

TO DRAFT OR NOT TO DRAFT? CONSCRIPTION REFORM IN THE EU

The decline of conscription is a key element in the transformation of European armed forces since the end of the Cold War. The majority of EU member states have introduced professional all-volunteer forces (AVFs). The reasons for this trend are both military and societal. Given today's geostrategic environment and the resulting task spectrum of European armed forces, the shift to AVFs is a logical development. The transition, however, requires a range of thought-out measures to secure appropriate recruitment levels and make the armed forces competitive on the labour market.



Recruits of the German army sworn in in Berlin, 20 July 2000

REUTERS/Michael Urban

On 1 July 2010, Sweden will become the latest EU member state to suspend compulsory military service. It thus follows a general trend across Europe to shift from conscript-based to volunteer-based armed forces. The evidence for such a trend is compelling. In 1990, the overwhelming majority of member states – 23 out of the current EU-27 – still relied, to some degree at least, on conscription. The only exceptions were Ireland and Malta, who have never practised peacetime conscription, and the UK and Luxembourg who introduced all-volunteer forces in the 1960s. In the last two decades, however, 16 member states have suspended peacetime conscription. Belgium and the Netherlands were the first to scrap the draft in the mid-1990s. The next group of reformers included France, Spain, Portugal, and Italy. Over the last five years, countries in Central and Eastern Europe have followed suit. This development has included all of the new Eastern European member states with the

exception of Estonia. Poland has been the latest country in this group to end compulsory military service as of 1 January 2010.

Decisions about conscription always have both a strategic and a societal dimension. They must therefore be understood in the context of military change after the end of the Cold War as well as the longer-term evolution of state identity and social values. Conscription reform nonetheless remains a controversial issue in those European countries that have so far chosen to maintain it.

Drivers of the trend

It is generally believed that geostrategic change and, most notably, the end of the Cold War was the single most important driver of conscription reform in Europe. The long-term prospect of peace in Europe undermined the Cold War rationale of a large conscript army as a cornerstone of national security. Mass armies were no longer required as a deterrent for a potential Soviet

attack and European states began to move away from the concept of territorial defence as the prime purpose of the armed forces. The geostrategic shift caused by the fall of the Iron Curtain also meant that ending compulsory military service was perceived as part of the 'peace dividend'.

With the end of the Cold War also came the rise of so-called other-than-war operations. Even though peacekeeping missions had already been on the increase since the 1970s, they assumed a central role in the task spectrum of European armed forces after 1989. The introduction of all-volunteer forces instead of conscription armies has been an important way of achieving greater deployability. The pressure of an increasing range of crisis management operations abroad has led to the belief that professional armies are better suited to meet the new military requirements. The rule has been that the more European countries are engaged in missions abroad, the more they are inclined to reduce the percentage of conscript-personnel in their armed forces and to enlarge the share of volunteers. Peacekeeping and peace-enforcement missions require that military forces can be deployed for extended periods of time away from national territory, often in complex operational environments. This requires flexibility and high skill levels from military personnel. Conscripts are not only impossible to train adequately for such demanding operations. Legal restrictions usually bar them from deployment in foreign interventions, thus limiting the strategic usefulness of the draft. Both NATO and the EU have sought to bolster their members' crisis management capabilities and have

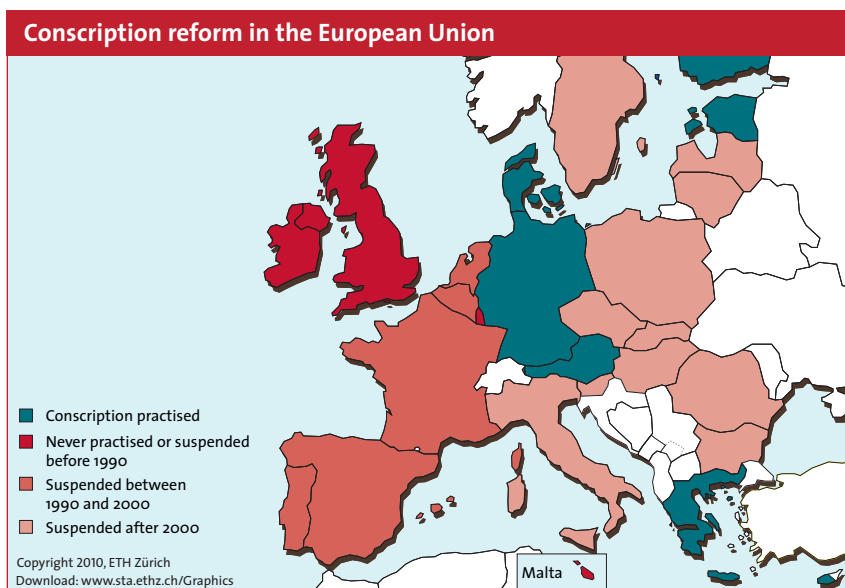
exerted pressure on them to modernise and professionalise their armed forces, thus reinforcing the shift from conscript-based structures to professional volunteer forces.

Technological change has been another important driver of the transformation of armed forces. Technological advancement necessitates a division of military labour, implying the enhanced specialisation of military personnel. The mass army, by contrast, is characterised by homogeneity. The high level of specialisation required to operate precision weapons systems call for highly-trained professionals.

Technological development has been shown to lead to a reduction of the army compared to the more technology-reliant navy and air force. Conscript armed forces, however, are army-dominated. This is because by far the largest share of conscripts serves in the army where they do not have to be trained to use modern air and naval technology. New technological standards and the types of missions that dominate the military spectrum today require a new set of skills from the soldier. The strategic usefulness of conscripts thus decreases further.

Military rationale, however, is not the only, and possibly not even the most important factor fuelling the abolition of the draft in Europe. Societal change has been more influential in the reform process than is commonly acknowledged. The formation of European nation-states in the 19th century and the introduction of conscription were a parallel development. Conscription originated in the idea that citizens' political rights were intrinsically linked to the active fulfilment of citizens' duties. Conscription served a 'democratising' function and helped to integrate the military in the newly-formed nation-states of the Napoleonic era. It became an honourable duty to serve one's country and, at the same time, the fulfilment of that duty was closely tied to the demand for greater political rights.

This traditional conception of citizen duties has changed. The second half of the 20th century has seen a gradual transformation of the notion of citizenship in which the 'blood tax' is no longer considered necessary or desirable. The legitimacy of European states today is far less anchored in the armed forces, and much more in the state's functional capacity to provide welfare services.



The redefinition of traditional citizens' duties, as well as changes in societal values, have been undermining the practice of conscription since 1968. The so-called rise in 'post-material values' heralded a significant growth in conscientious objection. High rates of conscientious objection coupled with low call-up rates eroded the universality of the draft and raised tricky questions about selective conscription. In many cases it proved easier for political leaders to scrap conscription altogether than to find satisfactory answers to the question of how it could be justified that some serve and others do not. Since ending the draft enjoyed wide popular support, reform decisions were also influenced by electoral considerations. The decline of the draft was therefore not only the functional result of the downsizing and restructuring of the armed forces after the end of the Cold War but also a social and political matter.

The exceptions

While there has been a clear trend away from conscription in the majority of European states, there are several exceptions. Most of the states that retain conscription can be subsumed under two categories. First, there are those states that are involved in territorial disputes or, at least, experience a perceived territorial threat. This applies to Greece, Cyprus and Estonia. In these cases, the particular security situation still acts as a justification for maintaining the draft.

A second category are the neutral states, i.e. Austria, Sweden and Finland. For the neutrals it has been a particular challenge to adjust their military and defence policies to the new strategic environment of

the post-Cold War era. However, some tendencies towards the professionalisation of the armed forces are becoming increasingly visible in these cases as well.

Sweden is the first among the neutrals to suspend conscription as of July 2010. It has already been operating a so-called selective draft system since 2003. While Sweden is not a NATO member, its involvement in the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) has been an important factor for military transformation. Austria has also undergone a gradual transformation of its neutrality doctrine. It has started to move away from an exclusive focus on territorial defence towards greater involvement in crisis management operations under CSDP. The draft has been increasingly less popular with public opinion. Since 2005, military service has been reduced to six months and it has effectively become a matter of choice whether young men prefer to perform military or alternative service.

While developments in Sweden and Austria show that the trend towards greater professionalisation of the armed forces is also taking hold in neutral states, Finland remains a true exception. Even though Finland participates in international crisis management, its defence posture continues to be heavily focused on territorial defence (see CSS Analysis No. 68 [☞](#)). Public opinion is also widely supportive of the draft system.

Germany falls neither under the category of a neutral nor a territorially-threatened state and has often been portrayed as a

'special case' with regard to conscription reform. Germany's historical burden is said to have inhibited the introduction of an AVF. However, given the trajectory of German security policy since the mid-1990s and its growing involvement in international crisis management, this argument is no longer convincing. While Germany formally maintains a conscription system, the actual drafting practice has undergone considerable change. The low proportion of conscripts as a total of the armed forces (approx. 35,000 out of a total of 255,000) has led some experts to describe the Bundeswehr as a 'pseudo-conscription force' (Haltiner). Moreover, the duration of service has been continuously reduced. The latest reform, tabled on 17 May 2010 by the CDU-FDP government, reduces military service to six months. Such a short duration of service fuels arguments that the draft is ineffectual from a military point of view. The future fate of conscription is thus likely to remain a disputed subject in German political debate.

Points of contention

The particular constellation of security-related, political, and societal considerations differs in each country and gives rise to distinct national debates about the future of the draft. By and large, however, the discussion now focuses on economic and social factors rather than military rationale. Economic arguments have been used by both supporters and opponents of the draft. Supporters of the draft often argue that a professional AVF is the more expensive option since salary levels are higher. It is suggested that in times of tight defence budgets military pay cannot be raised to offer competitive salaries. Without the budget to provide adequate financial incentives for volunteers it would be impossible to recruit enough people. But this line of reasoning is somewhat simplistic. From a macro-economic perspective, the cost of a conscription army includes the loss of purchasing power, taxes, and welfare contributions since conscripts only receive a small salary and are exempt from tax payments. The loss in individual lifetime earnings also has a negative impact on macroeconomic growth, as a recent study on economic development in OECD countries has shown. The economic case is thus actually in favour of AVFs, even though the myth persists that conscription forces are 'cheaper'.

Many supporters of conscription point out that its abolition would also mean the end of alternative social service. Some countries, such as Germany, rely on a vast number of conscientious objectors who perform their

alternative service in hospitals, old people's homes, and various other welfare institutions. There is widespread concern that there are insufficient financial resources to relinquish conscientious objectors in favour of professional care personnel. However, many social institutions and charities in fact argue that dependence on conscientious objectors makes their planning extremely difficult and that it is mostly among specialised and professional personnel where they are experiencing staff shortages. Moreover, it is paradoxical that alternative social service, which was supposed to allow for military service to be sustained in the face of rising conscientious objection rates, should now be the reason for maintaining military service. While the abolition of the draft may make it necessary to find new solutions for the provision of social services, the failure to devise such solutions cannot be a legitimate reason for maintaining the draft.

Societal arguments also play an important role in the debate. Conscription is seen as an essential tool for integrating the armed forces into society and it is often portrayed as a unique school of 'social learning' bringing together young people from all echelons of society. Others, however, point to the reality that draft avoidance rises with education levels. Nonetheless, it is often argued that thanks to conscription the armed forces are getting a greater spread of people with diverse backgrounds and skills. The draft is the easiest way for the armed forces to involve more educated young men without having to appeal to them on a competitive labour market. Purportedly, many of them stay on after discovering that the military is 'actually not that bad'. Compulsory military service is thus seen as a means for recruiting personnel as contract or professional soldiers. But again, such positive 'side effects' cannot be a justification for the significant infringement on personal liberty that conscription entails. Instead, it is necessary to address personnel requirements through targeted recruitment strategies.

Successful professionalisation

States in transition from conscript to volunteer forces must develop creative policy packages to address the specific recruitment challenges they face. A wide range of measures is needed to ensure the competitiveness of the military on the labour market. These measures include *inter alia* boosting military pay, implementing a professional recruitment strategy, improving career paths, and enhancing opportunities for post-service employment. There is

no doubt that devising successful recruitment strategies is a difficult task.

Many European countries that have abolished conscription in recent years are now facing serious difficulties in recruiting sufficiently qualified personnel. Some of them have had to lower entry requirements. This has had a detrimental effect on the quality of their volunteers and is at odds with the rising skill-levels required in complex crisis management operations. Other recruitment efforts may include advertising and the use of professional recruitment teams. Seeking recruits from non-traditional or underrepresented backgrounds, such as ethnic minorities or women, may also be important in order to expand the pool of prospective volunteers. Some countries have opened up the armed forces for non-nationals. Spain recruits among nationals of its former colonies, whereas Belgium allows other EU citizens to join its armed forces.

There is a need to ensure high compatibility between military and civilian qualifications so as to allow for successful post-service reintegration into the civilian labour market. Some countries, such as Italy, guarantee public-sector jobs for former volunteers. In certain European countries, ministries of defence are making arrangements with employer associations and other public agencies to assist former servicemen with placements. Offering family benefits and other quality-of-life provisions can also help to make military careers more attractive for volunteers.

In spite of some national peculiarities, the heyday of conscription in Europe has passed. In the post-Cold War era, the strategic utility of the draft has diminished and conscription has become an obstacle to greater involvement in international crisis management. There is clear evidence that conscription makes little economic sense and enjoys dwindling public support. The strong case for AVFs notwithstanding, much effort will have to be made in all EU states to secure sufficient recruitment levels, both in quantitative and qualitative terms.

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