



# Multifaceted Conscription: A Comparative Study of Six European Countries

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

EMMA JONSSON

MIKAEL SALO

ELERI LILLEMÄE

FRANK BRUNTLAND STEDER

THOMAS FERST

KAIRI KASEARU

JURATE NOVAGROCKIENE

JOHAN ÖSTERBERG

TEIJA SEDERHOLM

SOFIA SVENSÉN

TIBOR SZVIRCSEV TRESCH

TIIA-TRIIN TRUUSA

SCANDINAVIAN  
MILITARY STUDIES

\*Author affiliations can be found in the back matter of this article

## ABSTRACT

Although the last few decades have witnessed a shift from conscription to all-volunteer forces in many European countries, recent changes in the European security environment have raised new concerns and prompted several countries to reconsider conscription. However, modern conscription systems have also had to adapt to changing societies and an increasing emphasis on individualistic and neoliberal values. This study aims to examine the various forms of military conscription and illuminate the continuing viability of the conscription model in six European countries: Estonia, Finland, Lithuania, Norway, Sweden, and Switzerland. Four of these countries have consistently maintained conscription (Estonia, Finland, Norway, and Switzerland), while Lithuania and Sweden have recently reinstated conscription. Although conscription systems differ among these countries, there is overall an increasing emphasis on conscript motivation and female participation. Three key aspects are identified to describe different conscription systems: the proportion of conscripted individuals in the birth cohort, motivation to serve, and the approach to female conscripts. Combining these aspects, the study identifies three types of conscription system in these six countries. This article demonstrates that conscription has evolved and adapted to changing societies and security situations instead of merely retaining its traditional form.

## CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Emma Jonsson

Swedish Defence University,  
Sweden

[emma.jonsson@fhs.se](mailto:emma.jonsson@fhs.se)

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After the end of the Cold War, many European militaries transitioned from conscription to all-volunteer forces (AVF). The reasons for this shift varied from country to country. The absence of a direct military state-to-state threat<sup>1</sup> was a common argument for transforming a nation's military into a more expeditionary force better aligned with the new mission sets of the early 1990s. Several countries, furthermore, view conscription as outdated and inefficient for maintaining a military force; some argue that conscription does not allow for an optimal selection of the most capable and willing individuals, potentially resulting in a lack of morale and discipline in the ranks. Compared to volunteers, conscripts may exhibit a reluctance to engage in combat and a lack of commitment to the cause, potentially leading to a decreased effectiveness in combat performance (Freeman & Elgin, 2022). Moreover, with the influx of new countries joining NATO in the 1990s and early 2000s, many European nations chose to downsize and transform their military forces to align with the new alliance, accommodate new member states, foster international cooperation and operations, and address the growing awareness of non-state actor threats (see, for example, Ajangiz, 2002; Haltiner, 2003; Szvircev Tresch, 2005).

This shift from conscription to AVF, long predicted by Moskos (1977), among others, has been well documented by many researchers (see, for example, Ajangiz, 2002; Haltiner, 1998, 2003; Joenniemi, 2017; Kernic et al., 2005; Leander, 2004; Malešič, 2003; Mjøset & van Holde, 2002; Simon et al., 2011; Szvircev Tresch, 2005). The transformational pivot towards AVF swept across Europe from west to east, starting in Belgium and the Netherlands in 1994 and 1996 (Manigart, 2012). It did not get a hold in the northeast, however, where Norway, Finland, Denmark, and Estonia decided to maintain conscription. In the Central European region, Austria and Switzerland have maintained conscription, with Switzerland being unique in its armed neutrality and the decision to join neither the EU nor NATO (Trachsel, 2011).

Several prerequisites affect a country's preference for any military system; similar considerations have also affected the decision to adopt AVF or to maintain conscription. Fundamental aspects that influence conscription include the existing threat from state and non-state actors, the country's geography and geopolitical location, population size, historical background and experiences, the perceived security environment, the available pool of citizens for defence, and the size of the defence budget (Järvenpää, 2016; Salo, 2013; Szvircev Tresch, 2015; Szvircev Tresch & Leuprecht, 2010). The challenge is that most of these factors are contingent on time and context in the degree to which they prompt continuous transformation of a nation's military forces. For example, after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, concerns over Russian military activity and tensions rising in the Baltic region reactivated discussions about state-to-state defence models and whether these events might see the return of conscription (Bieri, 2015). Lithuania reinstated conscription in 2015 and Sweden in 2017, thus becoming the first two countries to do so in peacetime.<sup>2</sup>

In recent years, research on conscription has been mainly focused on either the effects of conscription on youth (its effect on educational attainments and income, for example; see Hubers & Webbink, 2015; Puhani & Sterrenberg, 2022) or what makes conscription viable in contemporary societies where values of individualism contradict utilitarian values of personal sacrifice for the greater good – a combination of conscription and AVF, for example, or increasing convertibility between civilian and military spheres (see Ben-Ari et al., 2023; Lillemäe et al., 2023). Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2022 has further revived the discussions on conscription. In this article, we consider the conscription systems existing in European countries nowadays, and how they have evolved. Currently, ten countries in Europe still practice conscription: Austria, Estonia, Denmark, Finland, Greece, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland, alongside Ukraine, which is actively engaged in warfare. We draw on examples

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1 A state-to-state threat can range from military aggression and economic sanctions to diplomatic pressure and political interference.

2 In 2013, Ukraine also abolished conscription, but re-introduced it in the following year amid the annexation of Crimea. After the start of the Ukrainian War in 2022, Latvia stated that they would re-introduce conscription and did so in January 2024. Discussions are also ongoing in other European countries. In the Netherlands, there are parliament members who advocate for the Swedish conscription model to solve personnel shortages (Een Vandag, 2022). After the terrorist attacks in 2015, the proposed one-month "universal" military service in France ultimately became a mandatory defence and citizenship day for all 16-year-old French citizens (Jankowski, 2019). Since then, Bulgaria (Leviev-Sawyer, 2017), Germany (Huggler, 2016), and Slovenia (RTVSLO, 2017) are among the countries that have considered re-introducing conscription.

of six of these countries – Estonia, Finland, Lithuania, Norway, Sweden, and Switzerland – as illustrative case studies useful in providing an overview of contemporary conscription systems.

Lithuania and Sweden exemplify cases of reinstating conscription a few years after its abolition; Norway and Sweden also provide unique cases with their selective and gender-neutral conscription systems; Estonia and Lithuania, both having experienced Soviet occupation, embarked on rebuilding their armed forces after regaining independence in the 1990s. Switzerland, however, diverges from the other countries in this study. Located in central Europe, Switzerland adopts armed neutrality and has joined neither the EU nor NATO, making it an interesting case to explore. We aim to examine the various forms of military conscription and illuminate how the conscription model is kept viable and embedded in these six countries.

These six countries offer valuable insights into the diverse nature of conscription systems and how they are sustained in contemporary societies. Their unique cultural, historical, and geopolitical contexts play a significant role in shaping their decision to maintain conscription and influence the mechanisms employed in their conscription systems. We contribute to the existing literature on conscription by demonstrating that although modern conscription systems differ in recruitment and composition, all have been renewed and adapted to current threats and societal changes.

After this introduction, the data and methods chosen for the research are described. This is followed by the presentation of findings. It begins by delineating the characteristics of conscription in the six countries under study and then addresses two pivotal dimensions typifying modern conscription systems: first, how and to what extent different systems take into account conscripts' motivation to serve in response to societal shift towards individual values; and, second, gender balance and inclusion of women in service.

The findings also reveal a third dimension to what typifies modern conscription systems: the proportion of conscripted individuals in the birth cohort. Based on these three aspects, the discussion posits three discernible types of conscription systems across the six countries subjected to analysis. It further advances the notion of the potential applicability of the developed analytical framework for examining contemporary conscription systems.

## **DATA AND METHOD**

This article does not aspire to be a systematic overview of conscription systems in all European countries. Instead, it adopts an exploratory approach, selecting a few exemplary cases for examination. This article employs a combination of official documents and academic literature to examine the current state of conscription in six contemporary societies: Estonia, Finland, Lithuania, Norway, Sweden, and Switzerland. The official documents include government reports, military publications, and legal statutes related to conscription policies. The academic literature comprises scholarly articles, books, and other relevant publications on the subject of conscription, military recruitment, and national defence.

Data collected from these sources was subjected to a two-step analysis. First, an inductive approach was employed to identify common themes and patterns that emerge across descriptions of contemporary conscription, and the relationship these themes and patterns bear to prevalent societal values; this exploratory analysis allows for the identification of key factors and dynamics shaping the conscription systems in the six chosen societies. Second, the initial inductively formed themes were merged into three core aspects. The first is the proportion of those conscripted in the birth cohort; the second and third are aspects that characterise how conscription is reflecting societal changes – conscripts' motivation to serve and increasing female participation.

## **RESULTS**

### **CHARACTERISTICS OF CONSCRIPTION IN SIX EUROPEAN COUNTRIES**

Conscription has undergone diverse transformations and adaptations over time in response to historical contexts and national defence needs within the six countries we consider. A short description of some of the unique characteristics of each country is listed below, followed by some common characteristics and trends.

On regaining independence in the early 1990s, Estonia re-established its conscript service, partly drawing from the ideals of the interwar period (1920–1939). While Estonia applies a compulsory service for men, it also enables young men to volunteer for service before they are officially called up. When applying to serve on their own part, the recruitment system takes into account applicants' preference for the place and time of service. Therefore, applying to the service gives the advantage of having some control over their service and enables them to schedule conscription at a convenient time. About half of all conscripts use that option. In Estonia, women can apply voluntarily and have the opportunity to leave service within the first three months. In all other countries included in the study, women are subject to the same ordinance as conscripted men from day one.

Finland, which has the longest border with Russia among European Union and NATO members at 1,344 km, has consistently developed its own defence capabilities on a long-term basis, including conscription-based service for men. In April 2023, Finland joined NATO to further strengthen its deterrence and defence. Among the countries included in our study, Finland has the highest number of conscripts (21,000), which means that two thirds of the male population fulfil their conscription duty. One third of male recruits are exempted due to their lack of capability for service. In addition, women can apply voluntarily.

Lithuania also regained independence in the early 1990s. The country had a short period of AVF between 2008 and 2015 before reverting to a conscription system; voluntary elements remain, including a system of individual application. While the majority of conscripts in Lithuania have enrolled voluntarily (around 90%), the number of volunteers has been decreasing annually by an average of 2%. Randomly generated draft lists select the remaining part of the call.

Norway has gender-neutral conscription and a stepwise selection procedure taking individual motivation into account. When Norway transformed its conscription system between 2008 and 2014, the focus was not on introducing conscription for women but on achieving equal treatment for both men and women (Steder, 2015). This means that conscription is “equally mandatory” for both genders.

Sweden has had gender-neutral conscription supplemented by volunteers since 2018; and before that AVF between 2011 and 2017.<sup>3</sup> After the reintroduction of conscription, about a fourth of all conscripts applied voluntarily, and in 2021, volunteers made up about a tenth (Svensén & Jonsson, 2022). Sweden has the lowest share of conscripts in this study; only about 5% of Swedish men and women are obligated to conscripted service.

Located in central Europe, Switzerland adopts armed neutrality and has not joined the EU or NATO, making it an interesting case to explore. Conscription is mandatory for men. Individuals who are deemed unfit for military service due to health or psychological reasons are exempted from compulsory military service and are required to pay a state tax (Swiss Federal Constitution; see Fuhrer & Haltiner, 2015). Conscription in Switzerland is closely linked to the militia system. The Swiss constitution prohibits standing forces, and the Swiss militia constitutes an “active reserve” (Szvircsev Tresch, 2011).

A summary of the characteristics and design of conscription in the six countries is given in Table 1.

The six countries all have relatively small population sizes, an average of 5.7 million, whereas the average European country has a population of 18.5 million (Eurostat, 2021). With the exception of Switzerland, the studied countries are located in the Baltic Sea area and the proximity of Russia. These characteristics have, among others, led these states to adopt comprehensive defence or, alternatively, total defence principles. This implies that conscription is integrated into a broader system of national comprehensive defence, which combines military forces with non-military capabilities and involves the active participation of the entire society (Berzina, 2020). Both concepts emphasise a similar principle: the integration of the capacities and resources of armed forces and civil society through a whole-of-society approach, aiming

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<sup>3</sup> The decision to re-establish conscription, in both Lithuania and Sweden, stemmed from two primary reasons: the changed security situation following the Georgia-Russia conflict in 2008 and the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and the challenges associated with fully manning the organization with volunteers. The latter issue has been well documented as a common problem for AVF (Manigart et al., 2018; Österberg et al., 2020; Svzircsev Tresch & Leuprecht, 2010).

	ESTONIA	FINLAND	LITHUANIA	NORWAY	SWEDEN	SWITZERLAND
Population (Eurostat, 2021)	1 330 068	5 533 793	2 795 680	5 391 369	10 379 295	8 667 088
Conscription established <sup>4</sup>	1920–1939/1991–	1878–1905/1919–	1918–1940/1990–2008/2015–	1814–	1901–2010/2017–	1848–
Recruitment type	Mandatory for men, voluntary for women	Mandatory for men, voluntary for women	Mandatory for men, voluntary for women, supplemented by volunteers	Selective gender-neutral	Selective gender-neutral supplemented by volunteers	Mandatory for men, voluntary for women
Length of basic military service (rounded)	8 or 11 months	5.5, 8.5 or 11.5 months	9 months	6–18 months	6–15 months	5 months
Conscripts in basic military training 2020 (rounded)	3 100	21 000	3 700	8 000	5 000	17 000
Approximate share of conscripts from a younger age cohort (18–early twenties, men and women)	18%	33%	10%	11%	5%	15%
Number of conscripts per 100,000 inhabitants (rounded)	236	379	135	148	48	196
Women	Voluntary since 2013	Voluntary since 1995	Voluntary since 2011	Mandatory since 2016	Mandatory since 2018 (supplemented by volunteers)	Voluntary, since 2005 the same right as men
Female participation of conscripts (rounded)	1%	4%	4%	25%	20%	1%
NATO membership	Yes, since 2004	Yes, since April 2023	Yes, since 2004	Yes, since 1949	No, applied in May 2022	No
EU membership	Yes, since 2004	Yes, since 1995	Yes, since 2004	No	Yes, since 1995	No

to deter potential aggressors by making the targeted state a challenging prospect (Wither, 2020). This approach entails fostering societal preparedness for crises and warfare through cooperation on all levels of governance, management, and leadership (Truusa, 2022).

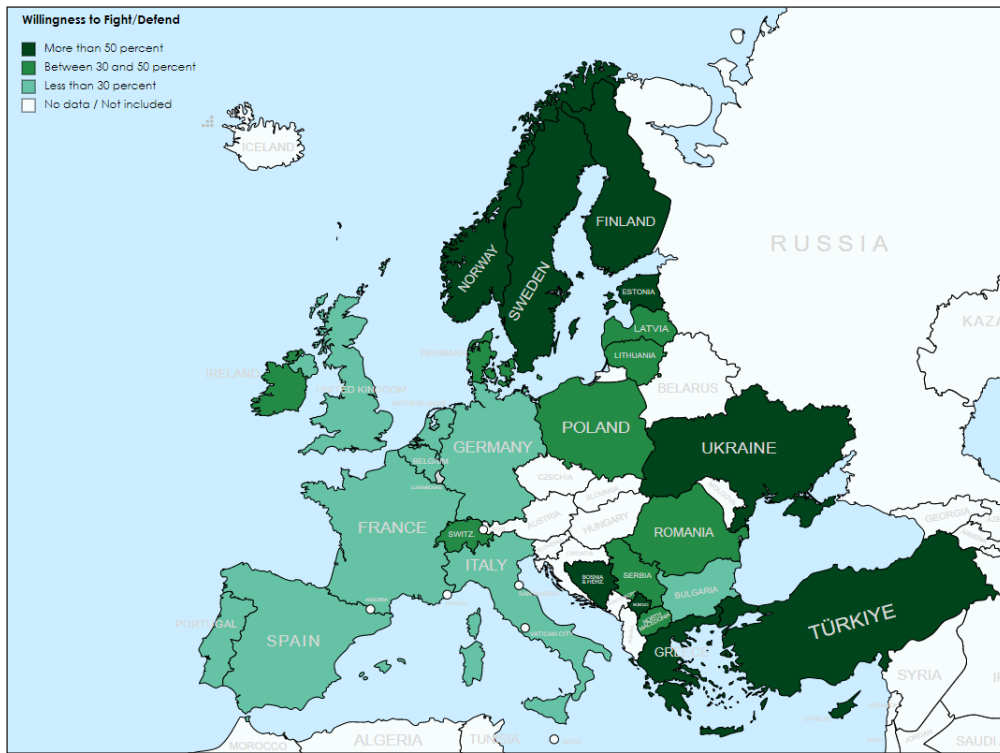
In a “total defence” framework, the military capabilities and personnel can provide support, if necessary, to other state authorities during a conflict (Goldenberg et al., 2019). However, it also entails that when the highest state of alert is declared, all sectors of society are actively engaged in the defence effort (Sydow, 2018; Veebel & Ploom, 2018). The concept of comprehensive national defence emphasises the interrelation between the military and society, promoting the idea that everyone is producing security rather than consuming state-provided security.

The nature of conscription has a significant impact at both the social and individual level. Since conscription involves, directly or indirectly, large segments of the society contributing to the functioning of the armed forces and acts as a social contract in which everyone contributes to the defence of the state (Choulis et al., 2021; Kasearu et al., 2022), conscription generally has stronger public support (Choulis et al., 2021; Finnish ABDI, 2022; Forsvaret, 2021; Szvircev Tresch et al., 2020; Turu-uuringute AS, 2020), and a higher will to fight<sup>5</sup> (Finnish ABDI, 2022; Rowe, 2002; World Value Survey, 2015, 2022) when compared to AVFs (see Figure 1).

<sup>4</sup> Conscription in Estonia and Lithuania was initially established in the early 20th century. However, both countries came under Soviet occupation for approximately 50 years, after which conscription was reintroduced in the 1990s. During the period of occupation, men from these nations served in the Soviet Army. While formally conscription continued, this problematic past tends to be “skipped” and the reestablishment of conscription and armed forces in general in the 1990s is rather closely tied to the republican independence before World War II (Kasearu et al., 2023). Consequently, neither Table 1 nor the article addresses the Soviet period of conscription.

<sup>5</sup> It needs to be pointed out that while World Value Survey measures the “will to fight”, Sweden, Finland and the Baltic States adhere more to the term “will to defend”, which forms the ground for the total defence paradigm in these countries and is used to point out that fighting is directly related to the defence of national borders and state sovereignty. The word “defend” emphasizes the need for defensive action. In the current article, however, we use the term “will to fight”, a more commonly known and used term, but equate its meaning to “will to defend”.

**Table 1** Overview: Countries’ characteristics, design and use of military conscription.



**Figure 1** Will to fight in European countries.<sup>6</sup>

One area of uncertainty is whether military conscription is the cause of a high will to fight or whether it serves as the foundation for conscription. However, research has shown that a population’s high will to fight strategically influences the political decision to establish and uphold military conscription (Asal et al., 2017; Hosein, 2016). Furthermore, a population’s high will to fight can also impact the effectiveness of conscription itself (Horowitz & Levendusky, 2011) as it is perceived to rally individuals to the cause and boost morale.

## REFLECTING SOCIETAL CHANGES IN MILITARY CONSCRIPTION

There are three particular areas in which the reformed military conscription system in the six selected countries deviates from the stereotypical impression of “traditional” conscription. Firstly, the proportion of conscripted individuals in the birth cohort is generally much lower today.<sup>7</sup> Secondly, contemporary conscription systems consider conscripts’ motivation. And thirdly, the reforms include women and emphasise their role in state defence. These changes in the approach to conscription form the pillars of understanding how conscription systems have altered. Below, we elaborate on the last two areas, as the proportion of conscripted individuals in each country is reflected in Table 1.

### Motivation and Volunteering for Conscription

In recent decades, the prevalence of self-expression values and widening opportunities in life (Inglehart et al., 2008; Welzel & Inglehart, 2010) have prompted countries with conscription to reassess and restructure their conscription systems in order to cultivate legitimacy and support from society.

Motivation, to varying degrees, is considered in the recruitment process of conscription in all six countries. In Finland and Switzerland, this is visible from female volunteers. Apart from volunteer women, Estonia and Lithuania have implemented individual application systems to adapt to societal changes and meet personal needs and expectations. In a way, there is something paradoxical in the idea of volunteering for an obligation – having volunteers in a mandatory military service system. However, offering the option to volunteer provides individuals with

<sup>6</sup> The figure is generated in MapChart (<https://www.mapchart.net/europe.html>) by the authors of the article. The values used comes from World Value Survey (2015, 2022), Andžans and Sprāds (2020) and national surveys from Norway, Estonia and Lithuania (Eesti Uuringukeskus, 2021; Folk og Forsvar, 2022; Novagrockiene, 2020).

<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, after many years of downsizing, the proportion of youngsters affected by conscription is slowly increasing. This is partly due to rearmament, a discussion that has become more urgent following the Russian aggression against Ukraine in early 2022, and partly due to lower birth cohorts (e.g., in Estonia).



a sense of control over their life trajectory and increases their agency, which is increasingly important in contemporary individualised societies. This option is becoming more popular in Estonia while less so in Lithuania.

In Norway and Sweden, a stepwise selection procedure is used to evaluate the individual's motivation, values, and attitudes. The selection process commences with an online questionnaire in which individuals provide self-reported information regarding their health, motivation, interests, and other relevant factors. Based on the responses, approximately 30% of individuals are selected to proceed to a physical and psychological evaluation, and about 30% of those are called for basic training and conscription. During the selection process, the share of individuals positively minded towards serving in conscription increased in Sweden from 30% (in the age cohort) to 90% among the individuals selected for conscript service (Svensén & Jonsson, 2021). A crucial difference between the two countries is that in Sweden, just like in Lithuania, volunteers complement the draft, which can be seen as a remnant from the AVF years.

In sum, we argue that a pendulum effect exists between AVF and conscription, according to which contemporary societies with conscription incorporate elements from both manning models to address the growing influence of values of individualism and self-expression. However, the position of the pendulum varies across different societies, and its movement is influenced by changes in a nation's security domain and societal trends.

## Gender and Conscription

Conscript-based armed forces generally have a lower proportion of female members in the armed forces compared to AVF (Carreiras, 2006; Persson & Sundevall, 2019). Increasing female participation has been a common approach to expanding the recruitment pool in AVF (Jonsson & Österberg, 2017).

Table 1 shows that female participation varies greatly, ranging from 1% to 25%, among the six countries. Variation falls into two categories: Finland, Switzerland, Lithuania, and Estonia allow women to apply for military service voluntarily, resulting in a lower percentage of female participants (1–4%), while Norway and Sweden have adopted a gender-neutral conscription system, leading to a higher proportion of female participants (20–25%).

It is worth noting that countries with a low share of women in the armed forces are constantly placing greater emphasis on increasing female participation in conscription. Estonia and Finland have plans to broaden the opportunities for women to participate in conscription service and active duty, while in Switzerland there is an ongoing debate about increasing the proportion of women from the current 1% to 10% by 2030 (Swissinfo, 2020). This shift reflects both societal movements toward gender equality and the declining size of age cohorts.

In Norway and Sweden, the proportion of women in the armed forces is notably higher. Women have been allowed to serve on a voluntary basis in the Norwegian Armed Forces since 1977 and in the Swedish Armed Forces since 1980, which is around 20 to 30 years earlier than in other countries. Even prior to the implementation of gender-equal conscription, the percentage of women in the armed forces was relatively high, with 13% in Norway and 15% in Sweden. Since the introduction of conscription for women in 2015 in Norway and 2017 in Sweden, the representation of women in the armed forces has increased further. It is also worth noting that one out of four volunteers in Sweden is a woman (Svensén & Jonsson, 2021).

Another significant distinction between Norway and Sweden and the other countries is that men and women live together in gender-mixed rooms for a significant portion of the conscription period. The inclusion of mixed-gender rooms and the growing proportion of women in the armed forces brings both advantages and disadvantages. Despite the increase in female participation, the military culture continues to be male-dominated, and it is likely perceived as a culture that embodies masculine traits (Stets & Burke, 2000). In a typical military masculine culture, it is not uncommon to observe the use of strong language and immature behaviour resembling that of young boys. A strong masculine culture emphasises and highlights the differences between genders (Kristiansen et al., 2010). In contrast, in a feminine culture, gender differences are less pronounced, and it is more common for men and women to take on each other's roles (Nelson

et al., 2006). According to the classification set out by Hofstede and his colleagues (1998), Norway and Sweden fall under the feminine culture category.

The use of mixed-gender rooms in the military has been found to have a positive impact on men's attitudes toward women in the military. Studies have shown that as the use of mixed rooms increases, men's negative attitudes toward military women decrease (Berggren, 2002; Hellum, 2014, 2016; Lilleaas & Ellingsen, 2014). Living in a mixed-room environment has been associated with greater openness among men towards women in leadership positions, combat roles, and mixed team deployment (Finseraas et al., 2016). Furthermore, research indicates that conscripts who live in mixed-gender rooms develop a greater appreciation for gender equality in society (Ellingsen et al., 2016; Hellum, 2014).

Estonia has now also adopted mixed-gender rooms, which signals that being a soldier should not be genderised. In Finland, a trial run of gender-mixed accommodation started in 2020 and the outcomes were successful in terms of improved group cohesion and information flow in the units (see Tallberg & Rahikka, 2021). Therefore, gender-mixed accommodation was recently put into effect in all units in the Finnish Defence Forces.

## DISCUSSION

This study aims to examine the various forms of military conscription in six European countries. Evidently, the meaning and position of conscription in the societies of the six selected countries is multifaceted, and each system reflects its social context. We propose that analysing conscription systems through the three aspects described in the Results section (the share of conscripted individuals in the birth cohort, conscripts' motivation to serve, and the share of women in conscripted service) enables us to characterise different conscription systems and their consequences for both young people and society at large.

The first aspect of the importance of conscription is the share of conscripted individuals in the birth cohort. The larger the proportion of conscripted individuals, the wider and more representative the conscription system is of the society. It also indicates the extent to which families are directly connected to the military, as conscripts are someone's son, daughter, brother, sister, etc. Furthermore, conscription has a socialising function (Salo, 2004; Szvircsev Tresch, 2011); it has been found to provide support for immigrants and ethnic minorities in their integration into society.<sup>8</sup> For example, in Switzerland, conscription promotes social and linguistic integration in a multicultural and multilingual society, thus holding historical and social significance for the Swiss military (Szvircsev Tresch, 2011). Similarly, conscription in Estonia, where around one third of the population is Russian-speaking, facilitates social cohesion and inclusion for the Russian-speaking minority through a shared sense of destiny, as the organisation transcends linguistic and social boundaries (Kasearu et al., 2022). However, studies have also indicated that Estonian-speaking conscripts have a higher likelihood of becoming non-commissioned officers (NCOs) compared to Russian speakers. This difference reflects both the self-expectations of conscripts and the limited opportunities available for them to realise their expectations (Kasearu, 2021).

The second aspect, closely related to the first, focuses on motivation and the role it plays in a country's recruitment system. The level of motivation influences whether conscripts are relatively heterogeneous or homogeneous in their propensity to serve. Modern conscription in contemporary societies is characterised by principles of voluntarism, individualism, and gender equality (Strand, 2023), leading to a hybrid, "volunteer-ized model" of conscription, which refers to increasing material and non-material incentives for conscripts (Ben-Ari et al., 2023). It has also been referred to as "pragmatic conscription," where conscripts themselves seek tangible benefits from military service, and armed forces strive to meet these new expectations (Lillemäe et al., 2023). Motivation and interest are significant factors in the conscript's willingness to pursue a military career after compulsory military service (Truusa et al., 2018).

The third aspect is the involvement of female conscripts and the extent to which the military aligns with general societal values such as gender equality. According to Carreiras (2006), variation in female participation ratios demonstrates the influence of time and history on

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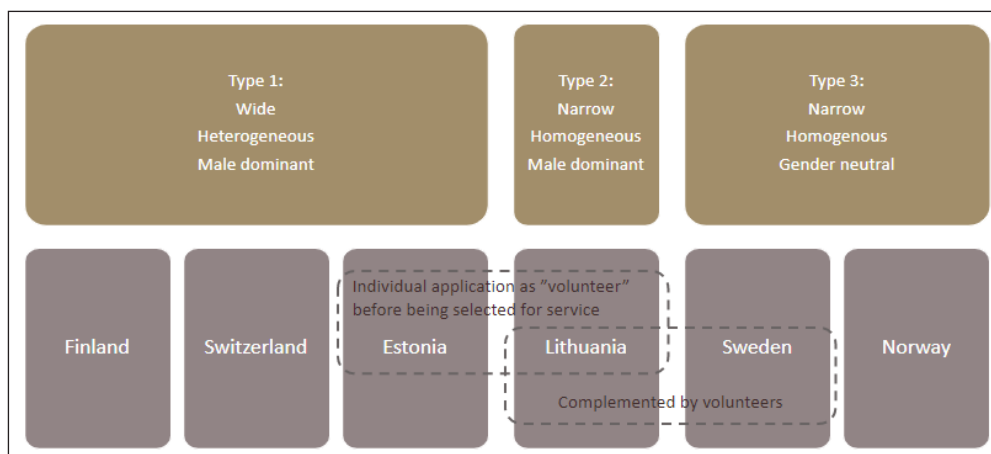
8 Citizenship is required.



women’s involvement in the military. Cultural and historical barriers, such as the perception that women do not belong in the military, contribute to this variation. One prevailing myth has been the notion that women are physically and emotionally incapable of serving in the military (Simpson, 2016). This outdated assumption disregards the potential contribution that women can make to a modern military organisation (Steder, 2015; van der Meulen & Soeters, 2007), particularly considering the significant changes in the nature of warfare since conscription was first introduced in France back in 1798. Practical barriers, including infrastructure, and equipment and clothing adapted to gender, also play a role. Additionally, studies have shown that women may exhibit lower motivation than men when it comes to military service, as evidenced by lower indicators of interest according to the Norwegian and Swedish online selection (Køber, 2020; Svensén & Jonsson, 2021). These barriers – cultural, practical, and motivational – collectively hinder the increase in female participation and deter women from military conscription.

As contemporary societies incorporate elements from both AVF and the mandatory military conscription model, we claim that the analysis of these three features (proportion of conscripted individuals, motivation, inclusion of women) enables us to characterise conscription systems in different countries. While some conscription systems are close to the conventional understanding of conscription, in which military service is mandatory for many, others bear a closer resemblance to AVF while not being entirely voluntary.

Based on these three features, three types of conscription system can be identified in the six countries involved in our study (see Figure 2):



**Figure 2** Different types of conscription systems in the six selected countries.

1. Wide and representative (proportion of conscripted individuals), heterogeneous (in motivation), but rather male dominant (Estonia, Finland, and Switzerland);
2. Narrow (proportion of conscripted individuals), homogeneous (in motivation), and male-dominant (Lithuania);
3. Narrow (proportion of conscripted individuals), selective and homogeneous (in motivation), and gender neutral (Norway and Sweden).

The first type of conscription system may have stronger socialising effects since the pool of conscripts is wider and potentially less motivated, leading to higher heterogeneity in terms of social background. However, this heterogeneity, which is an outcome of the mandatory drafting procedure, may have a stronger effect on the individual (adjustment problems, relationship problems) compared to the other two systems. This type of conscription system mostly resembles the traditional, compulsory, conscription model (known to the public).

The second type of conscription system shares similarities with the first and third types, notwithstanding certain differences. Like the first type, it is compulsory and employs a similar approach to female participation. However, the second type differs in that it has a relatively high proportion of volunteers and motivated conscripts, similar to the third type.

The third type of conscription system is based on selective conscription in the sense that the selection process pays attention to motivation, and individual aspects (e.g., skills, and military adjustment) are more likely to be positively perceived. The proportion of conscripted individuals

in the population is small, which may limit the aspect of socialisation. However, conscripts in this type of system are more likely to value and provide positive feedback on their experiences, potentially motivating future conscripts.

Changes in the overall security situation may result in different implications depending on the type of conscription system. For example, the first type of conscription system (see [Figure 2](#)) may lead to two possible outcomes. In the first possible outcome, the public support and the general will to fight increases, along with the share of volunteer and motivated conscripts (both males and females), and with this, the conscription system moves towards the second and third type: a more homogeneous group in terms of motivation and a higher share of women. Alternatively, both the general will to fight and public support stay the same, which indicates an increase in the number of conscripts (in general, defence organisations are growing). However, it also means that the proportion of motivated people decreases. Following this, conscripts will be increasingly heterogeneous, and the military has to consider how to balance the effects, both negative and positive, of the individual aspects of conscription. The situation in Ukraine saw public opinion change in many of the countries; in NATO countries it shifted towards the maintenance or the increase of defence spending; in Estonia and Finland, citizens' will to defend their countries saw a remarkable increase; even neutral Switzerland saw a remarkable increase in support for closer ties with NATO ([ERR, 2023](#); [NATO, 2022](#); [YLE, 2022](#)). These changes indicate that the support for state defence has increased as a result of changed threat perceptions, which makes the first outcome more likely (i.e., a more homogenous group in terms of motivation and a higher share of women). However, this research area needs to be further studied as the security situation is constantly changing.

The second type can be described as a conscription system in the transformation phase: it will either move toward gender neutrality (type three) or shift to type one as the need for human resources will increase the share of non-volunteers/motivated participants. The last scenario is also probable for the third type. The question is how big the pool of fit and motivated youths is, and whether the number is sufficient to cover the greater needs of the defence sector. As armed forces grow, the possibility of selecting motivated young people will become more difficult, recalling AVFs manning difficulties, and the need to enrol less motivated soldiers will result in a more heterogeneous conscription corps.

The current study advances our understanding and knowledge of how different countries implement conscription, how conscription has been adapting and changing in response to societal changes and current threats, and ultimately draws attention to the diverse nature of the concept of conscription. The typology created in this study can be further developed by studying other countries employing the conscription system or where conscription might be an option in the future. This typology can be helpful for policymakers and the military when planning to increase the number of conscripts or to make conscription compulsory for women.

## CONCLUSION

The effect of geostrategic changes, primarily in the proximity of the Baltic Sea area, has strengthened the emphasis on national defence compared to international operations in the 2000s. Russian aggression has intensified since 2008 with the Georgia-Russia conflict, the annexation of Crimea (2014), and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine (2022). Russia's hybrid influence, encompassing political, military, economic, cyber, information, and even cultural dimensions over other nations, has established new warfare standards ([Järvenpää, 2016](#)). Consequently, defence budgets have increased, militaries have grown, public support for the armed forces has risen, societal resilience has improved, and there has been a surge in the will to fight. Gradually, military troops have been withdrawn from international operations, their focus redirected towards territorial defence. The evolving security situation underscores the importance of high readiness, national resilience, and credible deterrence and defence. The modernisation and expansion of the Russian Armed Forces has exerted pressure on European armed forces to augment both the size and effectiveness of their national armed forces after two decades of downsizing. Societal and geostrategic factors that initially drove the transformation from conscription to AVF ([Szvircsev Tresch, 2015](#)) are now motivations for the continuance or reinstatement of military conscription and for the modernisation of the concept of national comprehensive security.


This article aimed to examine the variety of military conscription systems and illuminate how the conscription model is held viable. We researched the way conscription has evolved in six European countries: Estonia, Finland, Lithuania, Norway, Sweden, and Switzerland. Rather than being re-established on previous models, we found the military conscription systems of these six countries to have been renewed and adapted to current threats. Military conscription is particularly renewed with respect to a smaller number of motivated soldiers, as the selection process pays more attention to the needs and interests of young people (in Estonia, Lithuania, Norway, and Sweden) compared to the 20th century draft-like process. Moreover, Norway and Sweden's gender-neutral conscription is well adapted to societal changes, individual needs, and the nation's strategic positioning.

The examination of conscription across the six selected countries sheds light on a nuanced landscape shaped by historical legacies, evolving societal values, and national defence imperatives. The reformation of conscription systems, furthermore, reflects a response to evolving societal values. Motivation has become an integral component, allowing individuals to have a stake in their service. The inclusion of women in conscription efforts is also a critical step towards gender equality and reflects broader societal shifts. These systems, while unique, collectively contribute to the defence and security of their respective nations, showcasing the multifaceted nature of conscription in contemporary societies.


## COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

## AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

**Emma Jonsson**  [orcid.org/0000-0001-5659-0984](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5659-0984)  
Swedish Defence University, Sweden

**Mikael Salo**  [orcid.org/0009-0002-4931-1478](https://orcid.org/0009-0002-4931-1478)  
Finnish Defence Forces and Military Sociological Society of Finland, Finland

**Eleri Lillemäe**  [orcid.org/0000-0001-8959-9993](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8959-9993)  
Estonian Military Academy and University of Tartu, Estonia

**Frank Bruntland Steder**  [orcid.org/0009-0007-7876-8633](https://orcid.org/0009-0007-7876-8633)  
Norwegian Defence Research Establishment, FFI, Norway

**Thomas Ferst**  [orcid.org/0009-0005-5826-4062](https://orcid.org/0009-0005-5826-4062)  
Military Academy at the ETH Zurich, Switzerland


**Kairi Kasearu**  [orcid.org/0000-0002-9590-0284](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9590-0284)  
University of Tartu, Estonia


**Jurate Novagrockiene**  
Military Academy of Lithuania, Lithuania

**Johan Österberg**  [orcid.org/0000-0003-4596-1174](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4596-1174)  
Swedish Defence University, Sweden

**Teija Sederholm**  [orcid.org/0000-0001-7362-2570](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7362-2570)  
Finnish National Defence University, Finland

**Sofia Svensén**  [orcid.org/0009-0000-6738-7463](https://orcid.org/0009-0000-6738-7463)  
Swedish Defence University, Sweden

**Tibor Szvircsev Tresch**  [orcid.org/0009-0006-8400-769X](https://orcid.org/0009-0006-8400-769X)  
Military Academy at the ETH, Zurich, Switzerland

**Tiia-Triin Truusa**  [orcid.org/0000-0002-1862-1361](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1862-1361)  
Baltic Defence College, Estonia, and University of Tartu, Estonia

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