

Rethinking Military Service in Europe

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From 2023 Latvia will rely again on conscription, after abandoning it in 2007, when the country joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. The decision was taken to strengthen army forces, that now rely only on 7,500 active soldiers and national guardsmen (Euronews, 2022). The Russian invasion of Ukraine created the need to reinforce the army potential, and conscription – the mandatory enlistment of people in the national armed forces of their citizenship country – helps to reach this goal by increasing the number of reservists. The Latvian Ministry of Defence plans to recruit some 500 young men aged 18-27 twice a year; Riga hopes the quotas will initially be filled by volunteers, with the compulsoriness becoming effective only at a later stage (Balčiūnas, 2022).

The exact details of the process are yet to be defined; what matters is that the debate on military service resurged, again. Most European countries abandoned conscription between the end of the Second World War and the first decade of the 21st century. The reason behind this decision lies in different considerations. First, the end of the Cold War signed the beginning of a new era characterised by the changing nature of warfare. The advent of new technologies made conventional warfare perceived as less critical in the new international order. An army's readiness is no longer considered connected to the number of active soldiers. Peace in Europe was never questioned and as a result, European countries that kept military service became very few, namely: Austria, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Greece, Lithuania, Sweden and Latvia. The motivations that are behind the decision to retain conscription can be related to different considerations, one of these is the country's perception of threat. On one side some countries neighbour with Russia, whose behaviour and posture have always been intimidating: Sweden, Finland, Estonia and now Latvia. On the other side Greece, that has an historical dispute with Turkey.

Austria reconfirmed conscription during the 2013 referendum, which saw 60% of the population voting to maintain the draft. Sweden and Lithuania reintroduced the draft only after Russia's annexation of Crimea, respectively in 2017 and 2015, while Denmark and Finland never abolished it. However, for some countries where it is not envisaged at the moment, it could be easily re-introduced in case of war since it has been there only suspended (and not abolished). 2014 was a turning point for the resurgence of the debate. Several political parties and political personalities advanced the proposal of restoring conscription. In France, one of President Emmanuel Macron's 2017 campaign proposal was to re-establish military service. These are the words from one of his speeches in spring 2017: "I want every French youth to have the chance to experience, even briefly, military life. This is a major project for society, one of citizenship, that is intended to make our democracy more united and increase our collective resilience." (Deen, 2017)

In 2019 the Service National Universel was implemented, replacing the Journée Défense et Citoyenneté (Defence and Citizenship Day), and it affects all male and female citizens aged 16 to 25. This compulsory service lasts for a month and can be performed in both civil and military facilities. This civil conscription service aims to convey French values, strengthen social cohesion and promote social engagement. In Germany the idea of re-introducing military service was popular among conservative CDU representatives and now, as Germany re-evaluates its relationship with its armed forces, deputy leader of the conservative CDU Carsten Linnemann voiced again the return of national military service, along with representatives of other political parties, including the centre-left SPD (Luyken, 2022).

The Dutch defence ministry is looking into the possibility of introducing a Scandinavian style conscription system to solve the lack of military personnel while Poland introduced a new system of “paid voluntary general military service” in March (Euronews, 2022). According to Marius Blaszczak, the Polish defence minister, the goal is to increase the number of soldiers in the Polish armed forces to 300.000. (Polish Press Agency, 2022)

Is Conscription Outdated?

Grand armies of potentially hundreds of thousands of reservists seem to be outdated due to warfare’s changing nature. Nonetheless, the Russian invasion of Ukraine stressed the fact that conventional warfare has not completely disappeared. Nevertheless, there are other reasons why military service has been phased out. One of these reasons is related to the costs. Given that defence budgets have been neglected after the end of the Cold War – between 1999 and 2021 EU combined defence spending increased only by 20 per cent – conscription would need a far greater allocation of resources in military expenses (Euronews, 2022). This is related to another consideration that revolves around social consensus. It is necessary to reflect whether modern European societies where conscription was abolished – or suspended – more than two decades ago would be ready for the draft’s reintroduction, and along with this, an exponential increase in military expenditures.

New technologies changed the nature of warfare, introducing ultra-modern weapons and infrastructures. These would need specific technical skills, hardly obtainable during six months or one year training, leading to an undertrained and potentially inefficient army. Finally, military service can be disruptive for young people’s professional careers outside of the military.

On the other hand, there are many positive aspects that need to be considered, that revolve around the social impact of conscription. The Military brings young people coming from different social and cultural environments together, breaking down the social divide. The most important beneficial impact is that conscription makes citizens feel more patriotic, engaged, and involved in national security matters. Growing a new generation of young citizens aware of the threats and challenges that a country may face could help build up resilience.

The resurgence of war has brought back the debate over the benefits of conscription. Every country has a different perception of threats, according to its position, needs and weaknesses. What is certain is that the benefits of the introduction of a programme – which might be more civilian/educational oriented – aiming at building a national sentiment and awareness are many. Several countries envisage the possibility of choosing a civilian service instead of the military one. Massive infantry armies might be no longer needed, but the advantages of programmes aimed at supporting general civic education, awareness and resilience are undoubtable.

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