

# POLITICAL ARTICLE

(Eng)

## WAKING EU'S DEFENCE FROM IT'S DEEP SLUMBER



Source: Getty Images/AFP/P. Hertzog

By **Noor Ostyn**

This year - 2024 - started with increasingly worrying messaging from military leaders across Europe. As the conflicts around the world - closer and closer to the European Union's borders - intensify, it becomes clear that Europe has been enjoying their era of relative peace in ways that diminished their military responsive power. Whilst the limiting of military spending in the last decades freed up budget for European countries to invest in other sectors, it has left several member states and their armies understaffed, malequipped and underfunded. Additionally, ambivalence arises concerning the support of major military powers like the United States, as many European member states fail to meet the military spending quota, as proposed by NATO (2% of the countries GDP). All this considered, the European Union is left with a defence system that suffers several major issues; a lack of money, a diminished reactive capacity by the European defence firms, weak military cooperation between the member states, and difficulties regarding military recruitment.

Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine caused a sudden surge in military discussion throughout the European Union, debating the budgeting of Europe's chronically underfunded military. This became a question of both national investments (member states reaching the NATO threshold) as well as supranational defence budgets. The European Union does have certain tools in its defence arsenal, the European Defence Fund consists of 8 billion euros, which complements member states national efforts, but does not replace it. This might seem a considerable sum of money, however, since the start if the invasion researchers calculated a financial 'defence gap' of 160 billion euros, which puts the European Union in a net negative with regards to military budgeting. This leaves Europe consistently dependent on bigger military powers, especially the United States, which has become a more and more ambivalent partner. With the upcoming presidential elections, Republican candidate Donald Trump has been spreading the message that he can no longer ensure military support to the European Union, as they do not respect the NATO thresholds. Even without the instability brought by Trump US support becomes less evident, as US military officials warn for situations wherein the US will be preoccupied elsewhere in the Asia-Pacific and simply unable to assist the EU.



The beginning of this decade has seen multiple monetary injections. However easy that fix might seem it's insufficient to solve the plethora of issues faced by the European military sector. When the European Union decided to aid Ukrainian forces in their fight against its aggressors it became clear that even with bigger budgets the European military firms were not capable of producing the amount of equipment needed. This resulted in necessary outsourcing of military production to countries that have never know relative peace like the EU has the last decades. A clear example is South Korea, whom was able to - at least partially - fill the gap between the promises the EU made to Ukraine and what they were able to produce themselves. French president Emmanuel Macron reacted to this by calling out for an 'économie de guerre', reforming and strengthening the European defence-industrial complex. In may of last year the European Parliament fast tracked legislation boosting European production of weaponry and expand our defence equipment stocks while delivering to Ukraine. The war in Ukraine has also led to an increased price for key weapon systems, thereby devaluing the proposed budgets by European states.

One of the reasons why the European military production sector is not up to par – besides underinvestment – is the general lack of cooperation between different firms. There is a tendency of inefficient competition instead of efficient cooperation. Where countries refuse to outsource certain production processes, and rather keep the production of essential weaponry within its own borders. A clear example of this is the production of tanks, instead of applying the principle of comparative advantage – outsourcing the production of all European tanks to the country that is able to produce it most efficiently – France is producing its own tanks, as well as Germany, as well as... leaving little production capacity for other weapons or general scale enlargement

Former EU member state, Great Britain, already called for higher military participation rates among the public back in January of 2024. During a speech General Sir Patrick Sanders called for an increase in military training of civilians as well as creating a steady base for voluntary call up. By focussing on voluntary application Sanders opposes many others that are questioning whether the wars of tomorrow might rely on old fashioned involuntary conscription. In the case of Belgium, Admiral Michel Hofman considers it 'worth the effort' to re-evaluate military duty, as it was never technically abolished, rather temporarily suspended since 1992. However, the Admiral adds that at the time being a country like Belgium simple does not have the means to train and equip large numbers of staff. Additionally, one can question how to translate this ancient system to a 2024 society, with regards to gender equality, but also people part of the LGBTQ+ community, reasons that would previously exempt someone from service.

Answers to those questions can possibly be found in European countries that currently implement a military draft. Norway still has a military draft, whereby every 19-year old is required to meet at a military base. There a selection is held on who actually serves and who is excused, around 15% of eligible candidates are selected. Since 2014 this selection process includes women, and while the Norwegian military aims at an equal distribution regarding gender among participants, they find that women are generally less motivated, one of the selection criteria (BRONTHE NORWAYGUIDE). While this system could work for European member states there are limits. In most European countries the military visibility is low, without a continued draft the younger generation has been less exposed to uniforms and therefore less motivated to join the army. Furthermore, it is understood that the values of younger people have significantly changed, they tend to be war-averse, less patriotic, more individualistic and therefore less inclined to participate in defence (EURONEWS). Add to that an ageing demographic and the younger generations that are on average less healthy and unfit, resulting into a slinking pool of potential recruits. Some member states (Spain, France and Portugal) are considering solving this problem by granting citizenship to immigrants who serve.

De plus, les changements démographiques, avec une population grissante, mais aussi une population des jeunes qui sont moins sportifs et plus en mauvaise santé. Ça donne un plus petit nombre de personne qui peuvent être sélectionnées pour un service militaire. Quelques États membres (L'Espagne, La France et Le Portugal) considèrent des solutions qui incluent de donner la citoyenneté a des immigrants qui s'engageraient dans l'armée.

Russian bombs falling at the fringes of the European Union has clearly woken the bastion from its peaceful slumber, encouraging deeper and serious debate as well as action regarding the European defence system. While facing a plethora of challenges, the situation has also laid bare the potential and willingness of the European Union to become more independent and self-sufficient in its military needs. The upcoming election thereby provides a unique opportunity to re-evaluate the way in which European member states cooperate whilst trying to defend our safety. The military question is thereby no longer something located in a far away land, whereby the EU serves as a mediating or peace-fostering outside, rather it has come knocking at our doorstep, forcing us to critically reflect on what a European military future looks like.

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