

Academics as soldiers?

Ethical Forum of the University Foundation in Brussels - December 2019



The European Commission recently decided to make a considerable budget available for academic research that could contribute to the defence of the European continent. The Commission created the European Defence Fund with a budget of 13 billion EUR allocated for 2021-2027, much of which will be available to fund academic research.

In an era in which defence is just as much about terrorist organizations as about foreign armies, and in which cyberattacks and even fake news have become more damaging than tanks, most disciplines, from engineering to the humanities, are potentially concerned.

The European Commission has also launched a large-scale program for military technology for the period 2021-2027. The subsidization of weapons research has until now always been explicitly excluded from the European budget.

Every year more funds are spent on military warfare and every year there are more conflict zones. It is clear that even more and sophisticated armament does not contribute to less

violence and conflict. Now, more than ever, the concept of 'safety and security' and its interpretation demands a different understanding and approach.

Migration

Migration is seen as a security problem and a threat, against which the use of military means is the solution. European war and arms trade practices are hardly the subject of debate. The discussion about migration is about controlling or reducing flows. It is not about how foreign, military, and trade policies encouraged migration while Western countries spend mega budgets on war equipment that they ship to war zones. Then they close the borders to refugees trying to flee the armed forces, who are then left to fend for themselves in camps where aid is below par.

Three of the four largest European arms companies - Airbus (a pan-European company with headquarters in Leiden), Leonardo (Italy) and Thales (based in France, with a number of departments in the Netherlands) - are the main beneficiaries of this European border-wall policy. They offer a wide range of security goods and services that are used in the construction and management of the various types of border walls. In addition, they lobby the European Union loudly and successfully for militarization, for example for stepping up border surveillance. Cynically, they also profit by feeding the reasons why people are forced to flee, even directly supplying weapons to countries plagued by war, internal armed conflicts, repressive regimes and human rights violations.

Since the beginning of 2015, the 'Missing Migrants' project has registered around 20,000 refugees who perished in the Mediterranean and North Africa. This only concerns registered deaths. The actual number of refugees killed is even higher.

European arms industry

The European Union wants to improve the competitive position of the arms industry. The question of whether a strong arms industry brings the safety of European citizens a step closer is not raised.

The European military research program is not there for our security, it is a support program for the arms industry. "The European Union needs a strong and competitive arms industry," is the motto that moves the Commission. The arms industry has a privileged position in European decision-making. More than half of the expert group that provided "advice" on the research program at the request of the European Commission are representatives of the arms industry. Critical voices from civil society or independent experts were not heard. The results don't lie. The modalities recommended by this expert group are the most favorable ever under the European budget. Not only would the research costs be 100% subsidized, the property rights would also end up in the hands of the industry. It is unclear where this money should come from. Civilian research programs such as Horizon 2020 are already being cut.

The European Union was nevertheless conceived as a peace project; a soft power that tries

to resolve violence in internal and international conflicts. The militarization of the European budget threatens the European peace project.



Last December the 18th Ethical Forum of the University Foundation took place in Brussels.

The purpose of the Ethical Forum was to stimulate reflection on the following important questions:

*Should universities seize this opportunity as a way of funding research that could be useful for both military and civil purposes?

*Do the academics have a duty to respond positively to this request to help defend the European Union and its values, even if the research involved, is of no particular scientific interest nor likely to find civil uses?

*Or should they instead turn down this offer as being incompatible with their ethical ideal of producing knowledge for humanity as a whole, without the secrecy and other constraints imposed by defence concerns?

*Should the decision about whether to engage in defence-motivated research be left to individual researchers? Or should their institutions rather decide, separately or jointly? And what are the criteria that should guide such decisions?

Principles

One argument against defence research is that it would invite the military to infringe upon the independence of universities, thereby damaging public trust in our impartiality and objectivity, similar to how the influence of corporations (e.g. the pharmaceutical industry) has corroded the status of university research in the eyes of some.

Defence research would have serious repercussions upon academic publication policy, as the needs of secrecy will override the traditional academic needs of transparency and repeatability.

Restrictions on publication are already a precondition for corporate-financed research. Such restrictions contradict European academia's mission to produce universal knowledge and reliable technology for the sake of humanity as a whole, and not just for the benefit of

national communities, which has been the mission since the 'Republic of Letters' in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Academic research for the military?

One of the speakers during the Ethical Forum challenged the claim that Defence research is not an established tradition for European universities. He argued that, "This kind of research is not new to universities and still goes on. New is that the EU gets involved," he said. According to the speaker the military is a catalyst to achieve political goals and strategies.

It is also claimed that both national research funds and the European Horizon 2020 programme stipulate that only research with an exclusive focus on civil applications is eligible for funding. However, this seems not to be the reality. Neither does dual-use research seem excluded, although the ethical review committee says that it tends to disqualify research whose central purpose is not civil.

Do universities need to change their policy?

Defence is no longer just about military conflicts but also about digital security, preventing misinformation and 'fake news', or preventing interference from foreign countries in elections.

During the forum several interesting interventions were made. GRIP (Groupe de Recherche et d'information sur la Paix et la Sécurité) stated that academics should be aware about the political context of the project. On the European Commission (EC) decision to create the European Defence Fund, the weak player is the European Parliament (EP). The weak power of the EP and the absence of equilibrium between the EC, the European Council and the EP is a problem in the decision making.

A European Defence researcher made clear that EU countries spend a lot of money on military research. Academics doing research on military projects are participating in military actions. Specialised companies doing research for the military can pay the smartest researchers. A constructive dialogue amongst researchers is advisable.

Military technology is difficult to control, and the proliferation of arms creates new armed conflicts in unstable areas.

Money and economics

The European Defense fund is an economic, industrial initiative on research, development and acquisition of military technologies and strategies, that serve the global competitiveness and export of weapons and weapon systems. Military spending is still much higher than funding for human needs.

The questionnaire on research used by the EC is tricky. The main question should be: 'who is the end user of the research product?' In reality the end user of weaponry can mostly not be traced. There is no legal prohibition to work together: universities and military. Brains and funding used for military research are not available for research to serve humanity.

Open access principle and ethics

How can military research be compatible with open science and open access to information? Academic knowledge is intended to be public; research needs to be discussed freely. Open science is democracy.

Defense funded research is situated in complete secrecy. Yet despite the secrecy, the information can get into the hands of criminals.

Every Flemish university has an ethical commission that works as advisor and also has an evaluation role. Ethics need expertise and advice from experts, and serious debate on the issue. It is a joined commitment. Scientists have a special task, they have a mission. It is clear that ethical values differ amongst academics. Assertions such as 'it would be a scandal to abstain from military research, it is our duty to cooperate' and 'accepting money is collaborating to war, we need to educate for peace not for war' show conflicting opinions on ethical principles.



Peace and sustainability

The need for research on conflict prevention and crisis management on all levels such as economics, civil aid etc. is most necessary and urgent. Other challenges are research on the behavior of military personnel who use drones. What is their psychological condition? And what about the users of killer robots?

Peace research is underfunded and very often excluded from funding because it is considered to be ideological or not objective.

The military defense industry still preaches ‘us versus them’– ‘we need to attack’.

VLIR (Flemish Interuniversity Council)

Flemish universities are already bound by a number of legal provisions in the field of human rights. However, they wish to assume a much broader social responsibility in this area. On the advice of an inter-university working group, at the end of 2019 VLIR provided the universities with a series of concrete guidelines to evaluate the human rights impact of research, giving them a practical working tool for self-regulation.

These guidelines should enable academics to make the right decision on whether they should accept a military research project, or not. One of the guidelines is about international conventions. If a proposed research project conforms to international conventions then the project should be acceptable. But interpretation of conventions are often flexible.

The VLIR guidelines are not binding: they are a practical tool for self-regulation. The Flemish universities are committed to develop their own human rights policy and to play a pioneering role.

Every university has expressed its commitment to include the human rights test into its operation. How that happens exactly will vary from university to university.

Practical guidelines will sharpen awareness and will indicate how to deal with a problem situation.

Universities are operating in an increasingly complex and more international environment. There is a need for more support on human rights for the 32,700 researchers and employees (VLIR, 2018) associated with the Flemish universities.

At the end of 2020, the VLIR will evaluate how far the Flemish universities are in realizing their commitment and where possible adjustments need to be made.

Concerns are with the dual-use projects, because they will remain in a twilight zone.

Academic freedom is under attack in several places within the EU. VLIR will therefore urge all future European Commissioners for Justice to also pay sufficient attention to academic freedom in their periodic review of the member states.

‘Security’ turn of mind

Many academics showed their concerns about the increasing military research programmes. Military research and education are in conflict: Education is intended to promote peace not war. Sustainable peace requires changing attitudes and rethinking of unsustainable and destructive powers. Security issues are now being addressed by military strategies and interventions. While we know that military expenditures not only represent a theft from those who are hungry and suffer, but are also an ineffective means of obtaining human security and a culture of peace. Only some 10 % of the annual military costs would be

enough to meet the Millennium Development Goals. Substantial reductions in military costs could eliminate the crushing poverty whereby nearly one third of humanity lives in insufferable conditions, a majority being women and children. Since one year of military spending equals 615 years of the UN annual budget, such a reduction in military costs would also strengthen the United Nations' efforts and possibilities to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war.

It is unacceptable to continue a process of militarization, often outside democratic control, that mainly serves the arms producers. In order to move towards just and peaceful societies, we need to address the root- causes of conflicts, not only the symptoms.

Neither the European Union nor academics should take part in the global armament spiral. Instead they should pursue their most important goal: "to promote peace, its values and the well-being of its peoples."

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