

Evaluation of the Armed Forces Websites of the European Countries

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Abstract: The armed forces are a critical component of the national security strategy of several European countries. Despite the peace that has succeeded the cold war, several armies, in peacetime, have elements recruited with promises of individual opportunities. The countries have two forms of recruitment of their troops: by volunteering or by mandatory incorporation. Following the trends of the modern world, interconnected in a network, it becomes essential to the institutions to mark their presence on the Internet. The Armed Forces in their various branches are no exception; there are numerous sites with relevant information, being used as a channel for dissemination and fundraising. Since young people represent a large share of the population using the Internet, and this is the target population for recruitment, it becomes mandatory to use the internet as a communication channel between them.

It was carried out a qualitative study of all sites of European armed forces, and their branches, in order to assess their quality and differences. The approach focused on the evaluation of sites for their ability to inform, update, quantity and quality of content, service availability, use and visual attractiveness, and ease of communication. The study has also tried to verify if the countries with volunteer incorporation were producing websites with higher levels of quality, reflecting the need to invest in order to recruit. On the other hand, countries with compulsive incorporation could have lower investments in their websites, once the satisfaction of the need for staff is guaranteed.

We considered 38 countries, with an initial usability study where data about the characteristics considered important for proper construction of a website as well as for a good and easy relationship with the user of this type of site were collected. This research defined the parameters to evaluate the sites and groups were created with the parameters of the different areas of analysis of those sites.

The evaluation shows that there are differences in quality of sites for each of the countries evaluated in terms of graphics, usability and content, and that where there is a greater difference between the countries is on the number of existing sites by country. It is clear that there are countries that invest strategically in this area while others do not. It was also clear that there is a difference between Eastern and Western Europe in the quality and investment made in the sites of their armed forces. Dividing the countries by their incorporation system, the differences are smaller, both in terms of number of sites for the military, either as to the average assessment of each scheme. In countries where the incorporation is mandatory, investment in independent sites for each branch has not been neglected for a considerable part of the countries, a little more than half. But it is in countries where recruitment is made on a voluntary basis that there are more sites for the different branches, which may indicate an existing competitiveness for staff recruitment.

Keywords: Armed forces, Websites, Recruitment, Europe

1. Introduction

The aftermath of Second World War led to a growing sense of concern for the safety of the population. This situation has led to many European countries to take concrete actions, embodied in adherence to collective defense organizations (NATO and Warsaw Pact) and the reorganization of its armed forces, to ensure the integrity of its territory and the security of their populations. This feeling of security and insecurity, embodied in a mutual fear that characterized the period of the Cold War, would end only with the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991. In this period of nearly 40 years, we have seen the recruitment of large numbers of civilians for entry into the armed forces of most countries in Europe, leading in many cases oversized armed forces to the real needs of some countries. The recruitment was standard practice for ensuring the maintenance of staff seen as necessary.

This situation changes from 1991. The level of conventional threat against European countries was substantially reduced and the non conventional threat is to assume, since then, greater attention by states and organizations responsible for security. Inevitably, the armed forces follow this amendment, feeling an increasing need to improve its quality over quantity. The technological evolution of military equipment, catalyzed by the incessant demand for weapons systems more efficient to cope with an increasingly effective enemy, requires the existence of military increasingly better prepared. This reality has led some European countries to evolve to different systems of recruitment and training, better adapted to the new reality and new weapons systems.

Therefore, it becomes interesting to understand the reality of the armed forces of European countries by analyzing the recruiting method they use and how the divulgation made at sites they have, does or not, change the number and the quality of the civilians who are presented to serve their armed forces and their countries.

1.1 State Of The Art

The armed forces are an integral part of society in various countries of Europe. As regards Anna Leander, it is argued to be important to integrate society, to form political organizations, to ensure civil states and to control the use of violence in society (Leander, 2004). According to Stanislav Andreski, military organizations influence the social structure, especially by determining the distribution of power or, in other words, the ability to use violence (Andreski, 1968). As referred previously, the society is constantly evolving, and the various branches of the armed forces felt the need to monitor these developments. As stated by Alfred Vagts, we can say that each stage of social progress or regression produced military institutions in accordance with their needs and ideas, its culture and its economy (Vagts, 1981).

One of the factors that most influence had in the paradigm shift of the armed forces, in Europe and in the rest of the world, was the end of the Cold War. As noted by John J. Mearsheimer, the profound changes in course in Europe have been widely seen as harbingers of a new era of peace. With the end of the Cold War, it is said that the threat of war looming over Europe for over four decades are evaporating (Mearsheimer, 1990).

In the last three decades the army in peacetime recruited with promises of individual opportunities: money for college, professional skills, achievement, adventure and personal transformation. At first of a controversial war, many of those promises sounded inappropriate, if not absurd (Bailey, 2007).

Because of this reality and during this period, there was a military change in its relationship with market logic, which occurred naturally and virtually invisible. This change was an unintended consequence of changing to the voluntary regime (Bailey, 2007).

Some European countries have decided to end the recruitment as a result of geopolitical change and the limited utility of recruits for the post cold war missions, although other European countries plan to maintain recruitment despite these same factors. Thus, it is probable the extinction of recruitment in

armies that seek to reduce the number of recruits, and the maintenance of this characteristic in the armies which aims to increase the number of assets, and in armies of militia type (Jehn & Selden, 2002).

The European countries that continue to use conscription have cited his alleged budgetary savings, almost as its only justification. In the period in which we live, post-war and post-Cold War era, conscription may not finish in Europe however its importance is no longer relevant (Jehn & Selden, 2002).

The armed forces are also shaped by advertising for recruitment, since advertising can reach a greater number of recruitment-age populations more quickly and economically. The military advertising tries to incite the act of relatively low cost of contacting a recruiter or go to the army website (Bailey, 2007). The Internet and the increasing number of sites as an advertising medium, has become an undeniable reality in the information age in which we live. The armed forces being part of the society and the world are using this concept as a channel for dissemination and fundraising. As John Thompson, the development of communication mediums has changed in a profound and irreversible way the nature of communication in contemporary society (Thompson, 1995).

Networks are very old forms of human practice, but took a new life in our time by becoming information networks, fueled by the Internet (Castells, 2002). Since young people represent a large share of the population using the Internet, and this is the target population for recruitment, it becomes mandatory to use the internet as a communication channel.

1.2 The Problem

The adoption of the Internet as a means of communication by the armed forces raises the question of its effectiveness and its real significance in the society to which they are intended, taking into account the reduction of the population of military age and distinguishing between those who have a need for volunteer recruitment and those with obligatory military service.

With this article, we intend to carry out a qualitative study of all sites of European armed forces, and their branches in order to assess their quality and differences. The approach will focus on the assessment of sites in the following aspects: its ability to inform, update, quantity and quality of content, service availability, use and visual attractiveness, and ease of communication. It will be also examined in countries where the merger is voluntary, if there is a greater investment in the sites of the armed forces, and their quality compared to the countries in which the incorporation is obligatory.

2. Methodology

This article reveals a qualitative study of sites of European armed forces, which considered the following 38 countries: Albania, Austria, Belarus, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Denmark, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Estonia, Finland France, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Macedonia, Malta, Moldova, Montenegro, Norway, Poland, Portugal, United Kingdom, Czech Republic, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Sweden, Switzerland and Ukraine. The evaluation was excluded, for not having armed forces, the following countries: Andorra, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Monaco, San Marino and the Vatican. Due to its diplomatic complexity, Cyprus was also excluded, since that territory has two armed forces, one on the Greek side and another on the Turkish side (CIA, 2011).

We started by making a research on the usability of websites, to this end, we referred to the site <http://www.usability.gov>, from where it was collected information on the characteristics considered important for proper construction of a website, as well as for a good and easy relationship with the user of this site. Moreover it was also consulted and analyzed the book *Research-Based Web Design & Usability Guidelines* (Leavitt & Shneiderman, 2007). This research has defined the parameters to

evaluate the sites, and groups were created with the parameters of different areas of analysis: homepage; layout; pagination and scroll; headers; titles and labels; links; appearance of text; lists; widgets; graphics, images and multimedia content; organization; and research. As the analysis of sites was done separately by more than one person, each of which assessed its share of sites of European armed forces, and to avoid subjectivity in the evaluation, it was registered only if each site met each assessment parameter, by using a Boolean value (represented by 0 and 1). During the assessment was given to each parameter the corresponding value, later added with elements of the same group and divided by the number of parameters resulting in the final value for the group. The values were registered and treated in a spread sheet, which results are presented later in this article. The final result of the assessment has a minimum value of 0 and maximum of 8.79. This value results from the sum of the value of all assessed groups, which results from the sum of the relative importance of each parameter divided by the number of group parameters.

3. Analysis

The first step of this study was to search all sites of European armed forces for future analysis. One obstacle encountered was the difficulty in finding the sites intended for analysis, since some armed forces do not have sites, as is the case of Macedonia and Moldova. Moreover, we also found a site under construction, Malta, precluding their analysis. Throughout the evaluation we faced with several desktop environments, some more complex and some more simple, but in general with relative ease of use. To perform the evaluation we considered the sites of the main branches of the armed forces: army, navy and air force. In some cases, it was also considered the site of the ministry of defense of the country in evaluation, because it contains information related to the branches of the armed forces and also links to the sites of those branches.

3.1 General Assessment of All Countries

After a qualitative analysis of all sites it was possible for us to verify that the difference between the values obtained by each country under review has no great difference, as shown in Figure 1 below.

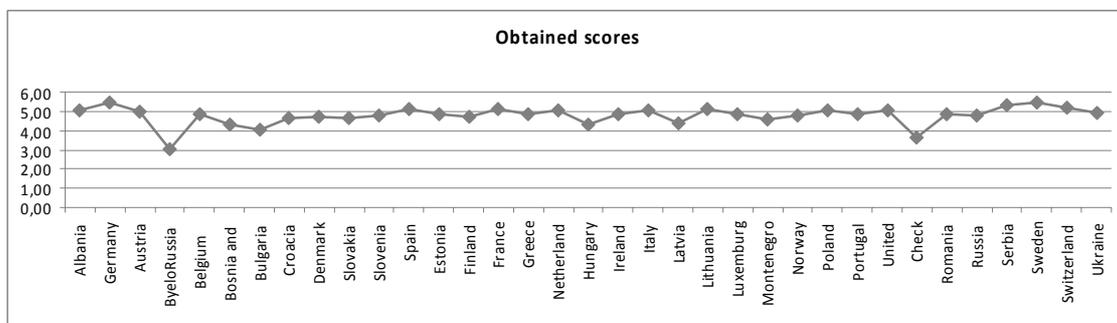


Figure 1: Scores of all assessed countries

Speaking in absolute values, the minimum was obtained by Belarus with 3.02 and the maximum score was obtained by Sweden with 5.49. This represents 34.34% and 62.50% respectively as compared to the maximum score possible. However, most countries had an assessment within a range between 50% and 60%, with an average of 54.38% compared to the maximum possible score, which indicates a satisfactory classification of the evaluated sites. This is presented in Figure 2 and in Table 1 below.

Throughout the analysis it was found that there is a reasonable investment for most European armed forces on their sites, revealing on average, a good level of information update, a nice graphic layout and simplicity of use. This shows that there is a technological sensitivity towards a greater need and willingness to disclose information relevant to society, with the objective, in some cases, to attract new elements to their forces.

Despite there is investment, there is a difference among countries in what concerns to having only one website for all the branches of the armed forces – Albania, Byelorussia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Slovenia, Luxemburg, Check Republic, Russia, Serbia, Ukraine – representing 32.43% of the countries; or having a website for two of the branches of the armed forces, sometimes with one for those branches and a global including all of them – Austria, Slovakia, Hungary, Switzerland – that represent 11.43% of the evaluated websites; or having a website for each one of the existing branches of the armed forces – Germany, Belgium, Denmark, Spain, Finland, France, Greece, Netherlands, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Montenegro, Norway, Poland, Portugal, United Kingdom, Romania, Sweden – that represent 54.29% of the evaluated websites (Figure 2).

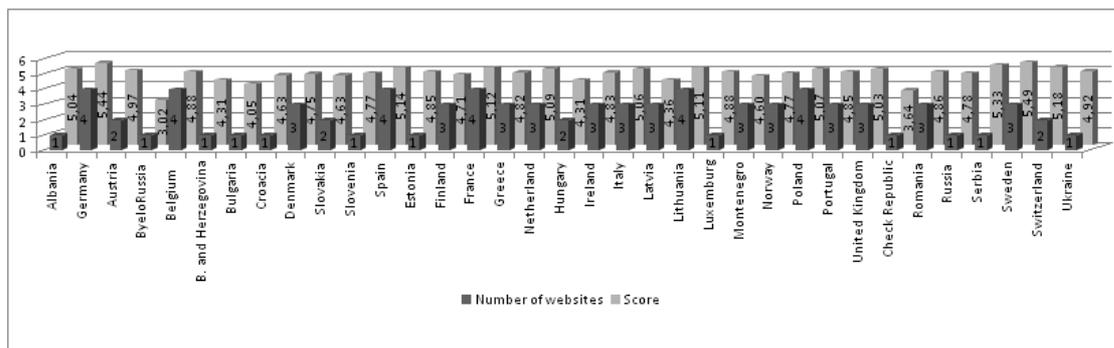


Figure 2: Scores and number of military websites

Countries	%	Countries	%	Countries	%	Countries	%
Albania	57,30%	Slovakia	52,70%	Ireland	55,00%	United Kingdom	57,25%
Germany	61,88%	Slovenia	54,24%	Italy	57,53%	Check Republic	41,41%
Austria	56,57%	Spain	58,51%	Latvia	49,57%	Romania	55,30%
Byelorussia	34,34%	Estonia	55,16%	Lithuania	58,18%	Russia	54,40%
Belgium	55,52%	Finland	53,56%	Luxemburg	55,53%	Serbia	60,68%
Bosnia and Herzegovina	49,02%	France	58,24%	Montenegro	52,38%	Sweden	62,50%
Bulgaria	46,05%	Greece	54,88%	Norway	54,23%	Switzerland	58,97%
Croatia	52,68%	Netherlands	57,87%	Poland	57,69%	Ukraine	55,92%
Denmark	54,02%	Hungary	48,99%	Portugal	55,23%		

Table 1: Relative percentage obtained by the assessed countries

Another obtained value was the percentage of countries that have sites that include recruitment links. 68.57% of the countries have, at least, one website linking to a recruitment page, while 31.43% did not.

3.2 Voluntary Incorporation versus Mandatory Incorporation

One of the significant elements in this study was the type of adopted incorporation in each one of the countries: 18 of the evaluated countries have voluntary incorporation, while the other 17 have mandatory military service.

Despite what was expected, the countries with mandatory service obtained a better average in the websites evaluation, 55.45%, than the one obtained by those countries that need to convince citizens to become voluntaries to service: 53.37% (Figure 3).

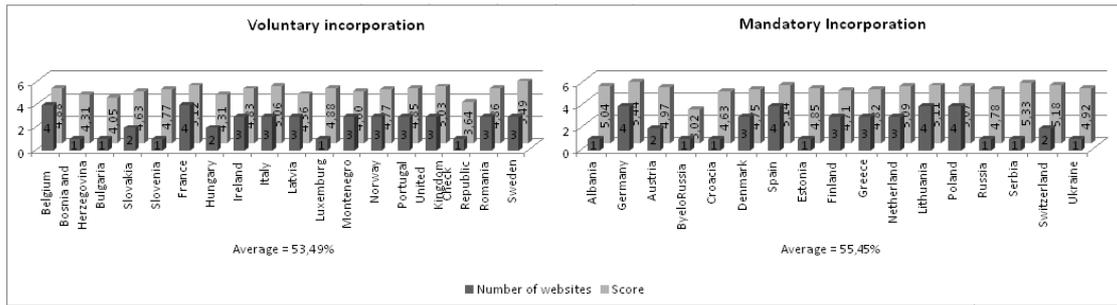


Figure 3: Scores and number of sites in both mandatory and voluntary incorporation countries

Concerning the number of sites in each of the incorporation regimes, 61.11% of the countries with voluntary service have several sites, one for each of the armed forces branches, while this happens in only 47.06% of the countries with mandatory incorporation. This shows that countries with voluntary incorporation have a higher level of investment in the creation of armed forces websites.

From those countries with one website for each branch of the armed forces, 28.57% have a mandatory incorporation system, 71.43% have voluntary incorporation, 35.71% are from the Eastern Europe and 64.29% are from the rest of Europe.

The countries with a lower investment in the number of websites, having only one website for all of the military branches, have the following distribution: 56.25% have mandatory incorporation, 47.35% have voluntary incorporation, 81.25% are from the Eastern Europe and only 18.75% are from the rest of Europe.

Another significant indicator of the importance that the armed forces websites have in each country is the existence, or not, of a recruitment link, making it easier to those interested in joining the armed forces to obtain relevant information to that process and/or register themselves for incorporation. 77.78% of the countries with voluntary service have an incorporation link, while that happens in 58.82% of the countries with a mandatory incorporation system.

3.3 Eastern Europe versus Western Europe

During the evaluation it was perceptible the difference in investment, regarding the number of the armed forces websites and regarding the quality of the existing websites, between Eastern Countries and Western Countries. This was objectively confirmed by the final results as it can be seen in Figure 4.

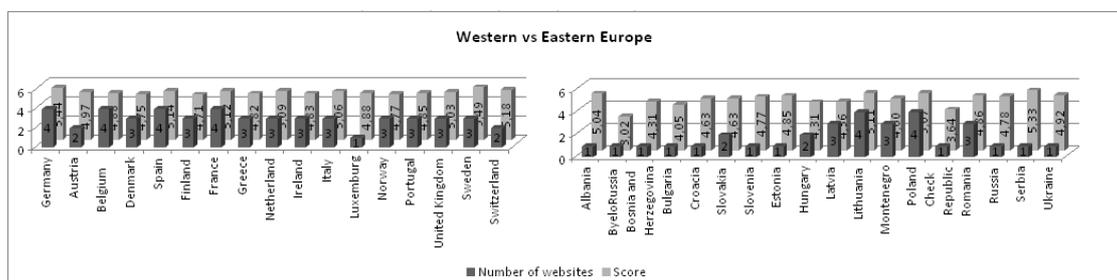


Figure 4: Score and number of websites of Western and Eastern Europe countries

Although being scarce in some of the information provided, as in providing specific websites for each branch of the armed forces, the difference between the Eastern Europe countries and the rest of the European countries in the average classification is not considerable, with the Eastern countries being classified with 52.00%, while the others have 56.90%. Despite this, there is a big difference in the number of websites of armed forces for each country, existing a big difference between the number of

countries in Eastern Europe that have only one general website for all the military branches, and the Western Europe countries in the same situation. Only 27.78% of the Eastern European countries have one website for each military branch, while 72.22% do not. In the Western Europe the scenario is the opposite, with 82.35% of the countries providing a specific website for each branch of the armed forces. There is also a great difference between the Eastern and Western European Countries in what concerns to recruitment links. 88.24% of the Western Europe countries have such a link, while that happens in only 50% of the Eastern Europe countries.

4. Conclusions

The performed evaluation allows the extraction of several conclusions regarding the web communication policies of the European countries, through the analysis of the quality of their websites in what concerns to graphics, usability and contents.

The Spanish website www.soldados.com stands out as an example of quality, in graphics, easiness of use, completeness of the menus, virtual maps indicating missions, interactive games, etc. Another demonstration of investment in this field is the Norwegian case. Norway has recently launched another domain, complementing the domain mil.no with the access through the forsvaret.no domain (*forsvaret* means defence). On the other extreme countries like Byelorussia can be found, with a very poorly constructed website (<http://www.mod.mil.by>).

The data collected demonstrated that the biggest difference in the Internet communication strategy of the European countries lay in the number of military websites, where 81.25% of the countries that do not have one website for each branch of the armed forces is located in the Eastern Europe. It is clearly proven the existence of a difference in the quality of the military websites of Eastern and Western European countries.

The differences found have obviously underpinning causes, forcing us to examine and understand not only the current situation but also what might be the future development of these tools. We cannot ignore, as the cause of these differences, the conflicts that occurred in Europe over the past 20 years, of which we highlight the Balkans, Chechnya, Georgia and the war against terrorism, among others, the political changes associated with German reunification, by the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the collapse of the former Soviet Union, whose breakup gave rise to a considerable number of independent countries, also in this paper. These new countries, this time awakened to the need of having armed forces, having started the process of developing its security and defense.

Looking specifically the countries of Eastern Europe, with few exceptions, the results reflect a constant that exists in almost all of them. Most countries live from their natural resources, or "rent" their territory for oil and gas pipelines can reach other sites. This reality contributes to the issue of development of these countries is tilted in relation to the concern of the necessary for their survival. Thus, the working middle class, who want strong, not to compromise the country's development, is negligible or nonexistent. The main difference lies precisely here. To be middle class, there must be education, which will necessarily lead to development, technology and information. The percentage of ignorance and inability to use these tools, does not catalyze its development, resulting in that the analysis of several sites turned out worst in these countries, as compared with other European countries.

Another important and curious issue, concerns the development that has been evident in the armed forces of the countries of the former USSR. The results show that the sites in these countries, contributing to a holistic view of the military, because most of them have a single website for all branches of the Armed Forces. Typically, this view is associated with a form of recruitment based on voluntary, contradicted, in this case, by the results found. This leads us to conclude that the armed forces of these countries are rapidly advancing, having already surpassed the old concepts of

epirocracy and thalassocracy, very common in the armed forces of the former USSR, based essentially on a system of conscription.

When classifying countries by their incorporation method, there are smaller differences, both in the number of websites as in the results of their quality evaluation (the difference in the obtained average score was of only 2.08%, with advantage to those with mandatory incorporation). It is also noticeable that there was not a diminishment in the investment in the quality of the military websites in more than 50% of the countries with mandatory incorporation. This contradicts the initial hypothesis of this work that expected countries with voluntary incorporation to have higher standards for their websites, as a mean to better reach their potential candidates.

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