



EUROMIL aisbl
(European Organisation of
Military Associations)
Rue John Waterloo Wilson 78
B-1000 Brussels
Tel: +32.2.626.06.80
E-mail: euromil@euromil.org
N° Ent.: 0538.809.759

Speech of the President of EUROMIL on the occasion of the General Assembly of N-COACA in Nicosia, on 7 March 2016

Dear Ms. President, Mr. Vice-President, Secretary General, dear Board Members, Minister, General, Dear Members of Parliament, honourable guests, delegates, dear members, ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to start by expressing my gratitude to the Non-Commissioned Officers Association of the Cyprus Army (N-COACA) for the invitation and for the chance to address such a distinguished audience.

Please permit me to introduce the European Organisation of Military Associations to those who are not yet familiar with us. I have the honour to be President of EUROMIL, the umbrella organisation of 38 national military associations and unions. EUROMIL promotes the social and professional interests of military personnel of all rank in Europe. Stretching across 23 countries, EUROMIL is the main Europe-wide forum for the cooperation among professional military associations on issues of common concern. EUROMIL, moreover, strives to secure and advance the human rights, fundamental freedoms and socio-professional interests of soldiers at European level.

What can EUROMIL do and what can it not do for you? While the question seems to be simple enough, any answer will not be as straight forward as it may be desired.

As main Europe-wide forum, one of our main tasks is to facilitate exchange of information, experiences and best practice among our member associations. This entails that member associations are encouraged to support each other in a spirit of mutual solidarity.

In order to secure and advance the human rights, fundamental freedoms and socio-professional interests of soldiers, EUROMIL makes every effort to monitor and intervene in multinational debates at European level and to promote the above mentioned through advocacy and awareness-raising. This happens mainly by acquiring contacts with members of the European Institutions, alliances and influential persons by attending and participating regularly in committee meetings in the European Parliament as well as other seminars, lectures, workshops, and debates relevant to our members.

Regularly we welcome Members of the European Parliaments (MEP), national politicians, and high ranking military leaders to our biannual Presidium Meetings. Furthermore, EUROMIL organises meetings with relevant national and European politicians and representatives of our member associations. We raise awareness



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toward EUROMIL's demands for international missions, such as a common soldiers' statute including a harmonisation of social standards and common rules of engagement, e.g. via our 'Recommendations for Armed Forces in Times of Multinational Crisis-Management and Peace-Keeping Missions'.

Besides, EUROMIL has participatory status at the Council of Europe. In 2014 we have been granted a special consultative status at the United Nation's Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). EUROMIL also upholds contacts with the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and particularly with the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR). EUROMIL is an observer at the NATO Parliamentary Assembly (NATO PA) and collaborates with the Centre for Democratic Control of the Armed Forces Geneva (DCAF). EUROMIL is the only Non-Governmental Organisation being part of the International Conference of Ombuds Institutions of the Armed Forces (ICOAF) which will meet this year for the eighth time.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Why do we promote the social and professional interests of soldiers? The armed forces are composed of human beings, who have chosen to serve their country as *Citizens in Uniform*. The fact that these men and women happen to be wearing a uniform does not negate their rights as citizens of their country. Of course, this may all sound somewhat self-evident, but it is no less controversial.

While armed forces must be democratically accountable, soldiers should also be fully integrated in the civilian social order, the individual soldier should have a clear and obvious stake in democracy. Service personnel, moreover, should be seen as highly skilled employees, workers, similar to police and firemen - ready to risk health and life in order to do their duty. As such, soldiers ought to legitimately influence and affect the social and professional conditions in the armed forces.

The fundamental premise of influence is the freedom of association – and the right to collectively represent, through consultation and negotiation, common grievances.

Here in Cyprus, soldiers are represented by three military associations, which are all members of EUROMIL. The Non-Commissioned Officers Association of the Cyprus Army joined EUROMIL in 2010.

Therefore, the fundamental requirements for the professional representation of Cypriot soldiers are met. You should consequently be able to exercise your core right of freedom of expression and association in order to promote your social



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and professional interests and ultimately to improve the working conditions of your members.

EUROMIL is an organisation founded on the idea that by working together across borders, we will be stronger. In this context, the solidarity with individual associations is of paramount importance to me and EUROMIL. We constantly strive to listen to the concerns of each association and to contribute when and where possible. What cannot be achieved by the individual association, can sometimes be accomplished collectively.

Ladies and gentlemen,

At this point, I would like to highlight the outstanding work that your association and its leadership has done in the past and continues to do so in EUROMIL. Your active participation at our work and the good relationship with many other European member associations made the Non-Commissioned Officers Association of the Cyprus Army in a short time a well-respected and above all a reliable partner: A partner with strong and firm positions when needed, but at the same time a loyal defender of our common values. EUROMIL is grateful and happy to have you on board.

Ladies and gentlemen, dear guests,

Allow me to come back a few moments on the situation in Cyprus. First of all I would like to emphasize that the right of association is about social dialogue; the channelling of information and concerns about personnel and material up the chain of command and *vice versa*. As such, military associations should be / are a valuable cooperation partner for military authorities. Institutionalising social dialogue thereby actively seeks to solve issues before they start to affect discipline and motivation. Hence, military associations contribute to a more caring and attentive organisation, boosting loyalty among the rank and file.

Therefore, stakeholders should make all efforts to establish personal contacts in order to exchange information and share experiences. If governments, military leadership and military associations are willing to act in an atmosphere of trust there is no need to limit the freedom of speech or expression in public for those who represent military personnel. Also in this case EUROMIL is of the opinion that some limitations are acceptable, for example declarations on operational matters, but that a blanket ban of the freedom of speech or expression is neither wanted nor needed.

As part of the restructuring and rationalisation process, national armed forces all over Europe are cutting numbers and increasingly emphasizing volunteer recruitment. Therefore, recruiting young citizens and tie them to the armed

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forces are essential strategic tasks. As a consequence, the military is now competing to attract men and women directly from the civilian labour market, meaning that the armed forces, in order to successfully fill its ranks, must position itself as modern and attractive work place to be competitive on the labour market. Moreover, it is commensurate with my understanding of modern armed forces that a career in the military must be as predictable for the individual soldier as any other professional career for other workers. A safe working environment, including regulated working times and the social security of - among other provisions - a fair and just pension system for all ranks, starting immediately after their end of service, should be of common use in modern armed forces.

Even if EUROMIL is of the opinion that military personnel are '*Citizens in Uniform*' we understand that it is not always evident to implement a certain number of European directives such as for example the working time directive. However, the latter has been drawn up in a way that member states can have a flexible implementation of the stipulated principles. It even gives the possibility to take specific measures for the armed forces. However, there is a huge difference between excluding a specific group of workers, such as the military, and implementing it in a way whereby the balance between the needs of the armed forces as such and the working and living conditions of military personnel can be found. This debate has been going on in several other countries and a number of workable and payable systems have been implemented. If wanted and needed, EUROMIL is always available to share its experiences on this and other fields.

Looking at the NCO's career I would like to make a personal remark. I started my military career in 1979 in the Belgian Armed Forces as a soldier and joined the NCO training school one year later. As a young sergeant I joined a field artillery battalion and served there for several years. Notwithstanding the fact that I had been working since the end of the eighties on a full time basis as the Secretary-general of an independent military trade union, I followed the normal promotions up to the rank of chief warrant officer, of course after having fulfilled the required conditions. It is my firm believe that a strong and well-motivated NCO corps is a benefit for the armed forces. Also, Cypriot NCO's should be entitled to develop a full career comparable with most of their European colleagues. The non-commissioned officer corps is often referred to as "the backbone" of the armed forces as they are often the primary and most visible leaders for most military personnel. Nowadays, NCO training and education typically include leadership and management as well as service-specific and combat training.



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Dear Delegates and guests,

To conclude I would like to stress once more that military associations do not challenge or undermine command and discipline; on the contrary, they stand for more efficient and well-motivated forces and provide military authorities with a valuable cooperation partner. Only, when soldiers and their representative associations are able to exercise and enjoy the full spectrum of fundamental rights and freedoms, will the armed forces be truly integrated in society.

Ladies and Gentlemen, dear delegates and guests,

In closing, allow me to express my wish for a constructive and productive debate – and that the General Assembly will conclude successfully.

Thank you for your attention.