

# NOT ONLY THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITY: WEU, EUROPEAN SECURITY AND THE EASTERN BLOC

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## **Introduction**

The Western European Union (WEU) is not known for being a success story. The enlargement to the East in the aftermath of the end of the Cold War is yet another unsatisfactory experience of the WEU, even though it seemed to have good assets for an advantageous settlement of a comprehensive European security environment at that time. The causes of this failure deserve an analysis because, although the WEU appears to be having a limited influence on European affairs, it impacted the post Cold War security architecture and the European construction process.

The WEU's role in bringing Western and Eastern Europe closer is treated peripherally by the few contributions on the WEU's history, with only a few exceptions which, anyway, could not take into consideration archival resources, not available at the moment they were written, and left aside the point of view of the institution in the ongoing events.

In this sense, this research is in line with the interpretation claiming that in a moment of stalemate of the integration process, the WEU let the push towards the European Union (EU) be forwarded and channeled in the security and defence dimension. It will be explained that in this process the WEU started positive relations with Moscow and progressively with the countries of Eastern Europe aiming, in particular after the collapse of the Soviet Bloc, at creating a pan-European security dimension and that the success in this task was negatively affected by the limits of the institution. Through the analysis of archival documentation from Italy, France, UK, Germany and from the Historical Archives of the EU, especially the proceedings of the Assembly of the WEU, it will be possible to determine that the causes of its inadequacy originate in its reactivation process.

## **The renewed WEU and the East**

After the efforts pursued in the European Political Cooperation (EPC) framework in the direction of an European foreign policy and security capacity, the WEU revitalisation, formalized in 1984, aimed to overcome a number of hurdles that were limiting a European initiative in these fields: the WEU had treaty-based competence in these subjects, it had an intergovernmental structure, it didn't pose a threat to NATO, it could collect the instances of the European countries in security and defence without involving the EC members which weren't interested in discussing such topics (Ireland, Denmark and Greece weren't part of the institution). Highlighting the tight link with NATO and the Atlantic affiliation of the members, the renewed WEU was meant to coordinate the multiple European needs in order to increase incidence in intra-allied consultations and to speak with one voice in the international forum with the final goal of making Western Europe an influential actor in world affairs. Many politicians considered this process a step toward a European union, the

realization of the Genscher-Colombo plan in a smaller frame and a development completely in line with EPC objectives.

With this reactivation, Western Europe intended to send a message to Washington in a moment of difficult transatlantic relations, but it was clear that a more determined Europe could be a signal for Moscow too. The goal to coordinate the European position in the East-West relations was supposed to enhance the cooperation with the East providing a security framework for a dialogue. In this sense the WEU opened to contacts with the Soviet bloc and in 1987 managed to send a delegation of the Parliamentary Assembly to the Supreme Soviet. Because the WEU was not a military organization, Moscow could rely on the fact that the WEU was not a mini-NATO capable of undermining its security, but a constructive counterpart concerned at the security of the continent. This mission confirmed the success of the renewed WEU as the one voice of Western Europe in security affairs and a shared interest and willingness to continue the contacts.

Also Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia were showing growing interest in the WEU tasks. In January 1989 the President of the Assembly, Mr Goerens, was invited in Hungary and delegates from eastern countries attended the WEU Assembly Extraordinary session of March 1990, together with representatives of the Soviet Union. In this occasion the goal of creating a new European security order and the end of its division was shared by all the participants and a reunification of Europe by European efforts was envisaged.

At the end of the decade, in fact, the WEU participated in one of the so called "security layers" imagined as the only possible options to design the new pan-European security dimension after the drastic changes in the Soviet bloc. The other two were the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), the most comprehensive one but which lacked enforcing means, and the Atlantic framework which excluded Russia and wasn't considering to acquire eastern members in such a delicate moment of mission reassessment and of international change. The third layer was the European level and included the WEU. The CE alone wasn't equipped well enough to provide all the help the new Eastern European democracies required, and the Western European Union added important assets: it had a mutual defence clause which, contrarily to the one in the Washington treaty, had a mandatory nature; it had no geographical limits, so it could operate everywhere; it had a parliamentary assembly which granted a close link with the populace; deployment of the WEU in crisis did not risk the involvement of the US and Russia in confrontation; it had expertise in armament control in a moment when most people considered disarmament as the main issue on which to build the new world order. The two institutions, despite separate, were very close: a relationship with the WEU was an indispensable element of the European integration.

Moscow had a positive evaluation of the WEU and thought that it had good prospects for creating a security environment capable of dealing with the new challenges: not being burdened by a significant Cold War heritage and not being a heavy military bloc, the relations with the East had better chances to achieve results. For the same reasons, an expansion of the WEU in Eastern Europe was preferred to the enlargement of NATO, even though Russia didn't approve the growth of an organization for the security of the continent which excluded Moscow.

Therefore, the WEU pursued a single pattern of cooperation which was equally dedicated to the Visegrad group participants, Bulgaria, Romania and the Baltic countries, creating a peculiar enlargement policy, different from the ones established by the EC and by the NATO. In this framework, after the Petersberg Ministerial Council in 1992, the WEU inaugurated the Forum of Consultation, a scheme for institutionalized dialogue and preventive diplomacy with the eight target countries. However, at the same occasion, the WEU deci-

ded to engage in new kind of tasks, involving peace-keeping and crisis management, to be conducted mainly in areas for which NATO had no mandate. This choice created some frictions between the expectations of the Eastern Europe countries and the WEU urgency to find a clear role which did not compete with NATO's tasks. As late as mid-1993, the security concerns of the Eastern countries had still to be established, let alone addressed. On the ground of the tight link established between a full WEU membership, the EC admission process and the NATO accession, in 1994 the Western European Union could only offer an associate partnership which, on the one hand, granted a good level of cooperation in European security affairs but, on the other, burdened the structure of the organization which was composed by then of four participation layers. Right at the same time, some hints suggested that the chances were increasing that NATO could start considering a future membership for the Visegrad group states, as what the Eastern countries were looking for was a kind of guarantee only the US could give.

Meanwhile, Russia's relations with the WEU had continued, especially in the framework of the Treaty on Open Skies (signed in March 1992), but further convergence wasn't possible at the beginning of the decade because of the fears of decoupling and of the low consideration Moscow could give to the relations with the WEU in a moment of reassessment.

### **The Failure**

In the mid-1990s, the WEU had an ambiguous collocation, inadequate means and seemed incapable of actual incisive action even in the armament control and verification process: the WEU was failing both as defence component of the EU and as European pillar of NATO. The conditions for its reactivation, restricting its scope for action, caused this decline.

The Rome declaration of 1984 had stated the emergence of a European perspective on security and defence issues, giving voice to an exigency that at that time could not be satisfied in the EC. This kind of sectoral cooperation was supposed to improve the military and political status of Western Europe and promote the integration. As works resumed in the community framework, with the signature of the Single European Act and the horizon of the European Union, the issues discussed in the WEU started to appear in the EC institutions agenda. This created confusion and competition, even though they were supposed to join their forces, but demonstrated that they were working for the same purpose: an integrated Europe with a security, if not a defence, dimension. At the end of difficult negotiations, the Maastricht Treaty institutionalized an already existing synergy. However, through the establishment of political responsibilities, the EU appeared a more complete and attractive option, consisting security in more than just the military component. Because of the tight links between the EU and the WEU, cooperation with this latter became a means for Western Europe of drawing eastern countries closer; similarly, the prospective accession to the former as the final step of the association agreements could grant Eastern European countries indirect defence benefits without irritating Moscow.

In a European perspective, WEU's outreach to the East can be considered an accomplishment: it brought together twenty-eight European countries (neutral countries included) which engaged in security discussions, not least with Russia, especially in the second half of the decade. In the end, the proximity between the EU and the WEU favored the former, more promising and complete, and boded for the slow assimilation, which was envisaged in 1995 in the prospect of the Amsterdam Treaty.

However, from the military point of view, by the mid-1990s, the WEU had proven weak and hesitant, raising concerns about its usefulness. This became evident especially after the establishment of the Partnership for Peace suggesting a future enlargement of NATO. The Western European Union, in fact, had not been able to emancipate itself from the complementary role to NATO and to provide a purely European defence dimension. In 1984, the coordination of the WEU members in defence and security issues was conceived to yield results primarily inside the Atlantic framework with the recognition of the European pillar of NATO, therefore any kind of duplication was to be avoided. The reaffirmation of this principle seemed necessary during the reactivation process: the renewed WEU was not supposed to create an alternative European army, but to enhance the European responsibility in the security domain. The primacy of NATO conferred the WEU a residual role which took shape in managing out-of-area operations, and limited the possible and beneficial actions in the Forum of Consultation. In this sense, despite the calls for a more effective burden sharing and for a greater defence effort from Europe in the Alliance, an effective enhancement of the WEU's role was opposed by NATO officials not only in order to avoid instability in the continent but especially for fears of competition with the NATO initiatives. Finally, the weakness showed by the operations in Iraq and former Yugoslavia revealed that the only organisation capable of using military means to ensure security was NATO. As a consequence, after the Partnership for Peace initiative and the centrality shown by NATO in conducting operations equivalent to the Petersberg tasks, the perspective of a WEU full membership started to lose value. In sum, it is possible to conclude that the WEU, in its supporting role, was a valuable element which facilitated the transition to a new European order by providing an exchange mechanism where to test the chances for a major integration of the two Europes without irritating Moscow and by paving the way for better-working organisations and institutions. However, the tight constraints and links of subordination to NATO and to the European integration process which allowed the WEU to be reactivated during the 1980s, impeded a full and free development of the organisation structure, tasks and role in the early 1990s. The successful evolution and achievements of NATO and of the EU, in fact, overshadowed the WEU depriving it of the means to accomplish a convincing pan-european security dimension. Eventually, after the first encouraging contacts with Moscow, the WEU was too limited and didn't manage to institutionalize its relations with Russia, leaving Europe in the early 1990s without a veritable and strong security and defence potential capable of dealing with a former superpower seeking for a comeback.

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