacy derived from fairness engenders voluntary cooperation rather than coercion.

Institutional trust strengthens national security policy through a multi-stage causal mechanism. First, trust reduces perceived coercion and increases voluntary compliance with security measures. Second, trusted institutions benefit from higher-quality information flows, as citizens are more willing to cooperate, report risks, and accept temporary constraints. Third, this cooperative environment enhances policy effectiveness, which feeds back into performance legitimacy. In this sense, trust functions not merely as an attitudinal variable but as an operational enabler of security governance.

Figure 2 illustrates the mediating role of public trust between foundational legitimacy and institutional performance, highlighting its dynamic but non-foundational function.

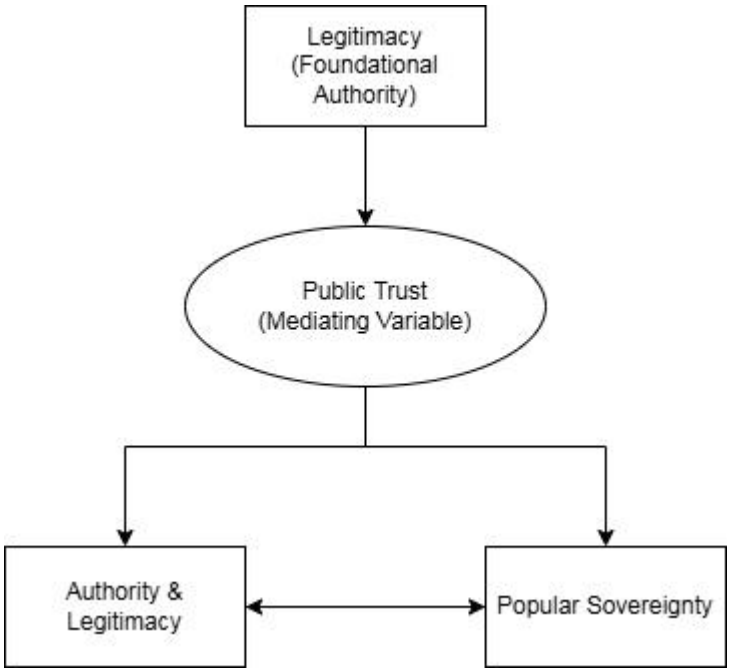


Figure 2. Trust–Legitimacy Interaction Model.

4.2. Trust Deficits and Security Policy

Empirical data show that trust deficits severely limit the capacity of states to implement long-term security strategies. For example, Hungary's declining trust in state institutions (below 35%) correlates with resistance to COVID-19 restrictions and skepticism toward NATO commitments [6]. In contrast, Finland's consistently high trust (78%) enables effective mobilization of resources for both defense readiness and societal resilience [18].

Trust also conditions perceived legitimacy of securitization acts—that is, public acceptance of extraordinary measures justified as necessary for national protection [2]. When securitization lacks communicative transparency, it risks backfiring as fear-based manipulation.

4.3. Institutional Neutrality and Depoliticization

Depoliticization emerges as a key determinant of institutional trust [6,12]. High-trust countries maintain clear separation between political leadership and security enforcement agencies. This professional autonomy reinforces citizens' perceptions that security decisions are made in the collective rather than partisan interest. In contrast, politicization—common in several Central and Eastern European states—undermines neutrality, leading citizens to perceive security measures as instruments of political control [21,22].

Non-partisan decision-making in democratic systems should not be understood as the absence of political influence, but as the insulation of operational security institutions from direct partisan control. While social and economic interests inevitably shape security policy through democratic channels, institutional trust depends on the perception that implementation and enforcement are guided by professional standards rather than partisan advantage.

4.4. Trust and Crisis Communication

The COVID-19 pandemic and hybrid threat environment underscore the centrality of risk communication. According to RAND [8] and Spadaro et al. [17], trust during crises depends less on message content than on perceived credibility of the communicator.

In Finland and Denmark, proactive communication and transparent publication of data fostered trust. In contrast, inconsistent messaging in France and Bulgaria fueled suspicion and social fragmentation.

As OECD [6] concludes, communication trustworthiness involves *acknowledging uncertainty rather than projecting false certainty*. This finding has direct implications for strategic communication in security and defense sectors.

5. Empirical and Comparative Analysis

5.1. Determinants of Trust: A Comparative Model

Based on the triangulation of OECD [6], RAND [12], and Ball et al. [19], five core determinants of trust emerge.

This section presents a comparative analytical model of the determinants of public trust in security institutions. The model is derived through qualitative synthesis of OECD trust indicators, Eurobarometer survey findings, and recurring explanatory mechanisms identified in the reviewed literature. Rather than representing a statistical model, Table 2 systematizes empirically observed patterns into analytically distinct determinants and causal mechanisms. The selected representative cases illustrate how these determinants operate across different governance contexts.

Table 1. Determinants of Public Trust in Security Institutions: A Comparative Analytical Model.

Determinant	Mechanism	Empirical Support	Representative Cases
Transparency & Accountability	Reduces perception of corruption; signals legitimacy	OECD [6]; Ball et al. [19]	Finland, Denmark
Professional Autonomy	Depoliticizes decision-making	RAND [12]; Kelemen et al. [18]	Germany, Czech Rep.
Performance Legitimacy	Tangible results increase compliance	Spadaro et al. [17]	Estonia, Poland
Communication Credibility	Trust maintained through clarity and empathy	RAND [8]; OECD [6]	France, Germany
Civic Culture & Social Capital	Historical habit of cooperation	Fukuyama [5]; OECD [6]	Nordic States

5.2. Cross-National Patterns of Trust

Building on the analytical framework of trust determinants outlined above, the following section examines cross-national patterns of public trust in security institutions. Comparative trust data from OECD [6], Eurobarometer [7], and RAND Europe [8] confirm that levels of public confidence in security institutions vary dramatically across Europe, revealing three broad clusters.

The key determinants were identified through comparative synthesis of OECD trust indicators, Eurobarometer survey data, and recurring explanatory variables in the reviewed literature.

Table 2. Trust in security institutions across Europe, (Source: OECD 2022; Eurobarometer 2023).

Cluster	States	Mean Trust in Security Institutions	Key Determinants
High Trust	Finland, Denmark, Sweden, Estonia	70–80%	Transparency, depoliticization, strong civic culture
Moderate Trust	Germany, Netherlands, Czech Republic, France	50–65%	Mixed performance legitimacy, high communication trust
Low Trust	Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania	25–45%	Politicization, corruption perception, limited transparency

This cross-sectional data reveals that trust does not correlate linearly with economic development, but rather with *perceived procedural fairness* and *institutional integrity* [17,18]. Even among high-income countries, trust levels fluctuate based on communication style, leadership credibility, and historical memory.

5.3. Regional Dynamics

Nordic States: Trust as Institutionalized Legitimacy

Nordic countries exemplify what scholars' term institutionalized legitimacy [5,6]. In Finland, 78% of citizens express confidence in defence institutions, and 74% in the police [6]. This trust derives from decades of consistent transparency, consensus-driven policy-making, and high-quality governance. Public institutions maintain open communication channels — daily briefings, fact-based updates, and accountability mechanisms. During hybrid threat campaigns linked to Russian disinformation, Finland's proactive strategic communication preserved public confidence [9].

Similarly, Denmark and Sweden have embedded trust into their national security architecture. These societies exhibit high interpersonal trust, which correlates with institutional trust — a phenomenon verified by longitudinal studies [17,19].

Central Europe: Fragile Trust and Politicized Security

Central European states present a complex picture. In the Czech Republic, trust in the army and police increased from 42% (2018) to 56% (2023) [6,16]. This growth correlates with greater professionalization and crisis management reforms following the pandemic and regional conflicts. However, the perceived independence of intelligence and interior ministries remains low (43%), reflecting concerns about politicization.

Poland demonstrates a paradox: trust in the military remains high (77%), yet confidence in civilian oversight institutions has declined. This "split trust" reveals tension between professional competence and perceived partisanship [12]. By contrast, Hungary and Bulgaria exhibit structural trust erosion (below 35%) due to long-term patterns of corruption, elite dominance, and opaque governance [21]. In these environments, citizens distinguish between *the military as a technical institution* and *the government as a political actor*, trusting the former but distrusting the latter — a divide documented by *Transparency International* (2022).

Western Europe: Communication and Contestation

In France and Germany, trust is influenced by risk communication and responsiveness.France's institutional trust declined after the 2015–2020 emergency laws and pandemic surveillance debates, revealing tensions between liberty and security (OECD, 2022). Germany, conversely, maintained trust stability (~61%) due to transparent parliamentary oversight and federal-state cooperation. RAND's [8,22] evaluation of German crisis communication found that admitting uncertainty ("We do not know yet") paradoxically *increased* perceived trustworthiness — supporting Luhmann's [4] argument that trust thrives under credible uncertainty, not false certainty.

Baltic Resilience and Trust under Threat

The Baltic States (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania) represent a unique model where *external threat perception* fosters institutional trust. Following Russia's aggression in Ukraine (2022), Estonian trust in defense institutions surged from 68% to 82% [18]. This "rally around the flag" effect, however, was sustained not by propaganda but by transparent government communication and demonstrable readiness. Lithuania's trust levels rose more modestly (from 52% to 64%), constrained by ethnic and linguistic divides influencing risk perception [22].

RAND [23] characterizes this as performative trust — where consistent institutional reliability reinforces legitimacy even in high-threat contexts. These findings align with Fukuyama's [5] thesis that social capital becomes a national security resource.

5.4. Statistical Trends and Correlations

While the focus of this paper is qualitative, correlation analysis from OECD (2022) demonstrates that a 10-point increase in perceived institutional fairness corresponds to an 8–12% increase in public trust. This pattern holds across both democratic and hybrid regimes, suggesting that procedural justice is a near-universal trust driver [2,21].

Interestingly, media freedom indices show a strong secondary correlation with trust in national security institutions ($r = .61$), implying that information transparency reinforces legitimacy. Conversely, perceived corruption (as measured by Transparency International, 2022) shows a negative correlation ($r = -.67$). These findings underscore that trust is not merely an attitudinal variable but a measurable component of governance performance.

5.5. Visual Model of Trust Dynamics

This cyclical model integrates both normative and functional components.
As Luhmann [4] suggested, trust acts as a "mechanism for reducing social complexity" — in modern security governance, it becomes a feedback system sustaining policy stability.

6. Discussion and Policy Implications

6.1. Trust as Strategic Capital in Security Governance

The empirical findings confirm that public trust is not an ancillary moral asset but a strategic resource in modern security policy. In high-trust systems (e.g., Finland, Denmark, Estonia), governments can implement intrusive or preventive measures — from digital surveillance to counter-hybrid operations — with broad public consent.
Trust converts coercive potential into voluntary compliance [2]. In contrast, states with low institutional trust compensate with greater coercion, propaganda, or centralized control, ultimately undermining their own legitimacy [12,21].

Figure 3 summarizes the causal mechanism through which legitimacy and institutional trust jointly enhance the effectiveness of national security governance.

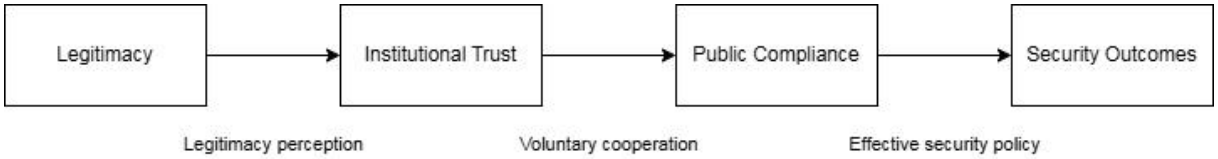


Figure 3. Trust–Legitimacy–Security Governance Mechanism.

From a systems-theoretical perspective [4], trust serves as a self-referential stabilizer within complex governance networks. It reduces uncertainty and transaction costs between state and citizens, allowing policy execution without constant justification or monitoring.

6.2. The Dual Nature of Trust: Normative and Functional Dimensions

While legitimacy and trust are closely intertwined, they operate at different analytical levels. Legitimacy constitutes the normative justification of authority in democratic systems, whereas trust reflects citizens' ongoing evaluation of how that authority is exercised. Confusing these concepts risks obscuring the causal mechanisms through which security governance gains societal acceptance.

(1) **Normative** – legitimizing authority through fairness and transparency.

(2) **Functional** – enabling policy performance by reducing resistance and facilitating coordination.

These two dimensions often reinforce each other but can also diverge. For instance, temporary "rally-round-the-flag" effects (e.g., post-2022 in Estonia) increase trust functionally but may not reflect deeper normative legitimacy. Durable legitimacy requires that citizens perceive decisions as both competent and morally justified [6,19].

6.3. Trust and Hybrid Threat Resilience

In an age of hybrid threats, trust becomes a form of cognitive armor.

Disinformation operations target not infrastructure but belief systems — specifically, confidence in state institutions [8,9]. High-trust societies exhibit greater resilience to such attacks because citizens rely on institutional information channels rather than alternative or conspiratorial sources [17].

A cross-analysis of RAND [23] and OECD [6] data shows that countries with trust above 60% experience significantly less misinformation-induced polarization.

Hence, trust functions as a security multiplier, reducing the resources required to counter hybrid threats.

6.4. Policy Implications

The findings yield several actionable implications for policymakers and practitioners:

Institutionalize Trust Metrics:

Integrate public trust indicators into national security and defense white papers, enabling regular assessments of legitimacy alongside capability measures.

1. **Enhance Communicative Legitimacy:**

Adopt transparent communication strategies emphasizing honesty, empathy, and uncertainty acknowledgment [8].

2. **Safeguard Institutional Neutrality:**

Establish depoliticization frameworks that shield security institutions from partisan interference.

3. **Foster Societal Trust Networks:**

Invest in civic education, participatory governance, and digital literacy to strengthen the trust ecosystem.

4. **Regional Peer Learning:**

Promote EU and NATO-wide exchange programs on trust-building practices, modeled after Nordic transparency and Baltic resilience frameworks.

6.5. Theoretical Synthesis

The integration of empirical and theoretical insights supports a multi-layered model of trust within security governance:

- **Macro-level:** Systemic trust in political institutions (governance quality, legitimacy).
- **Meso-level:** Institutional trust in specific agencies (defense, police, intelligence).
- **Micro-level:** Interpersonal trust shaping daily interactions between citizens and security actors.

This tripartite structure mirrors what Fukuyama [5] described as the "social fabric of cooperation." Its strength defines how well a democracy can mobilize during crises without eroding civil liberties. Consequently, trust and security should not be conceived as competing goods but as mutually reinforcing prerequisites for sustainable governance.

7. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that public trust constitutes the cornerstone of national security policy in democratic societies. Through theoretical synthesis and comparative empirical analysis, it has shown that trust enables the societal validation of legitimate authority and enhances operational efficiency.

High-trust environments — exemplified by Finland, Denmark, and Estonia — reveal that transparency, procedural fairness, and communicative credibility yield long-term resilience. In contrast, low-trust systems rely on coercive legitimacy, which erodes social cohesion and amplifies vulnerability to hybrid threats.

The evidence supports three central conclusions:

(1) Trust is both an input and an outcome of legitimate security governance.
(2) Institutional integrity and transparency are universal predictors of trust, transcending cultural and economic divides.
(3) Strategic cultivation of trust should be recognized as an explicit policy goal — not an incidental consequence of performance.

Future research should further operationalize trust indicators and explore longitudinal dynamics linking trust erosion, digital transparency, and resilience in the context of algorithmic governance. As national security becomes increasingly dependent on societal consent, trust must be treated as critical infrastructure — intangible yet indispensable.

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