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Conscription, Scaling-up and Regional Defence: Perspectives from the Baltic Sea States

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Introduction

Europe's security environment is in the process of being drastically reconfigured because of Russia's war in Ukraine and the related fears and doubts over the reliability of U.S. support and security guarantees. This is prompting several EU governments to bolster defence spending and rethink their manpower principles.

The increase in European rearmament has been described as the embarkation of an 'experiment', generating 'new imbalances' between EU states (Tooze, 2026). The rate of increase in defence expenditure varies considerably between different countries in both GDP share and absolute terms – notably Poland and Germany are rearming at a rapid pace, while France, Spain, and Italy exhibit a notable lack of urgency and/or affordability (ibid.). A key challenge in efforts to 'scale up' concerns the tension between military leaders urging societies to prepare for potential conflict, while Western armies struggle to fill their ranks through all-volunteer systems alone.

The debate over conscription has intensified. Several EU states with existing conscript systems (e.g., Latvia, Lithuania, Sweden, Denmark) are expanding or modernising them to strengthen force structures, including reserves. Germany has approved a mixed model requiring all 18-year-olds to register for potential service, keeping mandatory mobilisation as a future option (Höller, 2025). Whether this is a temporary or more sustained return to conscription over a longer term remains to be seen. However, at least presently, discussions across the continent are converging as policymakers continue to consider building up military capability, either by returning to conscription models – whether universal service or forms based on variations of voluntary, selective, or lottery-based systems, and male-only or gender-neutral models– or other large national service schemes in response to manpower shortages and strategic uncertainty. The conceptual use of 'scaling' in military contexts has gained ground recently, as 'scalability' has been adopted among some Western armed forces – notably the Dutch armed forces and MoD – to conceptualise 'scalable armed forces' (Zijderveld et al., 2025). This comes as part of the transformation in guiding principles of organising, moving from an expeditionary peace enforcement model to a modelconcerned with interstate warfare as a possibility within national and regional territorial defence (ibid.). This tendency of redesigning forces towards a mass army reflects a general principle that the constitution of different forces reflects different security needs.

The purpose of this report is to examine how a selection of states in the Baltic Sea region – Lithuania, Sweden, Finland, Poland, and Germany – are adapting to the sudden felt need to 'scale up' militarily, with a focus on compulsory military service, following Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February, 2022.

Rather than discussing the broad concerns of regional *security*, our focus is on regional *defence* – the policies and practices aimed at organising and managing increased military defence capabilities. Our key research aim is to investigate possibilities for scaling up recruitment, as this is often perceived as a constraining factor for a return to a large-scale, mass-force structure. A central question that our report seeks to address is: Which models for conscript training exist that other forces can emulate to increase the volume of soldiers?

The ambition of the report is not to offer a comprehensive overview, but rather to adopt a deliberately selective approach. This means focusing on the experiences and challenges of the Swedish and Finnish forces as they provide the most available data and both operate systems of conscription, unlike Poland and Germany. Indeed, it has been suggested that Sweden provides a useful reference case because after a seven-year suspension (2010–2017) it reactivated conscription (Strand, 2021, p. 3). Significantly, however, this can be seen as a 'reimagination' of a 'Scandinavian model' – gender-neutral, selective and competitive, and therefore 'still voluntary' – rather than a 'return' to a traditional one (ibid.). To complement this, we also draw on the relatively unchanged Finnish model and experiences. It is beyond the report's intention and realistic scope to develop an equivalent level of analysis for countries such as Lithuania, despite

its reintroduction of conscription in 2015. The report is designed to offer insights that may be of relevance and practical utility to other countries, including Lithuania, and potentially Poland and Germany. Sweden and Finland are thus allocated a proportionally larger share of the analysis. The report also addresses a range of thematic aspects. Similarly, these aspects are not afforded equal emphasis. Instead, the space allocated to each reflects their relative relevance and perceived usefulness to aid scaling-up efforts.

Our study is delimited by capacity reforms preoccupying Western armed forces as they steer away from the post-Cold War era's archetype of the all-volunteer professional force concerned with peacebuilding, counter-terror, and expeditionary missions and towards invasive war and the model of territorial and national mass defence (Hasselbladh, 2024; A. Weibull & Abrahamsson, 2008). Such 'ideal-type' thinking risks a logical 'binary trap', where the nuance and variation in states' military policies are overly simplified. Indeed, the post-Crimea response for a state such as Sweden is less of a return to a narrow territorial and geopolitical 'security' concept, but rather an expanded signification of 'threats' conceived not only in military but also in hybrid-, cyber-, terror-, and organised crime terms, and threats directed at transport, infrastructure, public health, and climate (Angstrom & Ljungkvist, 2024). Yet it is beyond the scope of this paper to consider such nuances of the expanded idea of 'security' (Haldén, 2001). Furthermore, it falls outside of our research design to consider the qualitative range of possible typologies and merits of conscript subjects producible via 'force design' processes', such as in terms of tasks and skills.

Our recommendation is that a schematic version inspired foremost by the Finnish conscription system serves as a model for other states to adapt to their own contexts. It concerns a rationalised, more efficient and more purposeful training system prioritising necessity, shortened training, and division of labour for states wishing to rapidly expand their military ranks. We also discuss the implications for training redesign, the skills-based diversification of the mass army, public opinion, and casualty sensitivity, as well as scaling elasticity.

Our policy-oriented recommendations on how to scale the output of conscription are:

- Increase training capacity by employing non-regular military personnel;
- Intensify training by adding more hours per week;
- Streamline training by prioritising core combat competencies and eliminating excessive generic content, 'add-ons', and ceremonial activities;
- Employ a 6-month basic training regime, allowing for the processing of *two* cohorts per calendar year;
- Develop cooperation between the military and universities of technology and offer conscripts career prospects in technology development.

Outline of Report

The report follows the presentation structure below.

- Key thematic and historical aspects of mandatory military service and an analysis of the emergent geopolitical and strategic issues in the Baltic Sea region.
- Country-by-country summary and analysis of military service policies and practices of key countries in the Baltic Sea region– Lithuania, Sweden, Finland, Poland, and Germany. This includes reviews and accounts of:
    - Each force's historical and cultural contexts shaping military staffing issues.
    - Recent military reform efforts, and other notable measures undertaken and planned in response to recent military capability scaling needs.
    - Experiences of issues and challenges of military scaling, the changing role and form of military recruitment and troop-raising systems, training capacity, demographics, and aspects of national political culture.
- A discussion section building on the presented issues and questions for each state, comparing and analysing the themes raised.
- The discussion focuses especially on practicable recommendations for smaller and less prepared states facing scaling demands under looming geopolitical pressure. The selection of questions is based on their topical future relevance and includes:
    - Ways to increase the 'throughput' of recruits through more efficient and shorter training periods.
    - The idea of the conscription-citizenship 'social contract' and the concern that a potential breach threatens to undermine defence willingness and voluntary conscription prospects.
    - Different levels of casualty sensitivity in different countries are a factor to consider when designing military training. Here technological developments in robotics and Unmanned Aerial Vehicles can mitigate concerns over the NATO concept 'no blood at first contact'.
    - The return of 'the mass army' in a new form, where the ideal-type conscript is no longer conceived as the unskilled recruits of the Cold War mass armies, but rather as a highly skilled or 'talented' human resources.
    - The question of scaling 'dynamics' – how to scale up, but also down, as requirements dictate in a sustainable manner, coupled with the mutual changes in the interplay between the supply of people, infrastructure, and buildings.

Thematic and Historical Overview of Conscription and National Service

Conscription – the form of military recruitment based on state-sanctioned coercion, in contrast to market-based volition – is, for the reasons mentioned above, currently making a strong and somewhat unexpected comeback, several decades after its demise was widely declared. Jacques van Doorn (1975) argued that the traditional conscript-based army – central to European states from the 19th century to the mid-20th century – lost its political, social, and military foundations in the decades following World War II. Mass armies had relied on large populations, nationalist mobilisation, and industrial-era warfare that required vast numbers of soldiers.

As nuclear deterrence reduced the likelihood of large conventional wars, the military need for huge conscript forces diminished among defence alliances and in the West. Simultaneously, social and political changes eroded the legitimacy of mass mobilisation. Rising individualism, higher educational levels, and expanding welfare states made compulsory service less attractive. Another important factor was that modern military systems became more technologically complex, requiring extensive specialised training, typically exceeding the time available for conscript soldiers. For all the above reasons, van Doorn (1975) famously declared the 'Decline of the Mass Army' — a shift from armies embedded in society to professional militaries, organisationally separate from civilian life. It should be noted that after the Cold War, NATO also changed its policies from territorial defence and the mass army model supporting it to professional forces for out-of-area operations. This had an impact on all allies. The Nordic states can here be mentioned as exceptions, as they continued with conscription despite welfare state policies.

Post-World War II Germany's conscription begins with the passing of a new law in 1956, the year after the Bundeswehr's establishment, and ends in 2011, when it was suspended as part of a reorientation and reform of the Bundeswehr (Bundeswehr, 2026a; von Bredow, 1992). Poland, which had 'carefully avoided' military conscription after 1945, reinstated it during the Stalinist period (Davies, 2002, p. 434) and sustained it throughout and beyond the Warsaw Pact communist period and up until 2008 (Żuk, 2016, p. 19).

The history of conscription is relevant to understanding and identifying the thought and ethico-political orientations that underpin its raison d'être. This history can be situated in the 'military revolution' period of 1560–1660, foremost associated with Dutch and Swedish reforms – those of Maurice of Orange and Gustav Adolphus (Roberts, 1956; Parker, 1996; F. Weibull, 2024). Although this essentially concerned tactics – how best to combine 'missile weapons with close action' – this entailed other, more fundamental changes, including training and disciplining soldiers (Roberts, 2018, p. 13). This second, 'more important', stage was carried out by Gustav Adolphus, launching in the 1630s, a Swedish army which was 'a conscript national militia – the first truly national European army' (Roberts, 2018, p. 16).

Conscription – compulsory military service – as one of the two major permanent ways of systematically replenishing a standing army (the other being market-based professional recruitment), is entwined with 'reason of state' (*raison d'état*) – the principles on which European state independence relies – as maintaining the state and the European balance requires a new concept of war, and the 'instruments' of diplomacy and 'a permanent military apparatus (dispositif)' (Foucault, 2009, p. 305).

Over the past fifty years, 'reason of state' and conscription systems have been 'swept away on a tide of cosmopolitan, neoliberal, and globalist enthusiasms' (du Gay, 2023, p. 344). The U.S. replacement

of 'the draft' with the 'All-Volunteer Force' (Janowitz & Moskos, 1979) and the widespread Western refocus towards market-based recruitment models (Dandeker, 2010) is associated with neoliberal thought, including that of Richard Nixon and Milton Friedman. By 2013, most Western states had abandoned conscription, with notable 'last bastions' exceptions, such as Finland (Yle, 2013).

In the aftermath of the continuing Russian invasion of Ukraine, as well as earlier adventures in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya, the return to conscription and to a reason of state-based 'organisational stance' – 'state-interested, historically particularist, and prudentially calculated' – is now seen as more legitimate and suitable for an increasingly 'Kissingerian' world (du Gay, 2023, p. 346). Indeed, this shift is exemplified in von der Leyen's recognition that the neoliberal globalist stance constitutes 'the old order' (Francis, 2026). Yet, it is worth remembering that this order, until recently, has succeeded in establishing a view of state sovereignty as an anachronism (du Gay, 2023, p. 345) and that there remain strong currents questioning it. There are neoliberal actors, such as the Swedish thinktank Timbro, which question the merits of conscription in the first place and – advocating market principles – contend that voluntary soldiers with competitive salaries would reduce public expenses considerably (Tralau, 2025). They also view conscription as unsuitable because it cannot provide the 'core of well-educated soldiers' (Brattström, 2026, p. 33) needed for today's accelerating technology-centric warfare.

As Baltic Sea states consider options for scaling up, it is worth keeping such currents of thought in mind as potentially representing a neoliberal alternative military 'organisational stance' to the conscription-fostering stance of reason of state. Following the end of the Cold War, numerous European and NATO countries switched to 'All-Volunteer Force' (AVF) models (Boëne, 1990; Dandeker, 2010; Janowitz & Moskos, 1979; Williams, 2005). The AVF model notably emerged with the recommendations of the 1970 'Gates Commission' (The Report of the President's Commission on an All-Volunteer Armed Force, 1970) appointed by and largely enacted by the Nixon administration in response to the public opposition to the US draft (Eikenberry, 2013, pp. 8–9; Janowitz & Moskos, 1974). The report acknowledged five 'major objections to the AVF': the risk of civilian control and separation between military and society; the eroding of civilian confidence; disproportionate enlistment of disadvantaged racial groups and low-income backgrounds; a decline in public concern for foreign policy; and a growing proclivity of 'military adventurism' (Eikenberry, 2013, p. 9). Many of those concerns have persisted in contemporary militaries (ibid.). Yet, in the post-Cold War era, the AVF model – rather than conscript systems – has been claimed to benefit from the particularity of professional military expertise and competence (Eikenberry, 2013). In Swedish strategic culture, this corresponded to a 'High-Tech Defence' vision, contradistinguished from a 'People's Defence' one, which prioritised 'military professionalism and the timely modernization of military equipment' over democratic legitimacy (Åselius, 2005, p. 29).

In the late 20th century, conscription declined due to geopolitical and technological developments but is – after 2015 – reemerging as states confront new threat perceptions. Historically rooted in early modern European statebuilding and the "reason of state", conscription has long been entwined with ideas of national sovereignty and mass mobilisation. Its relatively recent revival reflects a shift away from neoliberal, marketbased military models toward renewed emphasis on state security and 'realpolitik'.

Overview and Analysis of Military Service Policy in Five Baltic Sea States

The analysis in this section aims to examine the measures each of the respective armed forces of Lithuania, Sweden, Finland, Poland, and Germany is taking in response to the recent need to scale up militarily in the Baltic Sea region. For each state in turn, we address a set of questions aimed at offering insights and actionable recommendations to the other Baltic Sea militaries in general and those states in particular thatapparently have relatively low or modest military starting positions or 'baselines' – notably Lithuania and Sweden. This means considering the following issues and lessons learned: What are their experiences with military scaling and adaptation? What has worked? Which problems and struggles have been encountered, such as those related to logistics, training capacity, and political opposition? What is the form of conscription in the ongoing transformation of the troop training system? What is the role played by conscription in this context? Despite their relative underdevelopment, how can smaller or less prepared states still scale up effectively under mounting geopolitical pressure?

Lithuania

Lithuania has a 1000 km-long border with Russia and Belarus on three sides.

In 2025, the Lithuanian Armed Forces (LAF) numbered 13,192 professional service members, around 5,716 voluntary service members, and 3,856 conscripts (MoD (Lt), 2026). The Army forms the core of the military, comprising three brigades plus logistics and engineer battalions. Efforts are now underway to organise the three existing brigades into a Lithuanian Army Division, with c. 15,000 soldiers. The Navy of the Lithuanian Armed Forces numbers 700 sailors. The Lithuanian Air Force has 1,500 personnel doing air surveillance and air defence, but no fighter aircraft (Ottosson & Pallin, 2024). The Special Operations Forces are a separate organisational branch.

Figure 1: Map of Europe: NATO, CSTO and Lithuania-Poland

The map shows Europe, in terms of the NATO countries (in blue), CSTO countries (yellow), and Lithuania-Poland Border (red).

Lithuania's conscription system was suspended in 2008, but then reintroduced in 2015, with acurrent call-up age of 18–22 years (Karys.lt, 2025). After its NATO membership in 2004, Lithuania de-prioritised national defence in the midst of the 'euphoria of being accepted' (Česnakas, 2025, p. 179). Instead, Lithuania regarded Russia as a 'partner,' and the LAF was oriented toward out-of-area operations (ibid.). In the reintroduced system, LAF initially trained conscripts for **nine months**, but modified the periods in 2026 to adjust the structure in accordance with the varying needs of the LAF and conscript skills, while also rendering higher educa-

tion as no longer exempt (Česnakas, 2025). This was preceded by a public debate, which highlighted twelve months as a psychological upper barrier. Most of the c. 5000 conscripts for 2026 will be called for 9 months (3,870), but the remaining groups will serve for 6- or 3- month periods (Karys.lt, 2026a). The conscripts called for 3 months comprise merely 90 individuals, but 'with professions needed by the military' (Karys.lt, 2026b) and 'rare skills' (Weibull & Godliauskas, 2026), will perform 3 months of service.

Professional soldiers form the core of the LAF, comprising the majority of its active personnel. The reserve will be mobilised as necessary and for the replenishment of casualties. Despite targets to prepare an active reserve of 50,000 by 2030, set as late as 2022, the 'quality of the reserve' and refresher training remain unaddressed (Česnakas, 2025, p. 185). The much-prolonged conscription reform of 2024 meant a 'gradual increase' in numbers, ultimately approaching a near-actual universal model. It also involved extending the active reserve period from 10 to 15 years (ibid.). Estimates suggest a current 'active' reserve of 30,000, indicating that a relevant question is how many reservists will be called up in the coming years for refresher training of the c. 120,000 'prepared' reserve.

All conscripts complete initial basic infantry training followed by unitlevel and rolespecific training in different branches: infantry, engineering, logistics, etc. Like their Latvian and Danish counterparts, if there is a shortage of volunteers, Lithuania selects conscripts via lottery (Henley, 2025). The annual lottery generated in 2026 a pool of c. 42,500 individuals, out of which c. 12,000 were mustered and inspected, and c. 5000 called (Karys.lt, 2026b; Godliauskas, 2026). Out of these, 3,800 were volunteers, i.e. c. 75% (Karys.lt, 2026b). While allowed, women are not actively encouraged to serve in the military, and provisions are restrictive (e.g., there is no female cut or design for the uniforms). However, many women (perhaps about 30%) are part of the Riflemen's Union, a paramilitary volunteer organisation.

Sweden

During the Cold War, Sweden's Armed Forces would have been able to mobilise up to 800,000 soldiers in the event of an interstate war. The yearly conscription cohort was approximately 40,000 young men (with a small number of female volunteers), the majority of whom went into the Army.

One caveat concerning the current interest in making comparisons between today's growing scaling efforts and the Cold War, is that current volumes dwindle in proportion – armies were much bigger then. For example, in 1982, at the height of the tension between NATO and the Warsaw Pact, the Swedish Armed Forces (SAF) consisted of 32 brigades (Hasselbladh, 2024, pp. 159–164). In each Swedish Defence Act of '96, '00, and '04, the defence was cut in half and continued shrinking until 2019 (Agrell, 2010; Angstrom & Ljungkvist, 2024). Similarly, post-1990, most militaries, including Russia's and except for South Korea's military, scaled down. Having (with some difficulty) managed to set up two complete mechanised brigades, the Swedish Army is currently tasked with the challenge of producing two additional brigades, an effort considered insufficient by some commentators (Neretnieks, 2025). Recently, the Swedish Army Chief also declared that increased commitments mean that the current targets, initially formulated in 2020, will need revision. Instead of one Army Division, there is a need for three Army Divisions (Lindfors, 2026). Thus, the current actual and target volumes are still not comparable to those of the Cold War. The current scaling up is not a proper return to a mass army, but perhaps better characterised as a step in that direction.

Post-Cold War, large parts of the military establishment were dismantled, and conscription numbers were greatly reduced. Conscription was suspended in 2010, in favour of an All-Volunteer Force, only to be resumed in 2017 (see Dandeker & Ydén, 2024). Sweden now has a mixed model with both full-time soldiers/seamen, part-time soldiers/seamen, and conscripts. Swedish conscription involves 9–15 months of training, depending on the position. All conscripts complete basic infantry training. Longer service periods include specialised or leadership training for roles in combat units, technical branches, or command tracks. During the Cold War, the shortest conscript training was 7.5 months, compared to today's 9-month period.

Table 1. SAF: Number of conscripts enlisted for basic military training per year[1]

Year	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	2032
No of conscripts trained/year	900	3,700	4,600	5,000	5,800	5,500	7,310	7,246	8,251	12,000

At present, Sweden's reintroduced conscription system, operating at full capacity, trains approximately 8,000 new soldiers annually, a figure that has more than doubled since 2018 (see Table 1 for the annual intake since 2017). The stated ambition to quickly increase annual trained conscript numbers to 12,000 by 2032 (SAF Budget, 2025, p. 37) – a goal, which has already been delayed by several years (SvT, 2024) – is hampered by a lack of barracks, too few shooting ranges, a shortage of experienced officers, and limited access to various modern military systems.

Table 2. SAF: Conscript numbers per branch[2]

Branch	Conscripts	Branch share	Change since 2024	Men	Women	Share of women
Army	5,130	62%	246	4447	683	13 %
Navy	1,264	15%	101	1024	240	19 %
Airforce	1,061	13%	81	801	260	25 %
Command/intelligence	5,38	7%	383	455	83	15 %
Schools	258	3%	14	184	74	29 %
SUM	8,251	100%	825	6,911	1,340	16%

The Swedish government (2024) aims to increase the number of conscripts and the recruitment and training of personnel across different categories (see table). In a recent bill, it states that 'The armed forces need to be an attractive employer to be able to recruit and retain personnel' and that, 'in connection with this', it is 'making a special investment in infrastructure […], which has long been neglected, including with regard to the wartime organization.' (Government of Sweden, 2024, p. 11, our translation). One constraining factor in Sweden, however, is that recruits may only be called if the intention is to assign them a wartime posting (MoD (SE), 2013).

Table 3. Growth of SAF Military Personnel 2025-2035[3]

Personnel Groups/categories4		2025	2030	2035
	Plan	Ouctome	Plan	Plan
Officers (Yrkesofficerare; YO)	10,200	10,349	10,800	11,800
Full-time Junior NCOs, Soldiers, Airmen and Seamen (Kontinuerligt tjänstgörande gruppbefäl, soldater och sjömän (GSS/K))	6,900	7,201	8,800	9,505
Civil employees (Civilanställda)	11,400	12,016	13,100	14,605
Reserve Officers (Reservofficerare (RO))	5,800	7,125	5,800	5,800
Part-time Junior NCOs, Soldiers, Airmen and Seamen (Tidvis tjänstgörande gruppbefäl, soldater och sjömän (GSS/T)	4,800	4,771	6,000	6,000
Conscripts, excluding personnel-reserve (Värnpliktiga exkl. personalreserv)	26,500	25,010	44,000	51,000
Home guard contractual personnel (Avtalspersonal i hemvärnsförband)	24, 000	22,567	26,000	27,000
Contractual personnel in other units (Avtalspersonal i övriga krigsförband)	500	174	2,600	3,200
Total	89,800	90,529	116,800	128,910

1 The conscript numbers for 2017-2024 are based on Timbro's report (Brattström, 2026, p. 31); for 2025 the source is Plikt- och prövningsverket (2024, 2025).

2 Source: Olsson (2025) – the data has especially been requested from The Swedish Defence Conscription and Assessment Agency (Plikt- och prövningsverket).

3 Source: the Swedish Armed Forces' Budget for 2027 (SAF, 2026).

4 Swedish Armed Forces Rank Insignia (Swedish Armed Forces, 2024)

Yet, in terms of growing personnel, the current limitation is not the number of conscripts but rather part-time contracted soldiers and reserve officers (SAF, 2026, pp. 31–47).

A recurring challenge for the Army is retaining military personnel, especially in part-time positions. Retaining full-time soldiers/seamen for the entire service period of six years has proven difficult. They tend to leave their positions after a few years, which means that personnel turnover hampers unit development. Swedish labour laws do not permit binding employment contracts.[5] Another concern is that technically advanced career tracks remain largely undeveloped, a lingering debt from the expeditionary 'ISAF Afghanistan Era', in which the foreseen opponent was technologically limited to firearms, IEDs and, mortars. In order to attract more technical competence, the Swedish Armed Forces have recently announced that suitable conscripts will be offered the possibility of studying three-year engineering programmes (fees waived and expenses covered) at selected Universities of Technology if they sign up to become military officers (a model similar to the ROTC system in the U.S.).

Finland

Finland's foreign policy and strategic outlook is fundamentally premised on 'realpolitik', which is sometimes contrasted with its Swedish counterpart's more prevalent 'globalist idealist' orientation (M. Jonsson, 2024; Pesu & Iso-Markku, 2020). Unlike its Western counterparts in the 1990s and first decade of the 21th century, Finland never moved away from maintaining a large invasion-based military model based on conscription. This owes in no small part to its fraught relationship with its eastern neighbour, sharing a 1340 km-long land-based border with Russia and having fought the Soviet Union twice during the Second World War – in the Winter War (1939–1940) and Continuation War (1941–1944). This context informs the distinctiveness of the Finnish Defence Forces (FDF) as it never shifted in the post-Soviet period to a (smaller) All-Volunteer Force model, or to expeditionary capabilities and systems (M. Jonsson, 2024; Yle, 2013). Finland continuously maintained a traditional, large-scale conscription-based mobilising defence force, geared towards independently defending Finnish territory in perpetuity. The assessment that the Finnish model lagged behind AVFcentric forces during the past two decades is, when reconsidered in light of the shifting threat context, transformed into an affirmation of the FDF's system.

The FDF's active personnel in peacetime number 23,850 (Army: 17,400, Navy: 3,150, Air: 3,300) and the FBG (the paramilitary Finnish Border Guard) employs approximately 2,900 persons. Finland's active reserve count is c. 250,000, split between the Army (180,000); Navy (24,000); Air Force (29,000); and FBG (12,000) (IISS, 2025, pp. 86–88; M. Jonsson, 2024). FBG's personnel and reserves are also part of the FDF's wartime organisation (M. Jonsson, 2024). Finnish conscription trains recruits for 165, 255, or 347 days, depending on their role (IISS, 2025, pp. 86–88). All begin with basic military training focused on weapons handling, field skills, discipline, and physical conditioning. Longer service periods include leadership courses or specialised training for technical and combat roles, building a large, wellprepared reserve force.

To maintain a mobilised wartime strength of c. 280,000, Finland has a system that trains two conscription cycles per year – a January contingent and a July contingent – whereby the former trains the latter (FDF, 2025, 2026). Despite being characterised by an incremental approach to change, the FDF has undertaken notable adjustments in view of Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. These include the 2020 overhaul of the conscript training programme – from call-up to inclusion in the reserve – emphasising cost and time efficiencies, 'coach'-based instruction, and individual responsibility for independent learning. Its design is modular and promises time efficiency through reduced waiting times and fewer relocations (FDF, 2020b). It also adopts a selection process based on matching prior civilian knowledge, skills, and abilities with conscript positions and future wartime requirements (FDF, 2020a).

One of the major changes in the post-World War II period of the history of Finland's conscription system is the decision to introduce voluntary military service for women and the opening of the military profession to them in 1995 (Ahlbäck, 2022; Tallberg, 2025, pp. 15–16). As with many other nations, notably Lithuania, Finland is facing demographic challenges due to diminishing cohort sizes. One consequence is that two large garrisons in Finland – in 2005 and 2015 – were closed.

5 There is, in other words, no specified required duration of service for any military staff category (or any other Swedish employment).

Poland

The Polish Armed Forces (PAF) is racing 'to become NATO's frontline fortress' (Dowell, 2025). It was in 2024 Europe's fourth largest power in active personnel terms (after Turkey, France, and Germany) and fifth based on spending (after Germany, UK, France, and Italy) (IISS, 2025, p. 52). Spending increased from 3.9% share of GDP in 2023 to 4.81% for 2026 (gov.pl, 2025). This figure is the highest among NATO members (Dowell, 2025), which – considering that Poland is the EU's fifth most-populated country – has meant that it has built the EU's 'largest standing army' (Wiener, 2026). The bolstering has raised concerns over a misguided focus on building capabilities for conventional rather than drone-based hybrid warfare (Wiener, 2026) and a 'spending binge', risking a credit rating downgrade of the country (Kość, 2025). In 2024, the PAF counted 142,000 professional soldiers and 42,000 in its territorial defence units (WOT) (MoND (PL), 2024a, p. 12). WOT constitutes the reserve, and the personnel numbers for the gendarmerie and paramilitary personnel are 14,300 (IISS, 2025, p. 121). As of 2026, the total estimated size of the PAF's active military professional personnel is 155,841, comprising the Army (75,338), Navy (7,627), Air Force (23,060), WOT (6,500), and others (43,316) (MoND (PL), 2026a, p. 12). The Army comprises 54,000 soldiers organised in four divisions, with a future fifth division being organised and another, sixth division being planned, but, apparently, well underway (MoND (PL), 2025). Joint military assets, *inter alia,* include logistics support, Special Forces, and WOT (Ottosson & Pallin, 2024).

Poland suspended conscription and transitioned to an AVF model in 2009 (Thorburn, 2024b). However, Poland retains one obligatory measure as it still carries out mandatory medical examinations for all men, and a selection of women. In 2026, 235,000 men and 20,000 women will be called for screening. The purpose of the screening is to assess an individual's qualifications and fitness for potential military service as well as to maintain a comprehensive register. All screened individuals are matched to suitable tasks and positions, and placed in the passive reserve, while volunteers are assigned to the active reserve.

The Polish government aims to grow the PAF to 250,000 professional soldiers and increase WOT's size to 50,000 by 2035, totalling 300,000 thousand soldiers (MoND (PL), 2024b; Thorburn, 2024b, p. 125). According to a new Armed Forces Development Program from December 2025, the target for 2039 is to build a force of 500,000 soldiers, comprising 300,000 active duty and 200,000 reservists (PR, 2026). The plan also emphasises integrating robotics and unmanned systems across all branches and functions (ibid.). In order to boost recruitment to reserves and professional forces, a personnel reform in April 2022 established a new voluntary military service system with a salary in April 2022, aimed especially at young people (MoND (PL), 2023; Thorburn, 2024b, p. 125). The service period is 1 month of basic training and an option to continue for another 11 months of specialist training – recruits in both categories are placed in the active reserve (MoND (PL), 2023). Poland does not have a fixed enlistment and end date, but operates a continuous system. Non-salary benefits include priority for military and public administration careers (ibid.).

Recruitment and retention are additional critical components of the reform and will be crucial if the ambitious personnel targets are to be met. The PAF competes with other sectors in the labour market, in attracting young people, and attrition is a factor even when recruitment is successful. Although c. 20,000 soldiers and volunteers left the Territorial Defence Forces in 2022–2023 (Ottosson & Pallin, 2024), the country's Ministry of National Defence (MoND) reports that measures counteracting the outflow trend are taking effect, that WOT has grown to 42,000 individuals, and that the interest in the voluntary basic military service remains high (MoND (PL), 2024a, p. 12).

Even with successful recruitment, high attrition numbers pose a danger to the Armed Forces' future plans (Dowell, 2025). MoND emphasises that remedial efforts are underway to make the recruitment process more efficacious and that provisions for increased compensation and flexibility in the timing of reserve exercises are being introduced (MoND (PL), 2026b). Poland is focused on reservists and a wide popular anchoring of its defence (MoND (PL), 2026b). The government is also preparing to make available military training for all men, a model that emphatically is not a return to conscription but rather builds on the Swiss system where annual training is incentivised (TVP, 2025). Yet, a more profound concern is that a Polish cultural tendency of consumeristic 'liberal individualism, social atomisation, and anti-statism' is difficult to overcome via volition only. This sentiment is revealed by a 2025 public opinion survey which found that if Poland was attacked, merely 23% of Poles would volunteer for combat (Dowell, 2025).

Germany

The German Army consists of one light rapid reaction division and two mechanised divisions, which provide rotations of a reduced mechanised battalion deployed to Lithuania. The Navy is organised into two flotillas and one maritime air command. The Air Force is organised in six tactical air wings, two transport wings, one special operations helicopter squadron, and one air defence wing. There are also joint assets such as Special Forces and an Air and Space Operations Centre (Ottosson & Pallin, 2024). German Defence Minister Boris Pistorius has said, 'We must be ready for war by 2029' (Connor, 2024). Chancellor Friedrich Merz warned that 'Russia poses a long-term danger to Europe' (BBC Radio 4, 2025, p. 4). Germany is undergoing a significant reassessment of its military capabilities as security conditions in Europe continue to deteriorate. These follow the policy statement by Olaf Scholz (2022) that the continent is living in a 'watershed era'. According to one forecast, by 2029, Germany's military spending will be twice the size of France's (Tooze, 2026). This might be 'reasonable' given Germany's proximity to Russia, the larger size of the German economy and population, and the greater need for military scaling up after decades of underinvestment (ibid). Yet, as Tooze (2026) observes, the 'scale of the divergence is new'. Although the country has committed to strengthening the Bundeswehr (the Armed Forces), decades of underinvestment have left the armed forces with notable gaps in readiness, equipment, and personnel. Modernisation efforts are underway, supported by a special €100billion defence fund, announced in 2022 and which should be used by the end of 2027, but progress is uneven, and many capabilities remain strained.

A central challenge is recruitment. The Bundeswehr struggles to attract enough qualified personnel, facing anti-militaristic attitudes, competition from the civilian labour market, and a demographic decline that limits the pool of potential recruits. Efforts to improve working conditions, career opportunities, and public perception of military service have yielded mixed results. As it stands, Germany is unlikely to meet its longterm military personnel targets without substantial policy changes. Bundeswehr has c. 186,000 military personnel, composed of c. 40,000 officers, c. 90,000 NCOs, and 56,000 soldiers and seamen (Bundeswehr, 2026b). It faces difficulties to reach the goal of 203,000 personnel by 2031 (ZDF, 2025), largely because the soldiers terminate their contracts prematurely. This background has revived a national debate on conscription. It resumes an earlier debate about conscription and the alternatives to it, which emerged after the 1990 reunification. This was important as it indicated a public perspective for which the memory of the National Socialist terror and East-West conflict began to fade (von Bredow, 1992). Germany suspended mandatory military service in 2011, but the worsening security environment has prompted political leaders and defence experts to reconsider its potential value.

Supporters also argue that some form of compulsory service – whether military or a broader civic duty – could strengthen societal resilience and reinforce the link between citizens and national defence. Critics counter that reintroducing conscription would be morally problematic, costly, logistically complex, and potentially ineffective without major structural reforms. The discussion continues, reflecting deeper questions about Germany's strategic role and its willingness to adapt to a more demanding security landscape. In response to fears of history repeating itself in view of the combination of a 'stronger Germany militarily' and the 'rise of the far-right', Mertz justified a strong military Germany because 'We are witnessing now a completely different world. This period […] after 1990 is over. And if we want to be able to defend ourselves, not just as a country, but to defend our democracy, our freedom, peace, wealth in our countries [UK and Germany], we have to do more than we did in the past.' (BBC Radio 4, 2025, p. 4). Although conscription is generally viewed positively (aside from opposition on the left), one significant obstacle is German law. It requires universal male conscription, which would mandate the annual training of c. 200,000 men – a situation which would be both impractical and undesirable.

There is a considerable interest in re-shaping the Bundeswehr based on the Swedish and Norwegian model, especially in terms of its selective and gender-neutral aspects (Swedish Embassy to Berlin, 2025). The voluntary military service enacted in January 2026 is reminiscent of the system in Sweden 2009–2017, with favourable conditions and pay. It aims to recruit 20,000 volunteers in 2026. Defence Minister Pistorius is clear that he ultimately wants to reintroduce conscription but settles on an interim solution, drawing on the Nordic model, emphasising that 'voluntary service combined with attractiveness works' (Kinkartz, 2025). For now, Germany prioritises voluntary recruitment, reserve reforms, and improved conditions of service, but the conscription debate reflects deeper uncertainty about whether a purely professional force can meet the demands of large-scale collective defence in Europe.

Discussion: Possibilities and considerations

In the discussion section, we consider key issues and insights which have emerged in the country-based analysis and which provide bases for recommendations to forces undertaking scaling up of military capabilities with relatively modest starting positions. Table 4 provides a comparative overview of the national military characteristics, including the form of the mandatory military service model and a selection of its design aspects.

The transformations of the post-Cold War Western military brings into focus the two main archetypal modes of military recruitment – coercion via the state sanctioned conscription based compulsory military service model and the volunteer model based on a capitalist labour market mechanism. This is followed by a table comparing national demographics with the share of enlisted conscripts (Table 5).

Table 4. National characteristics and military service design[6]

	Lithuania	Sweden	Finland	Poland	Germany
Recruitment archetype	Coercion	Coercion	Coercion	Market	Market
Conscription periodisation[7]	1918-1940/1990–2008. Suspended 2009. Reinstated 2015	1901–2010/2017–	1878–1905/1919–	Active from 1950s under communist rule; suspended in 2008	1956-2011. In abeyance since 2011[8].
Recruitment model	Mandatory for men, voluntary for women, supplemented by volunteers	Selective gender-neutral Supplemented by volunteers	General conscription Mandatory for men, voluntary for women	N/A (New Voluntary military service in 2022)	N/A
Military service duration	3, 6, 9 months	6–15 months,	5.5, 8.5 or 11.5 months	N/A	N/A
Legislation for women	Voluntary since 2011	Mandatory since 2018 (supplemented by volunteers)	Voluntary since 1995	N/A	N/A
Female participation of conscripts (approx.)	4%	20%	4%	N/A	N/A

Personnel Capacity Utilisation

As is evident in Table 5, Finland trains a considerably larger share of each age cohort (35,5%) compared to Sweden (6,7%) and Lithuania (16,7%) because its conscription system is designed for scale, predictability, and national participation. Nearly all men are called up, allowing the armed forces to process large annual intakes without overstretch. Training infrastructure is extensive, with multiple brigades dedicated to conscripts and a clear pipeline from basic training to specialised positions. Social acceptance is widespread, reducing attrition and ensuring a steady inflow. Sweden and Lithuania, by contrast, select only a small minority of each cohort, limiting throughput and requiring more targeted recruitment.

6 Unless otherwise specified, based on The Military Balance 2025 (IISS, 2025) and Jonsson et al (2024).
7 Conscription for Lithuania during Soviet occupation is not included. Source: Jonsson et al. (2024).
8 See Bundeswehr (2026a).

Table 5. Conscript cohort capacity utilisation per country[9]

	Lithuania	Sweden	Finland	Poland	Germany
Population (rounded millions)	2,6M	10,6M	5,6M	38,7M	84,1M
% males 15-19	2.6%	3.0%	2.8%	2.6%	2.3%
% females 15-19	2.4%	2,8%	2.7%	2.5%	2.2%
Approx. annual cohort aged 18 (men & women)[10]	26,281	123,842	61,890	395,212	757,071
Trained conscripts per year today[11]	4,400	8,251	22,000	N/A	N/A
Enlisted share per cohort aged 18 (%)	16,7%	6,7%	35,5%	N/A	N/A

Finland's model shows how a country can maintain mass mobilisation capacity in peacetime. Should Sweden match the Finnish yearly proportional intake, it would mean training approximately 40,000 Swedish conscripts per year (compared to c. 8.000/year currently). That would be more than three times the stated goal of c. 12.000 yearly conscripts, which is currently planned to be achieved but not until 2035. Sweden thus lags very far behind Finland in terms of personnel capacity utilisation and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future. By comparison, Lithuania fares better and would have to roughly double its yearly conscript intake to be on par with Finland: from the current 4000/year to approximately 8500/year.

Constraints: Infrastructure, Equipment, Military Personnel

A negative factor in scaling up recruitment for conscript training is evident in most Baltic Sea region countries, bar Finland: infrastructural constraints, such as facilities (barracks, shooting ranges etc.), lack of equipment (weapon systems as well as uniforms), and overextended military personnel. Post-Cold War reductions in military establishments simply had the effect that the capacity to now quickly 'scale up' conscription training numbers is greatly limited. With insufficient production capacity, something has to give, at least in the short to medium term. Either training capacity must be speedily increased (which has proved difficult), or consequences will be evident either in insufficient numbers of the current output, or a modified output if larger numbers are deemed necessary. Below, we consider these alternatives.

Towards a Finnish model

In addressing the primary question of which models for conscription training exist that other forces can emulate to increase the volume of soldiers, our recommendation is that a schematic version inspired by the Finnish conscription system serves as a model which other states can adapt for their own contexts. A simplified description of the Finnish system is that it can be divided into two contingents, with conscripts serving overlapping 12- and 6-month periods. In the first six months, the conscript NCOs undergo basic training and branch-specific training. Halfway through the year, a new recruit contingent begins basic training. At this point, the earlier cohort – now trained as conscript NCOs –assumes responsibility for leading and delivering parts of the instruction for the incoming intake. This means that the earlier cohort effectively becomes instructors for the new recruits.

9 Unless otherwise specified, this table is based on the following sources: the International Institute for Strategic Studies' report The Military Balance 2025 (IISS, 2025) and the FOI report Western Military Capability in Northern Europe (Ottosson & Pallin, 2024)

10 Calculated through an aggregate of the share of the males and female proportion of 15-19 year olds and a division by the five annual cohorts in the age group. In the case of Sweden, the source for the numbers is Plikt- och prövningsverket (2024, 2025); it concerns the cohort born in 2006.

11 While the number of conscripts for Lithuania was 3,500 in 2022, the number of 4,400 is the planned number as per the Government decision in 2022 (Thorburn, 2024, p. 112). The number for Sweden is for conscripts enlisted for basic military training 2025 and mostly concern the cohort born 2006; the source is Plikt- och prövningsverket (2024, 2025). According to Jonsson et al (2024, p. 23), the 2020 numbers were: Lithuania, 3,700; Sweden, 5000; Finland, 21,000.

The proposed model addresses several issues constraining the optimal capacity for increasing the training of conscript volumes. These constraints are restrictive to varying degrees for different forces and include facilities, lack of equipment, low conscript training numbers, and limitations in terms of military personnel for training purposes. Our concrete recommendations include expanding training capacity by shortening training periods through the removal of nonessential training elements (i.e. a strict prioritising of 'needtohave' over 'nicetohave'), the use of non-regulars as instructors, using ways of optimising the use of employee work time, increasing the training intensity, focuses on core competencies and centralises training.

Based on consensus, our model's assumed lower limit for training duration is 6 months. The scope of the model's applicability is limited to the Army and perhaps less so to other branches of service. For example, in the Swedish Navy, the conventional assessment is that twelve months is the minimum

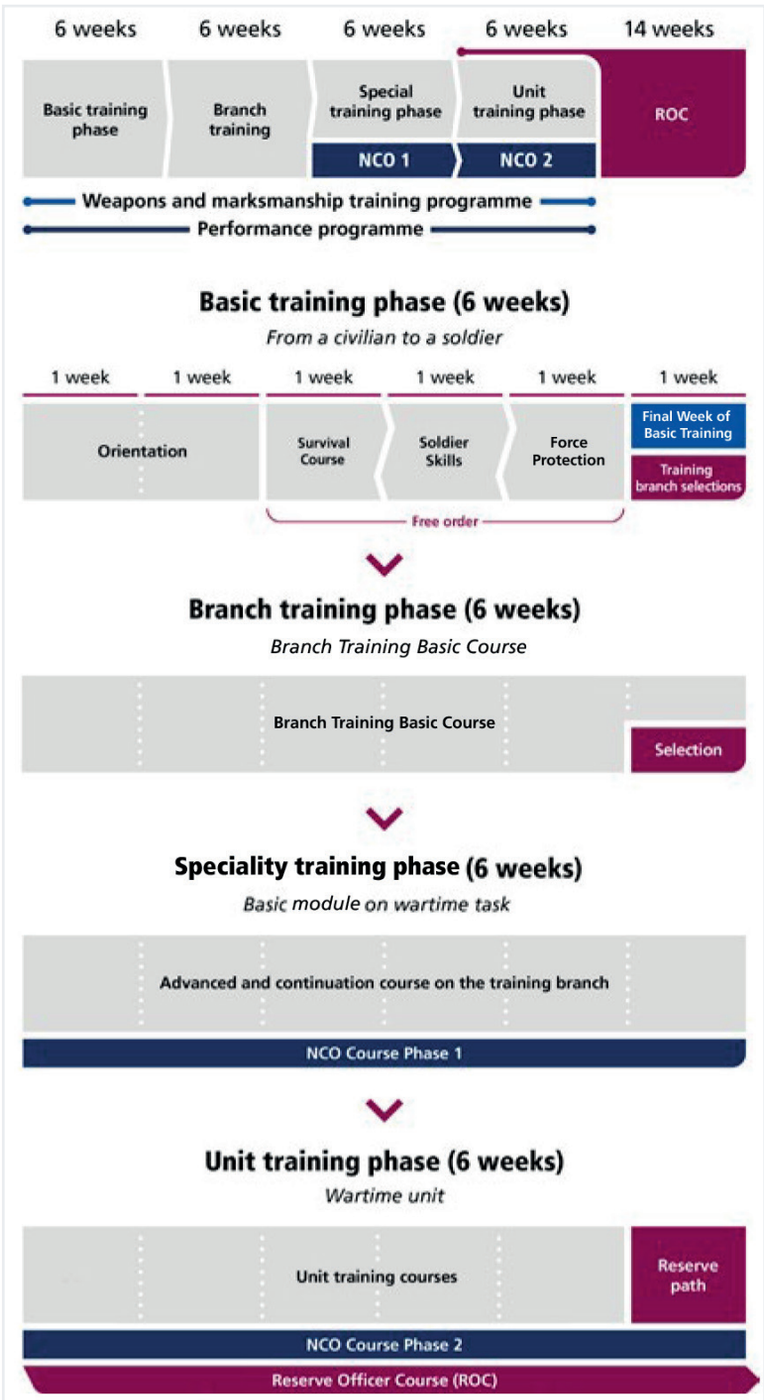

Figure 2: Structure of Finnish Conscript Training

The Finnish model demonstrates an economy of training time (FDF, 2025, p. 12)

needed training period. However, as most conscripts tend to serve in the army, this is the branch of greatest importance for scaling up via conscription. For example, over 60% of Swedish conscripts serve in the army, while merely 15% serve in the navy, 15% in the air force, and 7% in command/intelligence (Olsson, 2025; see table above).

One issue is that the model may not be the most suitable for all armies facing scaling issues. For example, staffing is not the main problem, or even a problem at all, in Sweden. SAF's aim is to increase the annual intake from c.8,000 to c.12,000 by 2035. The number of soldiers is considered sufficient for the current organisation and would even allow for additional brigades if such a decision were made. Rather than conscripts, the bottlenecks are primarily materiel shortages, including battle tanks, armoured vehicles, artillery and ammunition, with considerable manufacturing and delivery delays due to the increased demand from a stretched European defence industry (Granlund, 2025; Sundgren, 2025).

Another limitation concerns the nature of training for subarctic warfare. Such training needs to be conducted under demanding winter climate conditions, that is, during the first quarter of the calendar year (Q1). This means that a training cycle based on two intakes per year is suboptimal, as at least one cohort – possibly both – will be deprived of such training. Particularly Sweden, Finland and Norway must unequivocally be the most proficient within NATO in conducting operations in sub-Arctic climates, partly for their respective own national defence and partly in order to lead other allies' in the development for winter warfare (MoD (SE), 2026). For countries without subarctic requirements, this caveat is not applicable. In Lithuania, Poland or Germany, a double cohort training cycle would be largely applicable.

Towards a Gender-neutral Conscription system?

Another apparent consideration concerns ways to mitigate the decline in the pool from which the Armed Forces recruit by mandating women to do military service. The Finnish case is here illustrative. As Figure 3 indicates[12], the share of Finnish men completing conscription per age cohort has steadily declined by c. 20% in the twenty years between those born in 1975 and 1994 (Tallberg, 2025, p. 10). The official explanation for this is changes in physical fitness and health, but anecdotal suggestions offered include psychological, cultural, and social reasons. A suggested mathematical solution to counteract the decline in the share of men eligible to serve and the shrinking cohort size is to develop a Finnish model, taking inspiration from the gender-neutral selective conscription models of the other Nordic countries (Tallberg, 2025, p. 40). An additional qualitative argument for the inclusion of women in the recruitment pool is the wider variety of expertise it brings (ibid). According to the annual Finnish defence survey (ABDI, 2024), the support for the current conscription model has been consistently high (Tallberg, 2025, p. 13). However, support for the current system decreases to c.50% among Finns when the alternatives include gender neutral military service models (voluntary or mandatory) (ibid). Notably, coinciding with Russia's invasion of Ukraine 2022-2024, the support for gender neutral conscription rose to 30%, especially represented by the highly educated and young adults (aged 25-34) (Tallberg, 2025, p. 13).

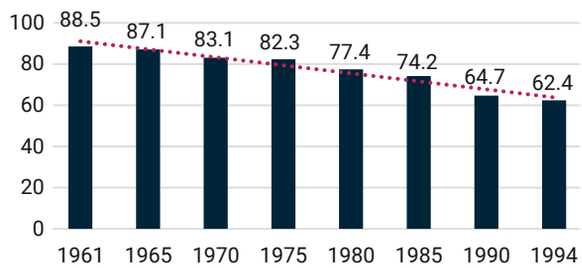

Figure 3: Share (%) of Finnish Men Completing Military Service of Male Age Cohort

Reducing Military Recruit Training Periods: Could Less be More?

How long must military training of new recruits be? This concerns a key reflection of whether it is possible to increase the 'throughput' of trained conscripts by reducing the introductory training

12 Tallberg (2025, p. 10) has calculated the percentage for each male age cohort after they, respectively, have turned 30 – the maximum age for completing conscription.

period to, say, six months. This draws on the efficiency model of training models, such as the Finnish training model.

An interesting empirical benchmark is Operation Interflex, in which Ukrainians undergo basic military training in order to join the fight against the Russian invaders. Interflex (MOD (UK), 2025) is run in the UK with instructors from 13 different countries, and it originally started as a 5-week activity. After feedback from the Ukrainian military the training was later extended to 7 weeks, which means it was extended by a not insignificant 40%. Clearly, that decision was evidence based, as it meant higher quality training but reduced numerical output for the Ukrainian military. This does not, of course, mean that 7 weeks would be the optimal training time for conscripts in peacetime, but it does provide a 'bare bones' benchmark obtained from a harsh reality case.

Could equivalent decisions be taken in the opposite direction – by shortening training periods? Could training times be reduced by 30-40% in response to an undersized 'production system'? What would it mean to reduce 9 months of conscription training to 6 months? The latter, 6 months, would still be between three and four times the Interflex training (MOD (UK), 2025).

To use Sweden as an empirical case, the post-Cold War reforms meant that 'Basic Military Training' at one point was reduced to 3 months – an entry gate for those who wished to seek employment in the Armed Forces. But soldier training expanded during the 'All Volunteer Force' period (2010-2017) as the full-time soldiers in barracks had plenty of time to undergo additional training. Every soldier was trained on every piece of unit equipment, and new skills were added to the mandatory training program. This legacy and some of these additions remain even today, almost 10 years after conscription was reactivated. Artillery and Air Defence soldiers now (like everybody else) undergo compulsory hand-to-hand combat training, unlike during the Cold War. The former emphasis on Afghanistan-type missions has led to a generally increased emphasis on light infantry training, also in branches that will arguably be much more effective using their main weapons (or other) systems. Under the current training regime, a conscript wanting to serve on a Navy ship or in an underground Air Force Command and Control function still must spend several weeks completing what is largely basic infantry training. While arguably of some value, such training commits scarce establishment resources without adding a clearly relevant skill.

A Swedish tradition is for conscript soldiers to carry out ceremonial guard duties at the Royal Palaces in Stockholm and Drottningholm. These 'Royal Guards' (*Högvakten*) duties are fulfilled for only a few days but require weeks of ceremonial preparation training with extremely limited battlefield relevance. An alternative solution would be to organise the guards of honour immediately after the conscription training's completion. The soldiers would be offered, say, a 4-week limited employment with an attractive pay package and would fulfil the Royal Guard service as state employees – freeing up 4 weeks of their conscription training for battlefield relevant content. Since the Royal Guard ceremonies and duties do not need to be trained at a barracks, the activity could be completed elsewhere, freeing up scarce military infrastructure for new conscripts.

A rough estimate would be that removing non-essential training novelties plus reorganising the Royal Guard activity as suggested above would allow for a 6-7 week shortening of conscription training. This provides a suggestion on how training could be adapted to allow for increased output, given capacity constraints. Can training be substantially reduced? The experiences from the Finnish case and the emergency training of Ukrainian soldiers raise the possibility of something akin to the law of diminishing returns after a certain amount of military training. Ukraine decided that the optimum was 7 weeks. One possible counter-argument against attempts to shorten conscription is that longer periods provide more time to incorporate training exercises, in order to foster joint learning. However, as significant numbers of the recruits will continue their military careers either as officers or full-time soldiers, the future wartime organisation will differ significantly from the one planned at the time of basic training. Therefore, some of the joint learning will be developed in groups which will never serve together again. Thus, an argument could be made that reducing some field exercise training would not seriously hamper wartime unit capability. However, one important reservation against such measures is that field exercises often provide the most valuable learning opportunities for military personnel, irrespective of their future organisational affiliation.

Increasing Training Capacity?

An alternative to relying exclusively on sharply reduced training times would be to think outside the box in terms of short-term constraints. Could current capacity limitations somehow be mitigated? *Interflex* is relevant here as Sweden switched from initially using regular officers and soldiers as instructors to increasingly turning to (part-time) Home Guard officers and soldiers for the same task, both with very good quality according to the Ukrainian military. The example illustrates that if military needs are really prioritised, reinforcements can be available by calling on reservists. Reservists, officers or soldiers/seamen, have undergone military training and can be called into active service for a set period of time. Reservists can have a background as an ex-regular, as a reserve officer, or as an ex-conscript. It normally requires some organisational administrative effort to put reservists on active duty, but the enhanced training capacity over a few years of service will quickly supersede that initial cost. One of the main obstacles is cultural, as professional closure dynamics are often in play. Reservists are seldom represented in military decision-making structures, and often the category is actively marginalised or simply forgotten (see e.g. Connelly, 2025). The move to a small, expeditionary All Volunteer Force in the early 2000s meant that reserve officers became less visible within the military as their organisational positions vanished and training was cancelled. But with the return of the need for mass in a protracted conflict, reserve concepts are necessary for strategic depth.

A different mitigation mechanism regarding personnel would be to change the current division of labour within the military establishment. Swedish Army captain Andreas Braw (2025; see also Villman & Braw, 2024), founding editor of *Militär debatt* (Military Debate), observes that many Swedish officers are typically busy with peacetime administrative duties (for which they are often not properly trained) instead of making use of their military competence. In an explicit invocation of F.W. Taylor's 'Scientific Management' (SM) approach (Cummings, et al., 2017; Taylor, 1911), Braw provocatively[13] recommends time and motion (T & M) studies of how military officers actually use their time, in order to provide a scientific foundation for improved military management. Hypothetically, handing over peacetime administration to often already employed and numerous HR staff, some officers could likely increase their everyday military professional contributions by a factor of 2 to 3. Again, such a shift would require some initial organisational effort and probably present some dilemmas, but the benefits of freeing up officers for military tasks would likely quickly outweigh these initial costs.

The growing presence of the HRM (Human Resource Management) discourse in the SAF has been debated in the Swedish context and described as a 'contamination of the [military] cleanroom'[14] (Hasselbladh, 2024, p. 245), indicating a view of civilian ideas and practices as encroachments. The spread of HRM intensified via an 'HR transformation' reform in SAF after 2006 (Hasselbladh, 2024; Thilander, 2013), coinciding with the suspension of conscription in 2010 and the introduction of a voluntary recruitment model (Strand, 2023)and many countries have recently expanded or reintroduced mandatory military service. This article offers insights into the contemporary "return" of draft models by exploring how the reactivation of (this time gender-neutral, explicitly emphasising the need for SAF to become an 'attractive employer' (Fredén, 2020). For officers, this has meant that officers are burdened by additions to their workload, created by the HR department. Notably, officers spend considerable time using the HRM software, and instead of being referred to as 'conscripts' or 'soldiers', recruits are approached as 'employees' or 'customers' (Strand, 2023, p. 1182)and many countries have recently expanded or reintroduced mandatory military service. This article offers insights into the contemporary "return" of draft models by exploring how the reactivation of (this time gender-neutral. In contrast, over a corresponding period, the FDF has cut down costs on administrative jobs, a trend which is now discussed to be reversed.

A third mechanism could be to add more training hours by adding every second Saturday. The military facilities are often largely unused on weekends, which means that otherwise scarce capacity

13 Possibly unbeknownst to Braw, the centrality of scientific management to the ideology of management theory is difficult to overestimate. Everywhere the system was introduced it lead to considerable controversy, including strikes and, reports Grey (2022, p. 37), '[…] T&M studies were actually banned in US defence plants.'

14 'Förvaltningslogikens kontaminering av det professionella renrummet' (Hasselbladh, 2024, p. 245)

and/or equipment access rest idle for a number of precious days every month. Many conscripts would probably prefer a more intense 6-month training regime to a slightly less intense 9-month equivalent. Mathematically adding every second Saturday would roughly equate to two weeks of additional training time over a 6-month period. Here, one challenge, which at least concerns the Swedish case, is that the flexibility of reorganising aspects of military employees' labour time, and particularly officers, is constrained by the regulations in Collective Labour Agreements (CLA), such as stipulations about the amount of time off after exercises. Another challenge is that the Finnish experiment during the 1990s with a 6-day working week was experienced as exhausting for both conscripts and instructors.

Streamlining of Military Recruit Training through Centralised Task Specialisation

Another way of making the conscription system more efficient is by focusing on core activities in its training organisation. By relying more on a specialised division of labour, this would mean that the organisation of the training instruction would become more streamlined, as it would free up time for individual units to focus on their core area of specialised expertise.

For example, the functional support units in the Swedish Armed Forces – notably air defence, command and control, engineer, and artillery units – each develop and provide armed ground combat as a component within their respective basic training programmes. As neither of these functional units have combat instruction and training as their primary assignment, this requires committing time and resources which detract from their main area of expertise. This also means that the same or similar training is repeatedly delivered in multiple locations. Instead of the consequent multiplication of time and resource spent in isolated instances, much of this infantry training could instead be delivered by an infantry unit which has land warfare as its primary area of competence and creates a centralised course for all functional units.

Casualty Sensitivity in Different Countries

The capacity for suffering across different countries constitutes an increasingly relevant issue to consider in the transformation of European militaries toward mass force models in the medium- and long-term. It pertains to the fundamental question of 'what makes it possible for a nation to ask someone to die for it'? (Foucault, 2014, p. 246). Casualty sensitivity emerged as a concept in relation to US policy studies of the public support for the Korean and Vietnam wars. It has subsequently been applied to the Cold War and more contemporary wars, such as the 1990 Gulf War, the Iraq War, the war in Afghanistan, and also in relation to European forces. It refers to the level of the public's tolerance for the 'human cost of war' in terms of military death toll (Feaver & Gelpi, 2004; Gelpi, et al., 2005). It is thus to political scientists, policymakers, and international relations and foreign policy scholars the equivalent of 'price elasticity of demand' to students and scholars of economics, business and management. A key basis for this focus is that public opinion is important for political decisions for military deployment (Berndtsson, et al., 2015, p. 309).

With Western armed forces reorienting to conscription, the question of tolerable numbers of casualties is increasingly relevant. This stems notably from the apparent high tolerance level for casualties in Russia, in contrast to a variation along the spectrum within Western countries. What is an acceptable level of Western lives lost in battle? Within NATO, the concept of 'no blood at first contact' has emerged in light of new technological capabilities. For example, the US army are developing ways to use a 'Forward Line of Own Robots' (FLOR), supported by surveillance from UAS (Unmanned Aircraft Systems) sensors, ahead of a 'Forward Line of Own Troops' (FLOT) (South, 2023). The deployment of robots in the battlefield means that 'we don't shed human blood for first contact, and then we're bringing in troops to finish the fight'. Unmanned and robotic technological capabilities thus afford a 'moral responsibility to not trade blood for first contact with the enemy anymore' (ibid).

Such thinking indicates a Western reluctance to accept extensive amounts of casualties, a question that becomes realistic considering the nature of the war in Ukraine. The 30-60 km reach of FPV

(First Person View) drones and artillery has created a 'hellscape' corridor, transforming the concept of 'frontline' or 'contact line' into a 'kill zone' (Melkozerova, 2025; The Economist, 2025). This dire situation means that evacuation, rotation and logistics are 'deadly exercises', severely undermining morale (Melkozerova, 2025). Another implication is that both traditional attrition trench warfare and manoeuvre warfare are undermined. In the latter case, the element of surprise is in such theatres not a viable possibility. This thus poses challenges to the nature that the training of army conscripts takes.

To address this challenge, our recommendation is to facilitate and support the development of increased and broader integration of unmanned technical systems in military training. Such efforts presuppose enhanced cooperation between military organisations and universities of technology, and they simultaneously enable new career prospects based on technological skills and expertise. One illustrative example is 'The War Lab (STRILAB)', which is an 'incubator' within the Swedish Army's 1. Brigade, whose main focus is technical solutions for military problems (1st Bridgade (SAF), 2026). To a large extent, their members are part-time officers and soldiers and, simultaneously, students at universities of technology.

Diversification: The Return of a New Kind of Mass Army?

In the 1970s, conscription was widely viewed as becoming outdated, partly because modern weapon systems were becoming too complex to be mastered within short conscription periods. Professional volunteer forces were therefore considered more suitable for operating advanced weapons and command systems.

As noted above, the end of the Cold War saw numerous European and NATO countries switch to 'All-Volunteer Force' (AVF) models, premised on the American suspension of the draft in 1970 (Janowitz & Moskos, 1979; Moskos, 1977). This entailed a view which located military competence within a professional, technologically specialised force, reflecting the belief that expertise in increasingly hightechnology warfare is bound up with the military profession rather than in conscript forces (Eikenberry, 2013). As also mentioned, such anti-conscription thinking has resurfaced in view of the 'transformative shift' (The Brussels Times, 2026) in Europe's military mobilisation and cooperation over the past five years. For example, one argument by the human capitalist think tank Timbro (see Brattström, 2026; Tralau, 2025) view conscription as unsuitable on grounds that it fails to provide well-educated soldiers' (Brattström, 2026, p. 33).

A similar idea is that armed forces – fragile from under-investment, such as the British – will be saved, and at a 'bargain', by AI-based "Kill chains', the systems by which intelligence is fed to those fighting on the front line' (Carter, 2026). Arguing for AI technology as a quick-fix panacea appears tempting in view of the unprecedented claim that in excess of '80% of Ukrainian strikes are now using drones' (Loh, 2026). A retort, however, is that what is needed is not only technological innovations but also traditional military units. As King (2026) argues, innovations such as 'AI-automated kill chains' are not 'remotely enough' to 'eliminate the requirement for large, robust military forces' because the 'limiting factor in Ukraine is soldiers, not drones'. Rather than misguided technology reliance, therefore, what is needed is a new direction for military competence needs. Notably, such competence is today, in contrast to the post-Cold War debate, offered through conscription as it provides a basis for this competence.

In today's conscription systems, the logic has partly been reversed from previously. Modern armed forces increasingly use conscription as a talent-identification and recruitment system rather than merely a means of generating mass army soldiers, such as riflemen (see e.g. SAF, 2026). National service provides access to a broad cross-section of technically skilled citizens who might never otherwise volunteer for a traditional military career. This is valuable because, as discussed above, modern armed forces increasingly rely on capabilities such as unmanned systems, robotics, electronic warfare, and cyber defence, which demand skills often more prevalent in civilian technology sectors than in traditional military careers.

Although the UK does not have a conscription system, they have recently embraced the need to diversify in view of the technological advancements in Ukraine. In response to the growing need to 'tackle drone threats' a new 'defence-focused undergraduate drone degree' opens at the New Model Institute for Technology and Engineering (NMITE) in

Hereford for intake in the autumn of 2026 as a way to provide defence personnel skills to 'better deter, detect and defeat drone incursions' (MoD (UK), et al. 2026). This is one example of ways of focusing on technological training and pedagogy in response to the dawning realisation that in Ukraine 'drones are causing more casualties than artillery - that's the reality of modern warfare' (ibid).

By selectively integrating technology students into conscription, militaries can identify and employ expertise in software development, data analysis, artificial intelligence, and systems engineering. This strengthens civil–military integration and turns conscription into a strategic tool for technological adaptation and long-term military resilience. More technically skilled types of soldiers will likely be needed. For example, the acquisition of new weapons systems for the Estonian Defence Forces (EDF) is recognised to mean adjustment in the training needs for soldiers, whose updated conscription system comes into effect during 2027 and will include 'combat readiness duty' (ERR News, quoted in Lillemäe, 2025). An application of the NATO principle of 'no blood at first contact' (South, 2023) is, in fact, to educate for drone warfare.

In other words, contemporary conscription is no longer restricted to foot soldiers, but can also include other types of conscripts, such as those trained for drone-, digital-, cyber- units and tasks. Lithuania is an example of rethinking a new type of defence in those terms, as it also considers expanding conscription to include a broader range, notably for technological competencies and tasks.

Conscription's Legitimacy: A Breach in the Military 'Social Contract'?

An important issue concerns the relation between society and citizens, and the demands that society can legitimately place upon its citizens, given, conversely, what benefits society provides citizens in return. As an indication, reformulated as the question, say, to anyone aged thirty or under: 'Because of social change, will you serve your country (militarily)?'. This revolves around a military version of the social contract, the Enlightenment and political ideas and concepts associated with Hugo de Groot, Thomas Hobbes, Samuel von Pufendorf, John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Immanuel Kant. Do young people now feel that there is a breach in the social contract? A negative answer would perhaps indicate that they foresee not getting something in return, e.g. a place to live and other constituents of a 'good life'. This has consequences for future military recruitment, as it approximates the limits of voluntary compliance to conscription.

Universal, Selective, or Lottery-based Conscription?

Finland's conscription model is universal for men, as is Germany's now suspended system. Although *de facto*, Lithuania does not have universal service, *de jure* it does[15] – a decision attributed to LAF's 'insufficient funding, infrastructure, equipment, and training capabilities' (Česnakas, 2025, p. 181), thus echoing Germany's capacity dilemma (Swedish Embassy to Berlin, 2025) – the 2024 legal reform 'allows for a gradual increase in conscription numbers that can nearly reach universal service' (Česnakas, 2025, p. 185). *Prima facie* conscription based on lottery corresponds to a democratic principle, suggesting that there is no discrimination in terms of recruitment and selection. Moreover, although this invokes the conduct-disciplinary mechanistics of Frederick the Great's ideal soldier – the recruit as automaton, as 'something that can be made; out of formless clay' (Foucault, 1991, p. 135) – it does place confidence in a military's training competence, which – regardless of ability – has the capability of turning almost any citizen into a competent soldier. Currently, states such as Lithuania, Latvia and Denmark use a lottery system, often applied after a majority has signed up voluntarily (Kleiderman, 2025; Thorburn, 2024a). The experience from Sweden and Norway is that being selected, in contrast to being picked at random, is experienced by the chosen recruit as something of a distinction – a mark of merit. Moreover, from the vista of the armed forces, the chance to assess and select the most suitable candidate from a pool as wide as the national population is

15 The constitution and other laws state that service is universal 'visuotinė privaloma' ('universal compulsory').

desirable, although it calls into question the ability of the often psychometric selection techniques to 'objectively' assess the candidate's qualities and skills and match these techniques to roles and organisation (Hollway, 1991; F. Weibull, 2024).

Taken together, the comparison between the forms of conscription considered here – between universal, selective, and lottery-based models – indicate that there are other, complimentary, issues to take into consideration when seeking ways of rapidly and efficiently increasing military scaling. These include questions of how democratic states integrate understandings of fairness, merits, and civic obligation. Strict universal conscription models embody the ideal of shared civic duty and the principle of the 'social contract', but as it is premised on sufficient material and infrastructural conditions it contains in practice inherent scalability constraints. While lottery-based systems have the advantage of reconciling egalitarian principles with administrative efficiency, its intrinsic randomness risk undermining the experience of belonging based on validation. While the selective model is more difficult to justify in terms of democratic principles and confidence in the training organisation's own abilities, from the vantage point of the recruits it avoids framing conscription as a a purely arbitrary and coercive phenomenon. Moreover, it offers both the ability to make merit-based appointments and cultivating a competence-based shared esprit de corps. The above aspects constitute some of the central considerations for decision-makers to evaluate.

Scaling Elastics: Scaling Up *and* Scaling Down?

We have presented viable recommendations for enabling relatively rapid increases in troop volume and military capability, mainly through conscription systems. This might be reconceptualised in terms of affixing 'scalability' to martial matters – a tendency following the term's establishment via microeconomics and ICT entrepreneurship (Zijderveld et al., 2025b). However, scepticism over 'scalable armed forces' may be warranted as, in some respects, the concept belongs within the 'fashionable' relabelling jargon of the security organisational vernacular. Yet, here the concept is helpful as it illuminates the question of elastic proportionality – that military size, form, and content of capabilities (personnel, infrastructure, materiel, skills and knowledge) are deployable at a scale that corresponds to that of the 'threat context' (Zijderveld et al., 2025a, p. 23). In view of the current European debate and threat perception, the will to 'scale up' appears to be a matter-of-course, but is the reverse true? What happens when threat perception de-escalates? For 'scalable' armed forces implies that it 'can both scale up (grow both qualitatively and quantitatively) and scale down (shrink) and thus adapt to the threat context.' (Zijderveld et al., 2025a, p. 23). This means that decisions to scale up such organisations come with an in-built design principle of a contingent preparedness to scale down, and vice versa.

While it is impossible to scale up resource commitments indefinitely, no one appears to be discussing the ultimate need for reductions. Today, European political cultures appear not to design their armed forces for a future when the up-scaled trajectory needs reversing. Just as the scaling down in the 1990s led several states with weakened armed forces, European militaries may, in the next few decades, have disproportionally bloated forces to the threat situation. For example, the size of the current British army has been heavily reduced since the Cold War – estimated to be able to field little 'more than 10,000 combat troops' (Carter, 2026), prompting the question if it is as easy to scale down as up?

Truly 'scalable armed forces' need to consider this elasticity principle in both directions. The case of Sweden reveals that this principle is not fully heeded, as its Fortifications Agency has embarked on a comprehensive expansion of its facilities through building and land acquisitions for training areas, airfields, lodgings and offices, new constructions, including new regimental areas across the country (e.g. in Falun, Sollefteå, Falun, Kristinehamn, Gotland and Östersund). For example, at the Military Academy Karlberg in Stockholm, extensions and new buildings are constructed to cater for the recent rapid growth in student numbers (DN, 2026), yet without considering the potential redundancy of these facilities in a future scaled-down military. The principle of 'dual use' is thus of relevance when considering scaling up. Rather than new buildings, scaling forces can consider using technology and infrastructure that serves dual - civilian and military – use, to enable reuse as the threat perception de-escalates.

Concluding remarks

As previously stated, this report does not constitute a comprehensive overview. Instead, what it aims to do is to offer some principles, insights and lessons for Baltic Sea region countries which, now or in the near future, want to rapidly increase their militaries, based on conscription. Our analysis suggests that, in view of the post-Cold War reductions in defence capabilities and materiel, that ambition appears likely to be undertaken while facing a number of constraints. This report tries to outline a number of these constraints and also suggests ways of mitigating them, foremost in terms of trade-offs. In concluding summary, these recommendations are:

- Increase training capacity by employing non-regular military personnel;
- Intensify training by adding more hours per week;
- Streamline training by prioritising core combat competencies and eliminating excessive generic content, 'add-ons' and ceremonial activities;
- Employ a 6-month basic training regime, allowing for the processing of *two* cohorts per calendar year;
- Develop cooperation between the military and universities of technology and offer conscripts career prospects in technology development.

It is our hope that the contents of the report can provide some food for thought for decision-makers during a period where long-term plans are increasingly being revised and force structures are reevaluated based on analysis of several ongoing and recent armed conflicts.

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