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COMPACT

## BROKEN ARMS

Demographic Change and Europe's Security Capacities

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### Key messages:

- Demographic change is a shaper of both security risks and security capacities.
- Recruitment requirements will remain at a high level due to the complexity of international military missions and new technology, while population ageing will make it increasingly difficult to recruit enough qualified personnel.
- Policies focusing on the improvement of employment conditions and the expansion of the recruitable population seem to be most promising.
- An open exchange about best practices among European countries could help identify the most effective combination of policies.

**POPULATION AGEING – AN UNDERESTIMATED CHALLENGE FOR EUROPE’S INTERNATIONAL SECURITY CAPACITIES**

THE SOCIAL, ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES of demographic change are widely discussed. Demographic change, however, can also be an important factor when security issues are concerned. In this regard, demographic change thus far has been mostly analysed as a shaper of security risks. Only recently has research also begun to understand demographic change as an important factor regarding security capacities. Here, one of the crucial questions is how population ageing will constrain Europe’s ability to take up its envisaged role in world affairs, respond to emerging international security risks and live up to its responsibilities of collective security.

**EUROPE’S MILITARY ENVIRONMENT**

EUROPE’S BROADER MILITARY ENVIRONMENT which defines military missions and military organisation is characterised by four central elements (Apt, forthcoming): (1) globalisation, which leads to a heightened sensitivity to security-relevant developments worldwide; (2) a geostrategic environment that is characterised by a high, sustained number of regional conflicts that simultaneously display low- and high-intensity elements of warfare; (3) changes in military technology with profound implications for the character of warfare; and (4) changing socio-cultural environments, which may either enable or constrain governments’ capacities to carry out foreign policy and, if necessary, project military power. Even those states that are typically more sympathetic towards the use of military force struggled to maintain and sustain societal support for military operations such as that in Afghanistan or Iraq.

As a result of these changes in the external environment, Western armed forces have been endorsed with an “extended role set”, in which newly emphasised demands of peacekeeping and nation-building are complementary to the traditional roles aimed at the security and integrity of national territory. This has led to a military professionalisation and a greater reliance on well-trained, immediately deployable professional soldiers.

**MANPOWER – STILL THE BACKBONE OF SECURITY POLICY**

WITH THESE DEMANDS, manpower will remain “the principal determinant of a state’s military power and is essential to success in almost any imaginable future conflict” (Korb et al., 2006). In particular, the contemporary military role set of expeditionary combat operations, peacekeeping missions and nation-building

displays a strong human element. Technological improvements withstanding, no substitute exists for large ground forces capable of accomplishing the critical tasks of judgment, control and cooperation, or socio-political reorganisation (Kagan, 2006).

In addition to the demand for manpower, recruits must fulfil a range of qualitative criteria. Despite the continuous growth in military technology, it is expected that the military profession will continue to place high physical demands on soldiers, necessitating such abilities as physical strength, endurance, coordination and agility. Furthermore, a certain level of cognitive skill is necessary to master complex military systems and operations. Further requirements comprise moral standards, social competences, appropriate age and, in most cases, citizenship. Finally, cross-cultural competences and diplomatic skills are a crucial factor in successfully operating sensitive military missions in other regions of the world.

**EUROPE’S RECRUITMENT CHALLENGE**

IN EUROPE, the absolute size and relative share of the youth population is shrinking due to low fertility rates in recent decades. The youth population in Poland is estimated to halve between now and 2050 (Figure 1). In Germany it could shrink to a level of about 70 per cent of its current size and even presently, the German military already fails to meet its recruiting goals. During the last years around 7,000 vacancies have been left unfilled (German Ministry of Defence, 2011). A much smaller decline of the youth population is, for example, projected for the Czech Republic, while it will grow slightly in the United Kingdom.

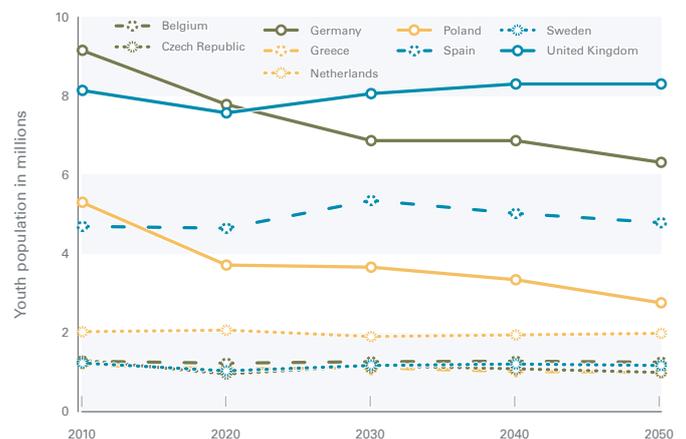


Figure 1. Youth population in selected European countries, 15-24 years, 2010-2050  
Source: Apt (2010)

An additional difficulty is that most Member States of the European Union have abolished conscription, mainly used as a “personnel reservoir”, and moved to all-volunteer forces. Fur-

thermore, a range of qualitative trends considerably exacerbates the challenge of recruiting sufficient numbers of new soldiers, particularly considering growth rates in tertiary education, poor youth health status, and changes of preferences and values.

Although European populations differ significantly in their educational attainment levels, a universal trend towards higher education has occurred (Figure 2). This long-term increase in higher education represents a dilemma for military recruitment efforts. Those young people that are most capable of fulfilling the cognitive and physical requirements of the soldierly profession attain a level of schooling that predisposes them for a variety of career options. Here, the military's recruitment target population strongly overlaps with that of other employers, such as civilian institutions and private firms, which will lead to a fiercer competition for skilled personnel in the future. At the same time, the share of youth that attain low or moderate levels of education will decline. This expansion in education will be favourable in terms of the recruitment of officers but will severely aggravate the recruitment situation among the lower ranks.

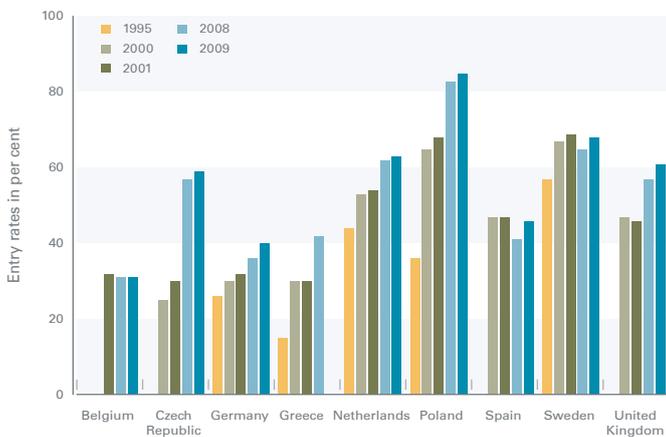


Figure 2. Trends in entry rates at university level in selected European countries, 1995-2009  
Source: OECD (2011)

In terms of health, empirical evidence suggests an emerging discrepancy between the demand and supply of recruits with good health. While soldierly physical and mental requirements have been on a continuous rise, recent trends indicate substantial health risks and deficits among youth, e.g. overweight and obesity, physical inactivity, tobacco consumption, alcohol misuse, and illicit drug consumption (Apt, 2010).

Finally, sustained social change towards a strong emphasis on self-fulfilment, individual freedom, and quality of life has affected individual values, preferences, and life courses in Europe. This also influences occupational preferences and the degree to which a military career is perceived as desirable and viable. It can be assumed that in the foreseeable future, the attractiveness of the soldier profession will further decline due to certain

imminent characteristics, like the risks to life and limb, long absences from home, high demands on the geographic mobility of soldiers and their families, as well as a high degree of hierarchy, bureaucracy and rigidity.

## EUROPEAN DISPARITIES

MEETING MILITARY RECRUITMENT GOALS poses an increasing challenge for most European countries, although to different extents and in different ways: either more quantitatively, more qualitatively or even on both levels (Apt, 2010). For Sweden and the Netherlands, for example, the future military recruitment outlook is consistently positive in regard to the size of the youth population, its human capital endowments, health and physical activity, as well as preferences and values. Still, it remains to be seen how the high level of educational attainment will influence future recruitment rates. The demographic makeup in the United Kingdom is also favourable, but endowments in terms of youth health status appear less conducive to military recruitment requirements. The situation in Germany is somewhat inverted to that of the United Kingdom, in the sense that the demographic situation is fairly dire, while human capital endowments are relatively favourable. Hence, the German population at recruitable age will shrink significantly while the youth health status seems to be encouraging. Countries like Poland range at the extreme end of the spectrum. While levels of educational attainment have increased considerably, a particularly gloomy demographic outlook is accompanied by a relatively poor health status of young people.

## POLICY OPTIONS: STRONGER FOCUS ON EMPLOYMENT CONDITIONS AND SUBGROUPS

MOST EUROPEAN COUNTRIES facing military recruitment challenges have developed specific recruitment strategies. Some initiatives focus especially on the improvement of administrative processes or on external marketing efforts. Apart from these, two measures seem to be particularly promising: (1) the improvement of employment conditions and (2) the expansion of the recruitable population.

Improving the basic conditions of employment in terms of contract conditions, work-life balance, and pay is an adequate response to social change and a new social interpretation of gainful employment. Most armed forces changed the terms of enlistment and now offer different forms of military service with varying durations. For all-volunteer forces, material benefits are an essential component in attracting youth. In the British military, for example, general annual pay raises are linked to increas-

es in civilian wages. However, even if necessary, these measures are expensive and divert resources from military procurement.

In view of these constraints, it seems that of all policy options, the expansion of the recruitable population by altering the enlistment criteria has the most significant direct effect on military manpower supply, especially in regard to women and immigrants without the country's citizenship. For example, to increase the share of women in the armed forces, the Belgian military introduced gender-specific cut-off scores for the physical fitness test to prevent female applicants from failing requirements that appeared unwarrantedly high (Lescreve & Scheurs, 2007). In regard to the inclusion of immigrants, the British armed forces seem to be especially successful. In 2009, the share of immigrants in the British Army reflected the ethnic composition of the general society at 11% (Mason & Dandeker, 2009).

An increase in subgroups thus far underrepresented would not only enhance the representation of the population at large; it would also be in line with economic and strategic rationales. Just as in the civilian economy, females and previously disadvantaged minorities would become the major beneficiaries of demographic change in the military organisation (Weiner & Russell, 2001). An increasing heterogeneity of the military workforce would also have a direct influence on the strategic options of armed forces. During military operations abroad, ethnocultural diversity among deployed soldiers may serve as "multipliers" of capabilities that increase the chances of mission success in culturally complex settings (Leuprecht, 2006).

However, altering existing recruitment criteria of age, educational attainment and health status seems only partially effective. In many countries the target audience was extended to include those under the age of 18 in the framework of pre-recruitment measures and those above the original maximum enlistment age of around 30. Other measures to counter demographic change, such as the delay of retirement, will only have marginal effects, because of the military's particular dependence on the constant inflow of young people to fill the junior ranks in the military personnel structure. Even though some countries (e.g. Belgium and Spain) found the lowering of recruitment criteria in terms of education and health effective in filling open vacancies, the lowering of selection levels seems to be quite expensive, since the duration of military education and training has to be extended and the risk of early attrition tends to increase.

Overall, the specific package of measures will have to vary in accordance with the availability of financial means and priorities regarding the recruits' quantity and quality. An extensive and open exchange among European countries about experiences in regard to the effectiveness of measures seems to be a promising way to identify best practices in military recruitment in times of demographic change.

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