



# The Impact of Demographic Change on Recruitment and Retention of Personnel in European Armed Forces

*Opinions of Young Prospects  
and International Experts*

## **Executive summary**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Within the European Union, demographic trends indicate that the number of young people entering the labor market (age group 15-24) will diminish and the ratio of older people in the population will increase. Western postindustrial societies, which were once quantitatively dominated by younger cohorts, are on their way to becoming societies in which older cohorts constitute the majority. At the same time, most EU Member States are also becoming more diverse as a result of immigration and the trend will keep accelerating in the near future, given the differences in fertility rates. The result of these trends is that in most Western countries the native labor force will shrink while the immigrant working force will grow. Defense organizations have to adapt to these changes.

To offset the shrinking base of recruits and successfully meet the challenges of the demographic transition, defense organizations have to increase the number of candidates in segments previously under-represented (for example, women and ethnic-cultural minorities), and/or to broaden the base (by raising the age limit), while trying to keep employees longer by reducing attrition or increasing the retirement age for certain categories of personnel.

With these facts in mind, an Ad Hoc Category B Project on the impact of demographic change on recruitment and retention of personnel in European armed forces (IDCRR) was initiated with the European Defence Agency. The research project brought together scholars from Belgium, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Norway, as well as from Switzerland and Canada (the last two on an informal basis). The two main goals of the project were 1) to understand the job expectations of young people from these six countries, how attractive they judged the military as an employer, how they perceived their armed forces (AF) in general and how open their AF are to women and ethnic-cultural minorities (ECMs) and 2) to make recommendations on possible ways to face this important challenge for military organizations in terms of recruitment and retention. This executive summary presents the main results of the research project and its recommendations.

## **METHODOLOGY**

In order to attain the main research goals two multinational common survey instruments were developed.

The first instrument was an online survey among young prospects. Its goal was to measure their job expectations and the attractiveness of the AF as an employer. The survey was carried out in the six countries between March 2015 and January 2017 among non-random samples of young people aged between 18-30 years old. In total, 13,373 respondents (partially or totally) completed the questionnaire; they were, however, unevenly spread out over the six different countries and not necessarily representative of their respective target populations.

In order to make comparisons possible and reduce to an extent the impact of the variability in sampling methods and population, the sample used for the analyses contained only completed questionnaires from respondents aged between 18-30 years old and not all the people who participated to the survey. The difference was particularly important for Belgium, to the extent that the sample used was a small subsample (Facebook and flyers) of a much larger one (young unemployed): 257 versus 5732 completed questionnaires).

Table 1 shows the sample sizes by country and gender, as well as the administration methods used.

Table 1: *Sample size, gender distribution and administration methods and timeline by country*

<b>Country</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>N Total</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Administration method</b>
Belgium	76%	25%	257	February - March 2016	Belgian Defense Facebook page and flyers during job fairs
Canada	47%	53%	1955	December 2016 - January 2017	IPSOS Online panel
The Netherlands	59%	42%	296	March 2015 - May 2016	Flyers distributed during job fairs, schools and open days
Norway	76%	24%	45	September - October 2015	Flyers distributed during job fairs and posted on the FFI website and Facebook page
Sweden	72%	28%	79	October 2015 - September 2016	Posted on the Swedish Defense University Facebook page
Switzerland	97%	4%	678	May 2015	Pen and paper questionnaire during information day for draftees in Birmensdorf's barracks

The second online survey was aimed at “experts” in human and social sciences, defense managers, policymakers, and journalists specialized in defense issues. Its goal was to see whether demographic change was perceived as a problem and a challenge for the AF of advanced Western industrial societies and what their recommendations were to minimize the impact of demographic change on recruitment. The survey administration started in May 15, 2017 and ended at the end of October 2017. In total, 197 respondents opened the link to the questionnaire. These respondents were from 26 different countries. As we were only interested in respondents from EU, NATO and Partnership for Peace countries, the final sample size used for the present report is 131 completed questionnaires.

Table 2 shows the distribution by country.

Table 2: *Number of respondents by country*

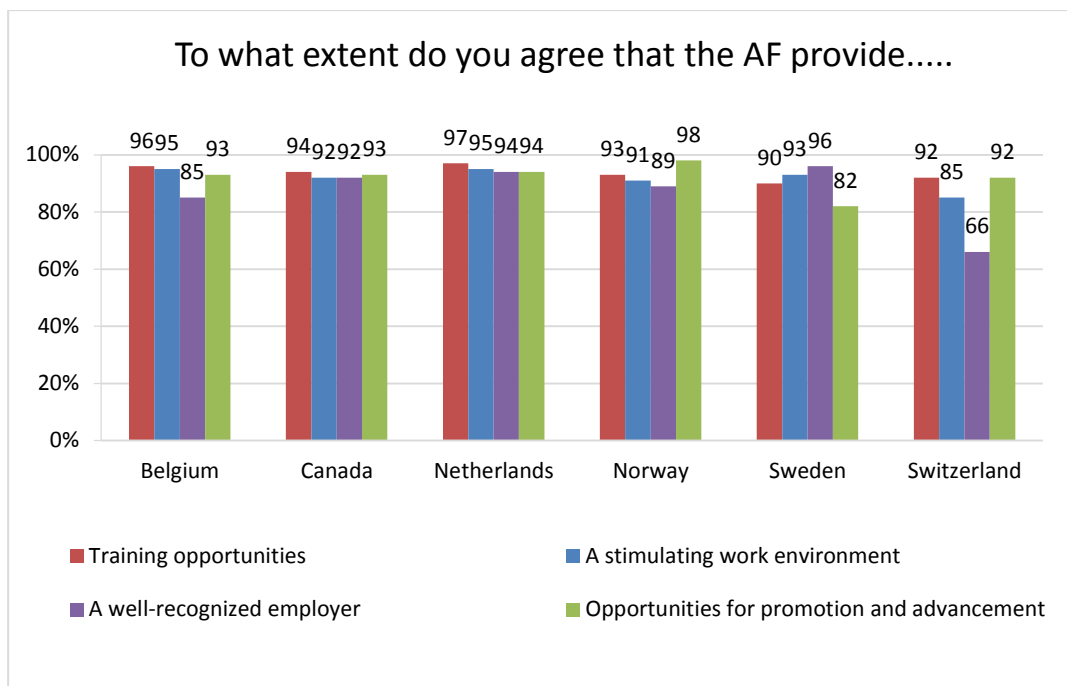
<b>Country</b>	<b>N = 1971</b>
Belgium	22
Canada	24
The Netherlands	1
Norway	19
Sweden	27
Switzerland	11
Other	27

## RESULTS

### YOUTH SURVEY

#### Image of the AF

The work characteristics most associated with the AF were training and promotion opportunities, a stimulating work environment, and a well-recognized employer (see Figure 1). Belgian (87%) and Swiss (85%) respondents were more numerous than respondents from the other countries to perceive the AF as a place offering job security. Norwegian respondents believed AF provide good opportunities for promotions (98%). Swedes saw the AF as a well-recognized employer (96%).

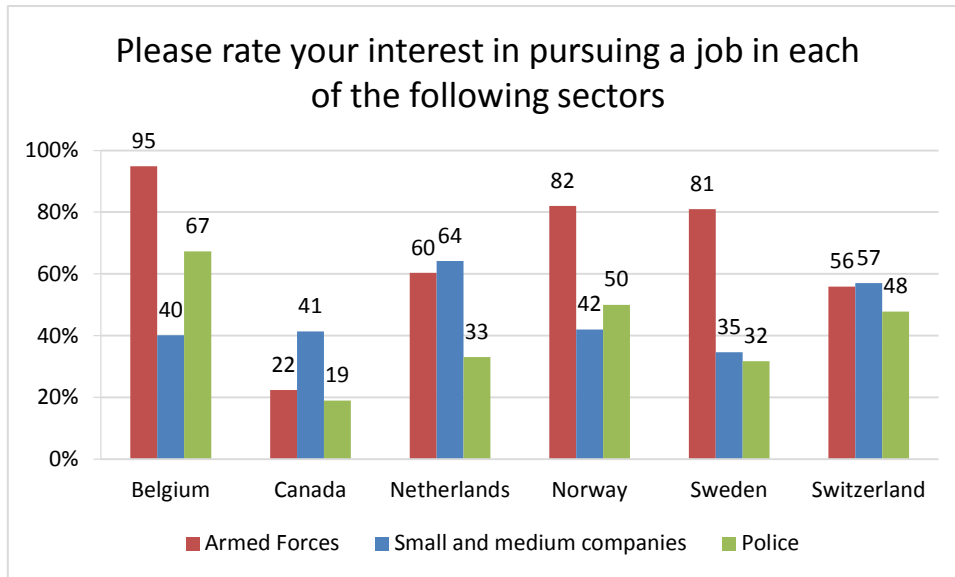


*Figure 1: Top four job attributes provided by the AF*

In Canada and in Switzerland, there were significant differences between the desire of a good work atmosphere and the perception that AF can provide it. Work-life balance had a similar problem in every country except in Sweden. There was also an important gap between the desire for a good salary and the ability of AF to provide one in Sweden.

#### ATTRACTIVENESS OF THE AF

When asked about interest in pursuing a job in various organizations/sectors, the AF ranked in first place in Belgium (95%), Sweden (81%), and Norway (82%), both among men and women (Figure 2). The AF came in second place in the Netherlands (60%) and in third place in Switzerland (56%). In Canada, the AF were only in ninth position (22%), after small and medium companies (41%), the health system (38%), and non-profit organizations (NPO) (33%).



*Figure 2: Top three institutions/industries where respondents are interested in pursuing a job*

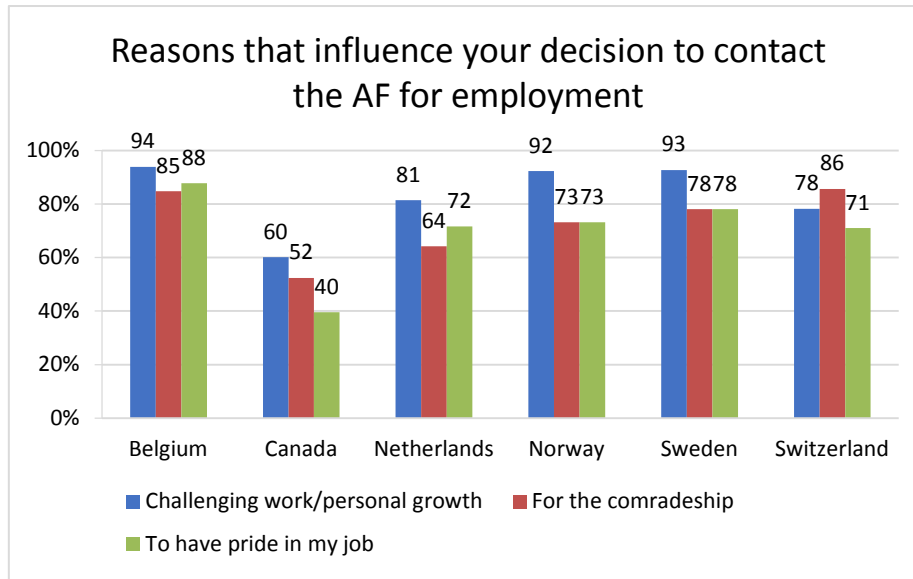
Canadian, Swedish and Dutch participants preferred the officer rank to a higher extent (56%, 48% and 37% respectively) while in Belgium (43%) and Norway (38%), respondents were more interested in becoming NCOs. In general, young men were more interested in becoming officers than young women, except in Belgium where young women were more numerous to prefer to serve as officers (rather than NCOs) than men (44% vs. 26%).

Respondents from all countries were more interested in the Army than in any other branches of service. Most of the respondents were more interested in combat or operational functions, except in the Netherlands where relatively more people were interested in technical or logistic functions.

Most respondents were interested in working full time for the AF. They were also more interested in long term careers, except in the Netherlands where 55% of the respondents did not know yet. However, among those who had already knew, most preferred a long-term career.

## **REASONS TO JOIN THE AF**

The main reasons for joining the AF across all countries were: for a challenging job and for personal growth (Figure 3). Other often cited reasons to join in Belgium were job diversity, comradeship, to serve their country and for the missions abroad. In Sweden, people also wanted to join because of the job diversity, comradeship, service to and defense of the country. In Canada and Norway, people were interested in joining the AF because of the educational and career opportunities, and to stay fit. In the Netherlands, people also cited among other reasons to join “to provide peacekeeping and humanitarian help”, for the job diversity and to work with different people. Finally, in Switzerland people wanted also to join because of comradeship, job security, to stay fit and job diversity.



*Figure 3: Top three reasons for joining the AF*

## PERCEPTIONS OF THE AF

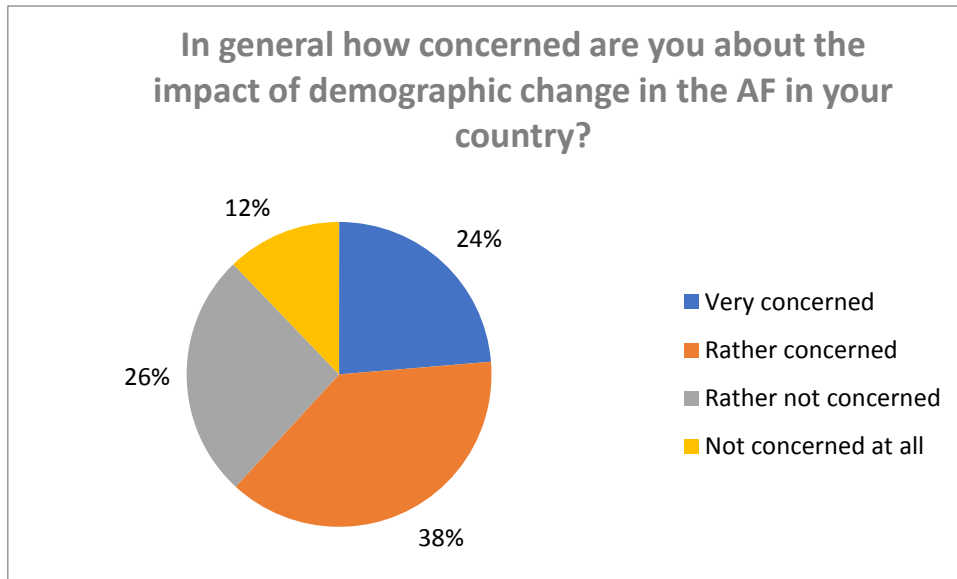
In all countries, the AF were considered an essential organization. In Norway, nine out of ten respondents (91%) were proud of their AF and thought they were a prestigious organization. Swiss youngsters thought their AF give equal opportunities to all (74%). Belgian (91%) and Swedish (87%) respondents agreed to a high extent that a job in the AF is very appealing. Canadians thought AF should help ethnic cultural minorities (ECMs) to better integrate society (80%).

The agreement was lower across countries for the item “things I value in life are similar to things the AF value,” especially in Canada (51%) and in Switzerland (43%).

## EXPERTS SURVEY

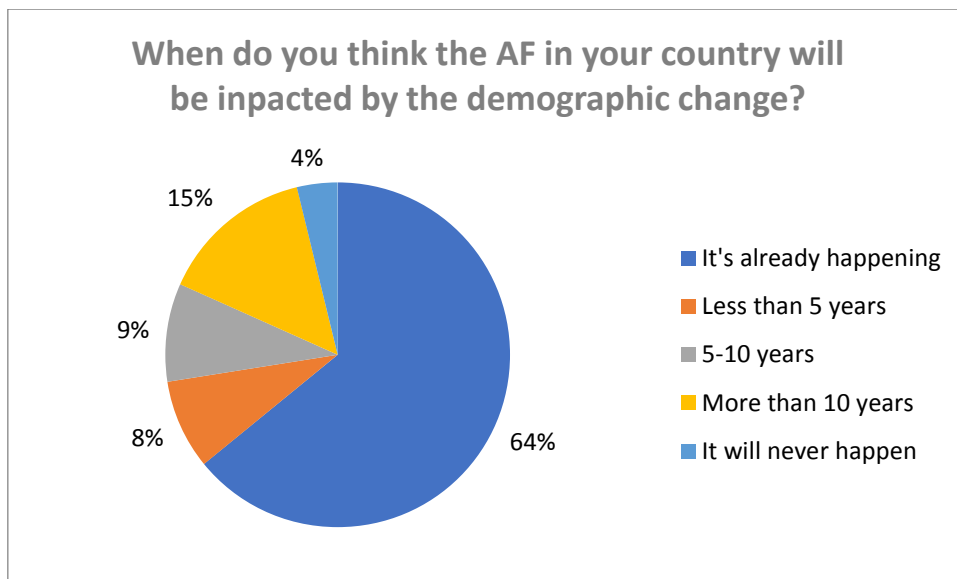
### CONCERNS

The results of the experts survey showed that a little more than six out of ten experts (62%) who answered our questionnaire seemed relatively concerned about the demographic change happening in their country (Figure 4) and most of them (64%) believed that it was already happening (Figure 5). Only 4% thought that it would never happen. This clearly shows that even among experts who were not feeling concerned about the impact of demographic change on their country, they almost unanimously (96%) believed that their country is or will be eventually impacted.



*Figure 4: Degree of concern about the impact of demographic change for AF*

If experts from most countries thought that their countries were already impacted by the demographic change, experts in Norway were more nuanced: while only 32% did believe their country was already impacted, 47% believed that they still had more than 10 years to prepare themselves.



*Figure 5: Timing of the impact of demographic change for AF*

A word analysis performed with Word Cloud allowed us to have a better view on the main concerns of the experts concerning the impact of demographic change on the recruitment of the AF (Figure 6). The larger the font of the word in the visual, the more frequently the concern was reported.



Figure 6: Please briefly explain why you are concerned about the impact of demographic change on AF recruitment?

As one can see from figure 6, one of the words that was often cited by our respondents was the word “Change”. As an illustration here are some selected quotes related to this word:

*“Demographic change will result in a shortage of potential candidates for armed forces.”*

*“The armed forces will be competing for technically qualified young people at a time of demographic change when leaving the EU may well also curtail British industries' ability to recruit from overseas - leading to more competition between the armed forces and industry for the same small number of recruits.”*

*“Demographic change may interfere and disrupt the democratic relationship between people -state -and military, leading to a development of a more professional and independent military.”*

Another word was “Physical”. Here are some selected quotes:

*“The greatest problem seems to be the deterioration of the physical condition and health of new generations of young people.”*

*“The available population of entry-level candidates is shrinking due to lower birth rates, the general lack of physical fitness, medical conditions and competition from other jobs.”*

*“Too few younger people with technical skills, and worsening of physical skills. Popularity of defense among youngsters is declining.”*

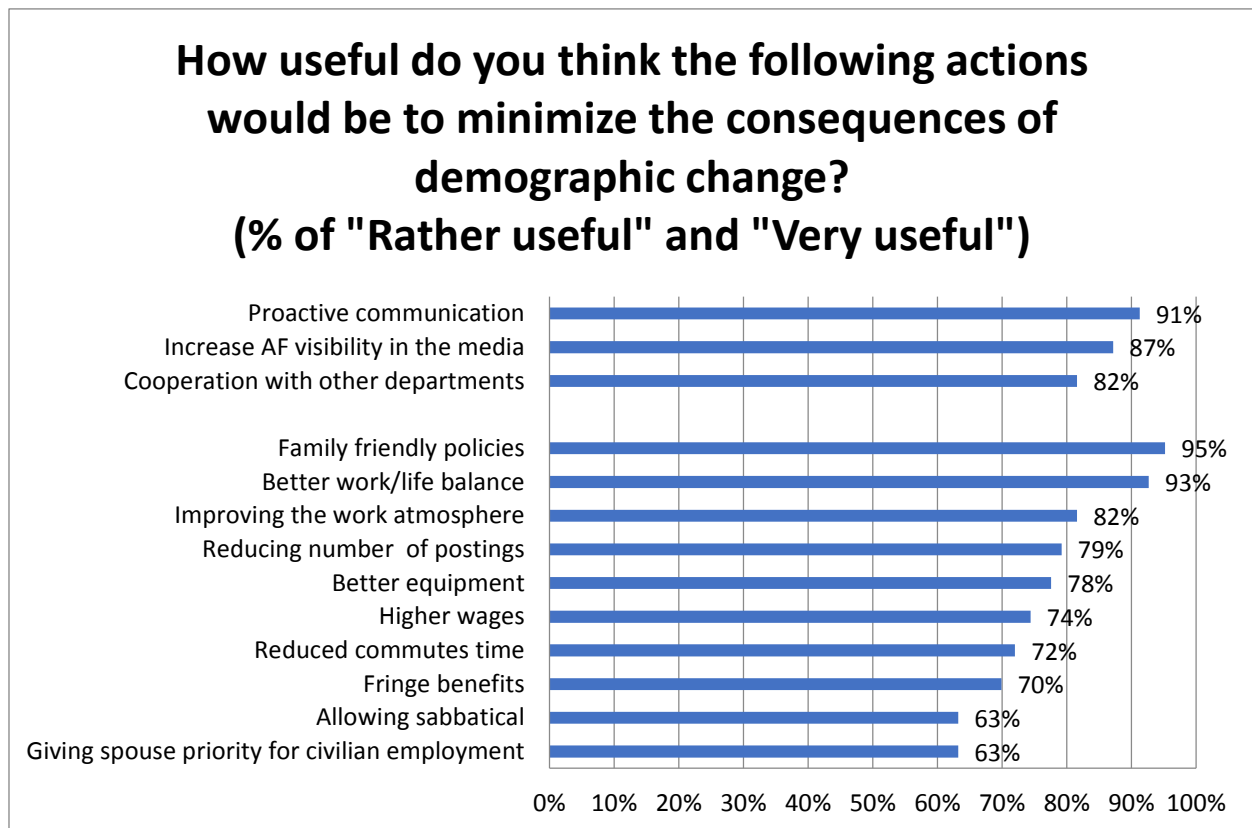


## DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE AND ACTIONS

In the expert questionnaire we also proposed various actions to minimize the impact of demographic change on the AF and asked experts to rate their usefulness. The actions covered five broad categories: advertising, work conditions, recruitment in general, retention and structural measures.

In total 125 respondents gave their opinion about advertising measures and working conditions (see Figure 7). The respondents thought that proactive communication could be very useful to reduce the impact of demographic change (91%). This went hand in hand with enlarging the visibility of the AF in the media (87%). Cooperation with other departments could also be increased (82%), according to the experts.

Although respondents thought that all working conditions actions/strategies could be useful, the most successful action, according to them, would be developing family friendly policies (95%). Improvement of the work-life balance came in second place (93%), followed by improvement of the work atmosphere (82%). These findings are consistent with the youth survey results. Work atmosphere and work-life balance are important job attributes to young people when they are looking for a job. Improving the equipment (78%) and higher wages (74%) came in the middle of the possible actions to be taken. The introduction of a sabbatical period and giving spouses priority for civilian employment were thought somewhat useful (63%).

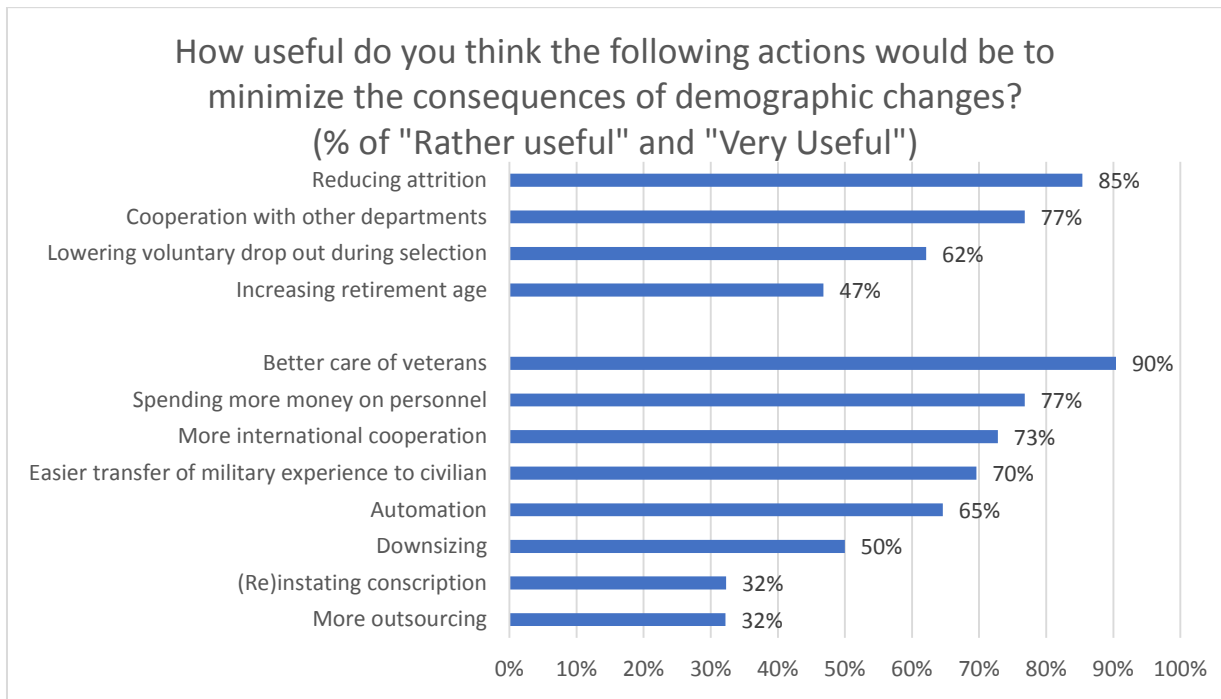


*Figure 7: Overview of the usefulness of advertising and working conditions measures*

With regard to recruitment in general, the most useful action to be taken according to experts would be to recruit more women (85%). This is not surprising; in most European countries women are still very largely underrepresented in the military. Other useful actions recommended by the experts were recruiting more ECMs (75%) and more reservists (73%). In the next section, results on special measures for recruiting more minorities are presented.

With regard to retention in general (see Figure 8), the most useful action mentioned by the experts was reducing attrition (85%), followed by cooperation with other departments (77%). Increasing the retirement age, however, was cited as a useful action by only 47% of the respondents. Lowering the voluntary drop out during the selection process was mentioned by 62% of the experts.

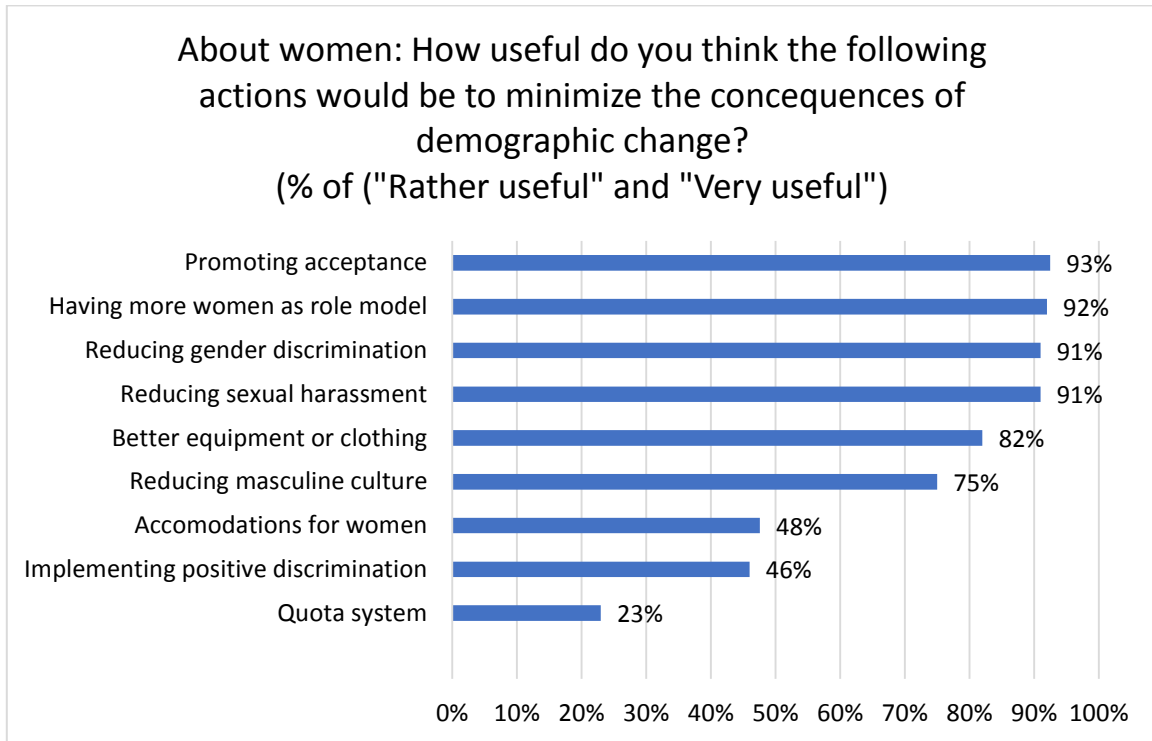
Among the other proposed structural actions, quite obviously, most experts agreed that the care for veterans should be improved (90%). Also, spending more money on personnel would be useful (77%). Another interesting action was thought to be automation (65%). This could help reduce the personnel needs but the remaining ones should be more qualified. Finally, downsizing (50%) was one of the cheapest actions possible but the risk is that AF might become too small to be effective.



*Figure 8: Overview of the usefulness of retention and structural measures*

## DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGES AND MINORITIES

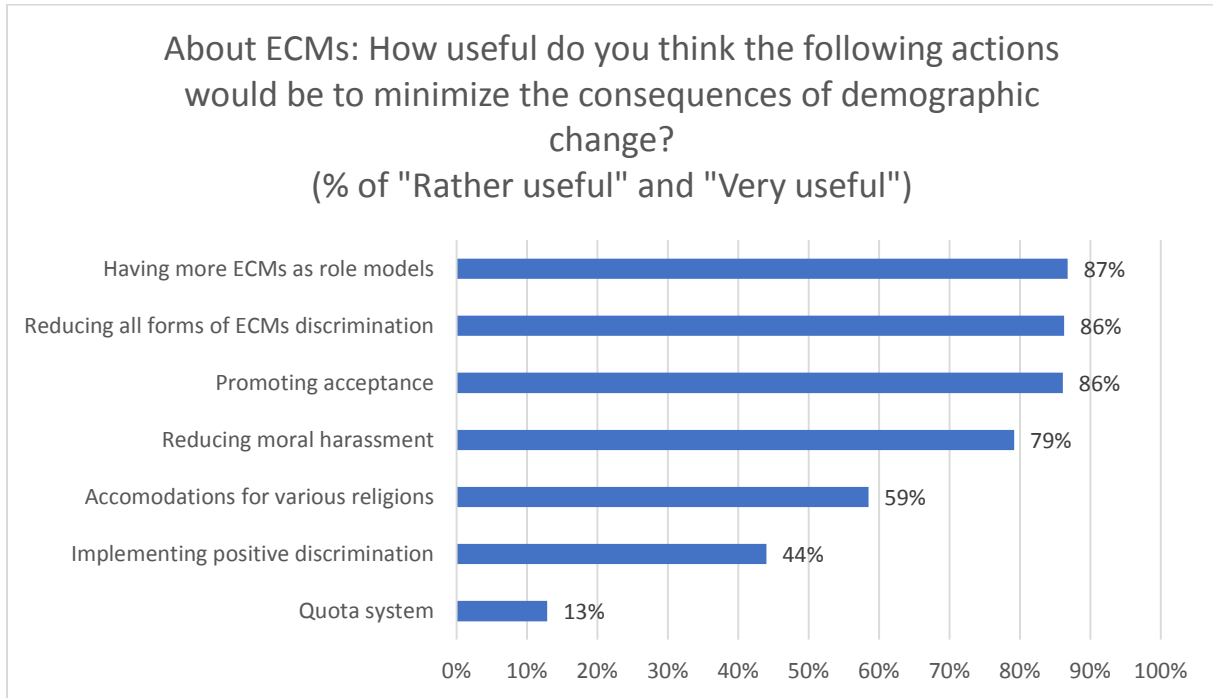
Two important population groups could help the AF face the recruitment problems that will increase with the demographic change: women and ECMs. In almost all AF, these two population segments are highly under represented.



*Figure 9: Overview of the usefulness of various actions to increase the proportion of women*

In order to better attract women, experts agreed on four important actions, two of them were external actions and the other two addressed more internal problems (Figure 9). The two external actions were related to the public image of the AF, i.e. the idea that AF should show more women as role models (92%) and promote the acceptance of women inside their ranks (93%). In addition, it was thought to be important for AF to reduce gender discrimination (91%) and sexual harassment (91%).

Concerning ECMs (Figure 10), the same pattern as for women was revealed: experts agreed that there should be more ECMs as role models (87%) and that AF should promote acceptance of minorities (86%).



*Figure 10: Overview of the usefulness of various actions to increase the proportion of ECMs*

Again, inside the AF themselves, it was judged to be important to reduce discrimination (86%) and moral harassment (79%).

Apart from these four important points, experts agreed that a quota system (13%) was not a useful way to attract more of them in the AF but more than one-half of experts that it could be useful to arrange accommodations for various religions (59%).

## MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS

While the conclusions are straightforward enough, it will still take time before the policy is implemented and until we see the results. We will therefore weigh the recommendations carefully. The results of both surveys (youth and experts) show that the AF await serious challenges. Experts are concerned by demographic change on the recruitment and retention of AF personnel. These changes are expected to have a significant impact: the average age in the population is increasing and this is reflected in many public organizations. This holds true for civilians in the AF, whilst service members are on average even younger, given that they retire early. This results in an organization that has a structural need for replacement by young recruits. The importance of this requirement will in a booming economy increase significantly over time with too many competitors on the labour market and not enough qualified younger aged workforce. To put these challenges and concerns into clear perspective, we divide the recommendations into three parts: recruitment, attrition and retention.

### Recruitment

At the most general level we found that the AF in Belgium, Switzerland, Norway, Sweden, Canada and the Netherlands were perceived to be attractive by young respondents. Training and chances of promotion were seen as opportunities whilst the work was thought to be stimulating and the organization was perceived to be a well-recognized employer. This is the most important finding because the product “AF” is fundamentally a good product that can be “sold” well to youngsters. Young people are attracted to a good work atmosphere and training opportunities and women slightly more than men want a good work-life balance.

But attractiveness does not pay off when recruitment results are considered. Interest among young people does not indeed necessarily translate into application behaviors. Youth survey results indicated that the top reasons not to join were doubts about one’s capability, having better career opportunities outside the AF and a career in the AF does not match one’s career goals. This suggests a lack of information about career paths in the AF as well as AF’ requirements and preparation needed to successfully pass the selection process. These misbeliefs could be corrected, for example, by advertising campaigns and/or by providing more information to prospects on the AF website.

The best recommendations to alleviate recruitment shortages are to invest more in personnel, bringing in more ECMs and women. ECMs and women are a resource that the AF until now have not tapped into well enough. Currently women and ECMs are underrepresented in the AF. The experts clearly indicated the need for the AF to become more diverse and inclusive and to better reflect the general population.

Experts stressed the importance of promoting equality and opportunity and eliminating discrimination and harassment. Recommendations that follow from this are that AF should have more role models available, meaning women and ECMs who are successful within the AF and who are breaking brass ceilings. AF need to ensure that its workplace policies and conditions are inclusive and supportive towards women and ECMs.

An important aspect mentioned was the work-family integration. Experts did not doubt the fact that military life extracts a toll on the private life of service members. Missing out on family time will not appeal to young people in general, and young women in particular. Thus, every measure that helps to mitigate the impact of work on family life is useful. An expert proposed for example to introduce ‘sabbaticals for child births’ which would be something like an extended parental leave. Some experts also mentioned the problematic deployment and posting system that should be made more family-friendly.

As far as more structural measures are concerned, improving care for veterans, international cooperation and spending more money on personnel were suggested actions by the experts.

Except for enlarging the proportion of women and ECMs, the situation is precarious because most policy measures will not work even though they might look attractive at first glance. For example, investing heavily in high tech solutions will modernize the AF but it will aggravate the need to recruit highly trained technical personnel. Other solutions are even less likely to solve the problem, like the idea to recruit by using social media of already employed service members. It might increase recruitment, but it does so by method of endorecruitment, meaning that one ends up hiring the same kind of people transforming the AF in a kind of hereditary class of people. It does not augment the much needed diversity.

Last but not least, an efficient way to increase the number of women in the AF would be to introduce universal conscription. Norwegian and Swedish experts suggested this solution and it has been implemented recently in the Nordic countries. No experts from other countries however mentioned this strategy. Recently some countries changed the conscription laws to advance formal equality but conscription in all these countries is still postponed. Seemingly the geostrategic perception of threats or other differences are not similar in all countries and thus conscription as a way to solve recruitment problems is politically not feasible everywhere. There is not yet enough support for such a solution and there will not be if the geostrategic situation remains as it is.

To sum up, among the various possible recommendations, the best policy regarding recruitment is to recruit more women and ECM.

### **Attrition**

The study indicates that preventing attrition and furthering retention were by all means the best policy measures one could implement. So these measures came highly recommended. In this regard it is very important for the AF to reduce gender discrimination and sexual harassment by, for example, implementing strict anti-discrimination policies.

However, lowering the attrition rate is a challenge. The present study did not focus on attrition and thereby provided little insight into how it could be reduced; therefore we recommend that a follow-up research project address this important topic.

### **Retention**

Experts did point out to working conditions to attract personnel, but these would also serve to retain service members. The AF should give more attention to family-friendly policies and the work-life balance for employees. More research is needed into the role of job satisfaction and possibilities to serve longer in the AF whilst remaining fit for duty. We know that the intention to quit is an important determinant for attrition but we do not know how this intention can be influenced so that people are retained in the organization. Keeping fit is paramount in all professions, but it becomes crucial when service members might need to remain on the force longer. Perhaps intelligent job allocation (less physical demanding jobs at the end of the career, more coaching and instructing) is possible.

In summary, the general recommendation regarding attrition and retention is to perform a follow up study to increase knowledge on the parameters that impact the desire to stay in the AF. Finally as far as more structural measures are concerned, improving care for veterans, international cooperation and spending more money on personnel were also actions suggested by the experts.