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LEADERSHIP STYLES IN MILITARY AND LAW ENFORCEMENT ORGANIZATIONS: A LITERATURE REVIEW ON MOTIVATION, AUTONOMY, AND ORGANIZATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS IN THE CONTEXT OF EUROPEAN SECURITY GOVERNANCE

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Abstract
Military and law enforcement organizations across Europe face increasing pressure to adapt their internal governance structures in response to a fragmented and unpredictable global security environment. While traditional paradigms have long emphasized external control and rigid hierarchical compliance as the primary mechanisms for managing personnel in such high-stakes contexts, a growing body of scholarly literature challenges this assumption. This paper presents a systematic literature review of leadership styles in military and public order institutions, with particular attention to their motivational dimensions and organizational outcomes.
Drawing on Self-Determination Theory (SDT) as a conceptual framework, this review examines how intrinsically motivated personnel demonstrate higher performance, resilience, and mission success rates. Recent empirical studies indicate that even within strictly hierarchical structures, the satisfaction of basic psychological needs — autonomy, competence, and relatedness — yields measurable improvements in individual and unit effectiveness. In this context, the "Mission Command" leadership philosophy, formally institutionalized within NATO structures, emerges as a particularly significant model. Studies by Knevelsrud and colleagues demonstrate that Mission Command functions as a motivational catalyst precisely because it operationalizes SDT principles: it empowers subordinates to exercise independent judgment under conditions of uncertainty, thereby satisfying their core psychological needs while maintaining operational coherence.
The review further incorporates findings on human resource management specificities in the military domain, including the unique risk profiles and performance requirements that differentiate military personnel management from civilian equivalents. Additional evidence is drawn from research on special intervention units (SWAT), highlighting the critical role of stress management programmed and physical preparedness in sustaining operational effectiveness and motivational engagement.

The broader relevance of these findings is contextualized within the European Union's current strategic moment. As Europe reasserts its institutional autonomy and strengthens its defence and public security architectures, the internal governance of military and law enforcement organizations becomes a matter of policy consequence. Adaptive, motivation-centered leadership models are not merely organisational best practices — they are structural enablers of the resilient, capable security institutions that European strategic autonomy demands.

This literature review contributes to the interdisciplinary dialogue between public administration, organisational psychology, and security governance, offering evidence-based insights applicable to both national defence structures and EU-level coordination frameworks.

Keywords: *leadership styles; Mission Command; Self-Determination Theory; military organizations; law enforcement.*

JEL Classification: H11; H56; J24; M12; M54.

1. INTRODUCTION

Leadership is not a new subject of study, but it remains one of the most debated topics in organizational science. Across different fields — from business management to healthcare, education, and public administration — researchers keep returning to the same essential question: what makes some leaders more effective than others? In most civilian sectors, this question has been explored extensively. The military and public order domains, however, present a specific set of conditions that make straightforward comparisons with civilian organizations difficult.

The traditional image of the military leader is someone who commands from above, whose authority is absolute, and whose orders are followed without question. This image is not entirely wrong — military environments do require clarity of command, especially in situations of combat or high operational pressure. But this picture is incomplete. Modern military and law enforcement organizations are not simply machines built from interchangeable parts. They are made up of individuals who bring their own motivations, values, and psychological needs to their work.

Over the past two decades, a stream of research has begun to challenge the assumption that external control is enough to get the best out of military and law enforcement personnel. Studies rooted in organizational psychology, management theory, and military science have demonstrated that when leaders attend to the intrinsic motivations of their subordinates — their need to feel competent, autonomous, and connected to others — the results are consistently better. This holds true even within highly hierarchical structures, where one might expect such concerns to be secondary.

The context in which this review is written matters as well. Europe is going through a period of significant strategic reassessment. Following geopolitical shifts, the resurgence of territorial conflicts, and questions about collective

defence, European nations are investing in the capability and resilience of their security institutions. In this climate, the internal governance of military and public order organizations is no longer a purely administrative concern — it has become a matter of strategic importance. How leaders lead, and how personnel are motivated and managed, shapes the operational readiness and institutional robustness that European security now demands.

This article reviews existing scholarly literature on leadership styles in military and public order contexts. It focuses particularly on: (a) the contribution of Self-Determination Theory to understanding motivation in hierarchical organizations; (b) the Mission Command philosophy as a leadership model with demonstrated motivational relevance; (c) human resource management specificities in security organizations; (d) stress management in special intervention units; and (e) the role of physical fitness in sustaining motivation and performance. The review draws on peer-reviewed literature, NATO doctrine documents, and established theoretical frameworks to map the state of knowledge in this field and identify themes of relevance for both research and policy.

2. METHODOLOGY

This article follows a narrative literature review methodology. The aim of a narrative review is not to produce a statistical synthesis of findings — as in a systematic meta-analysis — but rather to map the conceptual landscape of a research domain, trace theoretical developments over time, and identify how different streams of literature connect with one another. This is appropriate for a topic like leadership in military contexts, where the research is highly interdisciplinary and cuts across organizational psychology, military science, public administration, and governance studies.

The sources reviewed for this article were identified through database searches of PubMed, PsycINFO, Google Scholar, and ResearchGate, using search terms including: leadership styles military, Mission Command, Self-Determination Theory military, law enforcement leadership, SWAT stress management, transformational leadership police, military human resource management, and related combinations. The review prioritizes peer-reviewed articles published between 2000 and 2024, with foundational theoretical works (such as Burns, 1978; Ryan and Deci, 2000) included given their enduring relevance. Sources were selected based on their conceptual centrality, methodological quality, and relevance to the specific themes of this review.

3. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: LEADERSHIP AND MOTIVATION IN ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXTS

3.1. From Transactional to Transformational Leadership

The modern study of leadership underwent a significant shift in the late 1970s and 1980s, when scholars began distinguishing between leaders who manage through exchanges and rewards — transactional leadership — and those who motivate by appealing to higher-order values and shared vision. Burns (1978) first articulated this distinction, arguing that transformational leadership occurs when leaders and followers elevate one another to higher levels of motivation and moral commitment. Bass (1985) subsequently operationalized this concept, identifying specific behavioural dimensions such as idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration.

In military settings, transformational leadership has attracted considerable attention. As Barfod and Clifton (2025) observe, transformational leadership has been incorporated into the doctrines of several NATO member states and is explicitly endorsed in the NATO leader development framework. The British Army Leadership Code, for instance, calls on military leaders to promote shared values, vision, and trust — all core characteristics of the transformational approach. However, empirical research reveals a more complex picture: in fast-moving operational environments, the behaviours associated with transformational leadership do not always emerge naturally, and the conditions required to sustain them may be difficult to maintain under pressure.

For law enforcement, the implications are similar. In their study of transformational leadership and police officer performance, researchers have noted that officers who experience inspirational and intellectually stimulating leadership report higher job satisfaction, stronger commitment to the organization, and more adaptive behaviour in difficult situations (Alise, 2021). The key mechanism appears to be the degree to which followers internalize the organization's goals as their own — a process that resonates strongly with motivational theory.

3.2. Self-determination Theory and Its Relevance to Military Organizations

Perhaps the most influential motivational framework applied to military and public order organizations in recent years is Self-Determination Theory (SDT), developed by Ryan and Deci (2000). SDT proposes that human beings have three fundamental psychological needs: autonomy (the need to feel that one's behaviour is self-directed and intentional), competence (the need to feel effective in one's interactions with the environment), and relatedness (the need to feel meaningfully connected to others). When these needs are satisfied by the social and organizational context, individuals tend to develop autonomous motivation

— a form of motivation that is intrinsically driven and associated with sustained effort, creativity, wellbeing, and performance.

This theoretical perspective may seem counterintuitive when applied to military organizations. Conventional wisdom holds that military institutions function precisely through the suppression of individual autonomy in favour of obedience to command. However, SDT does not equate autonomy with independence or insubordination. Rather, it refers to the subjective sense that one's behaviour is self-endorsed and meaningful, even when following external rules. A soldier who obeys an order because they genuinely believe in the mission is experiencing autonomous motivation; one who obeys purely out of fear of punishment is not. The distinction has real consequences for outcomes.

Research guided by SDT in military contexts has found that leadership behaviours which support autonomy — such as providing rationale for decisions, acknowledging feelings, and offering choice within structured frameworks — are associated with higher levels of engagement, job satisfaction, and performance among military personnel (Knevelsrud et al., 2024). These effects hold even in strongly hierarchical environments, suggesting that the need for autonomy does not disappear simply because a structure is rigid; it finds expression through the quality of leadership relationships.

4. MISSION COMMAND: A LEADERSHIP PHILOSOPHY AT THE INTERSECTION OF DOCTRINE AND MOTIVATION

Of all the leadership frameworks developed specifically for military contexts, Mission Command is arguably the most significant for the purposes of this review. Unlike transformational leadership or SDT, which were developed primarily in civilian organizational research and later applied to military settings, Mission Command is a leadership philosophy that originated within military doctrine itself. It has been formally adopted by NATO and implemented, with some variation, across the armed forces of most Western nations.

At its core, Mission Command is built around the idea that effective military operations in complex and uncertain environments require subordinates who can exercise judgment and initiative. Rather than waiting for precise instructions that may become outdated as conditions change, Mission Command encourages leaders at all levels to understand the intent of the commander two levels above them and to act within that intent using their own judgment. The key principles that underpin this philosophy, as identified in NATO doctrine and scholarly analysis, include: mutual trust between leaders and subordinates, clear communication of intent, deliberate delegation of decision-making authority, and an organizational culture that tolerates — and even expects — subordinate initiative (Knevelsrud et al., 2024).

The connection between Mission Command and Self-Determination Theory is not merely theoretical. Knevelsrud, Sørlie, and Valaker (2024) conducted a

multi-study investigation of Norwegian military personnel to examine whether Mission Command leadership behaviours — as reported by soldiers — were associated with satisfaction of the three basic psychological needs identified by SDT, and whether these needs mediated the relationship between Mission Command and motivational outcomes. Their findings provided empirical support for this connection: Mission Command was significantly associated with autonomy need satisfaction, and through this pathway, with autonomous motivation and job satisfaction. Interestingly, the study found that the relationship between Mission Command and the needs for competence and relatedness was less direct, suggesting that the autonomy dimension of SDT is particularly central to why this leadership philosophy works.

These findings have practical significance for military organizations. Turnover intention — a major concern in all security institutions — was also reduced under Mission Command conditions, mediated by the same pathway of need satisfaction and autonomous motivation. This suggests that the philosophy is not simply a tool for operational effectiveness during missions; it has a sustained effect on how personnel relate to their organization over time. For NATO member states facing recruitment and retention challenges in their armed forces, this is a finding worth taking seriously.

It is important to note that Mission Command, while normative in character — it tells military leaders how they ought to lead — is not simply an abstract ideal. Its principles are embedded in training programmes, evaluation systems, and doctrinal publications. This formal institutionalization means that the leadership philosophy carries a form of legitimacy that purely academic models lack. At the same time, scholars have noted significant variation in how Mission Command is actually implemented across different services and national militaries, and there are organizational cultures in which the formal commitment to Mission Command coexists with an informal reality of centralized, control-oriented management (Barfod and Clifton, 2025).

5. HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT IN MILITARY ORGANIZATIONS: WHAT MAKES IT DIFFERENT

One of the persistent themes in the literature on military leadership is the difficulty of applying frameworks developed in civilian organizational contexts. Military and public order organizations are not simply more hierarchical versions of corporations or government agencies. They differ in ways that go to the heart of what it means to work in them.

The most obvious difference is the nature of the risk involved. Military personnel and law enforcement officers may be required to place their lives in danger as a routine aspect of their role. This is not a marginal or exceptional feature of the job — it is a defining characteristic. The willingness to accept this kind of personal risk, and to do so reliably under conditions of extreme stress,

requires a form of commitment that goes beyond what most employment relationships can be expected to generate. This commitment has motivational implications: if personnel are genuinely committed to the mission and to their colleagues, they are more likely to maintain performance under pressure; if they are merely compliant, the motivational reserves required for high-stakes decision-making may not be available when they are needed most.

The literature on military human resource management emphasizes that the institutional environment shapes the effectiveness of HRM practices in ways that have no direct parallel in the private sector. Research on Pakistani police forces, for example, found that organizational culture serves as a moderating variable between HRM practices and workplace wellbeing: a culture built on values of fairness and respect amplified the positive effects of supportive HRM policies, while an abusive supervision climate undermined them (PMC, 2025). This suggests that leadership practices cannot be evaluated in isolation from the organizational context in which they are embedded.

For researchers and policymakers in the European context, these findings highlight the need to attend not only to formal leadership models and HRM policies, but also to the informal cultural norms that either reinforce or undermine them. A military organization that formally espouses Mission Command values while informally rewarding risk-averse, compliance-oriented behaviour will not realize the motivational benefits that the philosophy promises.

6. STRESS MANAGEMENT IN SPECIAL INTERVENTION UNITS

The relationship between leadership, motivation, and performance becomes particularly acute in the context of special intervention units. Law enforcement agencies deploy SWAT (Special Weapons and Tactics) teams to respond to high-risk situations — hostage scenarios, terrorist incidents, armed confrontations — that exceed the capability of standard policing. Similarly, military special operations forces are assigned to missions that require exceptional skill, physical conditioning, psychological resilience, and the capacity for autonomous decision-making under extreme pressure.

Leadership plays a critical role in determining whether stress is managed effectively. Research on law enforcement leadership and resiliency has found that organizations where leaders actively model help-seeking behaviour, create psychological safety, and normalize the acknowledgment of stress among personnel see better outcomes in terms of both individual wellbeing and unit effectiveness (Journal of Leadership, Accountability and Ethics, 2025). Conversely, leadership cultures that stigmatize psychological vulnerability — treating it as a sign of weakness incompatible with the demands of the role — tend to produce personnel who hide their difficulties, which ultimately increases risk for the individual, the team, and the public.

The connection to motivational theory is again evident. An environment in which personnel feel they cannot acknowledge difficulty without risking professional consequences is one in which the need for relatedness — feeling genuinely connected to and supported by one's colleagues and leaders — is frustrated. According to SDT, persistent frustration of basic psychological needs does not merely reduce motivation; it actively undermines wellbeing and performance. Stress management programs that are integrated into the leadership framework of special units, rather than added as optional extras, represent a practical application of this insight.

7. PHYSICAL FITNESS AS A MOTIVATIONAL VARIABLE IN SECURITY ORGANIZATIONS

One area where military and law enforcement research has found consistent evidence is the relationship between physical fitness and motivational outcomes. In both organizational settings, physical conditioning is not merely a functional requirement — it serves as a proxy for competence, a source of self-confidence, and a reinforcer of group cohesion.

The SDT framework provides a useful lens for understanding this connection. Physical training in military contexts, when well-designed, satisfies the need for competence: personnel who can see tangible evidence of their own capability and improvement — whether in fitness scores, tactical performance, or the successful completion of demanding exercises — are more likely to feel effective in their role. This sense of competence, in turn, fuels intrinsic motivation.

From a leadership perspective, these findings suggest that the way physical training is organized and led matters as much as the content of the training itself. Leaders who use physical conditioning as an opportunity to develop competence, celebrate achievement, and reinforce unit bonds are doing more than maintaining physical readiness — they are actively building the motivational foundations that sustain performance across all aspects of the role.

8. DISCUSSION: LEADERSHIP, AUTONOMY, AND EUROPEAN SECURITY GOVERNANCE

The themes that emerge from this review point toward a clear and consistent message: in military and public order organizations, leadership that attends to the motivational needs of personnel — their need to feel autonomous, competent, and connected — produces better outcomes than leadership that relies exclusively on external control. This is true at the level of individual performance and wellbeing, at the level of unit effectiveness, and at the level of organizational sustainability as measured by retention and long-term commitment.

This conclusion does not imply that hierarchy is irrelevant or that the specific demands of security organizations can be wished away. It does imply that the way hierarchies function internally — the quality of relationships between leaders and subordinates, the degree to which personnel feel their contributions are recognized and their development supported, the culture that exists around psychological safety and stress acknowledgment — has a substantial effect on outcomes that no amount of formal structure can substitute for.

Situating these findings in the current European context, the implications are significant. The European Commission's 2026 Work Programme has placed particular emphasis on strengthening European defence capability, security institutions, and the resilience of public order frameworks. Member states are investing in their armed forces and law enforcement agencies at levels not seen in decades. But investment in equipment, technology, and formal structures will only translate into genuine capability if the human component of these institutions is functioning well. Personnel who are disengaged, poorly led, or psychologically distressed do not become more effective simply because they are given better resources.

In this sense, the leadership and motivational research reviewed in this article has a direct bearing on questions of European governance and security policy. The capacity of European nations to develop and sustain competent, resilient, and genuinely motivated security forces is a structural requirement for the kind of strategic autonomy that the EU is seeking to build. Leadership models that operationalize SDT principles — whether through Mission Command in military contexts or through autonomy-supportive management in law enforcement — represent practical pathways toward that goal.

There are, of course, important caveats. Much of the empirical research in this domain has been conducted in specific national contexts — Norway, the United States, the United Kingdom, South Korea — and the cultural, institutional, and operational contexts of these countries may not transfer directly to other European settings. The development of comparable research within diverse EU member states, including Central and Eastern European contexts, represents an important gap in the literature that future work should address.

Additionally, the normative character of models like Mission Command — which prescribes how leaders should behave without always grappling with the institutional and cultural barriers that prevent such behaviour in practice — needs to be balanced by more critical, implementation-focused research. Knowing what good leadership looks like is not the same as knowing how to create organizations in which it can flourish.

9. CONCLUSIONS

This literature review has examined the role of leadership styles in military and public order organizations, with particular attention to the motivational mechanisms through which leadership affects individual and organizational outcomes. The review has identified a number of consistent findings across the literature. First, Self-Determination Theory provides a useful and empirically supported framework for understanding why some leadership approaches work better than others, even within highly hierarchical structures. Second, Mission Command represents a concrete application of SDT principles within military doctrine, with demonstrated effects on autonomy satisfaction, autonomous motivation, job satisfaction, and retention. Third, the unique characteristics of security organizations — including the risks involved, the specific HRM dynamics, and the psychological demands of special operations roles — create conditions that make leadership quality particularly consequential.

These findings are not merely of academic interest. In the context of European security governance, they point toward a form of institutional investment that tends to be undervalued relative to material and structural resources: the investment in leadership quality, motivational climate, and psychological safety within security organizations. Personnel who are well-led, genuinely motivated, and psychologically resilient are not simply more effective operationally — they represent the human foundation without which any broader governance or security architecture will eventually struggle.

Future research should continue to develop the empirical base in this area, with particular attention to European contexts that remain underrepresented in the literature, to the implementation challenges that prevent best-practice leadership models from taking root, and to the intersections between leadership, wellbeing, and operational effectiveness in the evolving landscape of European security.

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