

Poland on its Way to Become One of the Largest Armed Forces in Europe?

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Poland, a country that lies on the eastern flank of the European Union (EU) and North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), is making serious efforts in defence to reorganise and rebuild its armed forces. A new draft law envisages a doubling of troop strength and a significant increase in military expenditure to counter external threats. These plans would enable Poland to become one of the largest armies in the Europe and to achieve strategic autonomy within the EU and NATO. This InfoFlash will look at what drives this new law. It will also explain what the law entails and how the country plans to finance the new plans. Finally, most importantly, what consequences this future "Great Army" could have for Europe.

Incentives That Led to The New "Great Army" Law

In January 2021, Poland organised a war game called "Winter-20" (Wojciech, 2021). This exercise aimed to simulate what would happen if Russia attacked Poland (Nowak, 2021). The scale of such a military exercise was unprecedented in the history of post-Cold War Poland. However, the results were not reassuring: despite NATO's support, including high-tech weaponry such as F-35 fighters, Patriot air-defence systems and M142 HIMARS mobile rocket artillery systems, Poland's front-line troops would quickly lose up to 80 per cent of their troops and equipment (Rossomando, 2021). The Russian troops destroyed the Polish navy and air forces (Buchanan Ponczek, 2022). The exercise planned for 22 days ended in only five days, with Warsaw surrendering (Rossomando, 2021). The result was described as "worse than 1939" (Nowak, 2021). As soon as the result of the war exercise was leaked to the press, Polish officials used public sentiment to push for more military spending. At the end of October 2021, Mariusz Błaszczak, Poland's Minister of National Defence, and Jarosław Kaczyński, the Deputy Prime Minister leading the Polish ruling party Law and Justice (PiS), proposed a new law "for the defence of the homeland" to increase national defence capabilities (Gera, 2021). However, the driving force behind this policy is not only the immediate security implications, such as Polish concerns about Russia's imperial ambitions and Belarus' hybrid warfare, but also the growing gap between Poland and the European Union (Adamczyk, 2021; Wilczek, 2021). Indeed, as part of the European Union, Warsaw's nationalist political ideas have often clashed with Brussels. The Polish Constitutional Court, for example, recently declared its supremacy over EU law, leading the European Court of Justice to fine Warsaw EUR 1 million per day (Tilles, 2021; Makszimov, 2021). A more formidable military force would have a leverage effect on the politics of continental Europe and enable Poland to achieve strategic autonomy within the EU and NATO. In other words, part of the motivation for this massive arms build-up is to give the Polish people more confidence in the strength of their national armed forces so that they will be far less willing to support the EU than their national government. That is a price worth paying for Poland. Nevertheless, the majority of the Polish population continues to support the European project, making a "Polexit" unlikely in any case.

Strategic Doubling of The Polish Army Modernisation of The Military Hardware "To Keep Peace"

When announcing the homeland defence bill, Kaczyński used the phrase "if you want peace, prepare for war". For Poland, this "preparation for war" means, first and foremost, a doubling of the number of full-time military personnel of the Polish army from 110 000 to 250 000, and an increase in the militia of part-timers and volunteers from 30 000 to 50 000 (Nowak, 2021). The Polish military personnel would number 300 000, making it one of the largest in the EU. However, this is merely a repetition of what was already outlined in the Polish Armed Forces Development Programme released in 2018 (Chang, 2022). More noteworthy is Poland's intention to acquire new weapons while modernising the current equipment and infrastructure of the Polish Armed Forces.

In addition to a new military branch, the Cyber defence Forces, Poland's defence upgrade over the next decade includes the purchase of missile defence batteries, cyber warfare capabilities, and conventional gear such as helicopters, fighter jets, and battle tanks frigates. The plan involves purchasing all such military equipment produced in the US and elsewhere in the EU, said Polish Deputy Prime Minister Kaczyński (Adamczyk, 2021; Gera, 2021). In this context, the Polish government has already signed defence contracts worth USD 17.4 billion over the past three years, including for two US Patriot missile defence batteries, four Black Hawk helicopters, 32 American F-35 fighter jets, 250 Abrams main battle tanks from the US, three Miecznik class frigates, and 24 Turkish drones (Chang, 2022; Nowak, 2021; Wilczek, 2021; Çetiner, 2021). While the machines themselves may be of top quality, their introduction into the Polish Army, unfortunately, brings the risk that the Army will work with several equipment families simultaneously. If there are differences in size, weight, and mechanics, this could lead to each equipment group needing its own armoured recovery vehicles, thus bridging the equipment and supply chain. All this will have severe consequences for interoperability and mobility. In addition, Poland's decision to supply itself largely with US equipment and thus become a sponsor of the US defence industry is also worrying for defence in the EU (Lulko, 2021). Firstly, it remains essential for the EU to secure and produce its internal supplies of armaments and military equipment so that it does not need those of others, and this would logically be compromised if the Member States were to purchase armaments and military equipment elsewhere, with all the consequences mentioned above. Thus, while the modernisation of military equipment is beneficial and very welcome for the EU, it does mean that the interoperability of EU forces will be compromised, and the EU will face difficulties if it wishes to operate militarily as a single entity without external dependence, such as that of the US. Furthermore, the US's equipment supply to Poland makes the country even more independent of the EU and even more confident of disagreeing with EU policy.

Poland's Military Financing Plan: Use of COVID Funding Methods And "A Little More Debt"

The above-mentioned improvements in Poland's war capacity naturally go hand in hand with significant defence expenditure. According to Polish Defence Minister Marius Błaszczak, an increase in defence expenditure is therefore planned, and new opportunities for borrowing will be provided. To finance this new expenditure commitment, Warsaw intends to set up a "support fund" for the armed forces, along the lines of the COVID fund, which would supplement military spending by using government-secured bonds issued by the Polish National Development Bank (Bank Gospodarstwa Krajowego, BGK), the state fund (Polski Fund Rozwoju, PFR), and the profits of the National Bank of Poland. Although no concrete figures are mentioned, Poland is already one of the few NATO members spending more than 2 per cent of its assets on defence, as Polish Defence Minister Marius Błaszczak also stressed. The official military budget has been increasing for years and currently stands at about USD 12 billion, or about 2.22 per cent of GDP, higher than it has been since 1994. Consequently, this means that the military expansion enjoys widespread public support in Poland and that they follow Kaczyński's ideology of "it is better to be safe and a little more in debt".

'National' Strategic Autonomy Put Above 'European' Strategic Autonomy: A Threat to EU Military Interoperability Plans?

A stronger Polish army would give the country considerable political weight. As noted above, a larger army, better equipped for battle, would give ammunition to Polish strategic autonomy within EU and NATO. It would give Poland more options without constantly consulting with its Western partners to deal with the growing problems in the East. Although Poland is far away from an EU exit, the EU should proceed cautiously with the new plans on the Polish table. Poland and the Polish people want to be part of the EU because they have realised that this is historically the best way to preserve their territorial sovereignty and national integrity. However, if they find alternative mechanisms, such as a strong army, the EU becomes superfluous to support and protect their national sovereignty. A country with an enormous army, one that is much larger than any other European country, will feel safer in the strength of its national armed forces than in any armed force, especially with the support of the US. Kaczyński argued that, as a country that lies on the eastern flank of the European Union and NATO, Poland must have a serious deterrent force and the “ability to effectively defend itself for a long time on its own” (Gera, 2021; own emphasis). However, Poland must not forget that it is not on its own, but that the EU is striving for greater cooperation, surveillance, defence of Europe, and cohesion in the European defence project.

This military expansion must be seen as a real threat to the EU, not in terms of a direct military attack, but in terms of what it means for the independent small Polish population and how confident they will be in taking on the EU in further disputes. Instead of a single entity, the EU will crumble without an EU army, but with each Member State having its own national army, a situation in which we, in fact, already find ourselves. The aim of EU countries should therefore not be to invest as much as possible in their armies and to acquire their strategic autonomy in the field of defence, but to invest in military cooperation between as many EU countries as possible, preferably with as little external dependence as possible, to increase EU strategic autonomy. There is still progress to be made if the EU is to gain the confidence of the Member States in its ability to coordinate and cooperate in the defence field.

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