



# THE EFFECTS OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS IN THE MILITARY ORGANIZATION

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This article makes a brief analysis of the sustainable development goals that are applicable in the military organization and identifies, through the literature-review method, the main ways in which the military organization was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on the evolution of military spending. The ultimate goal is to establish how the pandemic has influenced the implementation of sustainable development goals in the military organization, in order to provide strategic management with recommendations to increase the resilience and sustainability of the military organization. The main conclusion of this research is that the pandemic did not have a significant impact in the short term, but in the medium and long term the situation may change, which calls for adaptation, cooperation, coordination and caution in the configuration of defence spending. As a secondary conclusion, it can be considered that the pandemic can have an accelerating effect on sustainable development policies, the military organization being called to benefit from the identified lessons and new opportunities, in order to increase the response capacity.

**Keywords:** COVID-19; expenditures; goals; effect; durable development; military organization.

The end of 2019 is associated with the appearance of the first cases of respiratory infections caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus and, since then, humanity has experienced a new pandemic, with an ongoing unpredictable evolution. Characterized by a global spread and periods of intensity and calmness, the pandemic prompted authorities in each country to take restrictive measures to limit the spread of the virus. Most of the measures have had an impact on the continuation by nations of the trend of economic growth, a prerequisite for achieving the sustainable development goals (SDGs), which aim to achieve long-term positive effects in economic, social and environmental terms and access for future generations to limited resources.

As a part of society that ensures a secure environment, conducive to economic growth and sustainable development, the military organization must constantly adapt to its needs and follow the same guidelines, so as not to become an oasis of regression and be unable to fulfill its missions. In other words, the military organization must be transformed into a sustainable organization, capable of carrying out its missions efficiently.

However, the difficulty of achieving this goal is underlined by the characteristics of the current security context, marked by unpredictability, attempts to reconfigure the power poles, reactivated conflicts, local conflict situations, false news and hybrid threats. Many of these have been generated or exacerbated by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, a hybrid threat in itself, that can cause economic, social and military crises at any time, in the increasingly complicated context of extreme climate events. As a result, the orientation towards resilience, minimization and even the rapid elimination of negative effects are expected to ensure the continuation of the path towards a sustainable development society, which can develop sustainably, as a whole, only in terms of progress in each area of activity, including the case of military organization.

Taking into account the ideas mentioned above, the first objective I propose in this article is to analyze how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the military organization, focusing on the main ways in which this organization has been involved in limiting and stopping the spread of the virus and the related expenses. This analysis will be the basis for the fulfillment of the second objective, namely, the identification of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the implementation of the sustainable development goals into the military organization.

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The motivation behind this approach is related to the fact that, so far, a series of writings and studies that focus on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on health, education, economy have been developed, but those dedicated to the sustainable development of the military organization are few and do not address the financial side and the possible short-, medium- and long-term effects.

In order to fulfill the proposed objectives, I utilized the literature review method to critically analyze relevant documents available online, the applied reasoning being mostly the deductive one. The limitations are given by the classified character of other sources of information, which could not be used for the realization of this article, but which would have increased the specific character of the approached topic.

The article is organized in three sections. The first section contains a brief analysis of the main SDGs, which could find their applicability in the military organization, emphasizing the need to direct funds in this regard. The second section analyzes the effects of the pandemic on military spending, and the third section is meant to analyze the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the sustainable development of the military organization. The last part of the article presents the conclusions, focusing on recommendations addressed to strategic management to increase the resilience and sustainability of the military organization.

### **The applicability of sustainable development goals into the military organization**

Sustainable development aims at implementing economic, social and environmental policies by 2030, through the concerted fulfillment of seventeen objectives<sup>1</sup>. A quick review of these SDGs allowed me to conclude that they could find their applicability in the military organization, in order to ensure its adaptation to the evolution of society. Here are some examples of SDGs that could be implemented into the military organization:

- *SDG 3 – health and well-being*<sup>2</sup>, could aim at taking measures to improve the medical services provided to military personnel and military medical infrastructure;

- *SDG 4 – qualitative education*<sup>3</sup>, could aim at modernizing military education;

- *SDG 5 – gender equality*<sup>4</sup>, is already on an

irreversible trend, which still needs improvement in any field of activity;

- *SDG 8 – decent work and economic growth*<sup>5</sup>, and *SDG 9 – industry, innovation, infrastructure*<sup>6</sup>, could be correlated and analyzed in order to revitalize the defence industry, modernize the defence infrastructure and boost research, development, innovation in this domain;

- *SDG 11 – durable cities and human settlements*<sup>7</sup>, could translate into a sustainable military organization, given the presence of military installations in the territorial units in which they operate and the influence that can be generated on the process of sustainable transformation of communities;

- *SDG 16 – peace, justice, effective institutions*<sup>8</sup>, could be closely linked to the efficient management of activities and missions carried out by military organizations;

- *SDG 17 – global partnerships for SDGs*<sup>9</sup>, stresses the importance of maintaining military alliances and focused efforts on achieving a stable security environment conducive to economic growth and sustainable development.

Of course, there is a need for thorough research and coherent proposals leading to the implementation of these objectives, but also others in the field of sustainable development (those related to environmental protection, responsible consumption, energy efficiency), especially if the financial effect is considerable.

The requirement issued by NATO, regarding the allocation by the Member States of at least 2% of GDP for defence, corroborated with the allocation of 20% and 2% of the defence budget for modern combat equipment, respectively for research, development and innovation<sup>10</sup>, put pressure on decision-makers to choose between financing an unproductive, but still useful system, and other systems without which society, as a whole, would not be able to develop.

In this context, military leaders face the challenge to find the common factor that favors the planning and development of endowment and modernization programs beneficial to a sustainable military organization, on the one hand, and alignment with the evolution of the defended society, on the other, the defence budget being directly influenced by economic growth and civil society priorities.



### **The effects of COVID-19 pandemic on military expenditure**

Whether we are talking about national military structures or those from other states, COVID-19 pandemic is expected to have generated both negative and positive effects. What is certain is that these two categories of effects had as a common element the need to respond mainly on the medical side, and attracted unforeseen expenses, distracting, at first sight, attention from meeting the objectives initially set, and generating a sudden reorientation of financial efforts.

Taking into consideration the objective of this research, the main negative effects are represented by the supplementation or reconfiguration of the expenditure. To meet the need to protect military personnel, but also to support civilian authorities, military managers have taken a number of measures, more or less costly, with a potential effect on current military and investment spending, economic growth and sustainable development.

Addressing this issue in retrospect, a study conducted by the Swiss army in April 2020 shows that the logistical management of the situation created by the pandemic inside a military recruit training institution is very demanding, highlighting the importance of drastic early measures<sup>11</sup> taken to avoid the spread of the virus. The study also mentions the difficulty of implementing hygiene and social distancing measures within such a military facility, where efforts have been made to ingeniously arrange tents with low accommodation capacity inside a gym, as well as to provide the feeding service<sup>12</sup>, efforts which were not translated into figures, the study focusing more on the clinical side of the research. But the most important aspect shown in this study refers to the low incidence of COVID-19 cases among young recruits, those affected having mild symptoms, which did not require hospitalization. Given this aspect and the fact that, in general, active military personnel are under the age of 60, so with low vulnerability to SARS-CoV-2 infection<sup>13</sup>, my opinion is that the hospitalization of infected soldiers did not generate significant costs, but this requires thorough research.

Among the measures observed to have generated expenses at the level of most military structures, there can be listed: providing protective equipment in medical facilities, but also in each

military unit, ensuring temperature measuring equipment, providing hygiene and disinfection materials, stockpiling of long-term food items as a measure to protect against disruptions in traditional regional supply chains, and to adapt to the transition to digital ones<sup>14</sup>, providing disposable containers for serving food. Besides these, the highly publicized actions related to the deployment of mobile field hospitals have certainly been cost-generating, highlighting the need to make investments in the future, to supplement the availability of such equipment and modernize the existing ones, so that they correspond to infectious threats<sup>15</sup>.

The measures to limit the consequences of infection with the new virus have also been taken outside military barracks, whether they consisted of large-scale actions to support the restrictions imposed by the authorities, the effective support of the civilian population, or the steps taken while the military were on missions outside military units.

For example, at the national level, to support the restrictive measures imposed by the authorities, the military were sent to establish medical discipline inside hospitals transformed into outbreaks of infection due to inefficient civil management, and specialized equipment sent for disinfection of spaces and vehicles. Teams of military doctors were also sent on missions outside the territory to increase medical support in other countries.

Another aspect that could have generated expenses was the involvement of the available military in activities that generated overtime working, such as exercises or guarding objectives that would not normally fall within their area of activity, and which, in conjunction with the heavy allocation of the recovery days, may turn into additional expenses.

With the advent and marketing of vaccines, military forces and equipment were involved in air and ground transportation, being a decisive factor for the distribution of vaccines and the conduct of vaccination campaigns at national and local level.

The amount of expenditure generated by these actions, as well as an analysis of how they have influenced defence budgets, are issues which, at least for the time being, have not been published.

Although controversial at times, actions in support of civil society fall within the limits of both the missions set out for the armed forces and the trend at NATO level. An example of less



expensive measures, in my opinion, are those taken by the Polish army, which has managed, with the support of cadets from military academies, to make a significant contribution to the support of the civilian population. Among the ones that generate minimum expenses, there can be mentioned: collection and reconditioning of the second-hand calculation technique in order to be donated to the needy children who attended the online courses; donation of staple foods, personal care products and medicines to disadvantaged people and veterans; manufacture, with the help of 3D printers, of the visors necessary for the medical staff; production of disinfectants; construction of protective masks and donation of blood<sup>16</sup>. The latter initiative was also found in the case of the military from other states, the need for blood and derived products being high during the pandemic peak periods.

A concrete way in which NATO intervened to limit the effects of COVID-19 is represented by the scientific research project started in 2020, which refers to creating devices for COVID-19 testing, the results of which should be completed in 2022. Except for the involvement in developing these elements, NATO, through the Science for Peace and Security (SPS) program, is also pursuing the development of other telemedicine, emergency response coordination and biological threat detection equipment<sup>17</sup>.

In fact, this new type of threat is expected to significantly redirect the attention of political-military actors and organizations at the global, regional and national levels, and, consequently, to attract spending, at the expense of increasing or redirection of the foreseen ones, and these measures should, in my opinion, be based on comprehensive risk analyzes. For example, at the national level, Romania's military strategy adopted this year establishes "the elimination of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and strengthened national resilience"<sup>18</sup> as primary national objective for the 2021-2024 period of time.

A special category of actions taken to limit the spread of the virus are represented by military operations such as Operation Kill the Virus, carried out by the US military in South Korea, following the pattern of combat operations. They referred to the virus as an unseen adversary, developing its most likely and most dangerous course of action, cooperating openly with the authorities, engaging

in the formulation of prevention policies, and implementing eight principles specific to military rigor, which proved their efficiency, reducing the number of cases throughout the peninsula to twenty-four<sup>19</sup>.

Another example of a military operation caused by the SARS-Cov-2 virus is Operation Warp Speed, conducted by the US military in cooperation with national civilian authorities, for the rapid development and distribution of vaccines, based on research in military medicine and rapid contracting. In terms of expenditure, this operation had the effect of allocating funds to pharmaceutical companies to support the development of vaccines, but their level has not been published<sup>20</sup>.

The examples of involvement of the military structures mentioned above reveal a large participation of the military instrument in solving the crisis generated by the COVID-19 pandemic. A common feature of all the mentioned cases is the unavailability of data on the generated amount of military expenditure. On the other hand, the reduction of deployment, the focus on the organization of meetings and on-line conferences, as well as the cancellation of large-scale exercises that should have taken place in 2020 (Defender-Europe 20)<sup>21</sup>, could represent pandemic response measures that have reduced military spending. At least at European level, for 2020, expenditure related to the mobility of military forces has been reconsidered at 1.5 billion euros, a level with 4.4 billion euro lower than originally estimated<sup>22</sup>.

At first glance, the volume of military spending caused by involvement in mitigating the pandemic did not significantly exceed the one that would have incurred if the pandemic had not existed. However, available data show a significant increase in defence spending of some nations in the context of COVID-19. Thus, according to data published by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), at NATO level, in 2020 there was an increase of 2.6% compared to 2019, twelve NATO countries, including Romania, exceeding the threshold of 2% imposed by the Alliance<sup>23</sup>. This increase is explained by the efforts to keep the pandemic under control, the average share of military spending in the amount of GDP increasing from 2.2% in 2019, to 2.4% in 2020, the highest share recorded since the economic crisis of 2009<sup>24</sup>.

However, these data, recorded and interpreted



at the Alliance level, were not similarly justified at the level of each nation, as the policies pursued by each government to combat the pandemic were different. For example, data published by the same institute show that the increase in military spending as a result of the pandemic was explicitly achieved in Chile and South Korea, with Brazil and Russia at the opposite pole, which registered a lower level of real military spending than the one forecasted for 2020<sup>25</sup>. Overall, SIPRI researchers concluded that the pandemic did not significantly affect military spending, expressing interest in observing the maintenance of this trend in 2021, the second year of the pandemic<sup>26</sup>. In this regard, NATO's vision is that by 2021, "two thirds of Member States will not be able to meet their 2% defence target for gross domestic product (GDP)"<sup>27</sup>.

Regarding the medium-term evolution of the pandemic, the forecasts are not very encouraging, estimations showing that, at European level, defence budgets will witness reductions of up to 20% in 2025, which would not have been operated if the pandemic had not existed<sup>28</sup>, fact easy to understand, given the economic constraints that could be amplified in this period, if the pandemic continues. Therefore, speeding up measures and unifying efforts to stop the pandemic could translate into better defence funding and continued efforts to maintain high response capacity.

### **The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the sustainable development of the military organization**

Clearly, military spending in the first year of the pandemic, although not significantly increased as a result of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, has had some influence on global economic growth, with the additional amount being redirected to defence, into the detriment of other economic sectors, considered to have a major role in sustainable development (industry, education, health, etc.). However, two aspects may not be taken into account. The first refers to the involvement of the military organization in completing the efforts made in the medical field. In other words, where there have been increases in military spending, the basis of which is related to the pandemic, it can be considered that these allocations of funds were also of a medical nature, in support of society as a whole. The second aspect refers to the fact that the

military instrument contributes decisively to the achievement of economic growth, which would not be possible in an unstable security environment, severely affected by conflicts. For these reasons, in my opinion, the insignificant increase in overall military spending has not yet affected sustainable development as a whole, without minimizing the possibility that some nations might have been affected.

Related to sustainable development, in general, there have been several initiatives aimed at assessing the impact of COVID-19 on the implementation of specific objectives. For instance, the impact of the pandemic on aspects defining people's quality of life, namely: poverty, hunger, health, education and equality of chances, was analyzed through a study performed with the contribution of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the University of Denver<sup>29</sup>.

Analyzing four scenarios that progressively take into account the influence of the pandemic over the next decade (non-existence of COVID-19, existence of COVID-19 without major impact, existence of COVID-19 with major impact and intensification of SDGs implementation measures), the study uses as a main tool "International Futures / Ifs" forecasting system<sup>30</sup>. Beyond the fact that the results signal the need to extend the time horizon for the implementation of a part of the analyzed objectives by 2050, its main conclusion is that "44 million people could experience extreme poverty by 2030, as a result of COVID-19 effects"<sup>31</sup>.

In this context, investments in social protection, good governance, digitalization and green economy programs would not only be the solution that would nullify the effects of the pandemic, but would also contribute to the accelerated poverty alleviation of 146 million people, especially of those affected by conflicts<sup>32</sup>. Among these, digitalization could make a decisive contribution to the efficiency of the military organization and, consequently, to the implementation of SDG 16, with possible positive effects on the implementation of other objectives.

Regarding the progress made in implementing the SDGs, the case of Myanmar clearly shows that the effect of the pandemic, translated into a 5% increase in the poverty rate, is much smaller than the impact of the conflict caused by the coup, estimated to double the percentage of those in need<sup>33</sup>, emphasizing the importance of the correct



use of the military instrument for long-term economic, social and environmental development. Consequently, the sustainable development of the military organization can make a decisive contribution to the sustainable development of nations.

From my point of view, the sustainable development of the military organization is explained by the existence and uninterrupted growth, in the long run, of the capacity to react to various threats. This responsiveness must be supported by maintaining and even improving the financing policies of the military organization, so it is based on good cooperation with civil authorities, so that the military can equip themselves and prepare in accordance with the increasingly diverse requirements of the environment security, especially in the face of limited resources, environmental issues, biological threats and the emergence of new technologies and artificial intelligence, true vectors of competitiveness.

Beyond the additional costs generated by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the military organization itself was positively influenced. Maintaining upward funding for this area is a first sign that the political factor is aware of the need for an adequate response capacity to threats and appreciates the military's involvement in the fight against the pandemic.

Analyzing the documents published up to date, I did not identify the existence of situations in which the military procurement programs were canceled due to pandemic considerations. Similarly, recruitment programs can be considered to have continued in an adaptive manner, so that the organization can ensure long-term access to human resources. Moreover, the professional and mental training of the military have been improved, the pandemic being a real scenario in which a biological threat, not usually taken into account so far, generates a real crisis, which must be comprehensively addressed.

A detailed analysis of how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected security and defence issues at EU level, based on relevant documents, interviews with key leaders in the European institutions and the results of expert working groups, shows that the deficiencies already encountered on the side of the common defence capabilities were accentuated during the resolution of the pandemic crisis. Thus,

capabilities in the field of strategic air transport, security of communication and command and control remain on the procurement list of European military forces<sup>34</sup>. In addition, there was a strong need for investment in health intelligence, information technology security, cyber capabilities and the management of biological risks caused by dual-use technologies<sup>35</sup>.

Considering the cooperation of military structures with civil authorities to limit the spread of the virus, as well as the models of civil-military cooperation adopted in countries such as Finland (the Minister of Defence organizes a monthly committee on security, bringing to the table secretaries of state, intelligence services, border police and business representatives) and Latvia (promoting close cooperation on security)<sup>36</sup>, my view is that the pandemic has provided an opportunity to raise awareness of the need for a preventive approach and to unite the efforts of society as a whole to achieve resilience. In fact, SDG 17 aims to build partnerships to achieve common goals, the pandemic bringing positive results in terms of achieving it. As a result, civil protection cooperation and cooperation between organizations such as the UN, NATO and the EU have never been at this level, ensuring the framework for the sustainable development of the military organization, whose visibility has considerably increased.

Another issue highlighted by the pandemic context concerns the need for EU Member States to invest in "strategic autonomy"<sup>37</sup>.

This matter further encourages the sustainable development of military organizations, which, primarily, at the state level, must be able to conduct operations and missions without the support of other states. The implications relate to strong logistical support, based on a strong defence industry and rapid contracting capabilities (facilitating the implementation of SDGs 8 and 9), which will feed the fighting forces or the ones directly involved in resolving crises with the necessary goods and services, in a timely and complete manner (facilitating the achievement of SDG 16).

In the field of education, the pandemic highlighted the need to improve online platforms and the curriculum managed by military institutions, to ensure the continuity of educational activities and their adaptation to the new context. It has also pointed out the need to develop the digital skills of

teachers in all educational institutions, but also the adaptation of school curricula in order to improve the digital skills of pupils and students<sup>38</sup>, aspect that will favor the implementation of SDG 4 in military education.

In addition, the exercises, decisive for the full training of the military forces, have already been resumed with adaptive organization, in order to ensure the preventive conditions, especially in the context of the increasing number of vaccinated soldiers (Defender-Europe 20 took place in 2021<sup>39</sup>). In the future, they should take into account the many lessons identified when limiting the effects of the pandemic, including the organization of exercises based on the scenario of a biological attack initiated by non-state actors, conducted in a joint system by NATO, as well as by the EU<sup>40</sup>.

Concerning cooperation, support and coordination of financial efforts to counter the effects of the pandemic, the EU has set up an innovative recovery and resilience mechanism to "accelerate the implementation of sustainable reforms and related public investment in the Member States"<sup>41</sup>. It is the only instrument available at the moment, through which 37% and 20% of the total allocation of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP), are funds for expenditures related to the green transition, respectively the digital transformation<sup>42</sup>. In this context, as the plan has an average implementation deadline, August 31, 2026 respectively<sup>43</sup>, Member States are expected to register during the recovery and benefit from the allocation of these funds, which may increase the strain on military spending in the absence of such support. Beyond this, the military organization can benefit from the programs developed under this plan, thus increasing its resilience and accelerating its trend of sustainable development.

### **Conclusions**

It is obvious that the COVID-19 pandemic has increased the expectations of civil society towards the support that can be given by the military organization, and its involvement in limiting the effects of the pandemic has generated expenses that need to be carefully analyzed. However, it is premature to conclude that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on sustainable development, in general, and the sustainable development of the military organization, in particular, has been

negative. The lessons, the shortcomings and the remedial measures identified can have a positive influence on the sustainable transformation of the military organization. Detailed impact studies, carried out on the basis of detailed information, published by the military structures, are badly needed in order to facilitate cooperation with the civil environment, and, as a result, to establish resilience measures, the lack of these data being the biggest limitation of this research approach.

In the short term, the COVID-19 pandemic has not affected the responsiveness of military structures, but in the medium and long term it is possible that governments may not be able to keep spending trends unchanged as the pandemic continues, because they could be forced to reduce defence funding, which would be a real risk to security, but also a setback to the sustainable development of the military organization.

At national level, through the NRRP, military strategic management should adopt, in an accelerated regime (with implementation horizon on 31 August 2026), the following directions of action aimed at facilitating the availability of "dual-use" capabilities<sup>44</sup>, on the one hand, and sustainable development, on the other:

- significant investments in national defence industry, so that it can provide civil society and the military organization with common products to counter pandemic, environmental and other threats;
- establishment of stocks of products intended for civil and military consumption and the rehabilitation and/or construction of adequate storage facilities, enabling them to be kept in optimal conditions and exchanged between the military and civil fields, which have a constant rate of consumption during peacetime;
- reorganization of the military structures, establishing the appropriate legislative framework for the implementation of rapid contracting instruments, allowing adaptation, online procurement and access to the short supply chain;
- enhancement of research, development and cooperation with the civilian environment, for the reconfiguration of procurement programs, so that, until the deadline established in NRRP, the amounts needed to purchase the necessary equipment, primarily for medicine and education, can be planned and allocated by attracting European



non-reimbursable funds, which would contribute to the strategic autonomy of the military organization and to its greater openness to civil society;

- development of multinational training programs for military specialists in the fields of logistics, procurement, medicine, education, information technology and human resources, in order to connect them to the evolution and requirements of civil society and to the possibilities of attracting European funds;

- digitalization of the military organization and its connection to the platforms of other institutions in the field of defence, public order and national security and of civilian bodies in areas of common interest (education, recruitment, medicine, industry, etc.).

Besides the already mentioned aspects, my opinion is that the present research approach has achieved its proposed objectives. In addition, the prospect of extending the time horizon allocated to sustainable development will entail new possibilities for implementing the SDGs in the military organization, which can be a future direction of research.

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