



POLICY PAPER

CONSCRIPTION IN ESTONIA AND GEORGIA

LESSONS FROM AND FOR SMALL-STATE PEERS

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INTRODUCTION

For several centuries, conscription service has been intertwined with national sovereignty and statehood. The French Revolution had introduced the ‘mass army’ concept, superior to chivalry and territorial defence and protection of sovereignty became a cross-class obligation for all citizens – not a duty for the selected few.¹ Conscripted armies have long served as a ‘melting pot’ for multi-ethnic and multi-faith societies on their way towards a nation-state.²

By the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, however, protection of one’s homeland had morphed into a political concept that produced total mobilisation systems and soon culminated in the two world wars. The end of World War II brought about a gradual abolishment of conscription service in the west, while the post-Iron Curtain peace dividend resulted in cutting defence expenditures.

Modern capabilities and operational concepts redefined military strength and capacity to go beyond a manpower function. What followed was a silent revolution in defence policy – “a shift in the role of armed forces more generally, with broad technological, geostrategic, and societal changes challenging the utility and legitimacy of previous systems of military organisation, particularly those based around mass armies and conscription.”³

NATO’s collective defence and the US’s role as a security guarantor relaxed Europe and encouraged local political establishments to deprioritise defence spending and channel the

spared funds into economic projects and social programmes. While engaging only in smaller tactical counter-terrorist operations, many Allies halted conscription and transitioned to the All-Volunteer Forces (AVF).

Yet, the tides have been turning again. With interventionist Russia and increasingly assertive China, their small democratic neighbours are wary of a potential territorial conflict with larger authoritarian adversaries, in which “the fate, perhaps even the existence, of the nation might be at stake.”⁴ And a full year into Russia’s unprovoked invasion of Ukraine, conscription is again a relevant subject, with many nations seriously debating whether to bring the mandatory military service back and – more importantly – how to reform it.⁵

Acknowledging the reality of limited human resources, many have been moving towards a ‘comprehensive national defence’ – the opposite of the standing army approach

To mitigate big threats to small states’ national security, armed forces need to be flexible, mobile, and cost-efficient. Thus, acknowledging the reality of limited human resources, many have been moving towards a ‘comprehensive national defence’ – an operational concept that is the opposite of the standing army approach.

When it comes to small states, effective resource distribution and management are key. First, it requires maintaining and advancing critical capabilities. Second, it calls for an increased coordination between the state – primarily defence and security agencies – and civil society.⁶ Third, it relies on well-trained reservists or volunteers.⁷

This paper studies Estonia’s experience, reflects on Georgia’s compulsory military service, and draws the lessons that small states with larger aggressive neighbours should learn from each other.

¹ Birgül Demirtaş, “Understanding Turkish Perception of Conscription and Reluctance to Reform: A Westphalian Approach in a Post-Westphalian World?,” *Iran & the Caucasus* 16, no. 3 (2012): 355–68.

² Michel Louis Martin and Bernard Boene, “Chapter 4: France: In the Throes of Epoch-Making Change,” in *The Postmodern Military: Armed Forces after the Cold War*, eds. Charles C. Moskos, John Allen Williams, and David R. Segal, 1st edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 56–71.

³ Anthony Forster, Timothy Edmunds, and Andrew Cottey, “Introduction: The Professionalisation of Armed Forces in Postcommunist Europe,” in *The Challenge of Military Reform in Postcommunist Europe: Building Professional Armed Forces, One Europe or Several?* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2002), 1.

⁴ James J. Sheehan, “The Future of Conscription: Some Comparative Reflections,” *Daedalus* 140, no. 3 (2011): 113.

⁵ Matthias Bieri, “Military Conscription in Europe: New Relevance,” *CSS Analyses in Security Policy* 180 (2015).

⁶ Ministry of Defence of Republic of Estonia, *National Security Concept 2017*, (Tallinn, Ministry of Defence, 2017).

⁷ Ramon Loik, “Volunteers in Estonia’s Security Sector: Opportunities for Enhancing Societal Resilience,” *The International Centre for Defence and Security*, June 2020, 31.

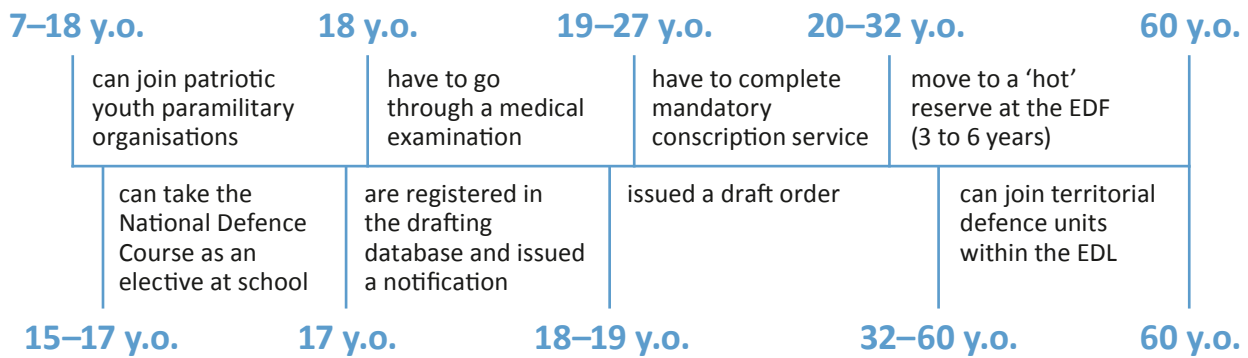


Figure 1. A Citizen's Lifecycle in National Defence

1. ESTONIA – A CITIZEN'S LIFE-CYCLE IN NATIONAL DEFENCE

Estonia approaches national defence in terms of social cohesion. The cornerstone of its national defence is the population's will to defend the country – each citizen can and should contribute to their nation's security by non-military means. Comprehensive national defence in Estonia combines various formats (see Figure 1: A Citizen's Life Cycle in National Defence).

This framework allows for much stronger civil-military relations in society. For instance, the Public Opinion on National Defence 2022 revealed that 56% of those polled had at least some experience with the conscription service through family or friends. 37% and 36% had reservist training in the Estonian Defence Forces (EDF) and Estonian Defence League (EDL), respectively; 26% went through active-duty military service in the EDF. 29% attended national defence classes in high school, while 29% participated in patriotic youth paramilitary organisations.

In 2022, 88% of Estonians supported professional service people.⁸ Moreover, Estonia reported record-high recruitment into active-duty service in 2020. In the same year, 52% of women who had completed conscription service chose to continue their career in the military.⁹ Such a high level of

public confidence and popularity also means the recruitment process is more selective and career-oriented, with a growing sense of occupational consciousness.

1.1. UNDERSTANDING DEFENCE FORCES, DEFENCE LEAGUE, AND TERRITORIAL DEFENCE

The **Estonian Defence Forces** (EDF) are part of a national executive authority under the Ministry of Defence (MoD). The EDF is structured according to the principle of a reserve force. In peacetime, the EDF ensures the development of military capabilities, which allows for a rapid and flexible response to potential threats while retaining coordinated control in case of an unexpected attack by superior forces. The EDF maintains a high level of combat readiness (that relies on a mobilisation system, conscription service, and reserve units) domestically and participates in NATO- and UN-led missions abroad.

High mobilisation readiness is a direct consequence of well-trained volunteers and reservists

High mobilisation readiness, in turn, is a direct consequence of well-trained volunteers and reservists in the **Estonian Defence League** (EDL). The EDL is a voluntary national defence organisation that operates under the MoD umbrella and is organised in accordance with military principles (for instance, its members possess weapons and participate in military exercises on a regular basis). In 2022, over 80% of Estonian citizens approved of the EDL and believed that “the most important duties of the

⁸ Estonian Research Centre, *Public Opinion on National Defence 2022* (Tallinn: Eesti Uuringukeskus OÜ, May 2022).

⁹ Defence Resource Agency of Republic of Estonia, *Kaitseväekohustuse täitmises riigis 2021* [Fulfilment of military service obligations in the country] (Tallinn: Defence Resource Agency, 2021).

League are preparing for the organised defence of the population in the event of emergency situations, participating in rescue activities in the event of accidents or catastrophes and the constant readiness for military defence of the state.”¹⁰

The EDL is divided into four territorial defence regions (Northern, Eastern, Southern, and Western); each of them contains 15 districts (similar to Estonia’s administrative division) that are equivalent to a battalion. All districts have **territorial defence units** (light infantry platoons or companies). They are staffed by reservists who have already completed their conscription duty, with many of them having served in active ‘hot’ reserve. During wartime, territorial defence units do not conduct joint or combined defence operations with the EDF but are tasked with protecting their locality (country, town, village, etc.) and disrupting the enemy supply chain and logistical lines by using tactics of asymmetric and irregular warfare.

Teaching the basics of national defence from an early age increases military socialisation in the long term

1.2. PATRIOTIC EDUCATION – LAYING THE GROUNDWORK

In contrast to indoctrination that breeds militarism in societies, educating youngsters about the fundamentals of the national defence system conditions them to function as productive members of society in adulthood.¹¹ Estonians can start their patriotic education from the age of seven (see Figure 1). There are two voluntary youth paramilitary organisations under the EDL umbrella: **Young Eagles** (*Noored Kotkad*) for boys and **Home Daughters** (*Kodutütred*) for girls. Both teach Estonian history and civic education, organise recreational hiking and camping trips, and pay attention to developing physical abilities in children. Teaching the basics of national defence from an early age

increases military socialisation in the long term. Youth organisations and schools with defence education have proven to be far more important than parents in shaping children’s political orientations and awareness of national interests.¹²

Additionally, **national defence courses** are available at the upper secondary and vocational school levels as an elective module. In the 2022 academic year, about 5 900 students took the national defence course offered at 156 schools (about 78.5% of all Estonian general education institutions). The course is structured to combine classroom activities with outdoor camps and field trips. Instructors are trained by the Estonian MoD in partnership with Tallinn University.

Surveys indicate that individuals who have completed the national defence course perform better during conscription service and exhibit a higher enthusiasm for national defence. Over 80% of Estonians are in favour of the opportunity to learn about national defence in all secondary education institutions. It is worth noting that girls who joined the conscription service claim that it was the national defence course that initially motivated them. In other words, it is assumed that many would not have considered entering military service had they not been exposed to national defence training.

Many would not have considered entering military service had they not been exposed to national defence training

1.3. REINVENTING CONSCRIPTION IN THE 21ST CENTURY – ONE SIZE DOES NOT FIT ALL

Compulsory military service in Estonia is conducted on the territorial principle and has two directions: one is conscription (from eight to eleven months), and the other is alternative service (one year). Some argue that the period

¹⁰ Estonian Research Centre, *Public Opinion on National Defence 2022*.

¹¹ Ronald R. Krebs, “A School for the Nation? How Military Service Does Not Build Nations, and How It Might,” *International Security* 28, no. 4 (2004): 85–124.

¹² Barry R. Posen, “Nationalism, the Mass Army, and Military Power,” *International Security* 18, no. 2 (1993): 80–124.

of the draft should be extended for up to two years.¹³

The **Defence Resources Agency** is a subordinate organisation of the MoD that is in charge of the conscription procedure. It also recruits personnel for active duty and provides an overview of the state's mobilisation pool. Having reached seventeen years of age, male citizens are listed in the drafting database,

The best time to undergo mandatory military service is immediately upon graduating from high school so that it does not intervene with one's transition into adulthood

issued a notification, pass the medical examination, and present their personal preferences regarding the time and location of their future service. Although university students can defer, the best time to undergo mandatory military service is immediately upon graduating from high school so that it does not intervene with one's transition into adulthood.

Annually, the Land Forces take the biggest share of conscripts. 2 600 of them serve in the infantry, with the majority assigned to the 1st and the 2nd Infantry Brigades that are staffed mainly by the 'hot' reserve (i.e., those who recently finished conscription); whereas 100 serve in the Navy. 800 conscripts serve in the the Cyber Command, Special Operation Forces, and Support Command. As of now, only the Estonian Air Force does not have conscripts.

During compulsory military service, conscripts acquire the basic knowledge and training necessary for them to act as specialists in wartime military units and fight as members of a consolidated team. The duration depends on the specialty (such as communications, reconnaissance, anti-tank, artillery, engineer corps, air defence, and military police). One of the most important philosophies in the Estonian military is that NCOs and officers treat conscripts with dignity and as their future colleagues. They are encouraged to socialise together off duty, which further strengthens the bond within the units.

The compulsory military service starts with a uniform twelve-week-long Soldier's basic course and is followed by a six-week-long Soldier's specialty basic course that terminates with a three-week combat pair course. Then, conscripts undertake a seventeen-week-long unit course. In addition, it is possible to participate in multinational exercises within the framework of international military cooperation. After the Unit course, conscripts whose specialty is infantry finish their **eight-month compulsory military service** and are moved to high-readiness units as reservists. When sent to the reserve, they make up one reserve unit led by the same commanders. At the end of every training cycle, a brigade-level exercise "Spring Storm" is conducted to evaluate the units.

The **eleven-month training option** envisages longer speciality courses in the Land Forces, (such as communications, reconnaissance, anti-tank, artillery, engineer corps, air defence, and military police). It allows conscripts to take junior non-commissioned officer (NCO) courses or reserve officer courses, pass signals and IT training, or serve in the Navy (where the military specialist course is replaced by the navy module for seaman's basic training).

The Junior NCO training course is eight weeks long and is divided into two parts. The first half is a four-week-long NCO Basic course that gives future NCOs the kernel knowledge necessary for a squad leader in peacetime and wartime. The second half is Junior NCO Speciality courses. It supplements future NCOs with knowledge in the tactics of squad combat (defence, attack, guerrilla war, and ambush), instruction skills, military psychology, leadership, combat engineering, medicine, and communications. The Junior NCO course ends with an examination to select suitable candidates for the reserve officer courses. Junior NCOs can then continue their studies at the EDF Battle School and apply to the Estonian Military Academy.

Two times per year, 40 '**cyber conscripts**' are recruited to serve in the Cyber Command in a supporting role to reinforce IT security by assisting both active-duty military personnel and civilian employees. All 'cyber conscripts' first have to pass the SBC and then progress

¹³ R. D. Hooker Jr., *How to Defend the Baltic States* (Washington, D.C.: The Jamestown Foundation, October 2019), 54.

to the cyber specialist courses. However, their recruitment and selection processes are more demanding.¹⁴ Since 2019, a dedicated ten-week cyber NCO speciality course has been added; the training curriculum includes IT development, information systems, business continuity management for IT services, recovery, backup, and user management.

In addition to a military profession, military service provides knowledge and experience, as well as professional skills and certifications that are applicable in civilian life and open new career paths, such as a category C, D, and E motor vehicle driver's license. Paramedic training opens a new career path and allows one to immediately start working as a licensed paramedic at any emergency ward. Furthermore, the courses train conscripts in logistics and communications to become radio and wire specialists. The most important of all, of course, is training in cyber security which provides the basic tool- and skillset necessary to enter the most in-demand profession in today's job market.

In compliance with international law, the legal basis for conscientious objection to compulsory military service in Estonia is guaranteed by Article 12 of the Constitution, which grants its citizens the right to "refuse to serve in the Defence Forces for religious or ethical reasons has a duty to perform alternative service pursuant to a procedure provided by law" and Chapter 6 of the Military Service Act. Based on a reasoned request, the Defence Resources Agency may decide to substitute compulsory military service with **an alternative service** based on the reasoned request. On average, seventy individuals opt for a year-long alternative service. Instead, they engage in relief and rescue operations or are employed by social, welfare, healthcare, or educational institutions.¹⁵ However, having refused to serve without any religious or ethical reasons, citizens are deemed ineligible to apply for hunting, fishing, or weapons permits and a driving licence, as well as to navigate recreational craft and personal watercraft.

¹⁴ Martin Hurt and Tiia Sömer, "Cyber Conscription: Experience and Best Practice from Selected Countries," *International Centre for Defence and Security, Cyber Conscription*, February 2021, 34.

¹⁵ Defence Resource Agency of Estonia, "The fulfillment of military service obligations in the country [Kaitseväekohustuse täitmisest riigis 2021]."

1.4. BUILDING THE RESERVE

Annually, approximately 5.6% of conscripts choose to continue service in the professional military, whereas the rest join the reserve. There are two types of reserve forces. The first one – also called a **'hot' reserve** – has high combat readiness. A conscript who has recently completed conscription service is assigned to a reserve unit for a duration of three to six years. The reserve units themselves are formed on the territorial principle.

After the 'hot' reserve, reservists move to the **supplementary reserve**, where they serve for up to ten years and are called up for training every five years. After the supplementary reserve, a reservist progresses to the **general reserve** where they stay till the age of 60. The actual time spent in reserve service varies: up to twelve months for a reserve officer, up to nine months for an NCO, and up to six months for a soldier. This time, however, is stretched over the period of several years; the same goes for training: up to thirty days for an officer, up to twenty-one days for an NCO, and up to fourteen days for a soldier. The EDF's territorial defence units are manned mostly by reservists from the supplementary and general reserve forces.

In peacetime, reservists lead normal civilian lives but continue regular training in camps. In order to maintain and evaluate readiness for mobilisation, additional training sessions are organised. Reservists are called up for training with a unit – where they initially served as conscripts – at a training centre or an EDF educational institution.¹⁶ It is important to highlight that the reserve is not a mass of individual soldiers but subunits that have already trained and practised working together so that they can be quickly assembled into larger formations if necessary.

Conscription provides a pool of manpower for the reserve forces for the EDF and the EDL. In addition to territorial defence operations, the EDL reservists and volunteers are involved in emergency response operations, which have recently been successfully tested at the height

¹⁶ Pauli Järvenpää, "[Preparing for the Worst: Conscription and Reserve Forces in the Nordics](#)," *The International Centre for Defence and Security*, October 2016, 17.

of the coronavirus pandemic.¹⁷ Therefore, conscription is the main generator of trained and skilled reserve that is capable of defending the homeland.

Conscription is the main generator of trained and skilled reserve that is capable of defending the homeland

1.5. MEASURING COSTS AND BENEFITS

Economists agree that it is difficult to compare the financial side of conscription versus the professional military (due to the complexity of assessing the opportunity costs that are associated with conscripts missing from the workforce among other aspects). The economic gain from maintaining compulsory military service is equally difficult to measure.¹⁸ When comparing the monetary difference between conscription and the AVF, personnel cost is the top consideration. NATO recommends a spending ceiling of 60% for the personnel costs in the member states' defence budgets. Instead, the Allies are advised to invest more in equipment and R&D (it also explains why countries in continental Europe have been cutting down their military personnel). Estonia has never exceeded 40%, thus having stayed within the mentioned threshold.

During compulsory military service, the conscript's place of work or service is preserved (an employer cannot terminate a contract with a conscripted employee). The EDF pays a monthly allowance from the first till the last day of conscription. Pay allowance, however, increases after conscripts step up on a rank ladder. Comparing one month's salary of a private conscript service and that of a private (active duty in the EDF) is a complex calculation that factors in other expenses beyond wages (a professional gets 1 250 euros per month, while a conscript receives 115 euros). For instance, in addition to the paid vacation days (and travel reimbursement), conscripts also receive other benefits such as gym subscriptions in the private sector.

¹⁷ Loik, "Volunteers in Estonia's Security Sector."

¹⁸ Bieri, "Military Conscription in Europe."

Service members are provided with a medical examination and regular health checks at the MoD's expense. The ministry also covers the treatment costs for injuries sustained while on duty. Another benefit of compulsory military service is child – 900 euros per month for each child. Worth mentioning is an EDF student loan repayment programme.

1.6. THE OPERATIONAL ENVIRONMENT – RISKS AND VALUES IN THE NORTH

Since 2001, the Estonian Research Centre has been conducting a yearly survey among Estonian citizens to analyse their attitudes and stances towards national defence on behalf of the MoD. It found, in particular, that if Estonia were to temporarily lose some of its territories, citizens would stand ready to resist the adversary within the national border.¹⁹ In 2022, 81% believed that military resistance in case of an attack was 'definitely' or 'rather' necessary, and about two-thirds of the population were willing to participate depending on their capabilities and skills. As to the military risks, 39% and 34% believed that a massive and limited military strike, respectively, by a foreign country were probable. Considering such a high sense of danger, support for conscription service remained at a high level – slightly over 80% considered conscription necessary for the nation and for its male citizens (when asked about young men with minor health problems, 75% of residents believed they should, nevertheless, complete conscription service).

A growing number of females in the armed forces has become a socio-political necessity to position the military within broader societal trends and value systems

The complex comparative study of polling data available to the author suggests that age is a factor contributing to a more positive attitude and readiness to participate in conscript service. In practice, it encourages young people to enter military service immediately after completing secondary education.

¹⁹ Ministry of Defence of Republic of Estonia, [National Defence Strategy 2011](#) (Tallinn: Ministry of Defence, 2010).

A growing number of females in the armed forces has become a socio-political necessity to position the military within broader societal trends and value systems, as well as to maintain the public legitimacy of the military service. In northern Europe, women are part of the conscription pool: in Norway, military service is compulsory for women, while it remains voluntary in Denmark; the same goes for Sweden, where gender-neutral conscription is in place. Norway and Sweden have hybrid systems that consist of both mobilisable reserves and the AVF, where women are seen as equally liable for military service.²⁰ In Finland, content and requirements for women's service are the same as for men; conscription is compulsory for men but voluntary for women. Some research suggests that the motivation of females in the military is significantly higher than that of males, which compensates for their lower physical strength indicators.

Professionalism, attitude, and enthusiasm are more important than gender. 43% of those serving in the EDF have higher education (bachelor's, professional, master's, or doctoral degree). This share is higher in women – 70% of female service members have university degrees, which already is a significant factor influencing the overall picture. Since 2013, Estonian women have been able to join the conscription service on a voluntary basis. According to the 2021 register, a total of 10% of EDF members were women. Despite the education level, women in uniform often serve in catering, medical, storage, and communication services. It has been repeatedly highlighted that medical units urgently need more female soldiers.²¹

Slightly over 80% of Estonian citizens believe that females should have the option to complete conscription service voluntarily. Within the military, however, surveys conducted among female soldiers indicate that few of them (2%) support the idea of mandatory conscription service for women. It is interesting to note

that, in female conscripts' opinion, the volume of national defence training could be more significant. They are also in favour of making national defence courses mandatory for everyone.²²

2. GEORGIA – A CASE STUDY

2.1. MUCH IS AT STAKE – A COMMON SECURITY ENVIRONMENT

Over the last two decades, Russia has transformed the security environment on the European continent. In the summer of 2008, it invaded Georgia and occupied 20% of its territory. In the spring of 2014, it annexed Crimea and installed puppet regimes in eastern Ukraine. By the winter of 2022, it finally upended the old status quo in Europe.

The Kremlin tries to project and assert global power by punishing sovereign states for embracing democratic values. Despite the erosion, fragmentation, and military losses on the battlefield, Russia, remains a potent threat – to its neighbours first and foremost – which Moscow continues to prove on a daily basis by committing war crimes and atrocities against the civilian population in Ukraine.

Moscow's revisionist policy has ambitions that extend well beyond Ukraine and drive Russian forces closer to the borders of NATO member states. It has been almost a decade of provocations, violations of airspace, hostile military drills, nuclear blackmail, and other means of destabilisation – in the Baltic region in particular.²³

69% of Estonians think Russia is on track to (at least try to) re-establish its power.²⁴ Although a direct full-scale conventional incursion of a NATO member state by Russia is of low probability, it will be impossible to deter absent an allied front. Therefore, it is vital to boost collective defence capability and increase military presence at the border with Russia.

²⁰ Tomas Jermalavičius, "Reinstating Conscription in Lithuania: Bringing Society Back into Defence?," in *Security in the Baltic Sea Region: Realities and Prospects*, eds. Andris Sprūds and Māris Andžāns (Riga: Latvian Institute of International Affairs, 2017), 33–53.

²¹ Andres Siplane, "[Women in the Estonian Defence Forces: Motivation, Attitudes, Experience and Challenges](#)," *The International Centre for Defence and Security*, December 2017, 29.

²² Defence Resource Agency of Estonia, *Fulfilment of military service obligations in the country*.

²³ Government of Estonia, *National Security Concept*.

²⁴ Estonian Research Centre, *Public Opinion on National Defence 2022*.

For the small states with limited military capabilities, however, it is just as crucial to develop mobile forces with high readiness and modern equipment, as well as to strengthen societal resilience.²⁵ Relying on the AVF has been recognised as insufficient for national security primarily due to Russia's aggressive posture. Threats coming from revisionist Russia have had an imprint on public institutions in Georgia as well and prompted civil society to launch a discussion on transforming the current compulsory military service and reserve system.

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2.2. MUCH HAS BEEN DONE

At the beginning of the millennia, the Georgian MoD cut the draft to a minimum and established the fully professional armed forces with colossal assistance from the US and NATO countries.²⁶ The rationale behind this transition to the AVF was that the growing technological complexity of state-of-art weapon systems. It was believed that it would take a longer time to learn how to operate and maintain very sophisticated and expensive equipment; conscripts were seen as not fully fit for that purpose. The reform has been largely successful, and the Georgian military has become one of the most respected institutions in the country ever since the Rose Revolution of 2004.

Currently, the Georgian Defence Forces (GDF) has a hybrid armed forces format: a very small number of conscripts and big-size active-duty personnel. For nearly two decades, Georgian troops have been valuable contributors to international peace and security, having participated in multiple peace support operations such as the NATO Kosovo Forces

²⁵ Ministry of Defence, *National Defence Strategy 2011*.

²⁶ Parliament of Georgia, *National Law on Defence Forces Reserve and Military Reserve Service of Georgia* (Tbilisi: Parliament of Georgia, 26 March 2018).

(KFOR), US-led Operation Iraqi Freedom, EU Training Mission in Mali, EU Military Operation in the Central African Republic, as well as NATO missions in Afghanistan (ISAF and RSM).²⁷ Pre-deployment training has increased the interoperability of Georgian combat units with NATO. Peace support operations have generated experience and produced well-trained soldiers equipped with modern military gear – although for counter-insurgency operations only.

Despite the military being well-respected, a career in the military is generally not very attractive.²⁸ Georgia, however, is not unique in this sense – many countries have struggled with maintaining the recruitment and retention of skilled and qualified personnel. The Georgian MoD has been tackling his problem by increasing pay allowance by 20% annually for almost half a decade, providing social and educational benefits for militaries and their family members, and improving living standards and conditions for the Georgian troops – all of it to attract and motivate high-quality human resources. Nevertheless, the private sector appears to be winning this competition. Georgia's economy has been growing at a reasonable pace, with private-

Peace support operations have generated experience and produced well-trained soldiers equipped with modern military gear – although for counter-insurgency operations only

sector wages outpacing those offered by the government. Therefore, recruits who enter the GDF often come from lower-income backgrounds and tend to have lower levels of education; some have been unemployed for some time or could not yet settle in their lives by starting a career or studies.

²⁷ Robert Hamilton, "The Bear Came through the Tunnel: An Analysis of Georgian Planning and Operations in the Russo-Georgian War and Implications for U.S. Policy," in *Crisis in the Caucasus: Russia, Georgia and the West*, ed. Paul B. Rich (Milton Park: Routledge, 2012), 202–34.

²⁸ Adriana Lins de Albuquerque and Jacob Hedenskog, "Georgia: A Defence Sector Reform Assessment" (Stockholm: Swedish Armed Forces, October 2016).

2.3. MUCH IS YET TO DO

Currently, Georgia has a male-centric compulsory military service model, with the conscripts distributed among the ministries of defence, justice, and internal affairs and the Special State Protection Service. In 2022, only 39.3% of conscripts served in the MoD.²⁹ All conscripts in all four institutions serve on a rotational basis every three days for twelve months; they are tasked, for example, with guarding checkpoints at military bases, governmental buildings, foreign embassies, and prisons. Therefore, conscripts do not receive proper training (excluding the MoD that provides basic combat training); they do not – and are not fit to – form a combat reserve force.

The duration of their training is a meagre couple of weeks, which is far from sufficient to conduct territorial defence operations – a critical function for Georgia’s national security

The approximate number of conscripts per year is 7 120.³⁰ The duration of their training is a meagre couple of weeks, which is far from sufficient to conduct territorial defence operations – a critical function for Georgia’s national security.³¹ Instead, the MoD uses conscripts for combat service support tasks and duties, which does not increase the combat readiness level of troops. Besides the low level of combat readiness, it should be emphasised that the conscript service in Georgia suffers from a shortage of personnel and is perceived as unattractive in society. As a result, fewer people enlist every year. It is also worth noting that the allowance is not competitive for the developed economy and labour market conditions.³²

²⁹ Government of Georgia, *Resolution 375: Mandatory Military Service Draft of Georgian Citizens for 2021 Autumn*, (Tbilisi: Government of Georgia, 21 July 2021); Government of Georgia, *Resolution 51: Mandatory Military Service Draft of Georgian Citizens for 2022 Spring* (Tbilisi: Government of Georgia, 1 February 2022).

³⁰ Parliament of Georgia, *National Law on the Military Mandatory Service of Georgia* (Tbilisi: Parliament of Georgia, 17 September 1997).

³¹ Ministry of Defence of Georgia, *Strategic Defence Review 2021-2025* (Tbilisi: Ministry of Defence of Georgia, 29 December 2020).

³² Lins de Albuquerque et al., “Georgia: A Defence Sector Reform Assessment.”

Having more conscripts than professional soldiers is less costly for the state budget but not beneficial in the long term. Deployment for extended periods, away from the national territory, and in complicated operational environments necessitates mobile and highly skilled troops. Conscripts are not trained adequately for peacekeeping or peace-enforcement operations. Moreover, the government has constitutional restrictions on involving conscripts in expeditionary forces outside of their country of origin.³³

Amidst the ever-growing fiscal pressure and the need to prioritise scarce financial resources, transforming the conscription and reserve systems appears to be natural, logical, and timely. However, this decision is not free from scepticism within the Georgian society that traditionally distrusts political establishment. In addition, there is some uncertainty about whether the MoD can actually afford to have reformed armed forces (professional military, conscripts, and reserve force) of such a considerable size and modern equipped.³⁴ This transformation, however, will be cost-effective and will not require building an entirely new system from the ground up.

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COMPARING NOTES – CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Military weapons and technologies are getting beyond the rational limits of expensiveness. The acquisition and maintenance of these modern systems account for big chunks of

³³ Aleksandra Dier, “To Draft or Not to Draft? Conscription Reform in the EU,” *CSS Analyses in Security Policy* 75 (2010).

³⁴ Shalva Dzebisashvili, “[Compulsory Military Service: The Victim of Ignorance and Opportunism](#),” *Georgian Foundation For Strategic and International Studies Blog*, 20 December 2017.

defence spending. And thus, downsizing and prioritising the AVF over conscription service has become a common practice throughout Europe. However, the rationale and cost efficiency of such measures in the long term have been challenged – and for a good reason.³⁵ Conscription remains an effective mechanism to both improve and maintain civil-military cooperation. Moreover, it contributes to overall social cohesion by bringing together individuals from different ethnical, religious, economic, and social backgrounds.³⁶ Conscription is not only an instrument to build an able defence force but also an intense socialisation tool.³⁷ Therefore, reforms in the system and structure of military service – and conscription service in particular – always have a strategic as well as a societal dimension. It demands policymakers have at least a basic understanding of the broader context of such transformation that will lead to longer-term consequences for national security.³⁸

Compulsory military service is tightly connected to citizenship. It is a profound mixture of duties and commitments that binds citizens to their country. It is more than a defence institution but a manner of articulating patriotic obligations that are critical for the survival of the state.³⁹ It is a cost-efficient way to produce a trained reserve force that contributes to societal resilience.⁴⁰ With a well-managed conscription system in place, armed forces are able to recruit from a wider pool of talent with diverse qualifications that benefit the military.⁴¹

Training is a state's long-term investment into an individual conscript's more secure future, as well as that of the entire country

It is worth remembering that benefits from conscription are streaming back to the local communities, not only in terms of national security but also through the enhancement of the labour force and social capital. Finally,

³⁵ Järvenpää, "Preparing for the Worst."

³⁶ Krebs, "A School for the Nation?"

³⁷ Henning Sorensen, "Conscription in Scandinavia During the Last Quarter Century: Developments and Arguments," *Armed Forces & Society* 26, no. 2 (2000): 313–34.

³⁸ Dier, "To Draft or Not to Draft?"

³⁹ Sheehan, "The Future of Conscription."

⁴⁰ Järvenpää, "Preparing for the Worst: Conscription and Reserve Forces in the Nordics."

⁴¹ Dier, "To Draft or Not to Draft?"

training is a state's long-term investment into an individual conscript's more secure future, as well as that of the entire country.

Bearing in mind that the Estonian model cannot be fully replicated – either in Georgia or in any other state – there are, nonetheless, many policies and practices that could and should apply. If adopted, the Georgian national defence system will benefit from the following general recommendations:

- **Engage all the stakeholders** (NGOs, local governments, private sector representatives, and the public) while discussing matters with broad effects on the country and society as a whole, such as transformations in the conscription service. Cooperation in national defence and a community-based approach will strengthen societal resilience.
- **Build up trust and awareness.** It is crucial to invest more in national defence education, which boosts patriotic sentiments among the youth and encourages them to join the conscription service voluntarily. It is essential to support patriotic youth paramilitary organisations and invest in national defence education at the school level.
- **Improve standards of living** by paying allowance that is above the minimum wage and offering other monetary and non-monetary incentives.
- **Move to the territorial principle.** New conscripts should be called up and serve in the units closest to their home. In addition to being more cost-efficient for the MoD and the personnel themselves, crisis management will benefit from conscripts who are more familiar with the local terrain and are active members of the local community.
- **Develop human capital.** When applying for jobs in the public sector, candidates who completed their conscription service should be rewarded and promoted. Moreover, conscription service should be a prerequisite for a career in law enforcement or security agencies (Police, State Security Service, State Protection Special Service, Coast and Border Guard).

- **Keep conscription service only in the GDF** and abolish it in other state agencies. It is further recommended that the selection process should be lottery-based in order to ease concerns about potential bias, nepotism, and corruption.
- **Amend deferment.** While cancelling deferment for university students, the timeline should also be adjusted so that conscripts have enough time to prepare for entrance exams.

When it comes to training:

- **Change the curriculum.** Twelve months is sufficient for individual and unit training in infantry units up to battalion level; in addition, conscripts should receive a couple of weeks of basic training in survival, mountain, and urban warfare.
- **Teach dual-purpose skills.** Offering the potential recruits a more complex educational menu will bring added value to their professional portfolio when transitioning to civilian life.

Finally, the government should utilise the MoD to fight for equality:

- **Integrate.** Ethnic minorities should be offered Georgian language classes, while religious minorities should have their dietary restrictions respected.
- **Eliminate gender inequalities** and introduce voluntary conscription service for women.

The GDF has an extensive reserve force format, including active (similar to a ‘hot’ reserve, consisting of former professional military servicepersons who finished active duty at least five years prior), territorial, and mobilisation reserve forces. One recommendation is to:

- **Invest, upgrade, and utilise territorial defence force.** Territorial defence units should be properly trained, equipped and exercised for deterrence tasks (e.g., anti-armour, aid defence, communications, and counter-mobility skills) to gain time and slow down an attack by cutting the enemy’s supply chain and logistical lines. They should be involved in support and logistics missions

associated with the continuity of critical government services, including in non-military crises.

Alternative service should be prestigious and not perceived as a punishment for those who could not perform military service due to religious, ethical, or pacifist considerations.

- **Modernise, reform, and utilise alternative service** as an instrument to fill the gaps in emergency response when extra human resources are warranted (e.g., during epidemics or natural disasters).

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