

Public opinion on European Union consular protection and assistance overseas. Descriptive Spain Country Report (2025)

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Abstract

This report presents findings from the survey experiment Public Opinion on EU Consular Protection and Assistance Overseas, conducted in Spain in June 2025. The study examines citizens' awareness, legitimacy perceptions, and governance preferences regarding the EU's evolving role in consular protection, particularly in light of the 2023 proposal to reform Directive 2015/637. Based on a representative survey of 1,200 respondents, we show citizens' information conditions (travel behavior and rights literacy), the visibility of political versus operational actors, legitimacy indicators (trust, responsibility attribution, confidence), and baseline preferences for how consular protection should be governed.

Overall, our findings show that respondents view consular protection positively but form opinions under limited practical experience and uneven knowledge of their rights. Political EU institutions are widely recognized, whereas operational arms (e.g., EU Delegations, EEAS) are less visible. In addition, legitimacy indicators show that citizens expect national authorities to remain central while acknowledging a substantial coordinating role for the EU. These findings suggest that the proposed Directive enjoys a permissive legitimacy environment in Spain. Yet, the Spanish case offers an informative baseline as citizens are more supportive of the EU taking a

supporting role rather than a replacing role (taking over national consular responsibilities entirely).

Keywords: Consular protection; European Union Delegations; Third countries; Institutional legitimacy; Rights literacy; European citizenship; Spain.

Resumen. *Opinión pública sobre la protección y asistencia consular de la UE en el extranjero. Informe descriptivo del país España (2025)*

Este informe presenta los resultados del experimento de encuesta Opinión Pública sobre la Protección y Asistencia Consular de la UE en el Exterior, realizado en España en junio de 2025. El estudio examina la conciencia ciudadana, las percepciones de legitimidad y las preferencias de gobernanza respecto al papel creciente de la UE en la protección consular, particularmente a la luz de la propuesta de reforma de la Directiva 2015/637 de 2023. Basado en una encuesta representativa de 1.200 encuestados, mostramos las condiciones de información de los ciudadanos (comportamiento de viaje y alfabetización sobre derechos), la visibilidad de actores políticos frente a operativos, indicadores de legitimidad (confianza, atribución de responsabilidades, seguridad) y las preferencias básicas sobre cómo debería gobernarse la protección consular.

En general, nuestros resultados muestran que los encuestados valoran positivamente la protección consular pero forman opiniones con experiencia práctica limitada y conocimiento desigual de sus derechos. Las instituciones políticas de la UE son ampliamente reconocidas, mientras que los órganos operativos (por ejemplo, Delegaciones de la UE, SEAE) son menos visibles. Además, los indicadores de legitimidad muestran que los ciudadanos esperan que las autoridades nacionales sigan siendo centrales, aunque reconocen un papel coordinador sustancial para la UE. Estos hallazgos sugieren que la Directiva propuesta goza de un ambiente de legitimidad permisivo en España. Sin embargo, el caso español provee una línea base informativa significativa, dado que los ciudadanos favorecen un papel de apoyo por parte de la Unión Europea en lugar de un rol de reemplazo total de las responsabilidades consulares nacionales.

Palabras clave: Protección consular; Delegaciones de la Unión Europea; Terceros países; Legitimidad institucional; Alfabetización en derechos; Ciudadanía europea; España.

Resum. *Opinió pública sobre la protecció i assistència consular de la UE a l'estranger. Informe descriptiu del país Espanya (2025)*

Aquest informe presenta els resultats de l'experiment basat en una enquesta titulada Opinió Pública sobre la Protecció i Assistència Consular de la Unió Europea a l'Exterior, realitzat a Espanya el juny de 2025. L'estudi analitza la consciència ciutadana, les percepcions de legitimació institucional i les preferències de governança en relació amb el paper creixent de la Unió Europea en matèria de protecció consular, especialment a la llum de la proposta de reforma de la Directiva 2015/637 de 2023. Basat en una mostra representativa de 1.200 participants, l'informe examina les condicions d'informació dels ciutadans (perfil de viatges i nivell de coneixement dels seus drets), la visibilitat comparativa d'actors polítics i operatius, indicadors de legitimació (confiança, atribució de responsabilitats i seguretat) i les preferències fonamentals sobre la governança desitjada de la protecció consular.

En termes generals, els resultats indiquen una valoració positiva envers la protecció consular entre els enquestats, malgrat que les seves opinions es formen en un context d'experiència pràctica limitada i coneixement heterogeni respecte als seus drets. Les institucions polítiques de la Unió Europea són àmpliament reconegudes, mentre que els òrgans operatius—com ara les Delegacions de la UE i el Servei Europeu d'Acció Exterior (SEAE)—mostren menor visibilitat pública. Així mateix, els indicadors de legitimació evidencien l'expectativa ciutadana de mantenir les autoritats nacionals com a actors centrals, alhora que reconeixen un paper coordinador substancial per a la Unió Europea. Aquests resultats suggereixen que la Directiva proposada compta amb un entorn de legitimació permissiu en el context espanyol. No obstant això, el cas espanyol proveeix una línia base informativa significativa, ja que els ciutadans prefereixen un paper de suport per part de la Unió Europea en lloc d'un rol de reemplaçament total de les responsabilitats consulars nacionals.

Paraules clau: Protecció consular; Delegacions de la Unió Europea; Tercers països; Legitimitat institucional; Alfabetització en drets; Ciutadania europea; Espanya.

Summary

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1. PURPOSE & POLICY CONTEXT

The Proposal for a Council Directive amending Directive (EU) 2015/637 on the coordination and cooperation measures to facilitate consular protection for unrepresented citizens of the Union in third countries and Directive (EU) 2019/997 establishing an EU Emergency Travel Document (COM (2023) 930 final) signals a step-change in how the EU conceptualizes the regime of consular protection. It extends the notion of non-representation to cover practical situations (Art. 6), strengthens EU Delegations' representation role by default, tasking them with the responsibility of chairing local consular cooperation meetings in third countries (Art. 12), and allows Member States (MS, hereinafter) to delegate specific consular tasks to EU Delegations upon MS request (Art. 11). In institutional terms, it formalizes a diarchy with hierarchy: shared leadership between the EU level and MS. It gives primary role to the Diplomatic and Consular Services of the MS particularly in routine assistance, while keeping the EU ready to coordinate during large-scale crises. However, the proposal reframes subsidiarity and proportionality. EU involvement was traditionally triggered at the limits of state for inter-state capacity, yet the proposal leans toward an inverse reading by treating protection of unrepresented citizens as inherently transnational, and thus suitable for EU-level activation.

Although the EU has strengthened its institutional settings and policy instruments in third countries over time to address large-scale crises situations (Fernández-Pasarín 2015), the effectiveness and, crucially, the perceived legitimacy of EU action in the eyes of citizens remain unclear. Scholarly work on public opinion in this domain is notably limited. Most studies examine legal, institutional, or policy frameworks, with few empirical analyses of citizens' awareness, trust, information conditions and legitimacy indicators (e.g., Fernández-Pasarín, 2016; Moraru, 2019).

This report contributes to fill the gap by showing the descriptive results of the study "Public Opinion on EU Consular Protection and Assistance Overseas: A Conjoint experiment of Perceptions, Preferences, and Policy in Spain", a survey conducted in

Spain as a pilot case to map the preferred institutional design of an EU consular protection regime overseas. The report discloses data about: (1) information conditions (travel behavior and rights literacy); (2) institutional visibility (recognition of political vs. operational actors; e.g., EU Delegations/EEAS); (3) legitimacy indicators (trust, responsibility attribution in large non-EU emergencies, and confidence in delivery); and (4) baseline governance preferences (MS-only, shared EU–MS, EU-led).

2. COUNTRY SELECTION

Spain has been selected as the pilot study since it has an extensive consular network composed of 92 embassies and 66 consulates in third countries outside the EU.¹ The country also has a large diaspora of almost three million citizens (Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores, 2023). As consular protection underpins practical rights such as right to vote from abroad and the timely delivery of assistance, Spain prepares to introduce online Consular Register procedures to improve access and data quality, strengthening citizens' information conditions (reachability, rights literacy) and crisis outreach (alerts, check-ins, evacuation readiness) (Government of Spain, 2024). In addition, Spain's recent large-scale operations underscore how national services and EU mechanisms work in tandem in real crises. In Lebanon, beside the 1,000 Spanish residents, Spain has commanded the United Nations' Interim Force (UNIFIL) in Lebanon and deployed 650 troops along the southern Lebanese border with Israel, since 2022 (Reuters, 2024). Likewise, during the Sudan evacuation, in 2023, EU–Spain joint efforts, evacuated over 162 citizens from EU Member States and partners. So far, 2,500 EU and non-EU citizens have been brought to safety by joint European action (EU External Action, 2023). Thus, Spain is a high-information, high-salience pilot case in which to map information conditions, institutional visibility, legitimacy indicators, and baseline governance preferences of consular protection policies.

3. SURVEY OVERVIEW²

Company name: Verian

Fieldwork period: June 2025

Country: Spain

Sample size: 1,200 respondents

Sampling: Quotas on region (NUTS1), gender, age, and education

Survey duration: ~15 minutes per respondent

Survey firm: Verian

¹ Information retrieved from the official website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union and Cooperation. <https://www.exteriores.gob.es/es/EmbajadasConsulados/Paginas/index.aspx>

² The survey has been pre-registered on the Open Science Framework (OSF) and can be accessed at: <https://osf.io/vdsq9/>

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Ethics approval: Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Protocol #UAB-CERec165

4. RESPONDENT PROFILE

The sample follows quotas on region (NUTS1), gender, age, and education for adult residents in Spain. The Spanish sample is balanced by gender (51.12% women; 48.88% men: see figure 1) and covers the full adult age range (22.28%, 18–34; 39.24%, 35–54; 38.49%, 55+; see figure 2). Educational attainment is diversified, with 37.82% reporting tertiary degrees, 25.27% upper-secondary/vocational, and 36.91%, lower-secondary or less (see figure 3). Regional representation follows NUTS1 quotas across Northwest, Northeast, Community of Madrid, Centre, East, South, and Canarias, with shares closely tracking population weights (e.g., Madrid 14.24%, East; 29.81%, South; 21.48%. See figure 4).

Figure 1. Gender Distribution of Survey Sample

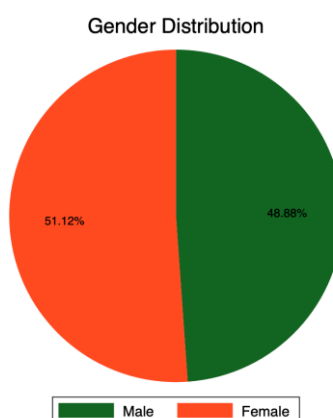


Figure 2. Age Distribution of Survey Sample

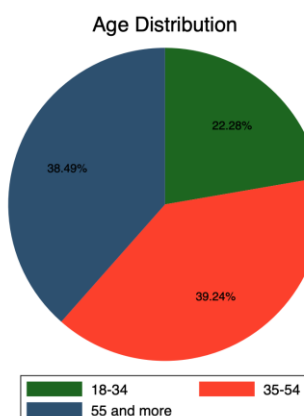
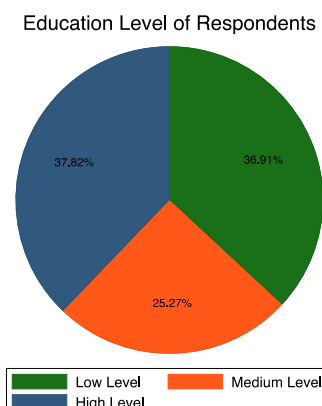
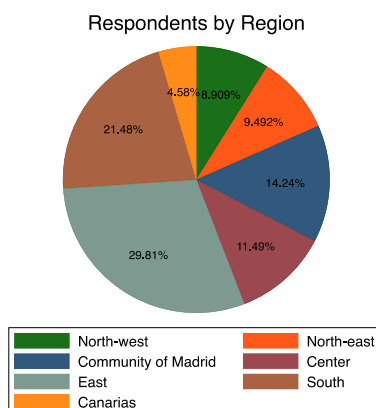


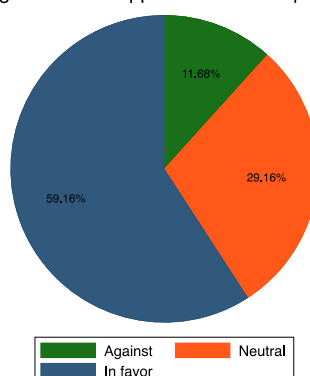
Figure 3. Educational Distribution of Survey Sample**Figure 4. Regional Distribution of Survey Sample**

5. ACCEPTANCE

First, we check whether consular protection plans are acceptable in principle in the eyes of the citizens. Our survey confirms that overall citizens' attitudes are positive: 59.16% of responses are supportive and only around 12% are opposed to these policies (Fig. 5). This pattern suggests that public attitudes are rigidly in favor, with the very low number of rejections serving as a proxy for the degree of constraining dissensus (Hooghe & Marks, 2016).

Figure 5. Citizens' attitudes toward consular protection plans

Average levels of support for consular protection

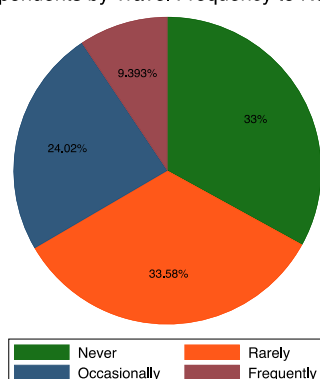


6. INFORMATION & EXPERIENCE CONSTRAINTS

Second, because many evaluations are formed under limited experience and partial knowledge, we measured travel behavior, rights literacy, and institutional awareness to understand how information conditions affect preference formation. Figure 6 shows that about two-thirds of respondents report never/rarely traveling to non-EU destinations (one-third ~33.5% do so).

Figure 6. Overall travel frequency of people

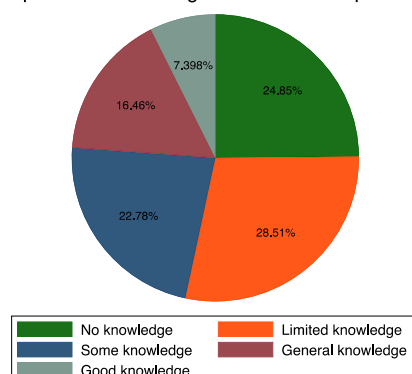
Respondents by Travel Frequency to Non-EU



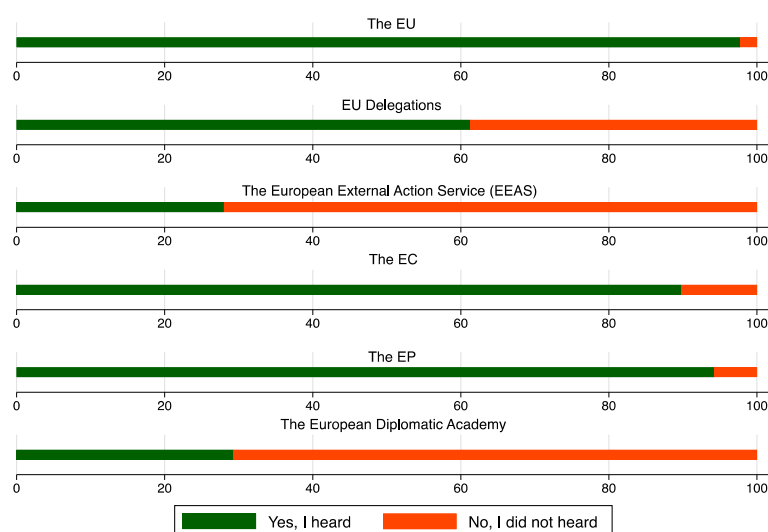
Similarly, the awareness of EU consular protection rights among respondents is generally low. A majority, 53.36%, report having either no knowledge (24.85%) or only limited knowledge (28.51%) of these rights. 22.78% say they have some knowledge, while smaller shares report general knowledge (16.46%) or good knowledge (7.39%). This suggests that while a portion of the population is at least somewhat informed, comprehensive understanding of consular protection as EU citizens' rights remains limited (see figure 7).

Figure 7. Respondents' Knowledge about Consular Protection Rights

Respondents knowledge about consular protection



Yet, awareness is near-universal for the EU (97.76%), the European Parliament (94.26%), and the European Commission (89.78 %), but comparably lower for operational arms, EU Delegations (61.26%), EEAS (28.01%), and the European Diplomatic Academy (29.34%), as seen in figure 8.

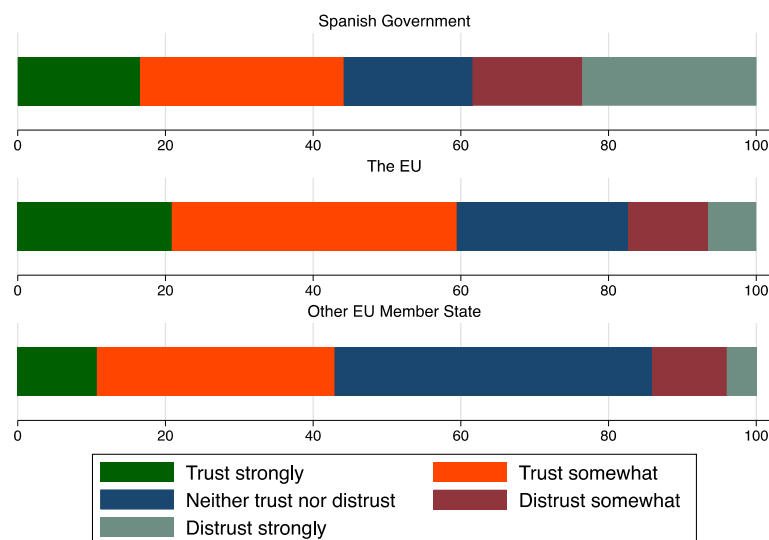
Figure 8. Respondents' Awareness about EU institutions and operational arms

Spanish respondents evaluate consular protection under informational and experiential constraints. They most rarely travel outside the EU and over half report no/limited knowledge of their consular rights. They readily recognize the EU's political face, the EU, Parliament, and Commission, but the operational hands are less visible. Thus, the awareness of EU Delegations is only moderate, and the EEAS/European Diplomatic Academy is little known.

7. INSTITUTIONAL LEGITIMACY (TRUST & CONFIDENCE IN THE ACTORS)

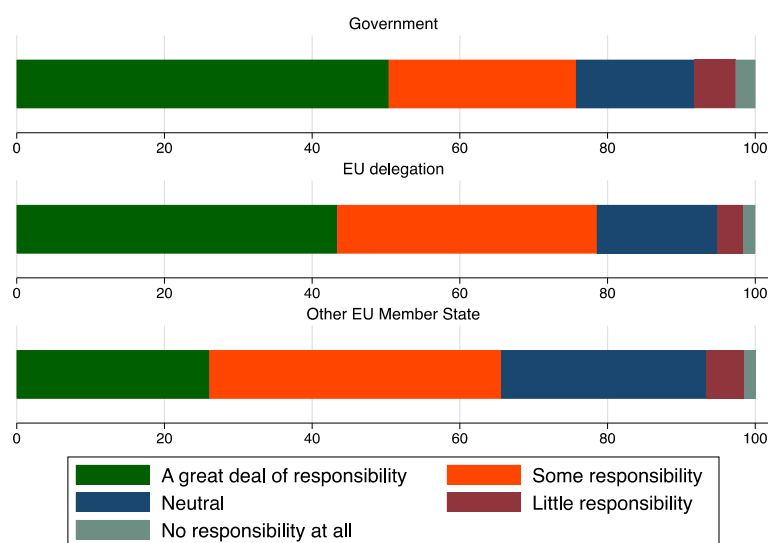
Most importantly, institutional legitimacy denotes citizens' belief that specific authorities are not only responsible to govern consular protection (rightful mandate) but also can do so effectively (credible capacity). Empirically, we use trust (a diffuse, forward-looking judgment about an institution's intentions and reliability) and confidence (a capability-focused judgment tied to expected performance) as complementary indicators. In figure 9, the EU exhibits the highest trust (around 59% combined "strongly/somewhat"). Other EU Member States attract the largest neutrality (43.1% neutral; 42.9% trust; 14% distrust), consistent with weaker public trust. The Spanish government is comparatively polarized (around 40% trust; 38% distrust), suggesting sharper domestic evaluations.

Figure 9. Respondents' Trust in institutions



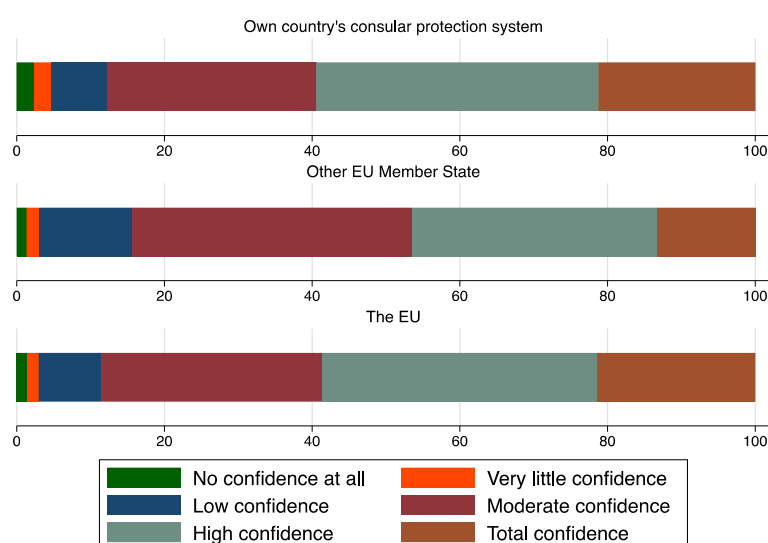
Beyond general trust meters, figure 10 shows that respondents place primary responsibility for managing large scale non-EU emergencies to the national government (50.4%). EU delegations also carry substantial expectations (43.4% "a great deal" and 78.6% at least "some,"). Other EU Member States are seen as more secondary: 65.6% assign them at least some responsibility, but only 26.1% say "a great deal," and neutrality is highest here (27.8%).

Figure 10. Respondents' responsibility attribution to institutions to manage (large-scale) emergency situations outside the EU



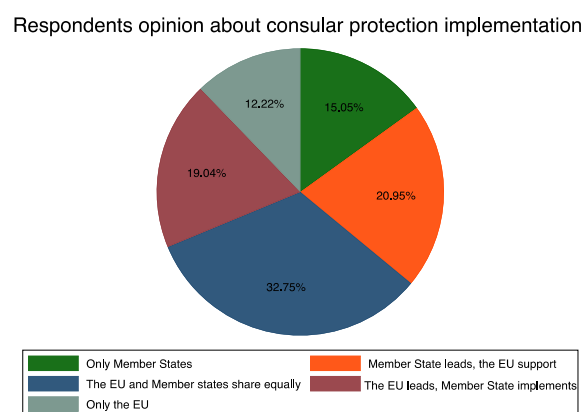
Coming to the confidence in the ability to provide effective protection, data show that it is similarly high for the respondent's own country (around 59%) and for the EU (around 58.6%), but lower for other Member States (around 47%), pinpointing cross-assistance as the soft spot in the perceived delivery chain which can be seen in Figure 11.

Figure 11. Respondents' level of confidence to institutions that can provide effective consular protection



Preferences over governance mirror these trust and confidence structures. As shown in Figure 12, when excluding national governments and examining respondents' opinions about consular protection implementation among institutions, the most common preference is equally shared responsibility between other Member States and the EU (32.75%). A further 20.95% want Member States to lead consular protection plans with EU support, while 15.05% favor Member States only. Conversely, 19.04% want the EU to lead (with Member States implementing) and 12.22% prefer EU-only responsibility. In other words, 85% support some EU role, 36% back Member State-led arrangements, and 31% back EU-led arrangements, again consistent with coordinated delivery rather than exclusivity.

Figure 12. Respondents' Opinion about consular protection implementation between The EU and Member States



These distributions jointly establish institutional legitimacy for both national authorities and the EU. At the same time, the neutrality confidence toward other Member States identifies the legitimacy risk in mutual-assistance scenarios, precisely where a Spanish national might be served by a consulate of another EU country. In other words, citizens are comfortable with the EU and with their own national service, but they withhold the same level of confidence from partner Member State provision. Together, these results indicate a legitimacy-consistent governance national lead- with EU support.

8. CONCLUSION

The Spanish pilot case offers a clear read on 2023 Council Directive proposal reform. Our survey showed that Spaniards support consular protection in principle. Yet this sits on thin information foundations. Respondents recognize the EU's political institutions, but operational actors such as the EEAS and EU Delegations, are far less visible. Many rarely travel outside of the EU and over half report no/limited knowledge of their rights. Thus, the combination of low operational visibility and low rights

literacy creates an expectations gap precisely where the proposal asks giving EU Delegations a more explicit role in field coordination and, potentially, delegated tasks.

On institutional legitimacy, Spaniards tend to assign primary responsibility for major non-EU emergencies to their national government, yet a large share also expects EU Delegations to play a substantial role. Trust in the EU is relatively high, and confidence that the EU can deliver effective protection is comparable to confidence in Spain itself, yet “other MS” preference falls behind. This points to a practical “national lead, EU support” namely front door model (Spain if present; otherwise, the listed EU Delegation/Lead State). Taking legitimacy indicators together, this suggests a permissive environment for the Directive’s shift toward stronger EU gathering, as long as communication stresses complementarity rather than replacement.

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