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Speech of the President of EUROMIL
Associazione Libera Rappresentanza on 9 April 2016, Palermo (Italy)

Dear Mr. President, honourable guests, delegates, dear members, ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to start by expressing my gratitude to the *Associazione Libera Rappresentanza* for the invitation and for the chance to address this audience.

Please allow 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 ranks in Europe. Stretching across 23 countries, EUROMIL is the main Europe-wide forum for cooperation among professional military associations on issues of common concern. Moreover, EUROMIL strives to secure and advance the human rights, fundamental freedoms and socio-professional interests of all servicemen and women 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 establishing contacts with officials of the European Institutions and influential persons, by 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 Parliament (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 toward EUROMIL's demands for international missions, such as a common soldiers' statute including a harmonisation of social standards and common rules



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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 EUROMIL was 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 with the individual soldier having a clear and obvious stake in democracy. Moreover, service personnel should be seen as highly skilled employees, workers, similar to police and firemen - ready to risk health and life in order to fulfil 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.

EUROMIL was founded and still is based on the idea that by working together across borders, we will be stronger. In this context, 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, dear Italian friends,

EUROMIL exists since almost 44 years; 44 years of understanding and friendship between soldiers; 44 years of exchange of experiences between individual



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member associations; 44 years to promote general, ideal, social, and career interests of soldiers and to represent member associations vis-à-vis supranational organisations. These goals were already set by eight associations from Belgium, Denmark, Germany, and the Netherlands in December 1970 during a preparatory meeting in Bonn.

However, it was on 13 September 1972 that a range of associations convened for EUROMIL's founding meeting in Bergisch-Gladbach in Germany. It will be a surprise for many of you that amongst the participants several Italian representatives were present. Dr. Aldo Berciatti, Mr. Giorgio Castellano and Prof. Romano represented the *Sindacato Nazionale Autonome dei Militari (SNAM)* and Mr. Arnaldo Brezzi represented the *Associazione Nazionale Ufficiale Aeronautica (ANUA)*. Unfortunately, these Italian associations disappeared soon from the list of EUROMIL members. But their presence in the early days of EUROMIL is the best prove that the wish to represent soldiers was on the agenda more than 40 years ago in Italy.

Ladies and gentleman,

Allow me 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 a valuable cooperation partner for military authorities. Institutionalising social dialogue thereby actively contributes to a mentality in which problems are solved 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 a blanket ban of their 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. Recruiting young citizens and tying them to the armed 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



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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 or international treaties on a national level. However, very often they have 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 is for example the case with the right of association for military personnel. This debate is going on in Italy and several other countries. However, a number of workable and successful systems have been implemented.

It is sometimes claimed that independent staff associations are incompatible with the military profession. What value does such an argument have when in countries like Ireland, Finland or Sweden over 95% of the active officers, including the generals, are member of an officers' association?

It is sometimes claimed that professional staff associations could undermine military discipline or combat efficiency. What value does such an argument have, when Belgian, Danish, Dutch or German soldiers have full trade union rights and are at the same time participating in several missions and operations abroad?

Decade-long experience has shown that those countries that have granted full rights of association to their soldiers have not experienced any loss of military efficiency or discipline. On the contrary!

We, as democratic military associations, do not interfere in matters of domestic or foreign policy, neither in defence strategy nor in operational decisions. We, as military associations, fully respect the chain of command and do not condone insubordination within armed forces. Mutual respect and trust are key factors in the foundation of a true social partnership. Military associations or trade unions are not about the personnel status of its leadership. They are not about chanting empty slogans. They are not about giving only criticism. They are about a search



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for common solutions. They are about looking for common agreements in benefit for as well military personnel as the armed forces.

Dear Friends,

Soldiers are called upon to make personal sacrifices in the service of the nation and the international community - including the sacrifice of their own health and life. In return, our soldiers must always be able to expect fair treatment. They are entitled to terms and conditions of service which are commensurate with their sacrifices.

Soldiers fulfil their duty towards their nation. Military staff associations in turn remind nations of their duties towards the soldiers and their families.

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 meeting today.

Thank you for your attention.