



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

## Separation and immersion: the changing role of the armed forces in Northwestern liberal democracies

Vark, A. van

### Citation

Vark, A. van. (2025, October 17). *Separation and immersion: the changing role of the armed forces in Northwestern liberal democracies*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4270680>

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4270680>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).





# 1

## INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

This dissertation is about the possible role of the armed forces<sup>1</sup> in strengthening the stability of liberal democracy in Northwestern Europe and the consequences for civil-military relations in theory and practice.

Various authors have in recent years pointed at a gradual decline in liberal democracy in the Global North. In books with catchy titles such as *How Democracies Die* (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018), *The People vs Democracy* (Mounk, 2018) and *Rupture. The Crisis of Liberal Democracy* (Castells, 2019), they point at factors such as dissatisfaction with mainstream political parties, a rise in populism, a decline in social cohesion, pressure on the rule of law, media rights and civil rights, as well as fragmentation of state institutions and a declining trust of citizens in democratic government.

Reading the newspapers in recent years, the impression seems to be that the stability of liberal democracy is being challenged. A few examples illustrate this:

### *Example 1: COVID-19*

In the early 2020's, the coronavirus pandemic was raging around the world and, especially in the first year of the pandemic, governments worldwide were taking measures to 'flatten the curve', to prevent their health systems from being overwhelmed, all the while trying to vaccinate as many citizens as possible to re-open society. These measures infringed on civil liberties: lockdown measures aimed to keep people at home and government apps monitored people's movement to control the spread of the virus. Law scholars in some countries complained that emergency measures had no sufficient basis in the law (Marijnissen. H., 2020; United Nations, 2020). At the same time, western governments relied on expert advice in determining policy and were hardly challenged in parliament – if it convened at all – which invoked the image of a technocracy, rather than a democracy (Boersema, 2020).

### *Example 2: The growing influence of organized crime*

There are signs that European liberal democracies are being undermined by international organized crime, which is increasingly challenging government authorities by using violence amongst each other and against the government. In recent years we have seen violent payoffs, violence against first responders, threats against politicians and public officials and against certain professions, such as journalists, lawyers, and judges. Lam, Van der Wal, and Kop call this the 'creeping poison' that is undermining the foundations

---

1 The terms 'armed forces', 'military forces', and 'military' are used interchangeably in this dissertation.

of the constitutional state (Lam et al., 2018; Tops & Tromp, 2017). In 2021, the Europol Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment (SOCTA) report concluded that serious and organized crime deeply affects all layers of society and undermines the economy, state institutions and the rule of law (Europol, 2021).

*Example 3: Parallel societies and social unrest*

In some European cities, parallel societies are emerging of groups of people that pull back from society, while making their own societal arrangements. Government influence in these areas is declining. These areas are attractive to criminal organizations. Consequently, criminal subcultures can emerge, where a neighborhood is effectively run by a criminal organization (Lam et al., 2018). In extreme cases, zones are being created where the government has lost (most of) its authority, as has been said about the banlieues of Paris and certain neighborhoods of Swedish cities (Åberg, 2019). On the other side of the spectrum, the wealthy elite moves to gated communities, guarded by all sorts of technology and private security guards. At the same time, many western liberal democracies have seen outbursts of social unrest: from the yellow vests (*gilets jaunes*) in France to the farmer's protests in the Netherlands to the storming of the Capitol in the United States to Extinction Rebellion blocking roads in Helsinki. People seem to be increasingly dissatisfied with government decisions and are taking to the streets to show their dissatisfaction (facilitated by social media) and in some cases using violence against the authorities.

To what extent are these examples representative of an underlying trend?

In the first empirical part of this dissertation (chapter 4), I will investigate the stability of liberal democracy in Northwestern Europe (specifically in Finland, the Netherlands and Sweden)<sup>2</sup> and the security and stability related challenges liberal democracy is confronted with. Some use terms like *undermining* or *subversion* to describe the processes which lead to an erosion of liberal democracy. Others talk about *democratic backsliding*. I will explore these processes with document analysis. I will also use secondary analysis of quantitative databases on the quality and stability of liberal democracy. This dissertation specifically focuses on security and stability related challenges and relates them to the role of the armed forces in liberal democracies. This focus means that other challenges to liberal democracy, stemming from, for example, electoral developments or the quality of political institutions, are not studied in this dissertation.

---

2 The choice for this region and the specific countries within this region will be explained in chapter 3 on methodology.

Why link this topic of the stability of liberal democracy to the role of the armed forces? When studying stability and security, it makes sense to think of the organizations involved in providing security and stability, particularly the armed forces (which traditionally focus on security and stability related threats originating outside the country) and the police (which traditionally focus on threats originating from within the country). This dissertation focuses specifically on the role of the armed forces, although the role of the police is also discussed. Recent years have seen a rise in the use of the armed forces in a domestic context, especially in case of transborder security threats, when the police were overburdened, or when a more robust performance by the authorities was deemed necessary. Looking at the examples mentioned above, some changes can be identified. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the armed forces heavily supported the civilian authorities in many liberal democracies, varying from logistical support to hospitals in the Netherlands and the use of Army personnel to restore public order and enforce lockdown measures on the Dutch Caribbean Island of Curaçao, to border control and enforcement of lockdown measures in Southern Europe but also in Finland, for example.

The police have been confronted with social unrest during the pandemic but in other instances as well, such as the farmer's protests or yellow vests mentioned above. In dealing with this unrest, they have sometimes been supported by gendarmeries (when available) or (other parts of) the armed forces. A good example are the farmers protests in the Netherlands, where military trucks were used to cordon off certain areas.

In the external context, the armed forces of many liberal democracies have been involved in stability operations in post-conflict areas, de facto performing police tasks in some cases and thus acquiring capabilities that can be of use in a domestic context as well. For the Netherlands, the search capabilities developed by the armed forces when searching for IED's in Afghanistan have led to these capabilities being used in a domestic context in support of the police to look for drug laboratories, in the fight against organized crime. Other examples include the use of the armed forces in the fight against terrorism, and the management of migration flows. *Opération Sentinelle* has seen 10.000 French soldiers deployed on the streets as part of a military operation to protect the population from terrorism. Several other European countries, including Belgium, Italy, and the United Kingdom (UK), have similarly deployed the armed forces.

My assumption is that this evolving domestic role of the armed forces in European countries is related to the undermining of liberal democracy. In the second part of this dissertation (chapter 5-9), I will therefore relate these challenges to the stability of liberal democracy to the domestic role of the armed forces. I will explore recent changes in the

domestic role of the armed forces, possible explanations for this change, and future policy options for the contribution of the armed forces to the stability of liberal democracy. Based on their broad training and specific capabilities, I assume that the armed forces can contribute to a strengthening of liberal democracy in Northwestern Europe. In many cases, this concerns a dual use of capabilities that have been developed for use outside of the country, for example in the context of stability operations. The earlier mentioned Army search teams in the Netherlands that have been trained to search for explosives in Afghanistan but are now used to search for drug laboratories in the Netherlands, are a good example of such dual use. Other examples could be public order capabilities, cyber capabilities, and intel capabilities. Furthermore, within the realm of crisis management, the armed forces may be able to do more to support civilian authorities.

While the armed forces, on the one hand, can contribute to the stability of liberal democracy, it is important to acknowledge that they can also undermine its stability if their position would become stronger than is fitting in a liberal democracy. This dissertation will study both possibilities based on civil-military relations (CMR) theory. In CMR, there is a dilemma between separation (military and civil domain separated) and immersion (military and civil domain immersed). In western liberal democracies, the military and civil domain have traditionally been mostly separated. In CMR theory, this is considered the ideal model for a liberal democracy. The armed forces are used for external security, while internal security is the responsibility of the police. With the separation between both domains becoming less distinct, this could possibly lead to a change regarding the CMR dilemma of immersion and separation.

A larger role for the armed forces in a domestic context in liberal democracies would entail a move in the direction of immersion. Ironically, such a larger role could eventually undermine the stability of liberal democracy as well. This could happen when the role of the armed forces becomes too strong, leading to an erosion of civilian control of the armed forces and – worst case – to an undermining of civil rights and to the civilian authorities being compromised, which would lead to a delegitimization of the state. The ultimate consequence of such a development would be a military dictatorship. The objective of this research is to examine the potential of the military to enhance the stability of liberal democracy, while also considering the associated risks, limitations, and factors that may influence such a contribution.

## 1.2 RESEARCH QUESTION

As explained in the introduction, liberal democracy in Northwestern Europe may be under pressure. After investigating this assumption, it will be analyzed in relation to the domestic role of the armed forces.

This leads to the following research question:

*How can the armed forces in Northwestern Europe strengthen liberal democracy and what are the consequences for civil-military relations in theory and practice?*

In answering this question, focus will lie on both the potential for the armed forces to strengthen liberal democracy and on the constraints on the role of the armed forces inherent in a liberal democracy.

The following sub-questions will be answered to answer the research question:

1. To what extent is liberal democracy in Northwestern Europe under pressure and what are the security and stability related challenges undermining it? (Chapter 4)
2. What is the current position of the armed forces in Northwestern Europe on the CMR dilemma, to what extent has this position changed in recent years and how can these changes be explained? (Chapter 2 for a general overview, chapters 5-7 for the case studies, chapter 8 for a comparative analysis)
3. What policy options can be developed for the future role of the armed forces in a domestic context in Northwestern Europe and how will this change the domestic role of the armed forces? (Chapter 5-7 for the case studies and chapter 8 for a comparative analysis)
4. What would be the consequences of a changing domestic role for civil-military relations in Northwestern Europe in theory and practice? (Chapter 8)
5. To what extent could a changing domestic role of the armed forces and a new balance in civil-military relations either contribute to the stability of liberal democracy in Northwestern Europe, or alternatively, detract from its stability? What are the opportunities and caveats for a new balance? (Chapter 8)

## 1.3 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

This section briefly defines and explains the theoretical concepts used in this dissertation, with a focus on the research gaps this dissertation aims to fill. The section starts with the concept of liberal democracy and the process of undermining. Subsequently, the field of civil-military relations and the main concepts of separation and immersion are explained, followed by a short introduction to the hybridization of the armed forces and the police. Chapter 2 will further elaborate on the theoretical background of this dissertation.

### Liberal democracy under pressure

Liberal democracy is a contested concept. Its meaning has evolved over time and is defined differently in different regions of the world. This dissertation uses Mounk's definition, who states that

- A *democracy* is a set of binding electoral institutions that effectively translates popular views into public policy.
- *Liberal* institutions effectively protect the rule of law and guarantee individual rights such as freedom of speech, worship, press, and association to all citizens (including ethnic and religious minorities).
- A *liberal democracy* is simply a political system that is both liberal and democratic – one that both protects individual rights and translates popular views into public policy (Mounk, 2018).

The term 'liberal' as it is used in this dissertation should not be confused with 'liberalism', which is a political ideology. Liberal, defined by Mounk, refers to institutions that protect the rule of law and guarantee individual rights.

After the Cold War, liberal democracy seemed to become the dominant regime form around the world. Francis Fukuyama in a famous essay spoke about the universalization of liberal democracy as the final form of human government and called this "the end of History". Democratic consolidation was thought to be a one-way street and once liberal democracy would be achieved the political system would be forever stable (Fukuyama, 2012, 2018; Mounk, 2018). However, as has been pointed out by many authors, Mounk and Fukuyama among them, 'democracy' and 'liberal' are not inseparable concepts and democratic consolidation does not seem to be a one-way street after all.

As Foa and Mounk have shown, the support for the democratic form of government and for liberal institutions is declining in western liberal democracies (Foa & Mounk,

2017).<sup>3</sup> They conclude that the long-time assumption of political scientists that 'democratic consolidation' is a one-way street may not be correct and that deconsolidation (or democratic backsliding) may take place when a sizable minority of citizens loses their belief in democracy.

It is this process of deconsolidation of liberal democracies that this dissertation focuses on. As it is a relatively recent development, it has not been researched extensively. This dissertation aims to establish whether liberal democracies in a very stable region of the world, Northwestern Europe, are indeed under pressure from stability and security related challenges. It will subsequently relate the stability of liberal democracy to the domestic role of the armed forces. This part of the dissertation is based on the field of civil-military relations, which will be briefly explained in the next section.

### Civil-military relations

The concept of civil-military relations encompasses several different civilian and military relationships, such as those between the military and society, between the military and other government bureaucracies and between leaders and their organizations within the military (Brooks, 2019). Many scholars assume that militaries are special actors because of the complex role they play in both government and state security. On the one hand, the military is a government and state's main protector; on the other hand, it is the government and state's main threat and source of insecurity (Brooks, 2019). Feaver calls this the civil-military 'problematique' (Feaver, 1999). This 'problematique' has to do with the concept of civilian control: how do you make the government strong enough to protect its citizens, but not so strong that it becomes tyrannical? How can a society assure itself that the armed forces of that society will do what society wants them to do? In other words, who guards the guardians? (Feaver, 1999, 2005).

The two opposing solutions in this debate are separation and immersion. On the separation side, the classical work is Huntington's *The Soldier and the State* (Huntington, 1957). Huntington propagates objective control, by which he means a separation of authority and domains of responsibility into a military and a political sphere. Proponents of separation state that civil and military domains should remain strictly separated. They argue that using the military in a domestic context may undermine the stability and strength of state institutions because it implies a loss of civilian control and compromises civilian authorities (Stevenson, 2006; T. Weiss, 2011).

---

3 Chapter 4 will provide the corresponding data for Finland, the Netherlands and Sweden.

The risk of the separation position is that military and civilian actors grow apart, and that military expertise and threat analyses are ignored. Research has shown there is a significant civil-military gap (Rahbek-Clemmensen et al., 2012).

On the other side of the debate is immersion or subjective civilian control, with the classical work being written by Janowitz (Janowitz, 1960). Proponents of immersion propose an active military citizenship, whereby the armed forces are immersed in society to such a degree that they want to do what society demands. These proponents point at the contribution the armed forces can make to improve security in the domestic context, at the same time preventing the militarization of regular domestic security forces (Schnabel & Krupanski, 2018).

A large part of the civil-military relations literature focuses on countries moving from a non-democratic to a democratic model. Recent analyses focus on countries in South America and Eastern Europe (Burk, 2002; Cottey et al., 2002; Pion-Berlin et al., 2017a, 2017b) and not on established liberal democracies that are less stable now than in the past.

As these developments are relatively new in Western liberal democracies, there is a gap in scientific research in this area. This dissertation aims to fill (part of) this gap, studying whether the above-mentioned ideal-types are sufficiently suitable for civil-military relations in established liberal democracies that have recently come under pressure. Is Huntington's model of separation still appropriate for liberal democracies in current times? If not, is immersion the answer? And how much immersion is then appropriate in a liberal democracy?

### **Current state of civil-military relations: hybridization of the armed forces and the police**

As has been discussed in section 1.2, the clear separation between the armed forces and the police in a domestic context in liberal democracies seems to have disappeared in recent years. In this section this so-called hybridization of the armed forces and the police will be further explored.

In the international context, western armed forces have been increasingly deployed in crisis response operations. In the security gap right after fighting has stopped but before civilian authorities are capable of providing security, this has often led to the armed forces (mainly Army personnel, but also Marines) performing police tasks such as restoring public order, crowd and riot control and stability policing (Stingo et al., 2017). This phenomenon has been defined as a constabularization of the armed forces (Hovens,

2017; P. Neuteboom, 2014). The performance of police tasks in crisis response operations has the potential to enhance the military forces' capacity to operate effectively in a domestic context.

On the police side, a certain militarization seems to be taking place in western liberal democracies. This militarization is particularly visible in the United States but can be found in Europe as well (Campbell & Campbell, 2010; Kraska & Kappeler, 1997; Lutterbeck, 2005). Hovens and Neuteboom point at centralizing tendencies in the police, the use of more robust gear and means and the development of a more military mindset, which is stimulated by the authorities' using military metaphors for police work (war on drugs, war on terror) (P. Neuteboom & Hovens, 2018). In the international context, civilian police are increasingly participating in crisis response operations, though usually on a voluntary basis.

Some western countries have an intermediary or hybrid force in between the armed forces and the police. These so-called 'gendarmerie-type' forces combine police and military characteristics and have historically only formed in continental Europe, not in Scandinavia or Anglo-Saxon countries. They usually perform police tasks related to the security of the state, which require a higher level of robustness than regular (community-related) police tasks. They may be part of the ministry of Defense or of the ministry of the Interior (or Security), but in either case usually have military training, organization, and competencies. The blurring of internal and external security has led to a fast growth in these gendarmerie-type forces (Bigo, 2006; Lutterbeck, 2004).

This process whereby police forces and armed forces seem to grow closer together has been defined as hybridization. This dissertation will compare hybridization processes in Northwestern Europe and look for explanations for similarities and differences between the three countries, thereby enriching the existing scientific literature on hybridization.

## **1.4 DISSERTATION STRUCTURE**

This dissertation consists of nine chapters. Chapter 2 is the theoretical chapter of this dissertation. It consists of a description of the definitions and theoretical concepts used in this dissertation, focusing on liberal democracy, civil-military relations and the hybridization of the armed forces and the police. It builds on the short introduction to these topics given in this introductory chapter. Chapter 2 includes the theoretical model for this dissertation.

In chapter 3, this model is operationalized and the methodology used for the research is described. This dissertation is based on case study research and consists of qualitative research. Chapter 3 explains and elaborates on this choice and the specific case selection, data collection and data analysis. It also contains a personal reflection on the research process.

Chapter 4 delves into the hypothesis that liberal democracy is under pressure and, based on both document analysis and secondary analysis of relevant databases results in three security and stability related challenges which are undermining liberal democracy.

Chapters 5 to 7 are devoted to the results of the individual case studies. These three chapters have a similar outline. They start with a description of the armed forces of that specific country, its tasks and legal framework, the relations between military and society, and the current state of civil-military relations. Subsequently, specific security challenges and threats are described. Following that, recent changes in the domestic role of the armed forces (including explanations) are described, followed by an exploration of future policy options. After that, the balance between separation and immersion is discussed. Finally, all three chapters conclude with an analysis of that specific case study, which facilitates the comparative analysis made in chapter 8.

In chapter 8, a comparative analysis of the three case studies is made. It starts with an analysis of similarities and differences, followed by explanations based on civil-military relations theory. The second part of the chapter is more future-oriented, as trends for policy options are defined and connected with civil-military relations theory, focusing on the direction in which civil-military relations in Northwest European liberal democracies are expected to develop. In the final part of the chapter, the research question on the stability of liberal democracy is answered, focusing on the effect that a changing role of the armed forces and a new balance on civil-military relations have on the stability of liberal democracy.

The final chapter, chapter 9, is devoted to identifying the theoretical contributions of this research, its limitations, and recent developments. It will also include suggestions for further research and practical implications.