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

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EPILOGUE:
IMPACT OF THE WAR IN UKRAINE

Two years ago, the security situation in Europe changed fundamentally because of the war in Ukraine that started with the Russian invasion on February 24th, 2022. The war caused a shockwave through the western world and Europe especially and has had enormous consequences for defense policies. Many countries, including the three countries in this research, decided to substantially increase their defense budgets. Since the start of the war, many European countries, the US, and Canada have delivered defense materiel, including (heavy) weapons, to Ukraine. At the same time, the focus within Ministries of Defense shifted towards their core task of defending the country against a foreign attack, at the expense of international crisis operations and domestic tasks.

What could be the impact of the war in Ukraine on the results presented in this dissertation? To start with security challenges, while the blurring of internal and external security has certainly not disappeared, more focus in domestic discourse has gone to external security threats, more specifically the threat posed by Russia. This could have an impact on the second part of the model, namely the extent of hybridization. With more focus on an external threat, there could be less incentives to constabularize the armed forces and involve them in domestic policing tasks. As Sweden and Finland were already quite reluctant to move in this direction, this reluctance can be expected to grow. In the Netherlands, public and political debate has clearly shifted towards rebuilding the armed forces, including for example acquiring heavy materiel that had been abolished before, such as tanks (Parlementaire redactie, 2023).

Moving to the next section of the model, what could be the impact of the war in Ukraine on the policy options identified in this dissertation? With more focus on external threats, as mentioned above, there could be less incentives to involve the armed forces in police tasks. However, the effect on, for example, cyber threats and intelligence could be different, as politicians and citizens alike become more aware of the cyber threat coming from foreign actors that could harm domestic security and have in some cases already done so. Another interesting area is that of civic education. As shown in the case studies, Sweden has already started to partly rebuild conscription some years ago. The Netherlands MoD has started to promote a 'year-to-serve', and the Christian-democrats have proposed (social) conscription (Sanders, 2023; Winterman, 2023). The external security threat posed by the war in Ukraine could provide an extra incentive to either expand or reinstate conscription. Sweden has also reinstated the National Defense Courses it used to have in the past and the Netherlands as well has started a pilot working towards such a course in 2023.

What about the impact on civil-military relations? The impact of the war in Ukraine could potentially be large. Certainly, the armed forces have become more visible in public

debate this past year in two of the cases where they were not so visible before, namely Sweden and the Netherlands. This could lead to more immersion in public administration, government strategy, but also in society. In the Netherlands, the Ministry of Justice and Security and the Ministry of Defense have announced a joint letter to Parliament (expected by the end of 2024) on resilience against military and hybrid threats, with the two pillars being societal resilience and military readiness. The letter will provide the outline for a Dutch whole-of-society approach and symbolizes the changed position of the armed forces. The first steps towards such an approach have been taken already (such as the creating of a National Security Council and the above-mentioned Leadership in National Security course).

Most likely, the consequence of the measures concerning conscription mentioned above will be an increasing immersion of the military in society. Additionally, the new Swedish government that was instated in the Fall of 2022 has decided to move several civilian agencies (MSB – the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency and MPF – Psychological Defence Agency) from the Ministry of the Interior to the Ministry of Defense, under the responsibility of the newly created Minister for Civil Defense. This move can also be seen as a move towards immersion.

On the other hand, the focus on national defense could lead to less immersion in the task dimension. Thus far, there have not been any examples in the three cases of this research, but the French government has already announced it will decrease its domestic Opération Sentinelle after already having ended its anti-jihadist operation Barkhane in the Sahel. Increasing investments will be made in preparing the French military for a high-intensity conflict in Europe itself, with an increase in personnel, heavy materiel, rockets, drones, and more reservists (Van der Ziel, 2022). The consequences of an increased immersion in society, public administration, and strategy, in combination with possibly a decreased immersion in tasks, remain to be seen.

Then for the final part of the model, the stability of liberal democracy, I argued in chapter 8 that the armed forces can have a stabilizing effect simply by being there. With the armed forces growing, this stabilizing effect can be expected to grow as well. Another positive effect on the stability of liberal democracy could be the reinstatement of conscription. Depending on the numbers, this could also have a secondary positive effect through an increase in social cohesion and in resilience of the population.

As for negative effects, with a stronger position of the Ministry of Defense in public administration (as evidenced in Sweden for example with the move of several civilian agencies from the Ministry of Justice to the Ministry of Defense), alertness to processes

of militarization is important, as well as to institutional interests of the armed forces, that have finally seen their budgets increase (in Sweden and the Netherlands) after a long period of cutbacks.

All in all, the war in Ukraine could have quite some effect on the results of this dissertation, but to which extent exactly remains to be seen. Much will depend on the length and outcome of the war, combined with other developments in the security domain.