
OBSCURITY SURROUNDS EU MILITARY FUND'S EXPERT GROUPS

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The European Commission is having difficulty finding adequate military experts to sit on an advisory group - raising questions about the implementation of a controversial defence research programme.

In addition, the commission may be breaking its own transparency rules over a second expert group on defence research, which contains member states experts.

The advisory group's page in the official register of EU expert groups: No members defined (Photo: Screenshot ec.europa.eu)

The two groups of experts are meant to provide advice on how to spend EU funds on a new military research programme, but much is unclear about how and even if they operate.

"It is the first time in its history that the European Union is spending money on research and development of weapons," said Bram Vranken, campaigner for the Belgian peace movement Vredesactie (Peace Action).

"That these military programmes are clouded in a veil of secrecy is calling into question the democratic legitimacy of these policies," he told EUobserver in an email.

The three-year programme is called the Preparatory Action on Defence Research - 'preparatory' because the [] project is a trial run meant to prepare the ground for a much larger European Defence Fund.

How to spend the money is determined via annual work programmes. Last month the commission adopted the work programme for 2018. In 2017, some €25m was already committed to projects.

However, an advisory group that was supposed to give independent expert input in the discussions on the work programme, is apparently not yet operational.

According to the commission's register of expert groups the first meeting was estimated to take place in "May/June 2017", but no meetings have been registered.

The register page also lists no members.

The group's rules of procedures are also missing. Instead, the webpage said: "The group will adopt

its rules of procedure at the 1st meeting." □ indicating that the first meeting has not yet taken place.

Extended deadline

"The selection procedure for the Advisory Group of the Preparatory Action on Defence Research (PADR) is still ongoing," said commission spokeswoman Lucia Caudet in an emailed statement.

The original deadline for interested experts to apply was 21 April 2017 □ a year ago on Saturday. The deadline was then extended by 3.5 weeks.

"The deadline of the call for experts for the advisory group was indeed extended to achieve a better mix of expertise and a wider diversity in terms of geography, gender and types of stakeholders and representatives," the spokeswoman added.

However, it remains unclear why almost a year after the new deadline no experts have been selected.

Caudet did not answer EUobserver's question why it was more difficult to get experts for this expert group, compared to others □ the commission has years of experience after setting up hundreds of expert groups.

She also did not answer in detail when this website asked why the 2018 work programme had been adopted while the expert group was not ready.

"The yearly work programmes for the defence research Preparatory Action are decided by the commission in close cooperation with the member states," she merely stated.

'Best possible external advice'

Nevertheless, the commission document which called for applications said one of the group's two key tasks would be "to provide consistent and consolidated advice to the commission services during the preparation of the annual work programmes within the frame of the Preparatory Action (PA)".

"Within the frame of the PA, the commission is responsible for drawing up yearly work programmes with calls for research proposals. In doing so, the commission wishes to draw on the best possible external advice," the document said.

"The group must provide advice on relevant objectives and scientific, technological and innovation priorities by way of opinions, recommendations or reports. The advice received from the group will complement other sources of external advice received by the commission services."

The document also said that the expert group should have up to 22 members, who "shall be appointed for the duration of the preparatory action, including the period before its launch".

None of that is apparently happening.

In February, Swedish MEP Bodil Valero from the Greens group also asked the commission

questions about the advisory group, but these have not yet been answered - although the six-week deadline for the commission to respond passed two weeks ago.

As if?

The European Defence Agency (EDA), which coordinates the programme, did not want to comment on the advisory group.

Its head of unit for the Preparatory Action, Dirk Tielbuerger, only wanted to comment on a second expert group related to the Preparatory Action: the As-If Programme Committee for Defence Research.

The peculiar name is not an abbreviation, but literally refers to the phrase 'as if' the expert group was already a formal programme committee.

Programme committees are set up for research programmes like Horizon2020, but because the European Defence Fund is not yet legally in place, the Preparatory Action could not have a formal programme committee, Tielbuerger explained to EUobserver in a phone interview on Wednesday (18 April).

Its members are experts from the 28 EU member states □ Norway and the EDA have been given observer status.

According to Tielbuerger, the committee had met "four to five times".

The expert group register webpage □ managed by the commission □ however only listed one meeting, on 21 March 2017.

The register has the agenda for that first meeting online, but no minutes or presentations.

This seems to be in conflict with the commission's own rules on transparency, as also written down in the draft terms of reference of the As-If group.

"[The European Commission's industry directorate-general] DG GROW shall make available all relevant documents, including the agendas, the minutes and the participants' submissions, either on the register of expert groups or via a link from the register to a dedicated website, where this information can be found," the document says.

"In particular, DG GROW shall publish the agenda and other relevant background documents in due time ahead of the meeting, followed by timely publication of minutes," it added.

Campaigner Bram Vranken said the commission was thus violating its own rules.

"Considering the controversial nature of these EU military programmes, the least the commission could do is to follow its own transparency rules," he said.

Shortly after this article was published, commission spokeswoman Caudet wrote to acknowledge that the register was not up to date, and that it would be updated as soon as possible.

This article was updated on Thursday 19 April 18:33 to include the commission's comment about the 'As-If' group page in the register

Kaynak/Source: