

Policy recommendations for defence considering Von der Leyen's speech on the State of the Union

WRITTEN BY MATTEO ZANOTTI AND RAQUEL VELASCO CEBALLOS

<https://www.istockphoto.com/es/foto/bandera-de-la-uni%C3%B3n-europea-contra-el-parlamento-europeo-gm506815322-84389551?phrase=EU>



Policy recommendations for defence considering Von der Leyen's speech on the State of the Union

By Matteo Zanotti and Raquel Velasco Ceballos

On the morning of the 14th of September 2022, in the European Parliament, the State of the European Union (SOTEU) took place. Ursula Von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, had a very passionate speech touching upon the main priorities of the European Union for the present and the future. In her discourse, but more in general on all the interventions of the other European Parliament Members, some interesting insights for the European defence industry, and European militaries can be drawn. Even if military affairs were not explicitly mentioned, the priorities and the guidelines they established should be applied also to the management of the armed forces.

This InfoFlash analyses the main points of Von der Leyen's speech to apply them to the defence sector and guide future investments in a European framework of cooperation and sustainability.

United is good, but united in a single market is better.

Speaking about the Russian aggression against of Ukraine, the President of the Commission highlighted that Ukraine's inclusion into the single market would help its reconstruction and its transition in the post-war period. This statement was intended to promote the process of Ukraine's integration into the European Union framework, both by underlining how the union of intent within the EU institutions helped Ukraine to resist and by saying that a lot more will need to be done in the future. However, even if this first topic appears to have no connection with the military field, except for the fact that she spoke about war, some policy remarks can be made for militaries. In fact, a single market does not only mean free trade within EU borders of raw materials, fine products or other goods. It also means that military production must be harmonised among EU countries. This is not the first time the EU pushes for a more integrated military market this year. Indeed, in February, the EU Commission published a press release titled "Actions to contribute to European Defence", in which multiple times it suggested that the idea of an integrated European force cannot overlook the production aspect. Considering these considerations, this paper suggests that European countries should push toward cooperation both in research and production of new military equipment. In doing so, this paper identified the European Defence Agency as the most appropriate forum to enhance and boost cooperation in an institutional framework.

Limit dependency on Russia and China's production.

Linked to the previous topic, Von der Leyen encouraged countries to limit their dependencies on the production of the two main challengers of the liberal-democratic system. Nowadays, with the ongoing resource and economic crisis, the main focus is on energy, and Von der Leyen's sentence should be read in light of these considerations. However, European countries' dependency on Russia is not only on energy, but also in the military field. In fact, the European military market relies consistently on Russian purchases of weapons and other military equipment, although the EU prohibited the sales to Russia in 2014. However, last year the weapons sales from the EU to Russia accounted for 39 million euros, because of a clause allowing bypassing the ban imposed in 2014 (Guarascio, 2022). To be able to reduce this relative dependency is a win-win prospect since European military exporters would reduce their bonds with an antagonist, but they will also be able to engage with an ongoing process of harmonisation in the European military realm, increasing the possibilities of cooperation and integration among European armed forces. The actual increase in the defence expenses all around Europe, can become a golden opportunity for both producers and importers of weapons, increasing the value of the European military market, without compromising the security of the continent. Therefore, the policy implication is to create programs inviting and promoting the purchase of European-made weapons and military equipment for the countries that import them, creating the premises for a shift in the sales of the countries that are exporting weapons to Russia..

Democracy's endurance depends also on the fight against infiltration and disinformation from foreign powers.

Again, President Von der Leyen draw attention to China and, mostly, Russia, considering them as a threat not only to European borders, but also to European citizens in their daily life. In fact, it is well known that these two powers use widely disinformation and infiltrations in European counties to gather support for their actions and test the endurance of democratic countries, through their public opinion. Russia's war against Ukraine is a clear example of the uncertainty and the chaos that disinformation can generate in public opinion. Danielle Pletka, in her article for Foreign Policy, highlights how Italian media and public opinion is susceptible to the influence of Russian disinformation, making the country a paramount example of the pervasiveness of Russian's disinformation campaign. This disinformation had the effect of creating a solid popular base in Italy who blames the EU, the US or Ukraine for the ongoing situation (Pletka, 2022). Another case study for analysing Russian disinformation is the narrative they build around the economic sanctions imposed by the EU in the immediate aftermath of the Russian invasion. In fact, according to Putin, the Russian economy seems to have not suffered at all from the sanctions imposed by the West. He also lets himself go in claims such as "the strategy of economic blitzkrieg has failed". These claims, Russia's sheer military losses in Ukraine, and the economic crisis that is targeting Western countries, all these elements create a fertile ground in European public opinion to find a scapegoat in the sanctions. Consequently, a consistent part of European politicians and media started to blame the sanctions for a backfire that deteriorates the living conditions in Europe more than in Russia.

However, as Chris Miller wrote on Foreign Policy, even if it seems now that the sanctions are not effectively hitting Russia, Moscow will need to address the effects of the sanctions in the medium and long term (Miller, 2022). Indeed, the sanctions were designed to create devastating effects on the Russian economy in its strongest sectors, such as energy or military industry^[f11]. Nowadays Russia has a limited availability of components to sustain its economy, but in the future, without Western components it will struggle to maintain the same productivity level with substantial impact for its military projection. Another important example of disinformation and infiltration is the recent claims by some foreign intelligence services that Russia is heavily funding some Western organisation to create a pro-Russian narrative (McBride, 2022). The examples presented here are different, but they are highly emblematic to show how foreign autocratic powers can act to try to undermine the democratic consensus in Europe. All European Union members are democratic, and as President Von der Leyen stated in her speech, "Democracy is strength". Nonetheless, certain foreign actors are engaging in real operations to compromise this condition. Here, militaries can have a role in fighting disinformation and infiltration both in national and communitarian contexts. This paper suggests mainly two trajectories to tackle disinformation. The first one is based on the Swedish model, for the creation of a "Psychological Defence Agency" (Orange, 2022). This brand-new agency is composed of a mix of armed forces members, and civil society professionals, who work together to fight disinformation and psychological warfare, and prepare the population to recognise fake news and increase citizens' resilience against this type of warfare (Bryant, 2022). The creation of such a division in every European country that will cooperate to exchange information and capabilities at the European level would be a first solution to the problem. On the other hand, a second trajectory could be based on the improvement of institutions and bodies already present at the European level. In fact, from 2015, the European External Action Service (EEAS), considers, among its duties, the contrast to "Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference" (FIMI). This is mainly made by the three Strategic Communication Task Forces, by cooperating with member states, civil society, and other institutions such as G7 or NATO (European External Action Service, 2021). However, these bodies have no real decision-making power, and have not enough capabilities to cope with the amount of effort put into place by autocratic regimes to undermine democracies. Moreover, militaries are not involved enough in this process, despite the intelligence and analysis capabilities at their disposal. The policy suggestion here, is to improve EEAS fight against FIMI by enlarging the participation of its dynamics to the armed forces, and to strengthen the Strategic Communication division, by adding a new task force, with the only duty to fight FIMI.

Fight against climate change and promotion of sustainability.

President Von der Leyen referred to the climate crisis and the extreme heat waves experienced this summer to highlight the necessity of advancing the European Green Deal and the commitment to fight against climate change. The Union also pushes for an ambitious global deal for nature at the UN Biodiversity conference of this year as well as for doubling firefighting capacity. The necessary transformation towards a more sustainable union has started, and it indeed can benefit the military sector. Creating a more sustainable EU is essential for energy security in the continent. The development of renewable sources of energy can reduce foreign energy dependence, limiting the consequences that disruptions in energy supplies can bring on military operations (Platteau, 2016). Moreover, fostering more energy efficiency and innovative energy solutions can help the military to become more sustainable while maintaining the effectiveness necessary for operations (NATO, 2022). Vehicles and aircraft consuming less fossil fuels and the possibility to use renewable energies as sources to operate military infrastructures can also save money. In this, hydrogen can change the situation completely as a source of renewable energy, as it is particularly promising for aviation and land transport, enhancing the mobility of the military and facilitating energy storage (Mills & Limpaecher, 2021).

Providing a better horizon for future generations.

Following David Sassoli's words, Von der Leyen remarked that the EU should always look for new horizons, waiting for future generations to complete the work. There is a need to enshrine solidarity between generations in the Treaties, improving the way things are done and decided. For instance, unemployment is at a record low. Further reducing unemployment can foster economic and social stability of future generations and benefit the military sector. With less unemployment, households in general experience higher financial stability, which activates the economy and provides more room for governments to invest in different policy areas, as can be the security field. Larger economic revenues in member states can be translated into more funds that can be used for military and defence personnel and equipment. At the same time, there is a demand to improve citizens' involvement in the EU and enhance their trust. Relating this to the military, the EU can foster military training and programmes in the different member states for younger generations, building a well-prepared and motivated military force for the future at the same time as they provide them with valuable professional and military training. In addition to this, member states can provide coordinated training, laying the ground for the possibility of creating a common European Army in the future.

As Josep Borrell (2022), HR/VP within the Union, has stated several times considering the current Russia-Ukraine war, the European Union needs its own armed forces to ensure its security and strengthen defence actions. To do this, the EU must develop strategic supporters that were previously delivered by the US, such as anti-missile defence or strategic airlift. To do this, the EU has taken, for instance, the decision to implement an EU Rapid Deployment Capacity of 5000 troops - set as a target for 2025 - to be deployed in non-permissive environments (Braw, 2022). In this way, the EU can ensure at least two things: strengthening the military for current and future coordinated land operations and involving younger generations of the Member States in such an important aspect of the EU as it is defence and security.

Conclusion

The Russia-Ukraine war has marked the annual EU's speech, with several implications for the member states and their different policy areas. Despite the positive advancements that have been mentioned in the SOTEU 2022, the Union remains on its path towards achieving more independence, internal cooperation, sustainability, and stability. Although military affairs were not directly addressed, the highlighted initiatives shed light on the possible application of these issues to the defence sector. Thus, the status quo offers a great opportunity to foster the military and defence capabilities in the European continent, encouraging their development and intervention while turning to resources' independence, sustainability, deeper European cooperation, strengthened democratic promotion, control against foreign infiltrations and more promising horizons for future generations.

Bibliography

Bloomberg News. (2022). "Russia Privately Warns of Deep and Prolonged Economic Damage". <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-09-05/russia-risks-bigger-longer-sanctions-hit-internal-report-warns?leadSource=uverify%20wall>.

Borrell, Josep (2022, January 25). "Europe in danger: what next for EU security and defence?" - Speech by High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell at the Bibliothèque Solvay". EEAS. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/%E2%80%9Ceurope-danger-what-next-eu-security-and-defence%E2%80%9D-speech-high-representativevice-president_en.

Braw, Elisabeth (2022, March 20). "Is an EU Army coming?". Foreign Policy.

Bryant Miranda. (2022), Stockholm. "Sweden on "high alert" for election interference amid Russia tensions". The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/sep/04/sweden-high-alert-election-interference-amid-russia-tensions>.

European Commission (2022, February 15). Brussels. "Commission unveils significant actions to contribute to European Defence, boost innovation and address strategic dependencies". Retrieved from: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_22_924.

European Union External Action (2021, October 27). Brussels. "Tackling Disinformation, Foreign Information Manipulation & Interference". Retrieved from: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/tackling-disinformation-foreign-information-manipulation-interference_en.

Guarascio Francesco. (2022). "EU closes loophole allowing multi-millions arms sales to Russia". Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/eu-closes-loophole-allowing-multimillion-euro-arms-sales-russia-2022-04-14/>.

McBride Courtney. (2022). "US Says Russia Covertly Spent \$300 Million to Sway Foreign Votes". Bloomberg. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-09-13/us-says-russia-is-covertly-funding-foreign-candidates-parties>.

Miller Chris. (2022). "Is Russia's Economy on the Brink?". Foreign Policy. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/russian-federation/russia-economy-brink-moscow-war-ukraine>.

Mills, Walker & Limpaecher, Erik (2021). "The promise of hydrogen: an alternative fuel at the intersection of climate policy and lethality". Modern War Institute. <https://mwi.usma.edu/the-promise-of-hydrogen-an-alternative-fuel-at-the-intersection-of-climate-policy-and-lethality/#:~:text=Hydrogen%20can%20be%20generated%20and,increased%20lethality%20on%20the%20battlefield>.

NATO, (2022, July 5). "Energy Security". Retrieved from: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_49208.htm.

Orange Richard. (2022), Malmo. "Sweden launches 'Psychological Defence Agency' to counter propaganda from Russia, China and Iran". The Telegraph. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2022/01/04/sweden-launches-psychological-defence-agency-counter-complex/>.

Bibliography

Platteau, Eric. (2016). "Sustaining Europe's Armed Forces". European Defence Agency. <https://eda.europa.eu/webzine/issue11/in-the-field/sustaining-europe-s-armed-forces>.

Pletka Danielle. (2022). "Russian Propaganda Finds a Home in Italian Media". Foreign Policy. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/09/13/russian-propaganda-italy-media-disinformation-ukraine-war/>.

Von der Leyen Ursula. "State of the Union, Address 2022". Retrieved from: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/ov/speech_22_5493.