



Armed soldiers in the streets: which European countries deploy them and which refuse

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Seeing military personnel in camouflage, armed with assault rifles, in front of a railway station or embassy has become a familiar image in some European cities. In other capitals, however, such a scene would be exceptional and could only occur in the presence of a serious crisis.

There is no single European model for the deployment of the Armed Forces in internal security.

Italy and France have chosen to permanently use military personnel in support of Police Forces. Other States, such as Austria, Poland and Belgium in the past, allow or have allowed significant deployment on national territory. Germany, Spain and Nordic countries, on the other hand, maintain a much more marked separation between military defense and public order, while providing for exceptions.

The difference depends not only on the terrorist threat. **Constitutions, national legislation, political history and above all the different way of conceiving the relationship between Armed Forces and internal security** come into play.

Italy: the Strade Sicure model

Italy represents one of the most evident cases in Europe.

The operation **Strade Sicure**, which began on August 4, 2008, has become a stable component of the national security apparatus.

In 2026, approximately **6,800 military personnel from the Armed Forces are deployed across 58 provinces**, with over **1,000 sensitive sites and areas** under surveillance: railway and subway stations, airports, diplomatic headquarters, places of worship, infrastructure and targets considered at risk.

Military personnel operate in cooperation with Police Forces and their deployment is defined on the territory through the Prefectures.

This is therefore not simply soldiers deployed in case of an emergency: after eighteen years, **military presence in Italian urban security has become structural**.

According to Army data, since the start of the operation, over 61 million checks have been carried out on individuals and vehicles and more than 100,000 subjects have been stopped, arrested or reported.

France: Sentinelle and the response to terrorism

A similar model, although born mainly from the terrorist threat, is the French one.

The **Sentinelle** operation was launched in January 2015 following terrorist attacks that struck France.

Today the system continues to mobilize thousands of military personnel daily to protect places of worship, stations, monuments, infrastructure and other sensitive targets.

The French Ministry of Armed Forces indicates a system that can involve **approximately 7,000 military personnel**, between personnel actually deployed and forces kept on alert, with numbers adaptable to the security situation.

During the Paris 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games, the Sentinelle system was strengthened to **10,000 military personnel** on national territory.

As in Italy, soldiers do not replace the Police: **they integrate the internal security apparatus**, operating in coordination with civil authorities and law enforcement.

Austria: soldiers also in the protection of sensitive targets

Less known is the Austrian model.

Austrian legislation allows the Bundesheer, the Federal Army, to carry out so-called **Assistenzeinsätze**, that is, missions of assistance to civil authorities.

Within this framework, military personnel have been used both to support border controls and to relieve the Police of the burden of protecting infrastructure and sensitive targets.

In Vienna, for example, Bundesheer military personnel have been deployed in **the surveillance of embassies and international organizations**.

Austria thus positions itself among those European countries in which the presence of soldiers on national territory is perfectly possible, but is activated as **assistance to the Police** and does not necessarily constitute a permanent urban presence comparable to the Italian one.

Belgium: soldiers in the streets were there, but they were withdrawn

Belgium represents a particularly interesting case because it has gone the opposite route to Italy.

In January 2015, following an increase in the terrorist threat, Brussels launched **Operation Vigilant Guardian**.

Military personnel were deployed in cities to protect Parliament, embassies, stations, sensitive locations and subsequently also nuclear installations.

Following the Brussels attacks in March 2016, the system reached a maximum of **over 1,800 military personnel**.

With the progressive improvement of the security situation, however, the government decided to return these functions to the Police.

On September 1, 2021, Vigilant Guardian definitively ended and military personnel were withdrawn from the streets.

Belgium thus demonstrates how a country can make massive use of military personnel in internal security without necessarily transforming that choice into a permanent mission.

Poland: military personnel armed especially at the borders

Poland represents another model.

Here the main internal deployment of military personnel does not normally concern squares or stations in large cities, but above all **the protection of borders and countering hybrid threats**.

Since the crisis at the border with Belarus, thousands of soldiers from the Polish Armed Forces have been deployed in support of the Border Guard.

Military units conduct patrols, observation posts and control activities, operating together with the Straż Graniczna and the Police.

The regulatory framework has also been strengthened in recent years, defining with greater precision the possibilities for military intervention and the use of force during border protection.

It is therefore correct to include Poland among European States that allow **significant armed deployment of the Armed Forces in internal security**, although in a very different context from Strade Sicure.

Germany: one of the most restrictive legislations

At the other extreme we find Germany.

The German Basic Law establishes a very precise principle: **outside of defense, the Bundeswehr can be used only in cases expressly provided for by the Constitution**.

The historical reason is evident. After the experience of Nazism and World War II, the Federal Republic built a particularly rigorous separation between the Armed Forces and internal

security.

However, there are exceptions.

The Bundeswehr can provide assistance in the event of disasters and serious emergencies and, in extreme circumstances provided for by articles 87a and 91 of the Basic Law, can be deployed to counter threats to the very existence or democratic order of the State.

But these are precisely **exceptional conditions**.

The German government reiterated even in 2026 that internal deployment of the Bundeswehr remains subject to **very strict constitutional limits**.

A German "Strade Sicure", with military personnel systematically deployed in front of stations in major cities, would therefore be extremely difficult to implement within the current constitutional framework.

Spain: no Strade Sicure, but there is no absolute ban

In Spain the deployment of the Armed Forces in internal security is much more limited than in Italy or France, but **it is not absolutely prohibited**. Ley Orgánica 5/2005 allows military personnel to collaborate with civil authorities in case of serious emergencies and to support Security Forces also in the fight against terrorism.

A recent example is **Ceuta, in the summer of 2026**, where units of the Army, including personnel from the **Tercio "Duque de Alba" 2º de La Legión**, were deployed at the border and in the city's neighborhoods in surveillance, control and support activities during the migration crisis. On August 12, Defense Minister Margarita Robles described the activity as a mission of **"presence, surveillance and support"**.

The point, therefore, is that Spain **can deploy armed military personnel on national territory**, but does so in extraordinary circumstances and under civil authority. There is no permanent system comparable to *Strade Sicure* or *Sentinelle*, also due to a political tradition that maintains a more marked separation between Armed Forces and public order.

The UME is not a public order force

A particular Spanish case is represented by the **Unidad Militar de Emergencias (UME)**.

Created in 2005, it is a true military unit belonging to the Armed Forces and intervenes in case of fires, floods, earthquakes, disasters and other major emergencies.

The UME can therefore be very visible in cities and across the national territory, but **its mission is neither the maintenance of public order nor normal security patrols**.

Confusing UME and Police would therefore be incorrect.

United Kingdom: military can be called, but only in crises

The United Kingdom also has tools that allow the Armed Forces to support civil authorities.

One of the most evident examples is **Operation Temperer**, the plan that allows mobilizing military personnel in case of a serious terrorist threat to free armed Police personnel from static protection duties.

After the Manchester attack in May 2017, approximately **1,000 military personnel** were mobilized, allowing armed Police to be redistributed to operational activities.

The British principle remains, however, different from the Italian one: the Armed Forces are an **extraordinary reserve at the disposal of the civil authority**, not an ordinary component of urban patrolling.

Sweden: military and Police remain clearly separated

Sweden too maintains a significant separation.

The Armed Forces can provide equipment, helicopters, bomb disposal experts and other specialized capabilities to the Police, but normally military personnel **cannot be used in situations where it might be necessary to use force or violence against individuals**.

One of the main exceptions concerns terrorism: in specific circumstances the Police can request military capabilities even for interventions that could involve the use of force, generally following government authorization.

In this case too, therefore, no ordinary equivalent of Strade Sicure.

Three different models in Europe

Looking at Europe as a whole, there emerge essentially **three major models**.

Italy and France represent the model in which armed military personnel are used continuously and visibly in protecting territory and sensitive objectives.

Austria, Poland, Belgium, and the United Kingdom demonstrate instead that the military can be deployed for internal security functions, but normally in response to a specific need: terrorism, borders, protection of objectives, or temporary insufficiency of police capabilities.

Finally, **Germany, Spain, and Sweden** maintain a much more rigid separation between military and police functions. Even in these countries, the Armed Forces can intervene within national territory, but under more restricted conditions and generally with an exceptional character.

The most correct distinction, therefore, is not between countries where military deployment "is possible" and countries where it "is not possible."

Almost all European systems provide for some form of military intervention within national territory.

The real difference is another: **how easily a government can resort to military personnel, what powers are attributed to them, and especially whether their use in daily security is considered normal or exceptional.**

Why Italy is a relative exception

Under this aspect, Italy occupies a particular position.

An operation that has now lasted eighteen years, with nearly 7,000 military personnel and more than a thousand monitored objectives, can no longer be simply considered a temporary response to an emergency.

Strade Sicure has effectively become **a stable component of the national security architecture.**

France presents a comparable model with *Sentinelle*, while many other European countries continue to consider the armed soldier in the streets as a tool to be used only when the situation exceeds the ordinary capabilities of Police Forces.

And this is probably the main European difference: not so much to establish whether a soldier can be deployed within his own country, but to decide **whether his armed presence among citizens should represent normality or exception.**

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