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THEMENSCHWERPUNKT

Ending the Draft: The Case of Belgium

Philippe Manigart*

Abstract: After the end of the Cold War, beginning with the Low Countries, most Continental West-European countries progressively ended (or more often, suspended) the draft, the core of the mass armed forces of the 19th and 20th centuries. In its place, smaller, professional quick reaction constabulary forces have progressively been put into place. The paper, after briefly analyzing the structural causes of this fundamental societal change, describes how compulsory military service was suspended in Belgium and examines the problems with which the Belgian armed forces have been confronted while restructuring, and what challenges lay ahead in terms of recruitment.

Keywords: Constitutional defense, Belgium, Armed force structure, social change, recruitment
Wehrverfassung, Belgien, Streitkräftestruktur, sozialer Wandel, Rekrutierung

1. Introduction

The end of the Cold War, technological change, social-cultural evolution and budgetary pressures have brought about the end of the mass army. First with the collapse of communist regimes in Eastern Europe and of the Soviet Union itself and secondly and more importantly as a result of 9/11, the missions of the armed forces of advanced industrial societies have changed. They are no longer to deter a known enemy, as during the Cold War, and even less to fight conventional wars on the European heartland, as during the mass armed forces era, but rather to respond to crises all over

the world (Manigart, 2003). In such an environment, the draft and its associated concept of mass mobilization, the core elements of the mass armed forces of the 19th and 20th centuries, do not have their place anymore. What is needed instead are smaller, professional quick reaction “constabulary forces” – to use Janowitz’ (1971) classic concept – capable of intervening all over the world to stabilize countries, maintain or restore peace, or fight international terrorism. As a result, beginning with the Low Countries (Belgium in 1994 and the Netherlands in 1996) (Van der Meulen and Manigart, 1997), most continental West-European countries progressively ended (or more often, suspended) the draft. France, the country that, with the United States, invented the “levée en masse”, followed suit in 2001. Spain ended the draft also in 2001, Portugal in 2004 and Italy in 2006. Until 2011, the only major exception to this long-term, structural trend remained Germany, which

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for political and social reasons,¹ maintained a “light” form of conscription.² Sweden had been the last one – before Germany – to halt compulsory military service (on July 1, 2010).

The aim of this paper is, after briefly analyzing the structural causes of this fundamental social change, to describe how compulsory military service was suspended in Belgium, and examine the problems with which the Belgian armed forces have been confronted while restructuring, and what challenges lay ahead in terms of recruitment.

2. The End of the Draft in Advanced Industrial Societies

Structurally speaking, the end of the draft in advanced industrial societies and its replacement by all-volunteer professional systems is a consequence of what sociologists call the decline of the mass armed forces. This model had been originally developed by Morris Janowitz (1971) and others (Harries-Jenkins, 1973 and Van Doorn, 1975) to explain, in the most parsimonious way, the radical restructuring of military organizations that began after World War II. This long-term process has been similar to the one that affected complex civilian organizations in the industrialized world, i.e. the transition from labor- to capital-intensive organizations. A model based on universal conscription in peacetime and national mobilization in wartime has been progressively displaced by a new form of organization, the postmodern military organization.³

Four structural factors act as selection pressures, or structural constraints, to push armed forces of advanced industrial societies to adapt their organizational structure in order to remain efficient and to survive.⁴ These four selection pressures are the technological, economic/budgetary, geo-strategic, and socio-political factors.

2.1 The Technological Factor

The armed forces of the 21st century use very complex and sophisticated technologies (weapons systems, etc.). Though designed to be as user-friendly and easy to operate by non-specialists as possible, these new high-tech weapons, in order

to be optimally used, necessitate highly specialized and trained personnel. The consequence is that, as in the industrial and service sectors, armed forces need highly qualified people, with a higher educational level than before. The least specialized functions tend to disappear: they are either automated or outsourced. The training of these specialists is also long and costly. In order to make training cost-effective, personnel must remain in place for a minimum period of time. At the same time, if this so-called « revolution in military affairs » (Snow, 1991; Toffler and Toffler, 1993) leads to more precision (“smart weapons”) and mobility, it also entails a sharp downsizing of the organization in order to finance these new technologies. The consequence of all these technological developments is that the role of draftees has been progressively marginalized, to the point that in most countries, the draft has been ended or suspended.

2.2 The Economic and Budgetary Factor

The economies of advanced industrial societies have been experiencing what some (Dicken, 1986; Giddens, 1992; Kennedy, 1993) call the third industrial revolution (information technology). The rhythm of technological innovations is ever more rapid and product life cycles ever shorter. At the same time and more important, the economy is becoming global. The old national markets are disappearing and are being replaced by a global market dominated by transnational organizations.⁵ This means that the world is becoming a lot more interdependent and that economic or political instability in one part of the world can have consequences for our economies. The United States and Europe have consequently a vested interest in contributing to maintain or restore order in places where instability is present. Intervening in far-flung countries was not the traditional role of conscription which instead had been instituted to defend the borders of the nation-state.

Concurrently with the growing pace of globalization and partly linked to this trend, most European nations have been confronted with more or less huge budget deficits. The European integration process (single market, enlargement, the advent of the European Monetary Union), public demands for less taxation and the concomitant rise of populist anti-tax political groups and parties have forced European Union member states to drastically reduce government spending and lower taxes (Kriesi et al., 2006). In such circumstances, the temptation has been great to cut defense spending. As weapons systems and other military hardware, as we have seen in the preceding section, are more and more costly to acquire, the easiest ways to reduce the budget is to pool resources (equipment, training, headquarters, etc.), downsize the military, and abandon conscription. The end of the Cold War greatly facilitated this trend. Table 1 shows the evolution of defense expenditures as a percentage of GDP between 1989 and 2010 in 10 NATO countries which are also EU member-states.

1 During the last decades, more than half of young German draftees opted to carry out alternative, non-military service, essentially in hospitals, nursing homes and other social programs. Abolishing the draft meant therefore losing these people for these institutions. It is therefore not surprising that the opposition to ending the draft came from this sector rather than the military. See *The Wall Street Journal*, July 19, 2010 (“German Hospitals Can Ill Afford End to Draft: Public-Service Providers That Rely on Conscientious Objectors’ Work Say Scrapping Conscription Would Hurt Programs”).

2 At the present time, the only European Union member states maintaining some form of compulsory military service are Austria, Denmark, Finland, Greece, Hungary and Estonia. Source: The CIA World Fact book — Military service age and obligation. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2024.html>.

3 For a more detailed discussion of the structural causes of the restructuring of armed forces, see Manigart (2003).

4 Or, from a less pro-active view of organizational change, these selection pressures can be seen as more or less rapidly eliminating organizational forms that are no longer adapted to their environment. For a more detailed discussion of this approach of change in populations of organizations, see Hannan and Freeman (1989).

5 According to Schuler and Jackson (1996: 63), a transnational organisation is structured in such a way that national boundaries disappear. The transnational organisation operates in several countries and does not recruit its personnel using national criteria. It functions in a global manner and production is entirely integrated at the global level.

Table 1: Defense expenditures as a % of GDP in 10 NATO countries

Country	1989	2010
Belgium	2.7	1.1
Denmark	2.1	1.4
France	3.7	2.0
Germany	2.9	1.4
Italy	2.5	1.4
Luxemburg	1.2	0.5
Netherlands	2.9	1.4
Portugal	3.0	1.6
Spain	2.1	1.1
United Kingdom	4.2	2.7

Source: http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_49198.htm

2.3 The Geostrategic Factor

The new geostrategic environment that emerged at the end of the Cold War can be characterized as one of greater complexity and uncertainty compared to the certainties of the bipolar world of the previous decades (Freedman, 1991). There are no longer any clearly identifiable threats, but rather a multitude of risks and dangers. The missions of the armed forces of advanced industrial societies have therefore become more diverse. They range from conventional war fighting to counter-insurgency, maintaining or enforcing peace in unstable regions of the world, fighting international terrorism and other threats, and carrying out humanitarian missions. In short, these new missions are of a constabulary nature (Janowitz, 1971). In order to carry out these new missions, large conscript armies are no longer adapted. There is a need to have smaller, but more flexible and highly capable professional rapid reaction forces, what King (2011) calls “empowered brigades”. Draftees do not have a place in such forces.

2.4 The Socio-political Factor

In advanced industrial societies, individualism becomes widespread and post-materialist values grow (Inglehart, 2008, Inglehart and Welzel, 2010). There is also a greater cultural diversity, the essence of postmodernism (Arts et al., 2003). One of the consequences of this cultural shift is that the search for one’s personal interest comes before everything else and that the feeling of belonging to a larger community tends to disappear. As a result of the globalization process and the increasingly transnational character of cultural, economic, and military organizations, the national sentiment declined. This fatally eroded the legitimacy of the draft; not surprisingly therefore, in most European countries, from the late 1960s onwards, it became quite unpopular among young people.

A question asked to a representative sample of young Europeans aged 15-24 in a special Eurobarometer survey, carried out in spring 1997, provides an indirect indicator of this unpopularity.

The question dealt with compulsory military service and asked respondents whether they thought young people their age were rather for or rather against this institution.⁶ Table 2 presents the results for the 15 EU countries.⁷

Table 2: Opinion on compulsory military service in the EU 15 countries (1997, % “for”)

Country	% for
Greece	79
Finland	52
Sweden	40
Denmark	39
Portugal	35
Germany	34
Austria	30
United Kingdom	18
France	17
Italy	17
Belgium	15
Spain	13
Ireland	12
Luxembourg	10
Netherlands	9
EU 15	23

Source: *Eurobarometer 47.2*.

Note: DK/NA included

On a comparative level, it is interesting to note that it was in the countries where compulsory military service did not exist anymore at the time or where the issue was debated that the percentages of respondents who thought that young people their age would be in favor of this institution were the lowest. Among the 15 EU countries, it was in the Netherlands that military service was the least appealing (9%). There was also very strong opposition in Luxembourg (10% in favor), Ireland (12%), Spain (13%), Belgium (15%), France (17%), Italy (17%) and Great Britain (18%). On the opposite, it was in Greece and, to a lesser extent in Finland, two countries which have (or had) difficulties with their neighbors that military service seemed the most accepted among young people: 79% and 52% of respondents respectively thought that young people their age were in favor of compulsory military service.

Interestingly enough, while the draft became more and more unpopular and therefore was suppressed or suspended in most European countries, trust in the military, which had drastically declined in the 1960s, increased again to the point that, at the present time, the armed forces are the most trusted institutions in the European Union: in 2009, 64% of the European Union citizens said they tended to trust the army.⁸ Some authors (Boëne and Dandeker, 2000; Manigart

6 It is interesting to know that in a 2001 replication of this survey, this item was not included anymore, meaning that this issue had completely lost its salience and relevance in most EU member states.

7 Sample size was 7,059 for the 15 EU countries. This survey was carried out for the Directorate General Education and Culture of the European Commission.

8 Source: Eurobarometer 72.4.

and Marlier, 1996; Van der Meulen, 2000) explain this trend reversal by the reorientation of postmodern armies' missions towards constabulary operations.

3. The Transformation Process in Belgium

Initially, the transition from a conscript force to an all-volunteer one was supposed to last 5 years, from 1992 as the year of the decision to suspend the draft to December 1997. The reality however proved more complex, so that the restructuring process is still going on. It can be divided into three main phases: 1) the initial reform plan (1992-1997) suspending the draft, the so-called "Delcroix plan" (from the name of the then Defense Minister), 2) the 2000-2015 Strategic Modernization Plan, presented in May 2000 by Defense Minister André Flahaut, and 3) the Transformation Plan initiated by his successor, Pieter De Crem, in 2008. The two main constraints driving the three successive reforms, however, remained the same, i.e. to cut defense spending and therefore, downsize the force.

3.1 The Delcroix Plan⁹

The so-called Delcroix plan was first and foremost a way of capitalizing on the "peace dividends" resulting from the end of the Cold War. It had therefore no clear strategic vision of the new roles of the Belgian armed forces (which was quite understandable given that these were not yet very clear) and consisted mainly in linear reductions in the various services and units. It was built around two basic principles: the freezing of the defense budget until the end of 1997 and the suspension of the draft in 1994. The plan foresaw furthermore the return to Belgium of the Belgian armed forces that had been stationed in West Germany during the Cold War. Various weapon systems were withdrawn and the personnel strength was to be reduced by half, from around 80,000 to 42,500 soldiers (40,000 active-duty personnel and 2,500 personnel in training). These measures had to be implemented without forced dismissals. It was envisioned that the bulk of the future recruits, especially at the enlisted level, would be short-term volunteers (2 to 5 years maximum), so as to have a younger age structure. For the long run, Defense Minister Leo Delcroix had originally proposed to integrate military service into an overall national service. Such a national service would have been organized on a voluntary basis, with some social and financial selective incentives (such as pay, priority for employment, etc.). In a first phase, this service would have involved only a few thousands individuals. Young people would have been offered the choice between service in the military and service in various welfare or cultural sectors (such as hospital, aid to handicapped people, aid to old people, foreign aid, humanitarian sector, etc.). However, the great unpopularity of the former draft system and the high costs of such a national service system led to this proposal not being accepted by the other members of the Cabinet, and the plan was abandoned.

⁹ For more details, see Manigart (2000).

Originally, the transition phase was to be completed by January 1, 1998. It soon became clear, however, that this target date would not be met. In addition to the end of the draft indeed, the Delcroix Plan, or professionalization plan, also required a significant downsizing of the career component of the forces, which, in the 1980s-early 1990s, already represented around 2/3 of military personnel strength. Around 600 officers and 3,700 NCOs were to be made redundant. From the start, however, the government had promised not to layoff anyone; measures were to be found to release excess personnel in a socially acceptable way. The hope was that, through a series of accompanying measures, by January 1, 1998, the Belgian armed forces would reach its 42,500 maximum authorized strength level. But the release measures that had been introduced at the beginning of the restructuring phase, such as transfers to public administrations, to the administrative and logistical command of the *Gendarmerie*, or to the police, did not produce the expected results. In 1996, there was still a surplus of 500 officers and 3,700 NCOs. Faced with this failure, Jean-Pol Poncelet, the following Defense Minister, was authorized by the Council of Ministers to postpone the end of the transitory phase from January 1 to December 31, 1998 and to take extra measures in order to further reduce manpower strength: on the one hand, recruitment was practically reduced to zero at the enlisted level; on the other hand, new measures were implemented, such as the introduction, on a voluntary basis, of the 4-day work week, i.e. working on a four-fifth arrangement, the possibility of early departures based on a half-time arrangement for those who were less than five years from retirement, the possibility of career interruption, or temporary withdrawal from the job, or the full release of senior officers (majors and above) and of NCOs, always on a voluntary basis, when being less than five years from retirement; for junior officers, the same possibility was also given, but only to those who were one year from retirement.

3.2 The Strategic Modernization Plan (2000-2015)¹⁰

Although the accompanying measures taken by the preceding two Defense Ministers had led to a modest reduction in the number of career personnel, serious problems remained. Furthermore and more importantly, in the eyes of many, the 1992 restructuring of the Belgian armed forces had not gone far enough. While it had replaced conscription with an all-volunteer format, it had not really touched the old structures inherited from the Cold War. So in May 2000, the new Defense Minister, André Flahaut, presented his *Strategic Modernization Plan (2000-2015)*. The plan proposed a sweeping reorganization of the Belgian armed forces intended, through a smaller but better equipped and more efficient force, to enhance Belgium's ability to project forces capable of operating across the full spectrum of military operations in concert with NATO and EU allies. It called for a joint structure and for maximum inter-service integration in order to be operational with fewer personnel. The core activities (operations) were to be

¹⁰ See Manigart (2000 and 2003) for more details.

coordinated by a joint staff, in coordination with European partners (combined). Operational units of the various force components were restructured on a modular basis (force packages) capable of putting rapidly into place elements that could then be integrated in multinational forces.

A big problem with the professionalization of the Belgian armed forces had been that the share of manpower expenditures within the defense budget significantly increased, from less than 50% in 1981, when the draft still existed, to 58.2% in 1997. One of the aims of the Strategic Plan 2000-2015 was therefore to reduce personnel costs from 58% to 50% in 2015 in order to increase equipment expenditures to 25% (against 17% in 1997) and to arrive to a more balanced manpower-operations and maintenance-procurement budget of 50-25-25. In order to achieve this goal, the Strategic Plan proposed first to reduce further the manpower size of the military to 39,500. Secondly and more importantly, in 2006, the Minister proposed to introduce a new type of contract, the Mixed Career Concept. Under this concept, all military personnel (with the exception of a few specialists) would have first served in operational units for about 10-12 years. After that first term, a limited number of people (based on their formation and specialties) would have been allowed to continue a military career at the top of their grade levels, while a second group would have been transferred laterally to other – civilian – jobs within the Defense Department or to other federal agencies. The others would have to return, through outplacement structures, to the civilian job market. Such a system would have allowed a younger military personnel structure. Compared with the 5-year short-term contracts originally foreseen in the Delcroix plan, the advantage of the new system was that it would have required less yearly recruitments. The measure was never implemented: after the 2007 legislative elections, a new government was formed – after long negotiations – with a new Defense Minister, Pieter de Crem. He was not very enthusiastic about the Mixed Career Concept.

3.3 De Crem's Political Orientation Note¹¹

Defense Minister Flahaut (from the French-speaking Socialist party) had clearly prioritized humanitarian missions authorized by the UN (“Priority to peace”), such as the one in Lebanon (UNIFIL). He had refused to send troops to Iraq and limited the use of Belgian troops engaged in Afghanistan under the ISAF flag to non-combat and force protection missions (Kabul International Airport). His successor, Pieter De Crem (from the Flemish Social-Christian party), reversed course, at least rhetorically, and put the emphasis on what he called the “core business” of the Belgian Defense,¹² i.e. medium-intensity operations under the NATO banner, such as Operation *Eagle Falcon* in Kandahar (Afghanistan) or *Freedom Falcon* in Libya.

11 See P. De Crem, *Note d'orientation politique* (Brussels, MoD, June 2008) and P. De Crem, *La finalisation de la transformation* (octobre 2009, <http://www.mil.be/transfo/subject/index.asp?LAN=fr&ID=1679>).

12 P. De Crem, *La nouvelle Défense a nécessité l'exécution d'une profonde transformation et d'un recentrage de l'armée sur son core business*, press conference, 7/21/2011.

In order to realize his ambitions, in June 2008, the Minister presented his so-called *Transformation Plan*. The goal of the plan was to increase the operational capacity and efficiency of the Belgian armed forces in order to make them a small but reliable partner within NATO and the EU. To achieve that, the plan envisaged again a further manpower reduction, from 37,500 to 34,000 (32,000 military personnel and 2,000 civilians) at the end of 2012.¹³ The increased downsizing tempo was to be achieved via so-called “Voluntary Suspension of Services” (*suspension volontaire des prestations* or SVP). This provision, which replaced the Mixed Career Concept introduced by his predecessor, allows military personnel within five years of their pension to leave the armed forces at their own request while keeping 75% of their final salary. In 2009, the year it was introduced, 1,150 people made use of this new option. The provision has been since then yearly renewed. The external mobility of the personnel is also encouraged, although it remains purely voluntary (contrary to what was envisaged with the Mixed Career Concept) and few people have taken the step to transfer to the civilian sector. The success of the SVP has allowed the Defense Department to recruit young military personnel in order to redress the age pyramid that, in the case of Belgium, is quite skewed to the right: in 2010, the average age was indeed 40.64.¹⁴

Besides lifelong/permanent contracts (mixed with inducements to voluntary leave the military), in 2010, the Minister, against the wishes of the top brass, created a new type of short-term contract, the EVMI (*Engagement Volontaire Militaire* or voluntary military enlistment), a 2 to 4 year contract that eventually – and given specific conditions – could later lead to a long-term regular contract. People choosing the EVMI path also have the opportunity to participate in a mission at the end of their contract. The first recruiting wave was very successful (at least in terms of recruitment) with more than 700 candidatures for only 150 available places. In terms of retention, however, the story appears (at least up to now) less successful. The attrition rate (59% in less than 9 months) is indeed the highest in the Belgian Defense.¹⁵

4. Recruitment Challenges

One of the biggest challenges in the near future for all European professional forces will be to recruit enough qualified personnel. Indeed with the demographic change under way in the European Union the population is expected to become older in all the member states. With a fertility rate as low as 1.6 and a constant increase in life expectancy,¹⁶ the ratio between the number of young people available on the labor market and the number of workers close to retirement will become smaller and smaller. Private companies as well as public institutions will have to compete to attract the best elements in a declining

13 On March 1 2011, there were still 35,591 military and civilian personnel, among which 33,543 military full-time equivalents (Robyns De Schneidauer and Bergmans, 2011: 14).

14 Source: DGHR (2011), *Rapport annuel DGHR 2010*. In 2002, with a median age of 35, the Belgian military was one of Europe's oldest (*Wall Street Journal*, Welfare for soldiers: Belgium's victorious strike force (10 June 2002).

15 Source: MoD, Directorate General Human Resource.

16 Source: <http://www.populationdata.net>.

pool of young people. Exacerbating the problem for the armed forces is the fact that, in the following years (2012-2018), the number of persons who will retire will drastically increase (baby boom generation). Concretely it means that, beginning in 2012, the Belgian military will have to recruit yearly around 2,200 persons, against around 1,300 today (Robyns De Schneidauer and Bergmans, 2011: 16-17).

As far as the Belgian armed forces are concerned, the competition will first be with such other public institutions as the Police, Fire Departments and the Civil Protection; when the number of young people available on the labor market will shrink again, the competition with the private sector will become more intense. In such an environment, it will become more important for the Belgian armed forces (and for the other European armed forces) to monitor and manage their image among future applicants.

Table 3: Image of Belgian institutions among young people (% of “rather good”)

Institution	%
Firefighters	96
Red Cross	94
Defense	79
Civil protection	77
Postal Service	76
Education	74
Administration	72
Police	67
Railway	59
Belgacom	57
Justice	50
Government	50

As table 3 shows, for the moment at least, the image of the Belgian armed forces among the youth seems to be rather good. In 2009, a little less than eight young respondents out of ten (79%) had a rather good image of the Belgian defense.¹⁷ It was a lot more than in the 1990s: in 1993, only 52% of young Belgians aged 15-25 had a rather good image of their armed forces (Manigart, 1993). In 2009, Defense scored higher than most of the 11 other national institutions that were included in the question; only the Firefighters and the Red Cross had a better image (96% and 94% respectively). Not only do the Belgian armed forces have a better image than a lot of other institutions, they also seem to be more attractive to young people than their most direct competitors (table 4).

Table 4: Interest for a job in various Belgian organizations (% “yes”)

Employer	%
Defense	35
Police	31
Firefighters	22
Railway	18
Post	17

In the same 2009 survey, more than a third of the young respondents (35%) showed interest in a military career.¹⁸ The police came in second place with 31%, followed by the firefighters (22%), the railway company (18%) and the postal service (17%). The attractiveness for a job in the military has been slowly rising since the 1990s (Manigart, 1993). In 1993, only 21% of the youngsters had shown an interest in a job in the armed forces. The greater attractiveness of the Belgian military is partly the result of its better image, but is also probably the result of the relatively high unemployment rate caused by the current economic crisis.

Table 5: Reasons why they are not interested in a job in the military (%)

Reason	%
Capacity better used elsewhere	30
Too dangerous	24
Because of the missions	20
Not an interesting job	19
Incompatible with a good health	18
Better career opportunity in the civilian sector	17
Don't like discipline	9
Don't like military	9
Not a useful job	5
Not a satisfying job	4
Salary is too low	4
Other reason	30
Don't know	5

As table 5 shows, the main reason given by the young respondents who said they were not interested in a military career had to do with the belief that they would not be able to develop their full potential in the armed forces:¹⁹ 30% said their skills would not be correctly used in the military. The other main reasons were more focused on safety concerns: risks (“too dangerous: 24%), the missions (20%), and the incompatibility with a good health (18%).

Notwithstanding this rather good position for the moment, with the predicted shrinking of the labor pool, things could become much more problematic in the near future. The Belgian – and European – armed forces will probably have to rethink their recruitment strategies, for example by increasing the number of candidates from segments previously under-represented

¹⁷ The results come from a CATI survey conducted by IPSOS-Belgium in January 2009 among a representative sample of the Belgian population aged 16 and older (with a subsample of 16 to 24 year olds)(n = 1284). The aim was to measure the attractiveness of the Belgian Defense among the public. The question was: “In general, do you have a rather good or a rather bad impression of the following Belgian institutions?” For more details on the survey, see Lecoq (2009).

¹⁸ The question was: “Would you be interested by a job in one of the following sectors?”

¹⁹ The question was: “Why wouldn't you come and work for the armed forces?”

(women and ethnic-cultural minorities in particular), by raising the age limit, or, as Belgium did in 2003, by substituting non-nationals for national citizens.²⁰ They will also need to keep employees longer by reducing attrition and/or increasing the retirement age for certain categories of personnel. More flexibility in employment contract should also be introduced by offering short-term contracts with attractive transfers to other sectors (public and private).²¹ These short-term contracts are also necessary to keep the operational units young and fit. Other possible measures to be considered would be to make an increased use of reservists for some support functions during operations abroad (what would make it possible to recruit more motivated persons for these kinds of missions), or to outsource some non-central/non-peripheral functions in Belgium.

5. Conclusion

On July 3, 1992, the Belgian government decided to implement the most radical restructuring of its armed forces of the post-war period. The plan called for the suspension of the draft as early as 1994, the professionalization of the forces, a reduction by half of the personnel strength, and the freezing of the defense budget. Although not yet finished, the restructuring process has profoundly changed the way the Belgian armed forces operate. In particular, it allows them to participate – as a very junior partner – in the new crisis response operations that have become the core business of the postmodern military organizations of advanced industrial societies.

Although up until now the Belgian armed forces have not yet experienced significant recruitment problems, it is likely that, in the years ahead, they and other Western military organizations will have increasing difficulties finding enough qualified personnel on the labor market. To face this challenge, they will have to develop innovative recruitment strategies and offer flexible work accommodation to retain their scarcer resources.

But in the end and on a more long-term perspective, given the present and future budgetary constraints facing all European governments and the ageing of their populations, the only durable way to solve the manpower shortages – and to maintain credible quick reaction forces capable of carrying out constabulary missions – will be through greater integration of and cooperation between European armed forces.

²⁰ Article 8 of the new law concerning the recruitment of military personnel, adopted on March 27, 2003 by the Belgian Parliament, states that to be able to apply for a job in the military, one has to be Belgian or a citizen of a member state of the European Union. The initiative came from Defense Minister André Flahaut in 2002. According to him, the recruitment of EU citizens would prefigure a future European military. In 2010, 74 non-Belgian EU citizens were serving in the Belgian armed forces. The three biggest groups came from the Netherlands (36), France (15) and Germany (9), not coincidentally countries where one speaks one of the three official languages in Belgium (Source: DGHR, *Rapport annuel DGHR 2010*). For more on this topic, see Manigart (2005).

²¹ In the youth survey, if 34% of the young respondents who said they were interested in a job in the military expressed their preference for a career contract, a significant number (36%) said they rather would prefer to spend 10 years or less in the military before continuing with a civilian career (Lecoq and Manigart, 2011: 11).

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