



Policy Brief

United in Military Diversity

How to Accommodate Diverging Military Cultures

ABSTRACT

This policy brief examines how military culture varies across the armed forces of European Union member states. It analyses the chances and risks that this variety poses to further integration and gives some practical policy recommendations how to accommodate the cultural aspect in defence integration.

Introduction

Never have European leaders so unanimously agreed on the project of deeper defence cooperation than today, in the face of damaged trust in their major ally across the Atlantic, the departure of the biggest military power from the EU and a persistent threat posed by Putin's Russia. But when leaders are pushing for more intense cooperation among their 27 member states, they will have to overcome certain structural obstacles. These will be in their way, regardless if they aim to achieve the ultimate goal of a European army, a European Defence Union¹ or, less ambitiously, just want to live up to the state of collaboration that is institutionally already provided by the treaty of Lisbon.

What are these obstacles? In the current debate on European defence integration as well as in the recently published reflection paper of the European Commission on the future of European defence², three fields of problematic factors are frequently mentioned. Firstly, there is the challenge to accommodate 27 diverging military cultures. How do different approaches to training, leadership and combat affect the overall effectiveness of European forces? And how could the integration process take this cultural variety into account? Secondly, there is the argument that integrated European forces require democratic control not only on the national but also on the European level. But the European Parliament does not yet have the necessary competences to exercise this role. Thirdly, there is the fragmentation of the defence market that is severely limiting the potential of European armed forces. The main obstacle here is the interest of member states to preserve their national industries.

This policy brief examines crucial aspects related to military culture. Key questions for further integration are: What are the actual and most striking differences among EU armed forces? How do they affect cooperation and military effectiveness on different levels? And how do they need to be taken into account when further integration is desired?

Current State of Play

Every national military organisation has throughout history developed a unique culture. Whereas a national military culture is usually well adapted to the structure of its own society and the requirements of the armed forces missions, it might clash with other military cultures when operating internationally. Many cultural aspects, like

¹ <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+TA+P8-TA-2016-0435+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN>

² https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/reflection-paper-defence_en.pdf

different combat experiences or training methods, even benefit cooperation. Some however pose serious obstacles. This paper focuses on the four most problematic ones: language, conscription, individual rights and leadership.

Language is an obvious expression of culture in military organisations. Whereas English is the standard language to be used in CSDP and NATO missions as well as in radio communication, operational guidelines and handbooks, it is often only mastered by officers or soldiers specialised in communication, reconnaissance and command and control. It must be noted in this context that the military is one of few professions, where people with mostly lower levels of education work in an international context. Hence, fluent communication in English can often only be expected among unit leaders and communication specialists but not among all soldiers on CSDP missions. This is a major obstacle to the integration of military units below battalion level and exchange programs.

Another interesting cultural aspect is conscription as it means that an individual soldier might not have joined the military voluntarily but has been obliged to do so by law. In Europe, compulsory military service is currently enforced in Austria, Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Estonia, Lithuania and Greece. Some countries like Austria only deploy conscripts on a voluntary basis though. Also the schemes of non-compulsory employment differ among the member states. In some countries like Germany, most military personnel works on the basis of temporary contracts whereas most French soldiers serve as life time professionals. Both of these aspects have implications on the degree of motivation and professionalism which do not necessarily cause problems but require mutual comprehension.

Closely related to the issue of conscription is the question, how military service is appreciated within different European societies and remunerated by the member states' ministries of defence. This question reaches beyond the indeed very different levels of salaries among member states. How are soldiers compensated for deployments or for hardship like back-to-back-missions? How are they being insured against physical or mental harm incurred by deployments? And ultimately, how are the relatives left behind provided for in case of a service related death? Member states' regulations vary largely in this respect, although the soldiers affected very often serve the same cause on the same European mission. These fundamental differences in appreciation and remuneration affect morale and identification with the European Union among soldiers in a very negative way.

Finally, culture is being expressed in terms of leadership and the level of responsibility of the individual soldier. This aspect revolves around a series of questions. Does an enlisted person have to obey any order? Soldiers in the German Bundeswehr for example are even obliged to disobey orders that conflict with international law which gives them a high degree of autonomy. Are soldiers allowed to criticise or to associate? Under certain restrictions, Swedish military personnel are even allowed to go on strike whereas Italian soldiers do not have the right of association and Portuguese soldiers have trouble to have their right of association respected. These fundamental differences in responsibility and the attribution of citizen's and employees' rights lead to a situation where most Danish soldiers would

probably refuse to serve under the command of a Portuguese officer. This, again, severely impedes exchange programs and integration of military units. Another important aspect in this context is the role of women in armed forces. While most Nordic and Western European countries actively pursue a strategy of gender mainstreaming, some Eastern and Southern European armed forces significantly lag behind in this respect. The general respect for women in leadership positions is a necessary pre-requisite for deeper integration.

Possible Ways to Move On

National military cultures have grown through history and are well adapted to the structure of their societies. It should not be a goal of national or European policies to replace them by a common European military culture. The goal should rather be to converge in the critical areas mentioned and to increase cooperation and integration in order to facilitate mutual learning and comprehension. When it comes to CSDP missions, it seems also desirable to stimulate identification with the EU as ultimately deploying entity. Moving on does not require a change of the European treaties but the consequent use of the instruments they provide for, such as PESCO.

Language must not be an obstacle for military cooperation. English should be the military lingua franca because the EU will continue to cooperate closely with its transatlantic allies and with NATO. Member states could support linguistic interoperability by providing every enlisted person, regardless of rank or function, with more intense English language training than now.

Mutual comprehension can best be facilitated by increasing the number of exchange programs. The element of “crosspollination” as it is called in NATO terms is still not sufficiently developed, particularly among ranks lower than officer.

Soldiers deployed on CSDP missions should receive the same remuneration for their deployment as well as the same insurances against injury or death. This would not only lead to an increased feeling of fairness among soldiers but would also provide a basis for identification with the EU. This goal could be approached if member states would agree on a certain level of remuneration and insurance for soldiers on CSDP missions. It could be even better pursued if the EU was willing to review its “Athena-mechanism” according to which all expenses for CSDP missions have to be covered by the deploying member states. If the EU funded at least part of the compensations and insurances out of its own budget it would remove some of the unfairness experienced by soldiers and provide a starting point for an increased European identification.

Finally, a common understanding of military leadership principles in Europe would be desirable in order to increase interoperability. This could best be achieved by further internationalizing the staff and flag officer training either by increasing exchange programmes on this level or even by setting up a European Military academy. Such an institution could assume the responsibility to train all future European Generals

and Admirals. A modern leadership academy might also help the top military personnel in some member states to advance their soldiers' rights and responsibilities. Experience shows that military personnel who are entitled to associate and voice critique are more motivated and hence more effective in training and combat. Motivated soldiers also contribute to a more positive perception of the armed forces as employer by potential recruits.