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Social War as a Public Policy Problem (The Case of France)

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Abstract:

Public policy faces several current problems. One of them is migration management, both in the phase of the arrival of migrants and in the phase of integration of the second generation of migrants born to migrant parents in the original host country. The case of France shows that failure to manage this problem can result in a social war. The study examines the issue of the social war in France (2002-2023) as a clash between three actors: government elites, retired generals of the French armed forces and Islamic terrorist organizations. To explain processes related to social warfare, the AFA model (actors-frameworks-activities) is used. The desk research method and in-depth loosely structured interviews with French experts were used for the investigation. Embedded history and collective memory are identified as key factors in the emergence and dynamics of the social war. The study identifies key historical roots and actors of social war in France, highlighting the influence of collective memory and migration policy failures on societal polarization. Findings emphasize the need for improved integration strategies to prevent further conflicts, with implications for similar challenges in other EU countries.

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1. Introduction

This study deals with the phenomenon of migration management and the effective integration of second-generation migrants in the host country. The problem of managing migration and its impact on society is topical for all EU countries, although the level and intensity of the political solution to the problem is different in Western European countries than in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe that do not have a colonial history. France is a Western European country where the problem of social war is evidently very topical.

This study explores the concept of “social war,” building on Bourdieu’s notion of social warfare and applying it to contemporary events in France. Social war is understood here in two senses (Bourdieu, 1984): negatively, as a social and political conflict without the characteristics of an armed struggle, and positively, as a conflict conducted through political maneuvers and campaigns. The objective is to diminish the enemy’s power and influence, discouraging and marginalizing them (Bigo, 2013). Social wars are waged by those fiercely defending their societal positions and dominance (Mérand & Pouliot, 2013).

The clash between the French soldiers and the ruling elites was started by a protest of the top-level military management against budgetary cuts and the following punitive reactions of President Macron and his entourage. It continued with the dismissal of all the protesting generals and culminated in the publication of two open critical letters of retired generals and colonel addressed to the government. This clash is reflected in a sharp dispute about the amount of defense spending.

Certain government elites, led by President Macron, aim to reform public finances and reduce the public debt of 182% of GDP. They see defense spending cuts as justified, but the retired generals protest, calling for army modernization and support for anti-terrorism missions abroad. They emphasize the need to suppress radical Jihadism and criticize the government’s handling of terrorism within France, a view not shared by the government. Meanwhile, radical Islamists, paradoxically hostile to the country that offered new opportunities to their families, joined this social conflict.

Each of these actors has their own depository of collective memory (DCM) which is expressed by deeply rooted modes of behavior created by generations of political and military élites (Guzzini, 2013, p. 86). Young Muslims have a historical grievance built into their collective memory (Guzzini, 2013). They know that France carried out a

violent colonial policy in the country of their parents. The influence of this “embedded history” (David, 2000) is so deeply “collectively rooted” in the consciousness of the young generation that they feel the need to get rid of the “inherited” historical grievance. The tool for it is revolt. Young Islamists thus feel that they belong to one social group. They are united by religion, the language of their ancestors.

The social capital of a given group reinforces the sense of exclusivity of the group members and supports their joint “defensive” response to a perceived external threat. For them, this perceived threat is a “different culture.” Therefore, within the framework of collective memory, young Islamists can strongly oppose France. The result is a confrontation called a social war which generates a fragmentation of the society (Claridge, 2018; Scholten & Holzhacker, 2009) and homophily (McPherson et al., 2001). There is a confrontation between a part of the population of the host country and a revolting part of the new generation of the Muslim population.

The issue of the social conflict in France has not yet been thoroughly analyzed. Our study seeks to address this gap. We identify three main groups: 1) the government officials and elites under the leadership of President Macron, 2) the retired generals from the French armed forces who have raised concerns about the budget reductions in the military, and 3) the extremist organizations, which some view as a reaction to France’s military interventions in Islamic countries. When examining them, we draw from a document analysis and structured interviews with French experts.

We will examine what clashes occur between the main actors of the social war in France and what impact these events have on the (in)stability in the French society. This study is so far the first paper to examine the issue of the social war in France. We address the following research questions (RQ) in it:

RQ 1: What are the historical roots of the social war in France?

RQ 2: What are the main features and events of the social war and how do experts evaluate them?

2. Theoretical framework

The core concept of our analysis is the concept of “social war” (Bourdieu, 1984). This relational concept (Bigo, 2013 102) refers to a war waged within a state between at least two position takers (Mérand & Forget, 2012, p. 102) obsessed with strengthening their respective positions in the field, of course, to the detriment of their competitors and challengers. It is waged without tanks, cannons, planes, or bombings, and without military operations and victims in battlefields. Instead, it is waged by political

maneuvers, campaigns, and pressures.

The aim of such a war is neither a military victory nor the annihilation of the enemy. The aim is to reduce their power and influence and discourage or marginalize them. Another aim is the social dominance (Bourdieu, 1994, p. 3–12) as all actors try to shape the power structure and satisfy their subjective expectations (Bourdieu, 2000).

Until today, no author had the courage (or the folly?) to work with this fear driving concept and apply it in an analysis of political fights in a concrete West European country (Eichler, 2023). This text has the ambition and maybe the impertinence to break this taboo and present a concrete application of the concept of social war to a study of political fights in a specific country.

We also use a doctrinal document in the study - the Global Islamic Resistance Call (GIRC) written in 2010 by Abu Musab al-Suri who presents the West as a decadent civilization while expressing an adoration of the Islamic world as a superior actor that represents the future of the humankind and as a therapeutic cure for the protracted, impious, weak, corrupted, hypocritical. The terrorist attacks are presented in the document as a reaction to the following French military interventions: Operation Harmattan in Libya in 2011, Operation Serval in Mali in 2012, Operation Sangaris in the Central African Republic in 2013, Operation Chammal in 2014, Operation Barkhane which took place from 2013 to 2016 and Operation Takuba during the same period.

3. Policy context

The AFA model (actors-frameworks-activities) makes it possible to explain the role and activity of the key actors of the social war. The key actors of the social war in France are President Macron, the retired generals of the French armed forces, and illegal Islamic terrorist organizations in France. To do this, we will explore the evolutionary trajectory of social warfare between 2002-2023. All the major events related to social war have occurred on this temporal trajectory. To explore this trajectory, we will conduct a content analysis of relevant documents and interview relevant French experts and retired French generals who are critical of the events of the social war. We understand these factors as barriers that need to be overcome on the way to finding a solution. By explaining and interpreting the events of the social war we can open windows of opportunity for dialogue and agreement between the opposing actors.

4. Data and methods

We use the research framework of historical institutionalism, applying retrograde analysis, desk research and structured interviews. Our aim is to understand how historical contexts shape current institutional behavior, which makes it a useful tool for analyzing changes in public policy. We analyzed government documents, political party programs, politicians' statements and the debate on migration and social war in the media. The findings from this analysis were used for the content focus of the in-depth loosely structured interviews with prominent French experts.

1. Interview Design: The interviews were in-depth and semi-structured, focusing on specific themes related to the responses of the key actors and experts. The questions were formulated after a thorough review of the participants' monographs and articles published in peer-reviewed journals.

2. Selection of Participants: The participants were chosen through purposive sampling to ensure their relevance and expertise.

The experts were selected as follows. In the first step, a list of 24 experts was created. In the second step, these potential experts were approached by a request for an interview. In the third step, the following 9 experts consented to an interview (see Table 1).

In order to strengthen and update the conclusions in relation to the CEE countries, interviews were also conducted with three prominent Czech generals (M1, M2, M3), and two groups of Czech and Slovak officers (G1 and G2), who took part in foreign missions in Afghanistan, where they came into direct armed conflict with jihadists. These respondents wished to remain anonymous for the sake of their safety (see attached Table 2).

5. Interview procedure

The respondents were given the freedom to provide open-ended answers. When new or significant information emerged, follow-up (ad hoc) questions were asked to explore these areas in more detail. Our aim was to cover the fields of international security, immigration in France and its consequences for the internal security of this country. All the interviewed experts enjoy respect not only in France, but also abroad. As a result, we have in our sample four professors (Pascal Boniface, Jean Klein, Dominique Moïsi, and Elisabeth Badinter), two Generals (Benoit Durieux and Pascal Roux), two leading experts on immigration (Michele Tribalat and Matthieu Tardis), two directors of research institutes (Pascal Boniface and Benoit Durieux), and four experts on international security relations (Pascal Boniface, Patrice Buffotot, Jean Klein, and Benoit Durieux). Eight of these experts are well known and respected thanks to their articles

and books published not only in French, but also in English, which are often cited.

The experts were introduced to our analysis of the problem of the social war and to the identification of key events (nodes) on the trajectory of the social war. The opinions of the experts on the results of this analysis are contained in the section “Results and discussion.” The experts were sequentially asked the following questions:

Q1. What is your opinion about the terrorist attacks in your country (especially the attacks committed on important days)?

Q2. What is your attitude towards Islam?

Q3. Do you approve of the identification of the terrorist attacks with Islam (the so-called amalgam)?

3. **Duration and Recording:** Each interview lasted approximately two hours and was recorded to ensure accuracy.

4. **Analysis:** The interviews were transcribed and then coded using both deductive and inductive approaches. This allowed for the identification of key themes based on predefined categories, while also enabling the discovery of new, emergent themes.

Respondents M1, M2 and M3 were interviewed freely about their experience of waging war in Afghanistan. A group interview was conducted with the G1 and G2 actors about the experience of the war. These interviews were conducted by the main author of the article. At that time, the interviewer (the main author of the article) aimed to gradually create an archive (to “preserve historical memory”) of the activities of Czech soldiers abroad. Later, the lead author of this study decided to use the recordings of these interviews in writing this article.

6. Results

The answer to RQ 1 is as follows: The phenomenon of social war is rooted in significant historical events and in the collective memory. The Algerian War (1954–1962) was followed by the mass migration of Algerians to France. The consequences of this migration are accompanied by features characterized by a clash of values, ethnic polarization and a tendency to create a parallel government (Waterman, 2023).

The reaction of the French soldiers to these features is influenced by the factor of the collective memory containing experience gained during the military operations in the Islamic countries in Africa, the Middle East and/or Afghanistan where French soldiers were confronted every day with the bestial cruelty of jihadists (Gomart & Guisnel, 2020, p. 123). They feared that Northern Africa could be “Afghanized” (Rocard, 2013). The clash between French soldiers and jihadist terrorists takes the form of a clash

of different morals (Graham et al., 2009), a confrontation of different religious worldviews (Reynal-Querol, 2002) a political rebellion (Collier et al., 2004) and even a form of a meme (Blackmore, 1999). French soldiers are strongly influenced by the growing radicalization among immigrants from the Islamic world concentrated in the so-called “no-law zones” throughout the entire territory of France (Caldwell, 2010, p. 343): this process involves the construction of more and more new mosques and an increasing submission of the ruling élites to the political, ideological and even theological requests of immigrants and their sons (Houellebecq, 2015). Since 2015, in connection with this, France has been moving in a vicious circle of violence, both doctrinal and instrumental.

The related French military operations are prepared, waged, and presented as actions of necessity with the aim of preventing the creation of safe havens for the Islamic State and other terrorist organizations. However, this narrative is categorically rejected by jihadists in these areas as well as in France. They condemn the French interventions as an unacceptable interference in the Islamic world. They react with new punitive terrorist attacks which aim to transfer the war from the Islamic world to the territory of France and create a long-term atmosphere of fear there. France is truly in a state of war; even President Macron (2019) and his Minister of the Interior officially declared it. Contemporary France is penetrated by a “culture of fear.”

Now we will look for an answer to RQ 2. We have found four key events of the social war (N 1, N 2, N 3, N 4). All the experts agreed on the relevance of these events.

N 1: The clash between a young Minister of the Interior and a largely respected General in 2013. Internal security as a key stake

General Soubelet of the French Gendarmerie, shaped by daily encounters with France’s immigration policy, openly criticized government decisions before the Parliamentary Commission for Security. He highlighted the cancellation of 6,000 National Gendarmerie contracts, which weakened national security. Soubelet described the gendarmerie’s growing powerlessness against young criminals in immigrant-dominated areas and condemned France’s incoherent approach to everyday crime, calling it misaligned with the severity of the situation (Soubelet, 2016). His critique of the political system’s restriction on military comments sparked harsh backlash from then-Interior Minister Manuel Valls, yet Soubelet became a hero to many, earning the nickname General Courage. In 2017, he published *There Is No Freedom without Authority* (Soubelet, 2017).

N 2: A presidential candidate vs. a strategically thinking General. The right of soldiers to speak as the key stake

Clash number 2 occurred in April 2016 when Alain Juppé declared: “*A soldier has the same thing as a minister: he either respects the rule of silence or packs up and leaves.*” In response to these words, General Desportes, then already a retired soldier, wrote an open letter entitled “*You are wrong, Mr. Juppé*”. General Desportes warned Juppé that the military budget resources were still dwindling. In April 2008, Desportes articulated his doubts about the way in which the United States was waging the war in Afghanistan. In return, at the instigation of the then Minister of Defense, Hervé Morin, he was reprimanded, and then he left the army and retired. This case has shown that the French generals were already refusing to be what they used to be during the Cold War: the so-called “Great Dumb.” General Desportes deduced that a soldier must speak whenever it is necessary to prove his fidelity to the above-mentioned values.

N 3: The direct clash between two top-level symbolic authorities. Military budgets as the key stake

In July 2017, President Macron imposed significant budget cuts, which led to delays in military modernization and mission reductions. Between 2008 and 2015, 54,000 armed forces jobs were cut, and inflation further reduced the defense budget by 4 billion euros. General Pierre de Villiers, then Chief of General Staff, criticized these measures before the National Assembly’s military committee, noting the weakened state of the armed forces. Macron responded firmly, asserting his authority as commander-in-chief and demanding public restraint from generals. Following this clash, General de Villiers resigned, becoming a hero among French soldiers. He later published *Service to the Fatherland*, emphasizing military service’s altruistic, collective values and the priority of national interests over personal ones. He reinforced the identity of French soldiers, framing their role as a commitment to defense and security. General de Villiers articulated a symbolic “us versus them” stance, underlining shared values and norms, or “le sens pratique” (Bourdieu, 1980), as integral to the soldiers’ identity and their societal role.

N 4: The two open letters of French soldiers – an open revolt

In 2021, a significant clash emerged when high-ranking French soldiers published two letters in *Valeurs actuelles*, titled “For a Return of the Honor of Our Rulers” and “The Generation of Fire.” These letters warned of two critical threats to France: terrorist groups in the Sahel and criminal gangs in France’s “outlaw territories.” They criticized governing elites for “inaction,” “cowardice,” “deceit,” and “perversion.”

Written by soldiers with experiences in Afghanistan, Mali, the CAR, and Syria, as well as in Operation Sentinelle, the letters condemned the erosion of French values in areas controlled by immigrant groups linked to jihadism. The soldiers affirmed their

resolve to defend the French Republic and its core values, even declaring their willingness to restore order should a civil war arise.

Metamorphoses of works of constitution

As the last decade (2013–2023) in France has been full of clashes between the three competing actors, the relevancy and importance of another important concept defined by Pierre Bourdieu were confirmed: the concept of the “work of constitution” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 3–14) as an integral part of the habitus.

The French jihadists continued to wear the same violent habitus. The work of constitution of governing élites has been based on two pillars. First, they continued to condemn terrorist attacks. Second, they held their negative attitudes towards the capital and habitus of the revolting soldiers, depicted as insupportable troublemakers. The work of constitution of the French generals was based on positive values articulated by General de Villiers.

The following conclusions emerge from the analysis of the interviews:

First, the experts unanimously condemned all terrorist attacks on French soil, noting that these brutal acts, often committed by young jihadists, have pushed contemporary Islam into a framework associated with violence and nihilism. They emphasized that, in France, religious belief is a private matter, and all Muslims are expected to respect the Republic’s values, including its culture, history, and customs. They also argued against allowing immigrant children to avoid French schools, where detached imams promote teachings focused on the Quran and Islamic superiority. They supported Macron’s decision to end the Education of the Culture of Their Origin (ELCO) program, which had been widely abused.

Second, experts B, C, and E discussed the “amalgam” theory, asserting that it is undeniable that recent terrorist attacks over the last two decades have primarily been carried out by home-grown jihadists.

Among all the experts interviewed, the answers of the following personalities were particularly original, interesting and remarkable:

a) The first is Benoît Durieux, a highly respected French Four-Star General with an exemplary military career. Since 2021, he has held the position of the director of the Institut des Hautes études de défense Nationale (IHEDN), an important and highly respected public institution with an interministerial dimension. He underlines the importance of strengthening **national cohesion** and contributing to the development of **strategic thinking** on defense and security issues, which is also the mission of his institution, and he is personally identified with this mission. In the past, he was not only a commander of large military units such as a regiment or a brigade. He also assumed the responsibility of serving as a speechwriter of the Minister of Defense and the director of the cabinet of the Prime Minister, and he held the latter position for six years. He emphasizes the highly

symbolic importance of the July 14, a French national holiday during which all the military units parade before the President of the Republic and pay tribute to their country by saying, "*We are here for you*". He states that politicians and soldiers must move towards reciprocal homage and respect. It is an implicit assumption that politicians must take into consideration the dignity and pride of their generals and of all soldiers in their absolute devotion to the security of their country.

b) The attitudes of Benoît Durieux are fully shared by the Général de brigade aérienne (Air Brigade General) Pascal Roux. He states that France, facing the war in Gaza and the permanent danger of terrorist attacks, urgently needs a closer and longer-term mutual understanding, respect and cooperation between politicians and soldiers. He declares that the past five years, full of tensions and hostile gestures, should not be forgotten. He perceives this dramatic period as a very serious memory for soldiers as well as politicians. He concludes that if France fails in its struggle against Islamic terrorism, it can be destabilized, and its national security can be very seriously threatened, if not undermined.

c) Professor Dominique Moïsi is a respected French political scientist and writer. In 2003, he supported the war in Iraq. Nevertheless, at the end of 2004, he had the political courage to publish an openly self-critical article under the title "I was wrong to approve of the war in Iraq" (*J'ai eu tort d'approuver la guerre en Irak*, 2004). Today, he articulates his fears of the growing antisemitism in France that has been reinforced by the war in Gaza and expressed by attacks against French Jews. In this atmosphere, they hide themselves for the first time since 1945. Moïsi underlines that this is an important dimension of the social war in contemporary France. He insists on the term "social psychological war" as a better term for it.

d) The fears of antisemitism are fully shared by Élisabeth Badinter, a French philosopher of Jewish origin, and the author of a wide range of often cited monographs. She remembers the case of Sarah Halimi, a retired French Jewish doctor and schoolteacher who was attacked and killed in her apartment in Paris on 4 April 2017. Her assailant Kobili Traoré shouted, "*Allahu akbar*" during the attack and subsequently proclaimed, "I killed the Shaitan." In connection with such attacks, Badinter uses the term "extremist Islam", which refers to the variety of Islam that France has faced since the beginning of the Israeli repressive military offensive in Gaza. She argues that the terrorist attacks in France in the last few years resulted from the laxness of the French governments that, during the last two decades, lacked the courage to resist the jihadi indoctrination of young sons and grandsons of immigrants from the Islamic world.

e) The most critical of all the interviewed experts was Michèle Tribalat. Like the other experts, she categorically condemns all the terrorist attacks. She openly speaks about the end of the French model of the integration of Muslims in society. She argues that the number of Muslims in her country is eight million, which is more than 8% of the total population. This percentage is simply

unmanageable. Tribalat underlines that this is a judgement on her country because the Muslim teenagers are aggressively hostile to France even though it is their native country since they were born in it. Finally, she openly shares the belief in the amalgam theory, and she adds that her country faces a massive invasion, the aim of which is to weaken and totally disrupt the French Republic and its values in favor of the values of radical Islam.

All the above-mentioned experts agree with three important views. First, immigration and the concentration of immigrants in the no-go zones represent an important and urgent problem. Second, the French immigration policy is failing. Third, the revolt of the French soldiers was an important event with serious political consequences.

Nevertheless, there are some important differences in the interviewees' opinions. Expert A explains his answers to all the questions formulated above by placing them in a broad geopolitical framework; he does not reject the fact that *French military interventions in the Islamic world are abused by terrorist organizations as a pretext for their cynical attacks*. He did not oppose the statement that his country is moving in a vicious circle of violence that has dangerous consequences for its everyday security and way of life.

Prudence is typical even for experts B and C. They agree that *the sacrifices of French soldiers strongly contrast with the violent behavior of young violators in immigrant quarters*. In contrast, expert D is quick to state that he shares all the attitudes and conclusions of the politically correct authors: his country has only 4 million immigrants, all Muslims born in France merit the French nationality, he has no understanding of the revolting soldiers, and he sees their behavior as *unacceptable*.

The most radical and critical attitudes have been articulated by expert E. She states that there are many immigrants in France (8 million, 12% of the entire population) and that they pose an imminent and serious security threat for this country, especially for its way of life. *She openly says that Islam is the religion of violence and revolt*. She rejects the argument of the politically correct authors, and she makes an equal sign between Islam and the terrorist attacks perpetrated in France during the 2010s. She unreservedly approves of all the basic theses of the revolting soldiers. She adds that even the French armed forces and police are menaced by jihadists who serve in their ranks and destabilize them.

The results of the survey are also relevant for CEE countries. It is a fact that there is no radicalized Islamic community in Central and Eastern Europe as there is in France. However, the ruling elites in Central and Eastern Europe are confronted with growing resistance from frustrated citizens who are afraid of radicalized Islam. It is a current public policy problem to which the governments of CEE countries are forced to respond. The problem is all the more serious because some political parties are turning

to frustrated voters with warnings against radicalized Islam. Fears of refugees from Islamic countries are spreading in CEE societies. A judgment is made on a part-to-whole basis, with a part of the uninformed public identifying Islam with radical Islam.

To this end, it is necessary to consider the experience of Czech soldiers in foreign missions in Afghanistan (G 1 and G 2) in Afghanistan and their commanders (M 1, M 2, M 3). The soldiers (G 1 and G 2) claim to have lost their original ideals and enthusiasm for the possibility of waging a victorious war against the Islamic State. They are also critical of the policies of the ruling elites in CEE countries. In their view, the political elites of these countries are losing their sense of reality. The political elites believe that it is possible to change the policy of the Islamic State and democratize it according to the Western model. The commanders (M 1, M 2 and M 3) also lost these illusions. They ask themselves: what did my comrades-in-arms die for? What was the point of this sacrifice? This is a serious warning for public policy, which can erode public confidence in the reality of the policies of the ruling elites.

And, much more importantly, in Summer 2021 the professional soldiers from the CEE countries witnessed a headlong flight of all the NATO armed forces from their military bases, a veritable “save yourself, who can.” Without exaggeration, it was a ruthless race to be the first to the airport in Kabul. As respondent M 3 stated, for all these soldiers, it was a bitter humiliation and an enormously bitter lesson that will follow them for the rest of their lives.

As a result, today, no one can exclude that the above – mentioned disenchantment caused by the increasingly a more and more striking contradiction between the empty phrases of the governing élites and the cruel reality in the missions in Afghanistan can lead to their soldiers’ radicalization “a la francaise”, namely via their contacts and cooperation within the framework of other military missions in the future.

7. Discussion

The phenomenon of the social war in France provides valuable lessons for public policy challenges in CEE countries. These conclusions are particularly valuable because in CEE countries this issue is not yet part of scientific discourse. Attention is focused on a different direction and on other actors. For example, the study by Hloušek et al. (2024) examines how leaders of radical right-wing parties work with emotions when addressing their voters and sympathizers on Twitter/X. Silvestri (2009) analyses the growing importance of Islam and religion in the institutional set-up of the EU after the Maastricht crisis. Vaughan (2024) examines the problem of religion, secularization, and the far right in the Netherlands, Hungary, and Italy. He concludes that new religious immigrants, seen as intruders importing contradictory values imposed on the

population by the EU elites, may threaten Christian and godless Europeans. However, no study deals with the problem of Islam and social war.

Although radicalized Islamic communities, like those in France, are not present in CEE countries, growing societal anxieties about Islam and immigration represent an emerging public policy issue. These fears, often disconnected from actual demographic realities, are largely shaped by political narratives and media portrayals, which have generalized Islam as synonymous with radicalism. Such misperceptions have led to public resistance against immigration, heightened social tensions, and mistrust in ruling elites.

The issue is compounded by political parties leveraging these fears to gain electoral support. By amplifying warnings about cultural and security threats posed by refugees and immigrants from Islamic countries, some political actors reinforce stereotypes and exacerbate divisions within society. This political exploitation not only undermines social cohesion but also diverts attention from substantive public policy discussions regarding migration and integration.

France's experience underscores the risks of politicizing societal fears and failing to address legitimate public concerns effectively. In the French context, the lack of coherent integration policies has allowed deep-seated historical grievances and collective memories of colonialism to fester, leading to the radicalization of marginalized communities and social polarization. A similar trajectory, though different in specifics, could arise in CEE countries if fears about radical Islam and immigration remain unaddressed or are handled poorly by ruling elites.

Another critical insight from France is the role of the military and security sectors in societal debates. In France, growing dissatisfaction among retired generals and active military personnel with government policies, particularly in areas such as defense spending and counterterrorism, has led to open dissent. CEE countries face a parallel challenge, as their military professionals—many of whom have witnessed the failures of international missions, such as in Afghanistan—express frustration with the perceived disconnect between political rhetoric and on-ground realities. This disenchantment risks fostering similar “French-style” radicalization within military ranks or among veterans, particularly if their concerns remain unacknowledged.

To prevent such outcomes, CEE policymakers must adopt a proactive and comprehensive approach. First, public education campaigns are needed to dispel myths and misinformation about Islam and migration. These initiatives should promote a nuanced understanding of cultural diversity while addressing security concerns in an evidence-based manner. Second, governments must prioritize inclusive and transparent policymaking processes that engage diverse stakeholders, including civil society, religious leaders, and security experts, to build trust and foster social resilience.

Furthermore, migration and integration policies must be designed with sensitivity

to local contexts, emphasizing the integration of newcomers into the broader societal fabric while addressing legitimate concerns about cultural and economic impacts. Policymakers should also take steps to de-politicize issues of migration and security, ensuring that these topics are debated constructively rather than used as tools of political polarization.

Finally, lessons from France's experience highlight the importance of addressing historical grievances and collective memory. For CEE countries, this involves recognizing the influence of past conflicts and societal narratives on current public perceptions. Governments should encourage dialogue that bridges divides, fostering a shared vision of societal security and cohesion. By proactively addressing these challenges, CEE countries can not only mitigate the risks of societal fragmentation but also strengthen democratic institutions and resilience against populist exploitation of cultural fears.

The French experience with social war offers a cautionary tale for CEE nations. While the context differs, the underlying dynamics of fear, polarization, and discontent have significant parallels. Through informed, inclusive, and forward-looking public policies, CEE countries can address these emerging challenges and prevent them from escalating into broader social conflicts.

8. Conclusion

An analysis of the social war in France shows that the social war is a thorny social problem. Addressing it is a challenge for public policy actors. Theoretical reflection and solutions to this problem are also topical for other Western European countries in which radical Islamist groups are emerging. The theoretical reflection of the problem is a challenge for both public policy theory and public policy actors to effectively set up migration policy. At the same time, the findings can initiate public policy actors to formulate an effective "post-migration policy," i.e. a policy of integration of the generation that was born in their parents' original host country.

A twenty-year trajectory of social warfare (2002–2023) was analyzed, identifying key events. The first event (N1) was a clash in 2013 between a young Interior Minister and a respected General. The second involved a confrontation between a Presidential candidate and a strategic-minded General. The third was a dispute over military budgets between retired generals and President Macron, which escalated into the N4 event: the publication of two open letters in *Valeurs actuelles*, titled "For a Return of the Honor of Our Rulers" and "The Generation of Fire." These letters warned of France's decline, threatened by terrorist organizations in the Sahel, criminal gangs in "outlaw territories," and the risk of social collapse and civil war. Intense social conflicts from 2013 to 2023

underline the relevance of Bourdieu's concept of social war in contemporary France.

Experts agree on the urgent need to address France's social warfare issues, despite differing perspectives. They collectively view immigration, particularly in concentrated "no-go zones," as a pressing problem, pointing to the failure of France's immigration policy. This perceived failure has led to open dissent among retired soldiers. The current social war is shaped by historical legacies and collective memory, which fuel confrontational actions.

Experts note that terrorist acts result from complex factors. Terrorism, whether organized or individual, emerges when actors see no alternative to change. According to social integrity theory, this "extraordinary" response aims to "awaken" society, serving to intimidate opponents and rally supporters. It may also be a form of "social" revenge preserved in collective memory, evident in the antagonistic attitudes of some young French-born Islamists. Understanding terrorists' mindset involves examining their "vision of reality" and rationale for violent action. The central question thus becomes: why do terrorists choose force over discussion to impose their beliefs?

The theory of social integrity may help address why terrorists rely on violence rather than dialogue. The drive to avenge ancestral humiliations often holds more power than a vision for the future, with the past legitimizing actions more strongly. For Islamist radicals, this historical-cultural grievance may create a perceived debt that cannot be settled through foreign military missions, as proposed by retired French generals. Instead, neutralizing the influence of the past—so that it ceases to be a political issue—requires dialogue across all societal actors, including civil society, which was beyond the scope of this study. Achieving this goal is a monumental task.

From this perspective, an effective migration and "post-migration" public policy must address a new and complex challenge to prevent further social conflict. This study identifies three main actors in France's social war: (a) an increasingly radicalized and aggressive Islamic community with aims of Islamizing France; (b) governing elites, perceived as increasingly weak and disconnected from the public; and (c) professional soldiers.

Through Operation Sentinelle, soldiers regularly confront jihadist aggression within France. Their experiences in Afghanistan, Mali, CAR, Syria, and Libya fuel their hostility toward jihadist militants both domestically and abroad. Soldiers also grow more critical of the government's perceived weakness and cowardice in handling jihadist threats.

This issue holds relevance for Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries, as the stark divide between government rhetoric and the harsh realities of military missions may lead to a similar "French-style" radicalization in these regions through future military cooperation.

Data availability

All data generated or analyzed during this study are included in this published article.

Ethical approval

The participation of experts in the research study was entirely voluntary. We did not discover any aspects of ethical risk. For this reason, we judged approaching ethics committee for their approval to be unnecessary in this case.

Informed consent

All participants gave their informed consent for inclusion before they participated in the study and agreed to have their names published.

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Appendix

Appendix 1: List of Experts

The name of expert	Position of expert	Date of interview
Boniface, Pascal A	Leading French expert in geopolitics, Director of l'Institut de relations internationales et stratégiques (IRIS). He held critical positions towards French military interventions in the Islamic world which are abused by terrorist organisations.	November 2019
Buffotot, Patrice B	Director of l'Observatoire européen de sécurité, Sorbonne, Paris. He has a big understanding for the revolting soldiers.	November 2020 January 2022
Klein, Jean C	Emeritus Professor at Sorbonne university. He states that the immigration policy of his country failed.	November 2019
Tardis, Matthieu D	Researcher, de l'Institut français des relations internationales (IFRI). He categorically refuses the conclusions of Michèle Tribalat, he states that France has only 4 million immigrants (6%).	November 2017
Tribalat, Michèle E	Demographe, leading French expert on immigration.	November 2020 January 2022
Général de corps d'armée (Four Stars) Benoît Durieux F	Director of the Institut des hautes études de défense nationale (IHEDN)	October 2023
Général de division aérienne (Three Stars) Pascal Roux G	Former representant of France in the European Union	November 2023
Professor Dominique Moïsi H	a leading and largely respected French political scientist and writer	November 2023
Élisabeth Badinter I	French philosopher of the Jews origin, author of a long range of awarded and largely cited monographs and articles.	November 2023

Source: Authors' own, 2025

Appendix 2: Participants in the war (generals and officers) against jihadists

Position	Code	Date of interview
High Representative of the Command of the Armed Forces of the Czech Republic (now Ambassador)	M 1	November 2020
The second highest top representative of the Czech Armed Forces command	M 2	April 2021
Top Representative of the Command of the Army of the Czech Republic (now Military Attaché)	M 3	December 2021
Ten former commandants of the PRT of the CEE countries (CZ and SR)	G 1	December 2021
Five former commandants of military units from the CEE countries (namely the CZ and SR)	G 2	2018-2021

Source: Authors’ own, 2025