

Military retention crisis undermines Europe's defence surge

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Europe is racing to rearm, but its militaries are losing talent faster than they can recruit it. Unless governments prioritize retention, Europe risks building hollow forces that look strong on paper but can't deliver when it matters.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has triggered Europe's most profound defence awakening in decades. It is a moment where the continent must reckon with hard choices and, finally, take ownership of its own security. European governments are rearming and raising defence budgets in response to the renewed threat from Moscow. Collective defence spending by EU countries jumped over 30% between 2021 and 2024, and NATO allies have announced ambitious plans to grow their armed forces.

Poland aims to expand its military from about 200,000 troops in 2024 to 300,000 by 2035. Following the *Zeitenwende* Bundestag speech by former Chancellor Olaf Scholz, Germany set a target of increasing the Bundeswehr's strength to 203,000 soldiers by 2031 (up from roughly 180,000 today). Across Europe, similar efforts are underway to raise troop numbers, modernise equipment, and enhance readiness to deter future Russian aggression.

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However, shortfalls in experienced personnel threaten to undermine this defence renaissance. European armed forces have shrunk drastically since the Cold War, and many lack the manpower to fully utilise the new investments in tanks, jets, and artillery. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Europe (including the UK) has about 1.5 million active-duty military personnel in total, down from well over 3 million several decades ago.^{1,2} Moreover, a significant fraction of those troops are not readily deployable due to being in support roles, training, or other limitations.

According to NATO's [Minimum Capability Requirements](#), an additional 49 brigades are needed in order to be prepared for the territorial [defence](#) of Europe, which includes adding least 300,000 additional troops to fill these new units.³ European political leaders have taken note. In a 2024 report, the [European Parliament](#) acknowledged that European armed forces "face severe recruitment and retention problems", calling for urgent action on the issue.⁴

NATO officials likewise stress that current force models are insufficient for a high-intensity war and urge member states to build up personnel numbers, whether through volunteer recruitment or selective conscription.⁵

FIRST STOP THE BLEEDING: MAKE RETENTION A PRIORITY

To expand their militaries, European states must first halt the ongoing exodus of military personnel. Retention is the essential starting point for the European defence surge. Any gains from new recruitment will be futile if experienced soldiers continue to quit in large numbers

since it means replacing experienced personnel with neophytes. Without a robust base of experienced military leaders and technicians, any new growth will lead to a hollow force that can barely operate. Thus, the priority should be to “stop the bleeding” of military experience and expertise.

Unfortunately, over the past decade, Europe’s armed forces have suffered worrying declines in retention. The 2024 EUROMIL [survey](#) of military associations revealed that low retention rates emerged as a serious issue around 2011–2013 and have since worsened in many countries. Germany’s active military, for instance, shrank from 206,000 personnel in 2011 to only 183,000 by 2023, as more soldiers left early or retired than could be replaced. Ireland’s armed forces saw an average net loss of 8–10% of their personnel each year, dwindling from about 10,500 in 2013 to just 7,600 in 2023.⁶

On average, the majority of those leaving European militaries trained professionals in their prime. EUROMIL found that 50% of military associations identified the 30–40-year-old cohort as the one most prone to premature exit.

In other words, Europe’s militaries are losing many of their most experienced non-commissioned officers (NCOs) and mid-grade officers. These are the very people needed to train new recruits and lead the new formations that Europe is trying to build.

For Europe to grow its forces without hollowing them out, it must retain the experienced personnel it already has. Otherwise, new recruits will barely fill existing gaps rather than meet growth targets. Indeed, NATO planners caution that in any major conflict, high attrition would demand far more manpower than current European forces possess. **Stopping the outflow by improving retention is thus a strategic imperative.**

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Why are so many European soldiers quitting early? Multiple factors are driving the retention crisis, but a few stand out across Europe:

First, a booming private-sector job market has lured soldiers away with promises of higher salaries, better benefits, and a stable family life. In a recent EUROMIL survey, over 83% of European military associations cited economic reasons, the competitive pull of civilian careers, uncompetitive military pay, and desire for greater stability as the primary causes of attrition.

European militaries can no longer count on being the employer of choice for adventurous youth, since unemployment is low and skilled individuals can find lucrative, less risky jobs in the civilian sector.

For example, Germany’s armed forces have struggled in recent years to retain personnel partly because a strong labour market offers attractive alternatives. The Greek military association reports that young professionals often leave for private-sector jobs that provide permanent contracts and housing opportunities that are not found in military service. In Ireland, competitive civilian career options, especially for technical and leadership skills, are a major contributor to the 8% annual retention decline. Simply put, when military pay and benefits lag vis-à-vis comparable civilian jobs, retention suffers.

Second, the intense demands of military life—from long deployments to unpredictable hours—can clash with personal and family needs. Approximately 72% of European military associations pointed to poor work-life balance as a key factor in attrition. Frequent moves, time away from home, and the inability to plan family life have driven many mid-career officers and enlisted soldiers to resign for the sake of their spouses and children. Several forces suffer from a vicious cycle; as staffing drops, those remaining must work overtime to pick up the slack, further eroding morale and work-life balance. Irish officers note that family issues and a high workload, stemming from others having left, are causing even more personnel to depart prematurely.⁷

Many who leave also cite frustration with their military’s internal culture, management, and their own lack of voice. Over 55% of participants in the EUROMIL survey highlighted negative work environments and ineffective, top-down leadership as contributing to low retention. Complaints include rigid hierarchies that stifle initiative, “fossilized” bureaucratic mindsets resistant to change, and senior leaders who undervalue junior ranks’ well-being.

The absence of respect and recognition for military service in European society at large also plays a role. EUROMIL found that 44% of associations noted that a lack of societal appreciation makes it harder to persuade personnel to stay in uniform. Poor leadership at unit level, such as overly authoritarian commanders and mismanagement, further erodes commitment.⁸

Paradoxically, even as some militaries are busier operationally, many European troops report periods of idleness or lack of doing what they signed up to do, often due to resource shortfalls. The German Bundestag’s Armed Forces Commissioner, Eva Högl, observed that “the biggest problem is boredom” for volunteers. People who sign up to serve their country are often attracted to the sense of purpose it gives them, but when that expectation is not met, they can become disillusioned. A 2024 [report](#) noted that of nearly 19,000 new entrants in 2023, over a quarter (5,100 troops)

quit within their initial six-month trial period because training programs were under-resourced or living conditions were subpar.⁹

These startling early attrition numbers in Germany illustrate how failing to provide a sense of purpose and decent conditions can quickly ‘bleed’ personnel, even after successful recruitment.

Similar challenges appear elsewhere: Poland’s expansion drive, for example, has been hampered by issues like outdated gear and insufficient training capacity, which are translating into [poor retention](#) and recruiting difficulties.¹⁰ Thus, securing the necessary equipment, infrastructure, and engaging training for troops are part and parcel of a successful retention strategy. A professional military career must be attractive not only in pay, but in day-to-day experiences, and the ability to see a meaningful and viable path ahead. But most importantly, there must be a sense of purpose that gives meaning to their service. Otherwise, a military career is not a calling but just another occupation.

Italy’s previous Chief of the Defence Staff and current chairman of NATO’s Military Committee, Adm. Giuseppe Cavo Dragone, warned that Italy’s armed forces have shrunk to just 165,564 personnel, falling below what he called the service’s “limit of survival” of 170,000 troops.¹¹ Italy’s undersized forces demonstrate the point—that halting attrition must precede and underpin any recruiting drive to grow the force. Simply put, it is difficult to fill a leaky cup.

Empirical evidence suggests that conscription-based forces enjoy more stable retention than all-volunteer models, whose reenlistment rates are highly sensitive to civilian labour market conditions. A 2023 study of Denmark’s mixed service system found that, although volunteers respond to changes in unemployment, conscripts generally serve out their legally prescribed terms, resulting in significantly lower post-deployment attrition among the latter group.¹²

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Similarly, a 2024 comparative analysis of six western European armies (Belgium, The Netherlands, France, Spain, Italy, and Portugal) that transitioned from conscription to an all-volunteer force (AVF) documented

wider fluctuations in reenlistment rates under the AVF model, closely tracking pay incentives and civilian job competition, whereas retention in former conscript armies remained largely insulated by statutory service obligations.¹³ Together, these studies imply that AVFs must deploy sustained incentive schemes if they are to match the predictability of conscription-based retention.

In several former European conscript armies, a surprisingly large share of each intake chose to stay on as career personnel once their mandatory term expired. For example, during France’s decades-long universal-service system, fully one-third of the standing professional force had begun their careers as conscripts; an indicator that many conscripts reenlisted or converted to a longer-term contract after finishing their compulsory service.¹⁴

HOW CAN EUROPEAN MILITARIES IMPROVE RETENTION?

While European governments are starting to spend unprecedented amounts on new weapons systems, these outlays will amount to little capability unless they also invest in tangible improvements in military careers and build a more supportive national culture.

Perhaps the best model for reversing this trend is France’s new Loyalty Retention Plan, a €500 million initiative to improve military retention through better pay and pensions, accelerated career advancement, upgraded housing, improved medical access, and targeted incentives for cyber and intelligence roles. It also facilitates career mobility between the military and civilian sectors to enhance long-term attractiveness.¹⁵

Overall, military personnel experts and national military associations agree on a broad set of recommendations to improve military retention. They include:

Boost financial incentives: Better pay, allowances, and pensions are essential to retention. These can also include supplemental pensions for longer service and compensating overtime and irregular hours which are common in military service. For example, the UK recently began to offer an £8,000 retention payment to junior soldiers entering their third year, alongside a £30,000 bonus for air engineers who commit to an extra three years of service. These are part of a broader package that includes the largest military pay rise in over two decades.¹⁶

Reform force-generation models: To mitigate AVF volatility, European militaries should consider introducing statutory minimum terms of service, mirroring conscription’s predictability, alongside market-responsive incentives. For example, an initial binding contract of 4–6 years with a built-in retention bonus at the halfway mark can both secure baseline manpower and smooth out pro-cyclical enlistment swings. Alternatively, a hybrid model as found in Switzerland and Finland (mandatory short-term service

plus a volunteer cadre) could guarantee a core of trained personnel while preserving AVF flexibility.

Enhance career development and pathways: Creating clear, attractive career pathways can motivate personnel to remain. If soldiers see a dead-end job with little personal growth, they will leave. On the other hand, if continued service offers education, specialization, and promotions, retention improves. Providing options for continuing education or skill certifications that are valued in civilian life can also reassure troops that their service benefits their long-term career, military or otherwise.

Improve work-life balance and living conditions: Enforcing work-hour limits and leave, and otherwise humanizing the demands of service, is a high priority. Implementing the EU Working Time Directive standards for military personnel to ensure adequate rest and compensatory time off. Defence ministries must also introduce measures to make military life more compatible with family life, such as adjusting posting cycles to reduce disruptive moves, and providing more support for housing and childcare. Ensuring the predictability of schedules where possible and granting regular leave can go a long way to retain mid-career members who have families.

Additionally, improving living and working conditions is crucial. This includes modernizing barracks, providing decent accommodations and healthcare, and guaranteeing safe work environments. These are basic quality-of-life aspects that, if neglected, become “push” factors out of the forces.

Invest in leadership and organizational reform: Militaries must foster a culture in which personnel feel respected and heard. EUROMIL members advocate better leadership training, especially for mid-level officers and NCOs, to ensure leaders are supportive mentors rather than solely taskmasters. They also call for giving servicemembers a stronger voice in shaping conditions through professional associations or feedback mechanisms. In some countries this extends to granting troops similar rights as other public sector workers, such as representation in legal matters or collective bargaining on certain issues.¹⁷

While the military chain of command is unique, treating personnel fairly and transparently builds loyalty and cohesion. Reducing peacetime bureaucratic hassles and encouraging innovation can also improve morale among younger servicemembers.

Rebuild the Social Contract around National Service: If serving in the armed forces is looked down upon within a society, few will want to stay and even fewer will want to join in the first place. The future of European security will depend on whether its societies can rebuild the social contract around national defence and other forms of service to ensure that Europe has the soldiers it needs for the challenges ahead. When service of all kinds is more honoured and recognized as vital to society, more people will want to serve.

Europe cannot afford to keep bleeding talent. Without urgent action on retention, all the new tanks and jets in the world won't matter if they are crewed by green recruits with no mentors to guide them. Holding the line against Russia starts with holding onto the experienced people already in uniform.

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