

Reasoning to (re) introduce military conscription in Europe

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Introduction

Modern democracies face tough life-and-death choices in armed conflicts and in the preparation for them. Chief among them is how to weigh the value of soldiers' lives. A democratic countries leadership might think in terms of black and white, a statistic of how many might be wounded or die in any conflict.

Yet for a teenager in a democracy facing conscription more important than such statistics might be the months and years that his or her lifestyle is altered by being in the military and not having teenage freedoms. In both cases in a democracy any form of national service needs to be justified.

It is my opinion that there is a need to increase rather than reduce the amount of people, soldiers, employed and engaged in the defense of states on the European continent and in meeting political goals in deployment outside Europe. I will address this in this paper under the following four headings: 1) The way it was is no longer. 2) Towards conscription, 3) How much is enough? and 4) The alternative options.

The paper concludes that there doesn't appear to be any options other than having some form of national service given the need to meet the emerging clear and present threats and political motivations for international peace-orientated and humanitarian deployments and civil-emergencies. However, it doesn't have to be a military national service.

The way it was is no longer

How leaders make decisions on conscription is much more nuanced than conventional wisdom suggests. When states are entangled in prolonged conflicts, hierarchies emerge and evolve to weigh the value of human life. Cultural narratives about the nature and necessity of war, public rhetoric about threats facing the nation, antiwar movements, and democratic values all contribute to the perceived validity of civilian and soldier deaths and the ways of life that need to be preserved.

Historically over centuries, most European countries were constantly at war, or living in fear of the threat of war. So conscription was justified as a value for citizenry to be in the military to defend the way of life. Slogans were for example 'For King and Country' in the First World War and 'For freedom, democracy and capitalism' in the Second World War.

The Cold War with its nuclear deterrence umbrella for both NATO and the Warsaw Pact countries was unique in European history. This strategy of deterrence prevented war on the European continent for over five decades. With this strategy evolved the tactics of defense. Offense as the best means of defense and preemptive and preventive wars were no longer seen as necessary. Moreover alliances such as NATO enabled each member to reduce their individual commitments by sharing. It could be said that this was successful. Last year on November 9th, 2019 Europe celebrated the 30th Anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall.¹ It was also the 70th anniversary of the formation of the collective security alliance NATO.²

The end of the Cold War and the opening of European borders were catalysts in the shift in focus from territorial defense. Except for the Balkan Crises in the 1990's the military of Europe states have not seen state-to-state combat on the European continent. Many European states abolished conscription and relied more on all volunteer forces (AVF) to meet their military obligations and requirements.³

At the same time political decisions shifted the role of the defense forces towards missions outside of Europe within the context of multinational co-operation.⁴ Consequently the roles, tasks and missions of European military forces has changed. They have progressively been deployed in non-military tasks in Europe and world-wide, for example peace-orientated missions or civil emergencies.

European leaders saw their society facing security threats and not state-based defense threats and therefore there wasn't seen to need large standing armies. Therefore most countries in Europe by the year 2000 had started to, or already had abolished their conscription systems. Between 1990 and 2013, 24 current European Union countries decided to abandon the draft. (See Table, below).

Towards conscription?

Some countries that made the transformation after abolishing conscription to all volunteer forces (AVF) are now experiencing human resource problems. There are not enough personals and even less so suitably trained personals.⁵ The reason is not only due to the end of conscription. One reason is a recruitment issue because the pay, work conditions and career options and advancement offered in AVF are not comparable to other types of employment available in the private and public sectors.

The possibility of introducing, reintroducing or extending the duration of conscription is being debated to meet the human resource requirements. I believe that European military leadership has always considered this in their planning and preparation. It was always suggested to the European political leadership. Both took advantage of the prolonged Ukrainian crisis that started on November 21, 2013 to engage in a resurgent debate on conscription.

Part of the debate is over the optimal size and shape of the defense forces. This is requirement driven based on two roles or tasks in addition to the traditional combat soldier to defend the territorial sovereignty of the state. These are the increased security threats facing Europe and the increased use of the military to suit foreign policy in international peace orientated missions.

The former, that of the rise of security threats, but not state-based defense threats, has been part of European military planning and operations, evident since the end of the Cold War and the concurrent enlargement and deepening of the European Union. State borders have been opened across Europe to enable the free-flow of people, goods, services and technology.

With this progressively new and diversified security threats emerged.⁶ For example, terrorism, illegal immigration, narcotics and human trafficking and cyber related.⁷ At the same time there has been greater international deployment for humanitarian and peace-orientated missions, where those deployed are in non-combatant roles.⁸

To meet these requirements there needs to be a change in the trend that has been ongoing since the end of the Cold War. There needs to be larger number of personal in the defense forces in European states. Given the requirements not all the additional personal need to bear arms and wield force.

The personal requirement for domestic security is less combatant, and maybe for example be more of a policing role. Diverse technologies in security threats require a different type of personal trained and operating for example in cyber.

Also peace-orientated tasks within the context of multinational co-operation dictate different roles, tasks and missions than combat soldiering. For example international peace orientated missions there is a need for 'boots on the ground' trained and operating for example in the education, medical and construction sectors.

Given these requirements there doesn't necessarily need to be a larger defense budget for equipment procurement. Both security threats facing Europe and international peace orientated missions are unlike the conventional rules of warfare tied strictly to territory and borders. Neither conduct operations in a traditional-military manner. They don't require heavy industrial weaponry for example submarines, tanks, artillery, and bomber aircraft.

Given these requirements should conscription be the answer to the human resource deficiencies then for some there may be a form of non-combatant national service rather than military service. Nevertheless the combined requirements of traditional combatant soldiers with the newer diversification of roles, tasks, missions and areas of deployment complicate the decision on how many personal is needed in total and how many is enough for each requirement.

How much is enough?

The quandary is that there is no definitive answer on how to increase the personals in the armed forces and much is needed. Options include conscription, larger AVF or reserve-type forces. The

quandary is complicated as care needs to be taken not to militarize the state and its society. The topic is significant for over 300 million Europeans should obligatory military conscription be introduced. And chief among the decisions is how to weigh the value of lives.

An insight and lessons may be learned from those European states who didn't abolish conscription. Conscription wasn't abolished in all European states⁹. Yet it became selective and the duration reduced as needs changed. (See Table, below).

There are no signs that Austria, Estonia, Finland, or Greece, will get rid of their conscription systems. The reasons need to be studied. The longest service is Cyprus at 26 months and the shortest Denmark at 4 months. Other European states have already taken steps to reintroduce conscription, especially after Russia's ongoing intervention in the Crimea. For example, Sweden reinstated conscription in 2017 after it had abolished it in 2010. Lithuania has also reinstated conscription, and Norway began drafting women for the first time in 2016.

A discussion has recently been going on in Germany and Bulgaria, to reintroduce conscription in some form amid serious military shortages. Meanwhile, lawmakers in Italy and Romania have debated reintroducing some form of conscription. French President Emmanuel Macron is pushing for the introduction of a national service program that would include a military option and last between one month and a year.

Further, given that the European Union has been working towards the implementation of European defense structures, the introduction of a Military Service at both the national and the EU level seems to be a topic that also needs to be discussed to determine how many personal is enough.

Experience from Cold War commitments to NATO regarding international collective security arrangements could assist to weave into the discussion and decisions. That is arrangements where each member state needs less forces nationally if forces were to be pooled collaboratively internationally. Each member state could specialize in one area so collectively the alliance could be bigger and stronger than if each state were to diversify nationally.

The alternative options

While collective security arrangements are important national decisions are required to determine specific national requirements and specialization. For example, land-locked countries will have a different emphasis than maritime states. Here there are a few options other than conscription, but each with its limitations, should a larger number of forces be required for diversified roles.

Two options for an increased number of people employed as soldiers besides conscription, are an enlarged all-volunteer force (AVF) or reserve-type forces. The AVF option has been the preferred option among European states since the fall of the Berlin Wall, the end of the Cold War and reduced territorial threats.

AVF forces are a preferred option when they are small to suit specialist roles. Should large AVF forces be required for many diversified roles then there will be a cost. It is not possible to maintain large AVF forces indefinitely as they are more costly than conscription. There are competing priorities that require state funding for example health and education. Also, some countries have had difficulties in recruiting for the armed forces, especially where the economy is doing well.¹⁰

Another alternative to both conscription and AVF could be an emphasis on reserve-type forces.¹¹ On the whole reserve forces, appear in a variety of guises - such as primary or supplementary reserves, national guards, home guards, territorial armies or militia and auxiliary formations. The limitations are that reservists differ from professional regulars in AVF and conscripts in terms of motivation, cohesion, familial dynamics, employment prospects, political commitment and awareness and long-term considerations.

Reservist type forces wouldn't be suitable for long-term international deployment for peace-orientated missions. It could have a detrimental impact on the economy as the reservist would need time off from his/her regular employment. Use of reservists would also need changes in doctrine to determine for example the domestic patterns of reserve forces for security threats and in their demographic composition (in terms of socioeconomic background, gender, or ethno-racial make-up).

Conclusion

To conclude in this paper but also to open the debate I don't see an option other than having some form of national service conscription in all European states. This is even if there are also AVF and reservist type forces and successful collective security arrangements in the EU and NATO. Each of these and conscription serve their own purpose and function. More personal are essential and conscription is the answer.

There must be an increase in the size and shape of the defense forces in European states. I see conscription as the only way to meet all the requirements for all the roles, tasks and missions to suit all the defense and security threats faced in Europe and to fill international peace-orientated and humanitarian deployments and civil-emergencies.

Due to the changing nature of war, defense and deterrence and the differences between defense, security and peace-orientated deployment not all those conscripted need to be combatant serving with industrial era weaponry of guns, tanks, ships and aircraft.

A debate on conscription should be public, conveyed in the mass and the social media with critical assessments to ensure informed choices about all the options and the acceptance of them. Such a debate should address civil-military relations, the role of the state, the relations between individual, society and state, the political-economics of conscription, the impact of militarization, citizens as soldiers, gender and social equality, and the optimal means of achieving peace nationally and internationally.

The process of holding such a debate may make the political decision making about conscription and its acceptance by citizens easier. For some of those serving it will not be one of a life-and-death choice. Such a debate is the minimum expected as a basic characteristic of democracy.

Table: Conscription in the European Union (July 2019)¹²

Country	Conscription today	End of conscription	Reactivation	Gender
Austria	Yes. - Re-confirmed during the 2013 referendum. 6 months of Military Service or 9 months of Civil Service for conscientious objectors			Males are obliged by law
Belgium	No - Abolished with the modification to the 1962 Law on Conscription. Conscription is only possible in wartime	1992		
Bulgaria	No - Abolished by the amendment to the Defence and Armed Forces Act	2008		
Croatia	No - Suspended in 2008 by a governmental decision, but remains in law	2008		
Cyprus	Yes - Compulsory Military Service according to the 1964 National Guard Law, lasts 24 months			Males are obliged by law
Czech Republic	No - Abolished by the amendment to the Military Act. Can be reintroduced in situation of threat or in wartime	2004		
Denmark	Yes - As stated in the Danish Constitution and the Danish Law of Conscription			Males are obliged by law. Women may participate
Estonia	Yes - The constitution states for Military Service of 8 or 11 months			Males are obliged by law. The Defence Forces Service Act of 2013 states that women can participate

Finland	Yes - Military or Non-Military Service for conscientious objectors. Military service can last 5.5, 8.5 or 11.5 months. Non-Military Service lasts 11.5 months			Males are obliged by law. Women can volunteer
France	No - Suspended according to the law 97-1019 of 1997. The law itself envisages the reintroduction when needed to defend the nation	1996		
Germany	No - Suspended by a parliamentary decision. It remains in the constitution and it can be reintroduced at any time	2011		
Greece	Yes - The constitution demands military service. 9 months in the army or 12 in the Navy. 15 months Alternative Civilian Service in case of conscientious objection			Males are obliged by law
Hungary	No - Abolished in peacetime by the amendment to the constitution in 2004. It can be reinstated in times of emergency	2004		
Italy	No - Suspended by the law 4233-B	2005		
Ireland	No - Officially, Ireland never had conscription. According to article 54 of the 1954 Defence Act, during emergencies it is possible to conscript men			
Latvia	No - However, Latvia introduces a new kind of project, called "Total Defence" in 2017	2007		
Lithuania	Yes - 9 months for males aged between 19 and 26 years old	2008	2015	Males are obliged by law
Luxembourg	No - Abolished by law in 1967	1967		
Malta	No - Conscription never existed in Malta			
Netherlands	No - Suspended, but the law on conscription still exists. At the age of 17, all citizens receive a letter stating they have been registered for service. They can be called up in case of war	1996		
Poland	No - Abolished through amendment to the constitution	2009		

Portugal	No - Abolished in peacetime according to law 174/99	2004		
Romania	No - Suspended in peacetimes by the law 395/2005. During war times, conscription is compulsory for men	2007		
Slovakia	No - Conscription was suspended but it is legally retained and can be reinstated in case of emergency	2006		
Slovenia	No - Suspended in peacetime	2003		
Spain	No - Suspended by law 17/1999	2002		
Sweden	Yes - After being suspended in times of peace, conscription was reintroduced in 2017. Conscription lasts between 9 and 12 months	2010	2017	Males and females are equally obliged by the law
United Kingdom	No - Phased out by 1960. It is possible to bring conscription back	1960		

Notes:

¹ The *Berlin Wall*. 2019. Available at: <http://history.com/topics/cold-war/berlin-wall>

² *Washington ceremony marks 70th anniversary of NATO*. 2019. NATO. Available at: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_165252.htm

³ Bernard D. Rostker. 2016. *The Evolution of the All-Volunteer Force*. Santa Monica CA: The Rand Corporation,

⁴ *The Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP)*. 2019. The European Union. Available at: https://eeas.europa.eu/topics/common-security-and-defence-policy-csdp_en

⁵ Marcel Dickow, Hilmar Linnenkamp, and Christian Mölling. 2012. *The Case for a European Defence Review*. German Institute for International and Security Affairs: SWP Comments

⁶ *EU Global Strategy*. 2019. The European Union. Available at: https://eeas.europa.eu/topics/eu-global-strategy_en

⁷ *European Agenda on Security*. 2019. The European Union. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-security_en

⁸ *Military and civilian missions and operations, EU External Action*. 2019. The European Union. Available at: https://eeas.europa.eu/topics/military-and-civilian-missions-and-operations/430/military-and-civilian-missions-and-operations_en

⁹ Rick Noack. *The military draft is making a comeback in Europe*, 2018. The Washington Post. October 19. Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2018/10/19/military-draft-is-making-comeback-europe/?noredirect=on>

¹⁰ *Recruitment for the forces is hard in an economy doing well*. 2017. Tri-services Network. March 7. Available at: <https://www.forces.net/services/tri-service/recruitment-forces-hard-economy-doing-well>

¹¹ Stanley Horowitz, Robert Atwell, and Shaun McGee. 2012. *Analyzing the costs of alternative Army active / reserve force mixes*. Virginia USA: Institute of Defence Analysis.

¹² Joeri Rongé and Giulia Abrate. 2019. *Conscription in the European Union Armed Forces: National Trends, Benefits and EU Modernised Service*. Brussels: Finabel