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MANDATORY MILITARY CONSCRIPTION IN EUROPE: ADDRESSING PAST OR PRESENT THREATS?



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Abstract

Military conscription seems to be experiencing a comeback in Europe. This paper aims to shed light on the case of Latvia, which passed a law in April 2023 calling for the mandatory reintroduction of military conscription after it was abolished in 2007. A perspective on the possible downfalls of such defence policy is analysed, while also contextualising the growing support for mandatory military service across the EU in the 21st century. A brief historical analysis also portrays the main reasons why it was abandoned by most European countries over the course of the last two decades and how the Russian invasion of Ukraine has generated a U-turn in defence policy in the Latvian case.

Military Conscription in Europe

Over the course of the last two decades, military conscription was abandoned by many European countries in an attempt to shift towards volunteer armies and increased professionalisation of the defence forces. Between 1990 and 2013, 24 countries abandoned conscription, with only Ukraine and Lithuania reintroducing the draft in the direct aftermath of the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 (Bieri, 2015). Discussions on the matter have continued to resurface since, and after the escalation of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine in February 2022 some countries have reconsidered their previous stances (Bieri, 2015).

A general European analysis of the current state of affairs regarding military conscription remains difficult as significant divergences in national legislation exist. Some countries, like Ireland and Malta, have never enforced a military draft (Hutt, 2022). While others, like Switzerland, Austria, Finland, Greece, Estonia, Cyprus, and Denmark never got rid of it (Hutt, 2022). Every country is moved by different priorities in the realm of defence and as such attitudes towards conscription differ greatly throughout the continent. In particular, there is an affirmed trend that showcases growing positive attitudes towards the reintroduction of the military draft in Eastern and Northern Europe specifically, as opposed to Western Europe (Bieri, 2015).

The Latvian example

The case of Latvia is particularly salient in this discussion as it is the country that most recently announced it would reintroduce mandatory military draft. Even though it had been abolished in 2007 following a unanimous vote in Parliament (Andžāns, 2023). This occurred in the aftermath of the acquisition of both NATO and EU memberships which were deemed as security guarantees concrete enough for the country to lapse previous legislation on defence force recruitment (Andžāns, 2023). From 2007 onwards the Latvian army was most notably deployed in international missions in Kosovo, Iraq, and Afghanistan (Andžāns, 2023).

However, following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the country's threat perceptions increased exponentially, especially due to its close geographical proximity to the region of the conflict (Gijs, 2022). The Latvian parliament announced on the 5th of April 2023 that military service will become mandatory for all males between the age of 18 and 27 (Szymanowski, 2023). For women, the choice remains voluntary (Szymanowski, 2023). Men will have to complete 11 months of training either in the armed forces or other services affiliated to the Latvian governmental ministries (Gijs, 2022). Riga is as such following the line of the other NATO Baltic states, because as mentioned previously Lithuania reintroduced conscription just a couple of years ago and Estonia never abolished it (Hutt, 2022). Public opinion on the matter remains divided in the country (Andžāns, 2023; Gijs, 2022; Szymanowski, 2023). It however appears that the Latvian government has clear intentions of increasing its defence capabilities as it announced in March 2022 that it would invest 2.5% of the national GDP in military expenditure as such exceeding the 2% benchmark set by NATO (Gijs, 2022).

Standardised Conscription?

The case of Latvia raises important questions concerning the standardisation of conscription legislation in the EU. In particular, the move to reintroduce a mandatory military draft as a way to securitise a new threat represents an interesting dynamic both in international legal affairs and policy-making. Debates surrounding military conscription and the potentially beneficial aspects it sustains remain unresolved both politically and academically. In particular, a strong argument for its general reintroduction suggests that mandatory military service acts as a medium through which citizens grow “closer to the nation” by directly engaging in the protection of domestic sovereignty and complementary socialisation (Bove et al., 2022, p. 13). However, this idea remains contested, with other scholars voicing that there is no proof that conscription effectively bridges the gap between the individual and the state (Bove et al., 2022). Moreover, opposers underline the costly nature of such labour policy (Bove et al., 2022b) and its ineffectiveness in equipping troops with the required skills for countering elements of contemporary warfare such as international terrorism conducted by non-state actors (Bove et al., 2022).

Conclusion

Even though military conscription was thought to have run its course in the post-Cold War era, the debate remains divisive today. As armies have opted to specialise their troops in order to counter new threats, it seems that the resulting overall reduction of the sizes of European armies has started to become an issue. This is particularly visible in the case study analysed. Even though Latvia joined both the Atlantic and European security frameworks, the threat of Russia has undoubtedly created a new-found sense of anxiety for the possible repercussions of an aggression on the Baltic.

As the conflictual relations between Russia and Ukraine linger, it remains to be seen how other European countries will act in order to ensure their own security. What is clear however, is that the EU is far from achieving a harmonised legislation regarding mandatory military conscription. The lack of such an agreement could therefore bring about more cases like the one of Latvia in the future, as conscription is still regarded as a tool through which a threat can be securitised. At the same time however, the feasibility of a joint European legislation on mandatory military service remains questionable, especially in the absence of a common European army. Until then, it remains to be seen what (new) role mandatory military conscription may play in the reassessment of European defence policies after the invasion of Ukraine.

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