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EU move into military R&D divides Germany

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Researchers are split over whether to go after new EU research funds

Andreas Breiter, vice president for research, University of Bremen
[Photo credit: Harald Rehling / University of Bremen] Advertisement

The EU's move into military research is causing disquiet in Germany.

For many, the new direction - signalled last week when the EU launched its first ever defence research call, offering grants for new military hardware including drones and lighter-weight armour for soldiers - crosses an ethical line.

Some 30 German universities have renounced military research in so-called civil clauses, which say that universities will only conduct research for civilian purposes.

The University of Bremen was the first German university to adopt the clause in 1986. Its vice president for research, Andreas Breiter, said he does not expect any researchers at the university to pursue the new EU funding. "Our university will not promote it or ask our researchers to go for it," he said.

However, Breiter pointed out that researchers are free to choose, meaning they are not required to comply with the clause. "The German constitution, which has superiority over the clause, says professors are free to follow their preferred studies," he said. "If some researchers want to apply, they will. We can only wish they won't."

It appears Bremen's researchers will refrain. Asked if the clause would deter researchers from applying for the EU defence competitions, Wolfram Elsner, professor of economics at the university, replied "definitely".

An enduring sensitivity over Germany's warmongering past explains much of the reluctance of universities to get involved in defence research.

And for those that do, complications can arise. An investigation by German public broadcaster NDR and Munich's Süddeutsche Zeitung in 2013 exposed research contracts between the US Department of Defence and German universities, several of which have the civil clause in their rules.

The story, which was widely followed by the rest of the German media, created a lot of unwanted attention for researchers, even "stigma", Breiter said. "The memory will create a lot of caution over new EU funds."



The situation presents a quandary for EU officials, pressed on one side, by the German government no less, to go deeper on defence, while at the same time risking alienating a large portion of the most successful EU research applicants, German scientists.

Breiter is not concerned about military research squeezing other fields however. "We don't think there will be any changes to our research interests in Brussels. We get a lot of funding in climate [science]. It's such a high priority that I think the EU will invest in it even more in the future," he said.

The other side

Another large cohort of scientists in Germany welcomes the EU move into defence funding. Institutions such as Fraunhofer, the German Aerospace Centre and the French-German Research Institute of Saint-Louis, carry out defence research.

Veit Larmann, an administrator at University of the Federal Armed Forces in Hamburg, said, "We do have an eye on the new military research competition, and if the chance comes up for some good partnerships for an application, I assume some of our professors will get into the race for the grant."

There is an appetite in her institute for even more EU coordination on defence. "If Europe one day decides on closer cooperation in training their young officers and supplying them with a full academic bachelors and masters degree, our institution is prepared to take up the task," Larmann said.

The German government has described the move as a matter of necessity. Speaking to members of the European Parliament in Strasbourg this week, Germany's defence minister, Ursula von der Leyen, said the election of US president Donald Trump was the decisive moment for EU defence.

"The election led to an about-change," she said. Trump's regular denunciation of the NATO alliance set off alarm bells. After that, there was the realisation that, "We have to [take] defence into our own hands," von der Leyen told MEPs.

Little debate

There is virtually no conversation on the EU's defence R&D push in Germany, said Lucas Wirl, programme director at the International Network of Engineers and Scientists for Global Responsibility. "It's still something of an unknown issue here," he said.

Wirl is concerned about the move, but cannot completely dismiss the arguments for more military science. "Professors who do research on behalf of the German army tell me that it is about ensuring peace, and is very different from working for the North Korean army. It can be hard to argue with that," he said.

Wirl does not view the civil clause signed up to by universities as a strong mechanism for halting military research. "It is sometimes a meaningless gesture and a distraction," he said.

In fact, he believes, the clause silences debate. "It removes protest. You need to fight a common enemy, which was lost when universities added the civil clause, but the new common enemy could be the EU defence programme," he said.

Dietrich Schulze, a researcher at the Nuclear Research Centre Karlsruhe Germany from 1966-2005, has written a lot on the civil clause.

Now a member of the advisory board of the advocacy group Scientists' Initiative for Peace and Sustainability, his dream is for a European civil clause. "Installing a civil clause at a Brussels University, right in the European capital," would be a good way to get the movement off the ground, he suggested.