

## IMPLICATIONS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON MILITARY EXPENDITURE: NEW PERSPECTIVES ON EUROPEAN DEFENCE COOPERATION

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*The global economic crisis of 2008 has had a negative impact on defence budgets in most European countries. After 12 years of efforts taken for the economic recovery, the member states of the European Union are once again facing financial challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Defence budgets are once again in danger of being reduced, but at the same time the European Union needs more than ever to show unity and cooperation.*

*In the wake of the 2008 crisis, defence cooperation was one of the solutions adopted by EU member states to protect and strengthen their military capabilities. The development of multinational capabilities has proven to be more cost-effective than nationally sustained efforts. The current situation, generated by the COVID-19 pandemic, reminded us that cooperation initiatives need continuous adaptation to the evolution of new types of crises. The planning, development, procurement, operation and support of joint defence equipment should be complemented by efforts to innovate and prepare for new risks and threats.*

*Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic; cooperation; defence capabilities; equipment programmes; military expenditure;*

## INTRODUCTION

In 2008-2009, the security environment was still under the influence of classical risks and threats, such as terrorism, the proliferation of mass destruction weapons, inter-ethnic conflicts, or organised crime. In addition, the economic and financial crisis triggered not only economic but also political and social effects, with strong implications for military budgets. States and regional and international organisations had to adjust their defence planning and to find new cooperation strategies in order to reduce spending and, at the same time, strengthen their armed forces.

The former High Representative of the European Union for Foreign and Security Affairs, Catherine Ashton, stated, in May 2011, that the European Union aimed to turn the financial crisis and its impact on national defence budgets into an opportunity to increase cooperation in terms of developing military capabilities. Thus, pooling and sharing the resources, prioritising, specialising and finding multinational solutions have become central points in defining new defence strategies.

Through the Pooling and Sharing initiative, the European Union aimed to ensure the continuation of the process of developing military capabilities, in the context of the global economic and financial crisis. Cost-effectiveness required the coordination and harmonisation of military requirements between member states, as well as the assessment of financial priorities for the development and acquisition of new military capabilities. Moreover, in order to increase the effectiveness of these activities, the duplication of capabilities had to be avoided, both within the European Union and within NATO-EU strategic partnership. The implementation of this cooperation initiative was not a singular action, NATO member states adopting a measure with a similar goal, the Smart Defence initiative. The two concepts, imposed by cost efficiency needs, have become representative in the defence sector, with cooperation turning into a significant feature in the reconfiguration of new security strategies.

After more than ten years since the financial crisis and budgetary constraints affected the defence acquisitions programmes, we are once again in front of a new potential crisis, generated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the effects that the drastic measures adopted during this period have had on the economic growth. Thus, the purpose of this article is to present the perspectives of the European

defence institutions on cooperation projects between states in the context of the pandemic. We aim to analyse the efforts taken, both at national and regional level, in relation to the challenges posed by the pandemic and its consequences on public health and the social and economic security of citizens, as well as the positions of European Union representatives on the impact that the COVID-19 has on the efficiency of the armed forces.

### EXAMPLES OF ACTIONS TAKEN BY THE ARMED FORCES DURING THE PANDEMIC PERIOD

We have noticed, since the beginning of 2020, that military personnel have been among the first institutions to respond constructively to the coronavirus pandemic, being early mobilised for various actions such as building hospitals, distributing medicines and protective materials and necessary goods to the isolated or quarantined persons, but also in the repatriation or evacuation missions.

In *Italy*, one of the European countries most affected by the pandemic, the armed forces have been mobilised from the beginning to help enforce quarantine and maintain the security level. These activities were part of the “*Strade Sicure*” operation (*Operazione Strade*). The armed forces have taken action in order to build field hospitals, transport patients, disinfect and sanitise public spaces, distribute medical products and provide specialised personnel. At the request of the Department of Civil Protection, in order to adequately deal with the emergency caused by the pandemic, the armed forces provided aircraft, ground vehicles and the necessary infrastructure to accelerate the distribution of personal and necessary protective equipment in the fight against the virus. Considering that fast responses were necessary to ensure an efficient distribution of medical and protection products, the Italian armed forces involved the Logistic Regiment of the Mechanised Brigade “*Pinerolo*” in the areas most affected by the virus, a logistics unit having a high capacity of materials handling (Ibid.). The Viterbo Air Force, which is a central unit for rescue operations, had the mission of administering and manoeuvring the bio-isolation stretchers “*IsoArk N36*” and mobilising several regiments, prepared to intervene in emergency situations (Esercito, 2004). The 3<sup>rd</sup> Air Support Regiment “*Aquila*” was also engaged in the Bergamo region in handling the effects of the high incidence of mortality, in collaboration with the civilian authorities and with logistical assistance and specialised personnel provided by the Russian Federation (Ibid.).

In France, in March 2020, President Emmanuel Macron launched a resilience operation (*“Opération Résilience”*) (Macron, 2020) in the fight against the coronavirus pandemic. This plan involved effective mobilisation consisting of logistical assistance for the health sector. The French Naval Forces carried out evacuation missions and mobilised the Tonnerre amphibious assault helicopter carrier and 200 sailors in order to support the civilian forces on the island of Corsica. The Air Force contributed to the evacuation, transport of patients and repatriation of French citizens from China. The National Agency for the Security of Information Systems was also mobilised to combat phenomena such as fake-news or attacks on strategic technological systems and communication networks (Assemblée Nationale, 2020). The resilience operation aimed to coordinate the actions of the French armed forces in three main areas: sanitation (by putting into operation field hospitals and carrying out decongestion operations in the most affected areas), logistics (by air, sea and ground transport of patients and health and protection materials, as well as by providing expertise and professionals), protection (support in the surveillance of sensitive areas, along with internal security forces) (Ibid.). Tests and performance measurements for several prototypes of protective masks have also been achieved within the Directorate-General for Armaments.

In *Germany*, the air force contributed to the repatriation of citizens, to the distribution of food, medicine and field beds. They also achieved patient transfer missions, both in Germany and from France and Italy. The land forces set up field hospitals, provided medical support and mobilised about 2,000 volunteer reservists in medical actions. The naval forces also took part in actions to help the citizens. In addition, as part of the support provided during this period, the armed forces procurement office allocated 241 million euros for the purchase of protective medical equipment (German Ministry of Defence, 2020).

*Spain* is another example of a state that has faced a very large number of cases of COVID-19. The military forces played a very important role in managing the situation imposed by the adoption of harsh restrictions. At the beginning of the pandemic, in March, the Spanish Ministry of Defence implemented the military operation *“Balmis”*. Thus, soldiers from the Military Emergency Unit were mobilised to implement activities of inspection and disinfection in public spaces. The transmission battalion of the same unit received two drones from a private company for their adaptation and use in the process of disinfection of large areas. For the same purpose, the Ministry of Defence took the initiative to develop a germicidal irradiation device with ultraviolet light. The air and land forces

also provided logistical support in transporting patients and distributing medical equipment, as well as setting up field hospitals in several affected regions. The Spanish armed forces continue to be mobilised throughout the year to help maintain quarantine and slow the spread of the virus, by creating a tracking system for early detection of infection, and establishing epidemiological surveillance units (Spanish Ministry of Defence, 2020).

In Romania, the Ministry of National Defence deployed the armed forces from the beginning of the pandemic, for the installation of epidemiological triage tents. Specialists in several fields (medical, procurement and logistics) provided support to local and central authorities. According to military ordinance number 3/2020, at the request of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the army intervened in public order missions and provided personnel and logistical means to support the activities of the Romanian Border Police. Moreover, the Ministry of National Defence installed the ROL 2 medical team, implemented missions for the transport and distribution of approximately 45 tons of medical equipment from Seoul to Bucharest and 21 tons of protective materials from Turkey (Romanian Ministry of Defence). Through the NATO Support and Procurement Organisation – NSPO, the Ministry of National Defence purchased 200 tons of medical materials and equipment, worth 15 million euros (Ibid.).

In addition to the missions of logistical support, procurement and support in building hospitals or coordinating medical activities where necessary, the Ministry of National Defence also contributed to the design and development of equipment to support hospitals and authorities in Romania in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. Researchers and military doctors from the Military Equipment and Technologies Research Agency and the Military Medical Research Centre developed the first type of isolation stretcher of Romanian design and production; a medical mechanic ventilator was also designed within “*Ferdinand I*” Military Technical Academy (Ibid.). The Ministry of National Defence also undertook missions to provide support with equipment and medical personnel to the states severely affected by the spread of the virus: Spain, Italy, the Republic of Moldova, the USA.

The above-mentioned examples demonstrate that military personnel were among the first institutions to respond to the challenges of the pandemic. Despite the fact that the defence budgets have been reduced in the recent years as a result of the economic crisis of 2008-2009, the armed forces of the European states have been mobilized since the beginning of this period and have provided support in the transport and distribution of medical equipment, protection, construction

of field hospitals, repatriation and evacuation of citizens, maintenance of public order, disinfection actions, resources provision and specialised personnel for the medical and research sector.

The military forces' responses to the health crisis were discussed in April 2020, during a video conference chaired by Josep Borrell, the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. Defence ministers discussed the impact of the pandemic on defence and outlined the efforts made in the fight against the virus and the status of the missions and operations under the Common Security and Defence Policy (Defence Ministers videoconference, 2020). In this context, the EU Defence Ministers decided to create a dedicated task force at the level of the EU Military Staff, with the aim of sharing information and expertise between member states on the military assistance in support of civilian authorities. This working group would strengthen strategic communication efforts and help identify lessons and practices that can be used in the future. General Claudio Graziano, President of the EU Military Committee, confirmed the involvement of all defence ministers of the member states, arguing that sharing expertise and increasing the capability of European armed forces will become a priority, reflected in future EU defence initiatives (Lařici, 2020).

## **THE ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND THE EUROPEAN INSTITUTIONS APPROACH TO COOPERATION INITIATIVES**

The International Monetary Fund predicts a slowdown of the economic growth by 4.9% globally, due to the negative impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had on the economic activity in the first half of 2020. A new economic shock is expected and, most likely, the defence budgets, which are unlikely to recover from the 2008-2009 financial crisis, will once again be subject to adjustments. Defence and integration initiatives, such as PESCO (Permanent Structured Cooperation) or the European Defence Fund, are dependent on financial contributions from states, and if they are affected by a new economic crisis, then the resources for common defence projects will be also reduced. In addition, the restriction of activities during the pandemic will have consequences for the defence industry, such as blocking supply and distribution chains, delaying delivery for military products, as well as the research, development and innovation projects for defence (Ibid.). The negative effects of a possible financial crisis on military expenditure will not only be felt at the national level, but will also affect the projects and programmes that the European Union

is trying to implement in the security and defence sector. The awareness of the risks posed by lower spending and the reorientation of the military equipment efforts at national level should drive the EU to maintain the solidarity and to strengthen the cooperation policies and strategies.

In 2018, the European Commission proposed the allocation of 13 billion euro to the European Defence Fund, in order to facilitate the process of cooperation between companies and between EU member states in research and development projects for defence (Internal Market). However, the forecast of the economic situation for the coming years will prevent the achievement of many such objectives. The EU's long-term budget for 2021-2027 was adopted under the economic and social pressures from the pandemic, with most of the negotiated agreements being conducted to the Union's recovery after the quarantine period in the first part of the year. Thus, the perspective on defence cooperation projects has changed. The European Defence Fund received a budget of 205 million euros (European Defence Fund, 2020). These funds will be directed to the development of capabilities such as: military drones and related technologies, space technologies, UGV (unmanned ground vehicle) solutions, high precision missile systems, future naval platforms, airborne electronic attack capabilities, tactical and highly secured networks, cyber situational awareness platforms, or next generation of active stealth technologies (Ibid.).

Although we cannot yet quantify the effects of the pandemic on economic growth and we cannot anticipate when a new financial crisis will break out, this above-presented example of a defence budget cut reflects the inconsistency on the European defence strategy. In this context, the strengthening of military cooperation initiatives remains an indispensable factor in the security and defence policies of the European Union.

Presumed budget cuts will affect the ability of some member states to initiate or continue national equipment and development programmes and the consequences will be felt within the European Union's defence strategy as well. This fact could, however, intensify the defence cooperation process. According to Jiří Šedivý, Executive Director of the European Defence Agency, Europe needs more than ever a consolidated joint defence and capability planning (Europe Defence Matters, 2020). The development, planning, procurement, operation and support of the equipment at multinational level, either under the auspices of PESCO or the European Defence Agency, is more cost-effective and interoperable and could have a greater impact comparing to the isolated efforts taken by the states at national level.

Tomislav Ivić, the Secretary of State for Defence in Croatia, who held the Presidency of the European Union in the first part of 2020, considers that the necessary steps to strengthen the cooperation efforts are: ensuring coherence in initiatives by integrating the European defence capabilities into the national strategies of planning, the cooperation at EU level, helping and advising the member states in the process of identifying capabilities and technologies that can be jointly developed, and the cooperation with strategic partners (Ibid.). It is also important to strengthen the initiatives of PESCO and the European Defence Fund, which are guided by principles such as cooperation and sharing of common values and interests. Understanding the new types of threats, adapting or developing new response mechanisms and the innovation of the security technologies should be a permanent task of the European Union, which assumes the role of security guarantor in the region. One of the lessons learned from the current pandemic is the importance of the response time and the efficiency of cross-sectorial coordination. Thus, we consider that the way in which national and European institutions approach the process of cooperation between various actors, from governments, research institutions, defence industry, private sector, to the military, civil society and citizens is a key element in achieving these goals.

## CONCLUSIONS

The armed forces have provided support to civilian authorities in various sectors since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, from the construction of hospitals, to the provision of medical personnel and equipment, transportation, procurement and logistical activities. This has been reflected at both national and multinational level. There have been many criticisms of the European Union's delayed response to this global crisis. However, the national armed forces have also been deployed to support missions in other states most severely affected by the pandemic, and this mobilisation is one of the visible methods of cooperation, as a response mechanism to an unprecedented crisis. We conclude, therefore, that the role of the defence capabilities must represent the focus of attention of decision-makers in the military sector. The actions taken during this period and briefly analysed at the beginning of this article show that the tasks of this sector are indispensable in addressing not only classical threats, but also new types of challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic is an opportunity to identify and prioritise capabilities that can be improved or developed in order to deal with similar situations in the future. Therefore, defence budgets must be treated responsibly and cooperation and coordination efforts must be constantly strengthened.

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