



Europe's Conscription Challenge: Lessons From Nordic and Baltic States

Sophia Besch and Katrine Westgaard

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Introduction

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has alerted European leaders that their armed forces are not ready for war. Recognizing this reality, they are responding by increasing their defense budgets, purchasing new weapons systems, and ramping up defense industrial production capacity. But lessons from the battlefield in Ukraine are also showing European militaries that they can no longer ignore long-standing manpower challenges. In a war of attrition, Ukraine has [struggled](#) to recruit enough troops to match Russia's [rate of mobilization](#). Meanwhile, Europe's armed forces have failed for years to meet their recruitment goals and make military service attractive enough to retain their troops. This has revived a [debate](#) over the usefulness of conscription.

While most European militaries suspended mandatory military service after the end of the Cold War, some retained it. And several countries, such as Latvia, Lithuania, and Sweden, have in recent years reinstated conscription in response to a changing security environment. In the last several months, Western European politicians, including in [Germany](#) and [the United Kingdom](#), have publicly pondered the benefits of returning to mandatory military service. The promise of conscription is powerful: it offers a path to building up military reserves while strengthening civil-military relations and promoting defense-relevant skills that bolster societal resilience to attack.

In search of a cost-effective personnel model that is palatable to their skeptical publics, European leaders have been [looking](#) to their neighbors in the north and east. Some military service models—in Finland and Sweden in particular—are considered exemplary in [Europe and beyond](#). Today, all Baltic and Nordic NATO nations (except for Iceland, which has no military) operate a version of a mandatory service system, each with distinct strengths

and weaknesses. As a region, these European frontline countries serve as a laboratory for national defense best practices. Therefore, it is useful to (1) consider how these countries have attempted to tackle manpower challenges via various models, (2) pressure test their approaches, and (3) lay out what other countries can learn from them.

Conscription is no silver bullet to solve Europe's military recruitment and retention woes. Countries must find tailored solutions to their manpower struggles, in line with their strategic objectives, politics, and demographics. In some cases, introducing compulsory military service where there is domestic resistance may be counterproductive and could even undermine public resolve to shore up national defenses and support Ukraine. Most successful European conscription models now rely on a strong degree of volunteerism, but instilling the willingness to serve in a population that does not have a recent history of military service takes time and sustained domestic debate. Even in countries where conscription might be the right option, militaries must be prepared to pour significant financial resources into overhauling their personnel structures. Measures to widen the military recruitment pool and incentivize service could help in the interim. A coalition of countries operating in the Baltic Sea region should establish systematic exchanges to learn from each other and benefit from a more coordinated regional approach to military recruitment and retention.

From Conscription to Volunteer Forces— and Back Again?

European mass armies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries relied on universal conscription for men. Military service at the time was understood not just as an instrument of military manpower but also as an instrument of citizenship: a conscript's duty to defend his country was directly linked to his rights as a citizen in a nation state. Conscripts' time in the military was thought to not only teach them combat skills but also mold them into valued and productive members of society—premised on the idea that the military “[makes men](#).” Conscription was seen as a means of building and maintaining civil-military relations and social cohesion by bringing together individuals from different economic, religious, ethnic, and social backgrounds to serve.

After the end of the Cold War, however, most European nations shrank their militaries from mass armies to much smaller forces. This made sense at the time: as the sense of threat from the Soviet Union/Russia subsided in most European countries, defense budgets shrank rapidly, making it impossible to maintain larger forces. In addition, after the September 11, 2001, attacks in the United States, NATO firmly shifted its focus to expeditionary missions, counterinsurgency, and crisis management—activities seen as requiring more nimble, professional forces. And the ideal of male citizen soldiers being duty-bound to defend

their nation became increasingly [contested](#). The reality of conscription often shows that it is unevenly enforced: marginalized groups are less likely to gain exception and thus are disproportionately called into service.

Furthermore, conscription comes with significant costs to a country's armed forces, the conscripts themselves, and the labor market. For one, conscription is a bureaucratic institutional [burden](#) to the military, which must ensure there are enough people to carry out the draft, enough instructors and support personnel to train and care for the conscripts, and sufficient accommodation for the duration of conscripts' service. And even though conscripts may be cheaper than voluntary professional forces in terms of pay, they are [not perfect substitutes](#) due to discrepancies in training and how they can be used. There are also societal [costs](#): conscripts are prevented from pursuing their professional education, and the labor market experiences a delay in human capital accumulation.

As a result of these realities, volunteer armies became the new ideal in much of Europe. Only Cyprus, Greece and Türkiye, Austria and Switzerland, and Denmark, Estonia, Finland, and Norway never suspended conscription. For some of these countries, that decision was motivated by their proximity to regional conflict—their acute threat perception exacerbated, in some cases, by the fact that they were not NATO members and thus could not rely on the alliance's security guarantees. Others, such as Denmark, maintained conscription irrespective of a declining threat assessment, holding on to the value of mandatory service as an [educational and civic tool](#). The United States, meanwhile, abandoned conscription and introduced an all-volunteer force model in 1973, following demographic, economic, and moral [considerations](#) driven by backlash to the U.S. war in Vietnam. The move to an all-volunteer force raised costs but was also seen as [making](#) the armed forces more professional and demographically reflective of society. The United States maintained selective service registration, requiring all male citizens between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five to register for the draft, which can be reactivated in case of a national crisis, as a "[low-cost insurance policy](#)" for the United States.

For decades, most European militaries have operated under the assumption that war scenarios would be out of area and would rely heavily on technology, requiring nimbler and more highly skilled forces. Societal debates over reintroducing mandatory military service have been focused largely on the perceived value of conscription as a unifying force and its promise to promote a sense of [civic duty](#) and improve relations between the military and wider public. Today, however, Ukraine and Russia are engaged in a protracted and intense territorial war of attrition, with a very [high casualty rate](#). And while the use of high tech is significant on the battlefield, this does not make up for the mass scale of the conflict: both sides struggle with mobilizing enough troops to fight. European leaders in frontline states—including the [Estonian prime minister](#), the [Swedish civil defense minister](#), the [Danish defense minister](#), the [Norwegian chief of defense](#), and the [Polish chief of intelligence](#)—have recently warned that NATO could soon find itself at war with Russia. At last year's NATO summit in Vilnius, Lithuania, NATO leaders agreed on a new force model that increases the alliance's pool of high-readiness forces to a total of [300,000 troops, up from 40,000](#). This is

already an ambitious target. To improve NATO's ability to not only respond to a territorial attack at short notice but also confront Russian forces in a prolonged war of attrition, however, the alliance will need its members to significantly build up their military reserves.

European countries that abolished or suspended conscription tend to struggle with recruiting and retaining troops in sufficient numbers. Take Germany, for instance. Chancellor Olaf Scholz's plan for a military "Zeitenwende," or defense paradigm shift, in Germany includes the goal to expand the Bundeswehr to [203,000 troops by 2031](#)). Despite efforts to recruit more troops, the German armed forces [shrank](#) to roughly 181,500 men and women in 2023, down from 183,050 in 2022. The British army, which has [tasked a private firm](#) with recruitment, similarly keeps missing its recruitment targets. In exceptionally frank public remarks, U.S. Navy Secretary Carlos Del Toro recently [urged](#) the United Kingdom to reassess the size of its armed forces. In the United States, too, all military services are [struggling](#) with recruitment, and there is concern that the all-volunteer force is increasing the chasm between the military and civilians.

A parallel challenge is keeping soldiers in service long enough to sustain experienced and combat-ready troops. France is struggling to retain its forces, as uniformed personnel are now staying in their positions on average [one year less](#) than they used to. In 2022, the rate of contract termination before the end of training hit [32 percent](#), while the military aims for the rate to hover around 25 percent. The French director of human resources for the Ministry of Armed Forces [told parliament in 2023](#) that "we are used to having turnover within our teams, but we have never seen this phenomenon on such a large scale." In Poland, the government developed a [voluntary one-year basic military service](#) to help increase recruitment numbers and strengthen its reserve forces. It has set a target to build NATO's largest land army and [increase the military](#) to 250,000 professional soldiers in the Armed Forces by 2030 and then to 300,000, including reserves, by 2035. But critics have called these plans [unrealistic](#), pointing to retention challenges and record numbers of experienced soldiers quitting the military. Having purchased new tanks to field heavy divisions, the country is now [lacking troops](#) to man them. In 2022, the number of recruits joining Poland's armed forces rose, but the most experienced soldiers were [leaving](#) in droves, resulting in an exodus of almost 9,000 professional soldiers.

The move from conscript forces to all-volunteer forces has left many European militaries vulnerable, as they continue to struggle to meet recruitment targets and lack sufficient mass to defend against an aggressive, expansionist Russia. These countries are now considering different avenues to ramp up their dwindling forces, including reintroducing conscription. They are looking to their neighbors in the north and east, all of which have either held on to or recently reintroduced systems of conscription, each with important nuances.

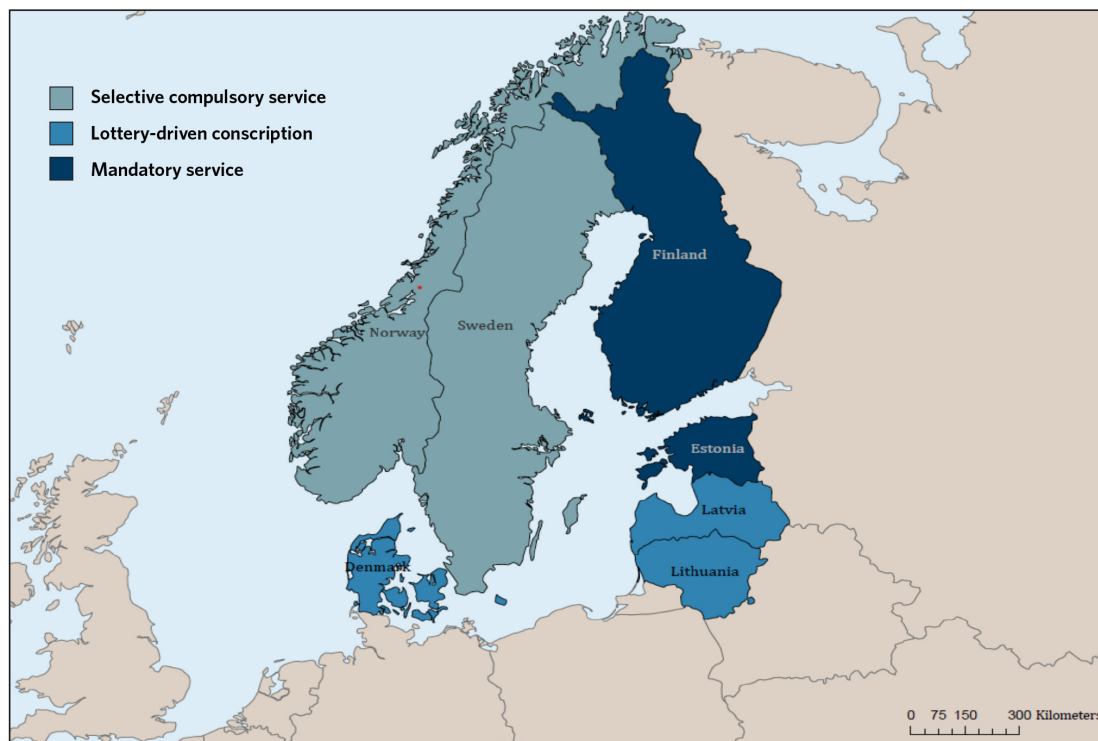
Three Different Military Service Models

Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, and Sweden have all instituted slightly different systems of military service. It is useful to distinguish between at least three different types of conscription: mandatory service, lottery-driven service, and selective compulsory service.

Mandatory Service

Under a [mandatory service model](#), all eligible males (and sometimes all males and females) of a certain age must serve their country for a minimum amount of time. Finland operates such a model. The country shares an 832-mile land border with Russia and only recently became a member of NATO. Based on its geography and history, Finland developed a strong shared societal responsibility to safeguard territorial defense. This is reflected in its [approach](#) to military service: every male Finnish citizen aged eighteen to sixty is liable for either military or civil service, and women can volunteer to serve. [Two conscription cycles](#)

Figure 1. Conscription Models



Source: Map created using ESRI ArcGIS software.

take place each year. After service, which ranges between six and twelve months depending on whether the men are training to become rank-and-file soldiers or officers, conscripts then join the reserve until they turn fifty, with officers and noncommissioned officers remaining until they turn sixty. Nonmilitary service lasts [347 days](#) and consists of a four-week training period followed by service in, for instance, a hospital, state facility, or religious organization. Despite having this alternative, around [70 percent](#) of eligible men complete military service as opposed to civil service each year. As a result, today, the [country](#) has one of the largest reserve forces in Europe and is able to mobilize 285,000 troops in wartime—an impressive showing, considering Finland’s total population size is only [5.6 million](#).

Estonia also requires [all male citizens](#) (except the medically unfit) to perform mandatory service in the defense forces at some point between ages seventeen and twenty-seven. In practice, however, the country lacks the financial resources to implement the training of an entire eligible cohort, and therefore, only roughly 3,500 conscripts are trained annually, with around half being volunteers in each cycle. The other conscripts are selected according to numerous criteria, including whether their skills, motivation, and physical abilities match the needs of the Estonian Defence Forces. Conscripts subsequently join the Estonian reserve force where they are called up for training every five years. Estonia, as of 2023, has an active force of 7,100 and a reserve force of 41,200. The country plans to increase the number of conscripts [to 4,000 per year by 2026](#) and has extended the service period from the standard length of eight months to eleven months for most service branches. Estonia also has a civilian national service open for people who refuse military service due to religious or moral reasons, albeit with a limited number of slots.

Universal mandatory military service requires significant resources. Any country with a professional military looking to reintroduce conscription would likely need to invest in new administrative capacities for the assessment of conscripts, new housing facilities, new instructors, and new personnel equipment. The German inspector of the army [has said](#) that if conscription for an entire age group were to be reintroduced in Germany, he would have to assign a good third of his personnel to training. Deputy Minister of National Defence of Lithuania [Zilvinas Tomkus](#) similarly has noted that moving toward universal conscription would require significant resources and infrastructure. Given the costs associated with a mandatory service model, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg has also been [reluctant](#) to recommend it to European allies.

Lottery-Driven Service

In Denmark, Latvia, and Lithuania, the selection of recruits is lottery-driven. Lithuania reintroduced conscription in 2015 after Russia’s first invasion of Ukraine and illegal purported annexation of Crimea the year before. Lithuania [requires](#) somewhere around 3,500 to 4,000 male citizens between ages eighteen and twenty-three to enlist for either six or nine months of military service each year. After their service, the conscripted soldiers then become reserves for the Lithuanian Armed Forces. According to the Lithuanian

Armed Forces, since conscription was reinstated, the [majority](#) of eligible males has enrolled voluntarily in military service. To fill the remaining part of the call, each year a computer program randomly selects men from a pool fit for service, and these men are called in to muster.

Having abolished conscription in 2006, Latvia reintroduced relevant legislation in 2023 in light of the mass requirements demonstrated by the war in Ukraine. Male citizens between ages eighteen and twenty-seven born after January 1, 2004, are eligible for conscription. Women can [volunteer](#) for national service. Men can choose between completing either eleven months of active service in the National Armed Forces or National Guard or five years in the National Guard Reserve. The first two call-ups in Latvia were [entirely comprised](#) of volunteers, but for the next draft starting this summer, conscripts will be [selected randomly](#). Latvia also provides youth with an [alternative](#) to military service by allowing them to conduct civilian service in organizations that form part of the Ministry of Defence. [All those](#) who have not been drafted within one year after reaching age eighteen or within one year of graduating from school will be removed from the conscription list and placed in the National Armed Forces Reserve.

Denmark operates a [mandatory military service](#) for all Danish men from the day they turn eighteen. Candidates must complete a written test and a health examination to determine their suitability for training. Not everyone is called up to serve: a lottery draft determines those that will have to serve in the armed forces. In practice, as many places as possible will be filled with volunteers. For the past ten years, nearly 100 percent of those who chose to undertake military service did so [voluntarily](#). In 2024, in light of the increased threat environment and personnel challenges, and in the spirit of gender equality and national mobilization, the government [announced](#) that it will in the future include women in the draft and extend the serving period for both men and women from four to eleven months. Having held on to conscription largely as an instrument of civil education rather than out of an acute sense of threat, the Danish example shows that even if the motivation may change over time, countries that have held on to conscription structures can modernize and adjust mandatory service to new challenges.

Selective Compulsory Service

Norway and Sweden have instituted what can be called selective compulsory conscription systems. They deliberately choose candidates for military service based on the candidates' motivation and qualifications. Both countries have set up their systems with slight nuances.

Norway's conscription model applies to both male and female Norwegian citizens from the age of nineteen. From the eligible cohort of approximately [60,000](#) men and women every year, only a select group are chosen for physical tests based on their results from a [questionnaire](#), which narrows down the number of conscripts even further. Only [around 9,000](#) eligible candidates are then chosen for compulsory military service in the Norwegian Armed Forces. This makes military service more selective than some universities, creating a

sense of [competition](#) among young people for a place in the armed forces. Interviews show that young people in Norway consider serving a “[stepping-stone](#)” for their future careers. Typically, Norwegians complete one year of service and can be called in for an [additional](#) seven months over the course of their life (until age forty-four, or fifty-five for those that have served in the military for at least a year after their mandatory training). After their service, conscripts join the active reserve, which is split between the regular armed forces and the Home Guard. The Norwegian government [announced](#) in April 2024 that it is planning to increase the number of conscripts from 9,000 to 13,500 a year by 2036.

Sweden has instituted what it calls a “total defense” service, which requires everyone between ages sixteen and seventy to complete either military or civilian service in the armed forces or emergency services. Regardless of gender, once Swedish citizens turn eighteen, they must complete an enlistment form that registers their level of education, health, and, crucially, their relationship with and interest in the military. On [average](#), 100,000 young people per year complete these forms—too many for the Swedish army to absorb. Instead, the armed forces only call up about a quarter of the cohort for muster, and of those, a selection will be called up for enrollment. In recent years, those called to muster were drawn [almost exclusively](#) from those who had indicated a high level of motivation to serve. [Volunteers](#) who might not have been called to muster or might be older than eighteen complement the draft: [in 2022](#), out of the 5,583 individuals enrolled, 16 percent applied for enrollment themselves. Enlisted conscripts participate in basic military training for three months and then complete additional training for up to twelve months.

Both Norway and Sweden have moved away from the idea of military conscription as essentially a male duty. Norway was the first country in NATO to require women to also be eligible for military service from [2015 onward](#), and Sweden followed when it reintroduced conscription in [2017](#).

A Duty Only for the Willing?

Some European military chiefs struggling with recruitment look with envy to their neighbors in the north. The [United Kingdom’s former defense secretary](#), Ben Wallace, praised Finland’s and Sweden’s militaries and stated that he would “love a model like that.” Dutch Admiral [Rob Bauer](#), who heads the NATO Military Committee, singled out Finland as a country that through its conscription successfully built up an effective military and reserve. The [Dutch defense ministry](#) is reportedly considering introducing a “Swedish style military service questionnaire.” And the [German defense minister](#) has declared the suspension of conscription a “[mistake](#)” and asked his staff to investigate the feasibility of the “Sweden model” for the Bundeswehr.

Two main elements make the selective compulsory models attractive. First, military leaders who need troops capable of operating high-tech weaponry and understanding the complexities of modern warfare are drawn to a model that allows them to train only the most fit and highly motivated young people. Bigger countries especially can draw from a large pool and do not need all eligible persons to serve. European militaries urgently need skilled personnel to fill engineering, medical, and cyber security roles. Second, in the selective compulsory systems, even though everyone is technically eligible to be conscripted, the armed forces have been viewed as essentially recruited from volunteers. The Norwegian and Swedish systems are specifically designed to look for those able and, crucially, willing to serve. In practice, the systems of Latvia and Lithuania, too, are primarily focused on those “willing”—allowing for volunteerism first and only then conscripting. Public opinion is the greatest hurdle for European governments looking to reintroduce conscription today, and therefore, designing a conscription model where no one serves against their will is a highly seductive idea.

A review of Nordic and Baltic conscription models shows that these countries have also introduced incentives to make military service more attractive. Some are financial: Norway offers conscripts [substantial](#) monetary compensation during their service and a lump sum payment upon the completion of service. Other incentives focus on preserving a sense of agency for conscripts: in Latvia, volunteers can [choose](#) which type of state defense service they want to join and are [compensated](#) better than conscripts. [Lithuania](#) offers financial benefits to all who join the service voluntarily. Even under Estonia’s universal mandatory service, the military considers volunteers’ [preferences](#) for when and where they serve.

A third set of incentives focuses on educational opportunities and career support after service. [Denmark](#) and [Lithuania](#) provide employment and educational support for soldiers during and after they complete their service. Latvia even provides direct tuition support by giving volunteers the [opportunity](#) to enroll in higher education programs for free after they have completed their service and passed their entrance exams. In Sweden, in addition to offering consulting services and direct support, the armed forces [issue certificates](#) to conscripts to make skills gained in military service transferable to the civilian labor market (though the temporary suspension of conscription has produced fewer private sector employers with a history and understanding of service themselves). The Estonian Defence Forces similarly emphasize skill convertibility by working with private employers to ensure that citizens’ competitive advantages are utilized and cultivated during their service. A good example of this is the [forces’ cyber conscription](#), where information technology companies reach out to the military to send their employees into the cyber service to further hone their competencies that can be applied in their regular jobs.

Conscription models designed to incentivize volunteering appeal to the modern values of individualism and personal growth. [In this way](#), conscription is no longer conceived as an instrument to strengthen societal cohesion and civil-military relations, and it risks creating the perception that selective service unfairly discriminates against those drafted. Running a mandatory civil service in tandem with military service can go some way to counter that

perception. Sweden, via its “[Total Defence](#)” service, is already taking steps to ensure that every citizen is involved in the country’s defense. Denmark, Estonia, Finland, and Latvia also offer alternative paths to serving the country without serving in the military. Norway is currently [debating](#) bringing back some form of mandatory civil service. Then UK prime minister Rishi Sunak has proposed a [national service scheme](#) that offers a choice between enrolling in a yearlong military training program or carrying out civil service one weekend every month for a year.

The Risks of Backlash

A recent [Gallup poll](#) found that, in the event of war, only 32 percent of European Union citizens would be willing to fight for their country. Reintroducing conscription is widely unpopular in most Western and Central European countries, especially among those citizens who would be most affected. A public opinion survey conducted in November 2023 in [Poland](#) found that around 44 percent of respondents were against reinstating conscription. In [Germany](#), 52 percent of respondents supported compulsory service in the Bundeswehr, but 59 percent of respondents aged eighteen to twenty-nine, the age group that would be affected by the reintroduction of conscription, were against it. In the [United Kingdom](#), a third of survey respondents aged eighteen to forty said they would refuse to serve in the armed forces even if Britain were facing imminent invasion. In a follow-up poll that examined why Britons would refuse to serve if called up, respondents indicated an [unwillingness](#) to fight for the elite, a lack of patriotism to risk their life for their country, as well as ideological and religious qualms.

Calling on men and women to serve and potentially die for their country requires a particularly strong social contract between the state and its citizens. Governments that hope to garner support for conscription must consistently engage citizens in discussions on national security threats and make a convincing case for why their country is worth defending. There are two necessary elements here: citizens must agree that there is a real and present sense of potential threat, and they must believe in the idea of the country they are asked to fight for. Arguments claiming that conscription could provide aimless youth with a purpose should not lose sight of the fact that agreeing to go to war requires a sense of purpose in the first place. This sense of purpose, in turn, can be connected to voters’ trust in institutions and the state. In countries where a general loss of confidence in the political center is driving populism, conscription would likely face headwinds. Finland is often hailed as the gold standard for defense willingness; last year, 79 percent of poll respondents answered in the [affirmative](#) when asked, “If Finland were attacked, should Finns, in your opinion, take up arms to defend themselves in all situations, even if the outcome seemed uncertain?”

Especially in the countries bordering Russia, an increased threat perception appears to have increased support for conscription. Latvia is an instructive case. Compulsory service in Latvia was [generally unpopular](#), but this changed with the evolving security situation. After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, a poll [conducted](#) in May 2022 found that 45 percent of Latvian respondents were in favor of reintroducing conscription, and in June 2023, [61 percent](#) of Latvians supported the return of conscription. Notably, support for conscription among Latvians between ages eighteen and twenty-four also increased from 34 percent to 50 percent of respondents from 2022 to 2023. Similarly, in Estonia, support for conscription also increased after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, with [rising numbers of volunteers](#) for the armed forces and the Estonian Defence League (Estonia's national voluntary defense organization). In addition, in October 2023, [46 percent](#) of Estonian young people were voluntarily starting their military service, up from 38 percent just two years before.

But in some countries, the changing security environment and the corresponding need to expand service requirements are putting pressure on the voluntary spirit of European conscription. The Swedish Armed Forces plan to increase the number of eighteen-year-olds undergoing basic military training to [10,000](#) per year as early as 2030, which means that more individuals will likely be enlisted to serve without actively expressing an interest in it. In fact, in 2023, [4,000](#) people were called to muster despite indicating on their entry forms that they were not interested in military service. Young men and women (and their parents) [worry](#) about what service will look like now that Sweden has joined NATO. Sweden is currently [looking into](#) whether conscripts might in the future be obliged to serve outside national borders. As the possibility of war with Russia grows, skepticism of conscription, rather than willingness to serve, might grow with it. The threat of war on Europe's borders is putting strain on the Scandinavian idea of conscription as a career progression opportunity.

If politicians pursue conscription where there is domestic resistance, then they risk creating single-issue voters, particularly among populations directly affected by compulsory military service. Doing so could empower the political parties most skeptical of investments in defense or those trying to claim the mantle of bringing "[peace](#)" at the cost of Ukraine's sovereignty. Already, parties on the far ends of the political spectrum in Europe and the United States are [trying to win voters](#) by asserting that they can make a deal with Moscow and Kyiv to end the war. If they are in the future able to claim that only by voting for them can young people avoid having to fight themselves, this could significantly strengthen their appeal and thus ultimately undermine Europe's resolve and support for Ukraine.

Of course, this scenario is not predetermined. Nordic and Baltic countries have for years invested in the public acceptance of military service and the defense readiness of their citizens. Learning from their example, European governments looking to introduce conscription should prioritize engaging the public in an [ongoing, open discussion about national security](#), emphasizing the importance of defense readiness as distant security threats move closer to home.

Measures Short of Conscription

As an intermediate step, rather than introducing compulsory military service, militaries might consider making only muster—or even merely an initial questionnaire assessing willingness and ability to serve—mandatory. By prompting all eligible young people to engage with the choice of serving in the military, the armed forces may be able to widen their reach into additional regions and demographics. Under pressure to drastically decrease the mandatory elements of a new military service model, Germany’s defense minister has put forward a [solution along these lines](#): youth are required to fill in a survey and then appear for muster if they are called, but the final decision to serve remains voluntary.

An increasing number of young people in Europe and North America are no longer “[fit to fight](#)”, with mental health and obesity-related issues top reasons to deny eligibility. Notably, nearly [two of three Swedes](#) indicated they were too sick to perform military service on their forms. Militaries may need to update their regulations to no longer disqualify applicants with particularly prevalent mental health conditions such as attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder. They may also need to look into how effective voluntary self-evaluations are for gauging conscripts’ eligibility.

There are other ways for militaries to broaden their potential pool of candidates. They could, for instance, design new legal frameworks that allow noncitizens to serve in the armed forces, similar to the [U.S. model](#) of recruiting legal immigrants and to the [French Foreign Legion](#) model of recruiting foreigners and offering them the possibility to apply for citizenship after three years of service. The Danish Armed Forces already [allow foreign nationals](#) to serve if they have lived in Denmark or a European Union or NATO country for the past seven years. However, unlike in the United States and France, serving in the Danish military does not grant the volunteers Danish citizenship. Latvia is also [moving forward](#) with implementing amendments to the Law on Military Service, by allowing foreign citizens to serve in the Latvian National Armed Forces in case of an emergency. Yet, in addition to legal considerations, there continues to be stigma attached to recruiting foreigners for military service, related to [questions](#) over loyalty and outside influence.

In the spirit of widening their reach, militaries could also make serving more attractive for women. Because women remain underrepresented in most European armed forces, increasing their numbers is an obvious solution to help arrest the decline in troop numbers. In 2021, the average female participation in NATO members’ armed forces was only 13.9 percent. The [unequal](#) treatment of women in the military, ranging from discrimination to bullying and sexual harassment, is one reason for this low engagement. Notably, in Denmark, which [announced](#) in March that its military service will be gender neutral by 2026, those most affected by the Danish government’s push for gender equality appear to be the least supportive of it: in a poll from last year, [70 percent](#) of the male respondents thought women should be conscripted equally, whereas only 41 percent of women did. [Studies](#) of the Norwegian and Swedish online selection forms for conscripts also show that women still

tend to exhibit lower indicators of interest in serving than their male counterparts. Militaries can try to alleviate these issues through decisively addressing instances of discrimination and launching educational campaigns that fight gender stereotypes.

Without compulsory service, these interim measures will only go so far. European militaries are competing with the private sector in recruiting and retaining personnel. Unemployment in North America and some European states is [low](#). To win this battle, militaries need to address the prevalent [challenges](#) soldiers face, such as limited career progression opportunities and missed recuperation periods. They must implement benefit packages that include fair compensation, healthcare, childcare, and pension offers. And they must invest in modernizing their facilities and address [persistent complaints](#) about the low standards of accommodation that many European soldiers are enduring. All these measures cost money. This is true even with conscription: an increase in military personnel requires substantial financial resources to build up the capacities needed to muster, house, equip, and train conscripts. And these costs endure beyond the initial military service. Maintaining a competent reserve force also [requires](#) substantial organization, training, and equipment. Even though all European NATO members are ramping up defense spending, they face huge capability gaps in addition to mass requirements. Investments in technology, including in autonomous weapon systems, remain crucial, but lessons from the battlefield in Ukraine have shown that technology cannot replace head counts. Thus, European countries must do both: invest in head counts as well as technology.

The Choices at Hand and a Regional Approach

The current debate around reintroducing conscription is the result of a European military reckoning. Faced with the threat of an expansionist Russia, some governments are trying to accelerate efforts to address long-standing recruitment and retention challenges. Those pondering the (re)introduction of conscription have a choice between different models of military service. A review of conscription models in Nordic and Baltic states shows that modern-day military service systems, with their focus on individual choice and opportunity, often differ distinctly from the systems that produced Europe's mass armies of the twentieth century and are in some cases being put under pressure by the real prospect of war.

Mandatory and lottery-based service models can significantly widen the recruitment pool. Their domestic acceptance depends on a high willingness to serve. Selective compulsory service models aim to select only the most highly motivated and capable recruits to meet specific needs. These models are attractive because they seem to have found a way to make duty voluntary. In practice, all countries in Europe's north and east examined here have in recent years been able to draw from a pool of willing recruits and, in some cases, volunteers. However, as most countries are now looking to dial up recruiting numbers in the face of a more challenging security environment, this may change—certainly in the age groups that are eligible for service.

Whether countries are weighing a mandatory military service model or a selective compulsory service model, they must consider the opportunity costs associated with each model, as well as the time and resources each one will take to implement. In countries where domestic resistance to bringing back conscription is high, a forced return to military service also risks creating single-issue voters and undermining public support for increasing defense expenditures and maintaining aid to Ukraine. Willingness to serve is closely linked to a population's threat perception and trust in the military as an institution; fostering it requires leaders to engage in a sustained conversation with the public on national security issues. In the interim, European militaries should consider measures to broaden their pool of potential recruits and incentivize recruitment without pushing through compulsory service.

Military leaders of the Baltic Sea region are already linked through a close network of institutional and political exchanges. They should set up a regular meeting format (for example, a quarterly working group) to share best practices and lessons learned on military mustering, recruitment, and training for conscripts and reserve forces. This group should minimally include the Nordic and Baltic states, Germany, and Poland. It may also be beneficial to bring on board the United Kingdom, which wrestles with military recruitment and retention challenges and has taken a close interest in Baltic Sea regional security.

This working group should explore how the countries of the region can make military service appear appealing and prestigious to young people. In this vein, military leaders might investigate offering regional exchange opportunities for conscripts, in order to make military service more attractive to a generation that is used to living and working abroad. They should also look into opportunities for sharing resources: regional military leaders might consider pooling conscript training between their different militaries. These measures could have the added benefit of making the militaries of the region more interoperable in the long term. In addition, the group should also assess how the countries of the region might be able to harvest the secondary benefits of a larger standing military. Trained military personnel could, for example, feed into a human capital base to drive innovation in the technology sector or support the parallel effort to expand the defense industrial base. All these exchanges on military service and conscription should feed into a broader discussion on societal resilience and "total defense," exploring what lessons countries can learn from each other on creating threat awareness and forging their populations' willingness to defend their respective countries.

There is no one-size-fits-all solution to military recruitment and retention, and Europe will need to solve this problem at a country-by-country level. But militaries can learn from each other as they manage the transition from pre-2022 military planning to updated military service models that suit the increased threat level now facing Europe.

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