



ANALYSIS

PREPARING FOR THE WORST CONSCRIPTION AND RESERVE FORCES IN THE NORDICS

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Cover page photo: Army conscripts attend a base training at the armoured battalion in Setermoen, northern Norway on August 11, 2016 (AFP / Kyrre Lien)

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INTRODUCTION

The modern system of military conscription dates all the way back to the French Revolution in the 1790's, and it soon thereafter became the means of creating large and powerful armed forces. Most major European states conscripted their male populations at a certain young age, trained them, and then kept them in their reserve force, giving them periodical refresher training exercises to maintain their military readiness.

In many countries, conscription was considered not only as a method of building up military defence but also as a way of instilling maturity in young males, creating social equality, fostering social consciousness, breaking down class divisions, and in general immersing the country's male adults in activities supporting the state and its structures.¹

During the Cold War, all countries in northern Europe adopted a system of military conscription, including the Soviet Union. After the Cold War was over, most countries in the region came to the conclusion that they could scale down their militaries in order to enjoy a "peace dividend"; in other words, they sought to save money by cutting their defence costs in order to use these resources for other societal needs. Out went territorial defence, and in came the projection of force in an expeditionary way. In this process, many of the countries dropped conscription and adopted fully all-voluntary or near-fully professional forces.²

The only exception in the Nordic-Baltic region was Finland. Against the fashion of the times, the Finns have maintained their universal conscription, which also has given them an opportunity to create capabilities for participating abroad in peacekeeping and crisis management operations. Finnish conscripts who volunteer for international operations are given a special

training that provides them a solid foundation for such operations.³

In a nutshell, conscription is a time-tested way of providing military training to young men (and now also young women) cheaply. But can conscript forces handle their tasks with the level of professionalism that is required in today's battlefield? Through the build-up of the Russian military, a "new normal" has been established in northern Europe. It can be argued that Russia's swift annexation of Crimea with the use of the "little green men", and a subsequent "hybrid war" in Ukraine, with its military, political, economic, cyber, information and even cultural dimensions - as well as the "snap exercises" designed to improve the readiness of its troops - have set new standards. So, the central question is: Can conscript forces fight effectively in the contemporary environment?

These developments bring us to a set of crucial questions: Can a conscription system produce troops that are able to answer these challenges, or will the answers be found only by creating and maintaining fully or near-fully professional military forces? What are the weaknesses of a system that conscripts most of its soldiers, and what are its possible strengths? Specifically and most critically, how will the countries that have opted to base their defences on conscription be able to maintain a necessary level of readiness for their troops?

This paper aims at providing background material to answering three separate questions:

1. Can conscription produce troops that are sufficiently prepared for today's highly demanding battlefield? How can preparation be measured?
2. Can conscription produce troops that can be mobilized quickly enough to meet today's requirements?

¹ For a concise analysis of various pros and cons of military conscription, see Matthias Bieri, "[Military Conscription in Europe: New Relevance](#)", ISN ETH Zurich, 27 October 2015.

² Bieri, *op.cit.*, concludes that between 1990 and 2013, 24 European countries ceased to practice military conscription.

³ For details, see "[International Crisis Management](#)" The Finnish Defence Forces.

3. Can the small countries of the Nordic-Baltic region acquire and maintain the weapons systems required by today's battlefield standards; and more specifically, can they rely on conscription to train soldiers to use those highly sophisticated systems?

The countries studied in this report are Denmark, Finland, Lithuania, Norway, and Sweden. Most attention will be focused on Finland, for the simple reason that Finland is the country in the Nordic-Baltic region that most relies on conscription to produce its military reserves. At the end of this paper, general conclusions will be drawn on the basis of "best practices", focusing on how relevant the experiences described in this report are for other countries in the region, such as Estonia.

BASIC FACTS AND PRINCIPLES OF CONSCRIPTION IN THE NORDICS

DENMARK

In Denmark, all male citizens between the ages 18 and 30 are liable for conscription. All women also have the right to serve, if they so wish. However, not all the young Danish citizens are deemed to be needed for military training. The selection of who will actually serve in the Armed Forces is made by lottery. As a result, the majority of the Danish conscripts are volunteers.

How does the Danish system work? Especially, how does it select those who are called up for conscript military training?

First of all, the total manpower available for military service in Denmark for the years 2010-2015 has been relatively stable, altogether about 2.4 million citizens (all males and females between ages 16 and 49). Of this total, the number of those mentally and physically fit for military service has been about 2 million. Counted on an

annual basis (as an annual "cohort group", i.e. the total number of citizens born any given year), there have been about 38,000 fit males and 36,000 females per year. For example, in 2015, the exact figures were 37,913 males and 35,865 females. In the same year, 567 female volunteers finished their service as conscripts.⁴

A unique Danish feature is that all young conscript-age men are called up (and all conscript-age young women invited) to attend a so-called Day of the Armed Forces, which was previously known as the examination day of the Conscription Board. There, they are given a chance to get familiarized with various opportunities to volunteer for one of the armed forces' basic training programmes.

During the Armed Forces Day, the young men and women also undergo a medical examination and take an intelligence test. They can also obtain information on the various types of national service available (including non-military options) and watch videos on the training programmes of the armed forces and the Danish Emergency Management Agency in order for them to familiarize themselves with what is available in the armed forces and other security-producing authorities in Denmark.⁵

Since there are more young people than open conscript positions, the process of who is to be conscripted is determined by drawing of lots. The lot numbers range from 1 to 35,000, to reflect the total number of young men in the annual cohort group. First, those who have volunteered to serve are drafted as a priority, regardless of their lot numbers. From the remaining pool of conscripts only those who have drawn the very lowest numbers are drafted, until the necessary number of conscripts has been reached. Those young men with high enough ballot numbers are not called up to do conscript

⁵ Major Enrico Schou, Chief of Conscript Management Section, Danish Defence Personnel Organization, Conscript Management, Personnel Organization, Danish Defence, DDPO-27-10-2015.

service at all, but are instead transferred to a “reservist” category.⁶

There has been a temporary reduction in the intake of conscripts between 2011 and 2014 as a result of the lowering of the actual needs of the armed forces. The annual need for conscripts in the three military services (the Army, the Navy and the Air Force) has been 4,100 conscripts for the Army, 400 conscripts for the Navy, and 300 conscripts for the Air Force during this period.⁷

Military conscripts generally serve four months, with some exceptions: conscripts in the Guard Hussar Regiment Mounted Squadron serve twelve months, conscripts aboard the Royal Yacht Dannebrog serve nine months, and conscripts in the Royal Life Guards serve eight months.⁸ Conscripts assigned to the Danish Emergency Management Authority – of which there have been about 420 in recent years – also serve nine months. In 2013, 19.3 per cent of conscripts were female.

As is seen here, the Danish conscription is very selective. The Danish armed forces are effectively recruited from a pool of volunteers. Conscripts are not called up at all unless there are not enough volunteers to fill the required slots. As a consequence, there are no notable military reserves in Denmark. Conscripts are registered for three years after finishing their service, ready to be called back to the Danish Total Defence, if needed. According to the political agreement concerning the Danish armed forces in 2013, the current conscription system will remain in place until at least the year 2020.

FINLAND

All able-bodied Finnish male citizens, starting from the year they turn 18 and continuing until they turn 60, are subject to universal conscription by Article 127 of the Finnish Constitution. After their mandatory conscription period (165

days, 255 days or 347 days of service, depending on the tasks in the reserves they are trained for), they are eligible for call-ups for reserve refresher training exercises.⁹

All eligible draftees are evaluated in special call-up examinations, which determine whether or not they are fit to serve without endangering their own or the other conscripts’ safety. These examinations take place during the year when the draftee turns 18 years old. Information concerning a draftee’s fitness to serve is collected at the call-up examination from the draftee himself, from a medical examination, from a general aptitude test, and from information received from the other public authorities on the basis of the law on conscription.¹⁰

Since 1995, it has also been possible for Finnish female citizens to voluntarily take part in general conscription. In order to qualify for voluntary military service, a female must be a citizen of Finland and at least 18 years but not yet 30 years of age, and capable of participating in the military service under the same premises as the male citizens.¹¹ The number of females who seek to do military service on a voluntary basis has stabilized to around 500-550 women each year. However, in 2015, a record number of 818 women sought to do military service.¹²

According to the latest available figures, the total manpower available for military service in Finland in 2014 was 1,155,368 males (men aged 16-49 years) and 1,106,193 females. Manpower fit for military service was 995,151 males and 912,983 females. That year, 32,599 males and 31,416 females reached military conscription age.¹³

Legislation for implementing military service is the responsibility of the Finnish Ministry of Defence. Regional Defence Forces’ offices are re-

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.5.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁸ “Denmark”, War Resisters International.

⁹ “Conscription in Finland”, Wikipedia.

¹⁰ “Siviilipalveluslaki”, Finlex.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² It will be interesting to see whether this was just a one year’s peak, or if it will represent a longer term trend. “Conscription - a Finnish choice” The Finnish Defence Forces.

¹³ See, “Finland”, *The Military Balance 2014*, The International Institute for Strategic Studies, Routledge, London, February 2016.

sponsible for all matters relating to conscripts and reservists.¹⁴

Service time for the conscripts varies between three options: 165, 255 or 347 days. On the basis of conscripts' performance during the mandatory eight-week long introductory training period ("boot camp"), as well as their educational background and general aptitude, some are selected to continue their military training in reserve officer schools (RO), reserve non-commissioned officer (NCO) schools, or specialist's training programmes. Only 5-7 per cent of the conscripts are selected for RO training, with about one third assigned to reserve NCO training; both serve for 347 days.¹⁵ A majority of the conscripts continue their training as specialists or as common soldiers, serving 255 and 165 days respectively.¹⁶

As enshrined in the Finnish Government Defence White Books (the latest available from the current year 2016), it is government policy for the entire annual cohort group of men (men reaching conscription age on any given year) to be called up and trained. The latest full information available for the annual cohort group of male citizens is for those who were born in 1983. In that group, 76.5 per cent were fit and willing to serve as conscripts. The percentage of those who were judged unsuitable for service in the call-up examination or who for some reason interrupted their conscript service was 17.1 per cent. Another 5.6 per cent of the cohort group chose non-military alternative service.¹⁷ As mentioned above, annually an average of about 550-600 female citizens have chosen to participate in the voluntary general conscription and to do military service. Altogether almost 7,000 Finnish women have taken advantage of this opportunity since 1995, when military conscription for female Finnish citizens became possible.¹⁸

It is possible in Finland to apply for exemption from military service based on personal beliefs. In this case, the applicant is obliged by law to perform non-military civil service for 347 days. Such work usually takes place in social and health care services, teaching, cultural services, or civil defence and environmental protection duties.¹⁹ Such exemptions are valid only for peace-time.

Training for the conscripts can be divided into three distinct periods, the first of which is basic training. It lasts about three months and concentrates on teaching the conscripts the elementary individual skills of a soldier. The second phase lasts about two months, and it is the period during which the conscripts will be introduced to special tasks required in their military branch. Finally, there is the period during which the conscripts, now equipped with individual and special skills of being a soldier, form a unit (platoon or company), and they are training and exercising as a military unit. This is a particularly important phase of training for the conscripts, since they are now conducting their training in their real war-time units with the unit's real war-time leaders. When they will after their conscript service be called up for refresher training, they are already familiar with both of their leaders and their fellow reservists.²⁰

All in all, obligatory conscription continues to be highly popular in Finland, as it tends to be in the whole Nordic-Baltic region. In national Finnish opinion polls, more than 70 per-cent support general conscription, and more than 80 per cent say that they would fight for their country, no matter how high the odds against them.²¹ This has not changed very much over the years. What has changed is the number of reservists to be called to service in case there would be a need

¹⁴ "[Organisation of the Ministry of Defence](#)", Ministry of Defence.

¹⁵ "[Conscription – a Finnish choice](#)" The Finnish Defence Forces.

¹⁶ "[Conscription in Finland](#)", Wikipedia.

¹⁷ Interviews with personnel experts from the Finnish Defence Staff, Helsinki, 5 November 2014.

¹⁸ See footnote 17.

¹⁹ There is a small number of Jehova's Witnesses (60-70 individuals annually) who refuse to do any service offered. Also, those who have a permanent residence in the Åland Islands are exempted from military service but can attend on a voluntary basis. "[Conscription in Finland](#)", Wikipedia.

²⁰ "Sodan ajan joukkojen tuottamisen ja perustamisen periaatteita", Pääesikunta, Muistio, 5.11.2014, p. 8.

²¹ See, "[Finns' Opinions on Foreign and Security Policy, Defence, and Security Issues](#)", Ministry of Defence.

for full mobilization. Whereas in the 1980's the size of the fully mobilized Finnish Defence Forces was still about 700,000, that number has come down, step-by-step, so that in 2015 it was about 230,000 (154,000 for the army, 20,000 for the navy, 24,000 for the air force, and 11,000 for the border guards). About 95 per cent of these troops consist of reservists. This change does not reflect the number of reservists who have received military training, but rather the change in the strategic and operational evaluations of how many of the reservists would be needed to defend the country in a worst case scenario.²²

Furthermore, the Finnish military has recognized that the system of conscription-produced reserves might not be able to react in foreseeable crisis situations quickly enough. When the situation was reviewed in the 2000's, it came as rather a nasty surprise that even the key units had not been given a sufficient number and quality of refresher exercises, and that military registers were missing data as basic as reservists' addresses. Furthermore, the reservists' occupations were for the most part not even known, let alone taken into account in placing the reservists in their military tasks.²³

This prompted the authorities to take several measures that have increased the speed at which they can call up reservists for refresher training. Under current legislation, reservists must receive notice three months before the beginning of the refresher exercise. As a peacetime regulation this makes good sense, since it gives the reservists plenty of time to arrange their civilian matters in order to participate in the exercise. Or, as it is the case in about a quarter of the training orders, the reservists can tell the authorities that they cannot attend, for in-

stance due to poor health or pressing work schedules.²⁴

To enhance readiness, in April and May 2015, the Finnish military authorities sent a letter to about 900,000 reservists. The letter started by reminding the recipient that "universal conscription is the cornerstone of Finland's defence capability" and continued by explaining each reservist's war-time duties before then closing by asking them to respond with up-to-date contact information, details of their occupations, and other relevant information.²⁵

Later on that same year, the military authorities revealed their plan to move towards establishing simpler call-up processes in order to lend greater flexibility and higher readiness to the conscription system. There was a proposal by the Ministry of Defence to amend the existing Law on Conscription so that in certain situations the Chief of Defence will get the authority to summon up to 25,000 reservists to active duty immediately, rather than letting them know of their call-up three full months in advance.²⁶ Reservists included in such units would be no more than 20-25 years old, would be informed of their placement in such rapid action units at the end of their conscription service, and would be asked to sign an agreement with the Defence Forces to join their units immediately under all circumstances. At the same time, the Ministry of Defence is doubling the number of regular reservists included in refresher training exercises from the past year's 18,000 to 36,000 starting in 2016.²⁷

There is also a voluntary defence organization in Finland called "Maanpuolustuskoulu-

²² "Sodanajan joukkojen tuottamisen ja perustamisen periaatteita", Pääesikunta, Muistio, 5.11.2014, p.6.

²³ It is only fair to point out that such reviews were periodically carried out by the military authorities, but the fact was that the badly needed changes were not made due to lack of resources. Several interviews with the Finnish military authorities in 2013-2015 by this author.

²⁴ Interviews with Finnish military authorities in 2013-2015 by this author.

²⁵ "Reserviläiskirjeet aiheuttaneet pettymyksiä – Sodankäynti on nuorten miesten hommaa" Yle Uutiset.

²⁶ After some debate it turns out that the principle of rapid call-ups will be kept, but the authority to make the call-ups will stay with the President of the Republic, not with the Chief of Defence. For further discussion, see "Varusmiehistä kootaan uusia valmiusjoukkoja – niiden sotilaat kohtaisivat yllätyshyökkäyksessä vihollisen ensimmäisenä" *Helsingin Sanomat*, 25 July, 2016.

²⁷ Tuomas Kaarkoski, "Nykyistä nopeampaa reagointia", *Reserviläinen*, 2/2016. See also Ossi Mansikka, "Reserviläisten pakokertaus kerää kritiikkiä", *Helsingin Sanomat*, 12 March 2016.

tusyhdistys”, or MPK, (National Defence Training Association of Finland) which offers an opportunity for those who would like to receive military and non-military security and defence related training on a voluntary basis. In 2015, MPK arranged training for about 50,000 participants in about 250 training events. Two-thirds of that training was funded by the Defence Forces to support and supplement the training it provides to reservists.²⁸

LITHUANIA

The Lithuanian National Defence System (the Lithuanian Armed Forces, which are organized into Land Forces, Navy, Air Force Special Operations Forces, Logistics Command and Training and Doctrine Command, as well as the Ministry of National Defence and various agencies under it) consists of 15,570 active personnel.²⁹ In 2015, manpower available in the whole country and fit for military service was about 670,000 males (aged between 16 and 49 years) and 720,000 females (between 16 and 49). The annual cohort group was about 20,500 males and 19,500 females, who can also join as volunteers. The total number of reserve personnel consisting of those who had been conscripted before 2008 or who had retired from active military service was about 80,000 persons.³⁰

In Lithuania, universal conscription is mandated by the Constitution, Article 139, which establishes that “the defence of the State of Lithuania against a foreign armed attack shall be the right and duty of each citizen of the Republic of Lithuania. The citizens of the Republic of Lithuania must perform military or alternative national defence service according to the procedure established by law.³¹ By law, military draft was mandatory to all physically and psychologically

suitable male citizens without criminal court conviction between ages 19 and 28, but only voluntary female citizens.

Mandatory military draft was suspended by the Minister of National Defence in September 2008 – four years after the country joined NATO and as part of the focus to build smaller and lighter force for international crisis management operations. Between 2008 and 2012, the government established a short basic training course to attract volunteers who, upon successful completion, were supposed to either become full-time members of the Lithuanian Armed Forces or join the reserves. However, this had proven largely inadequate to cope with the personnel needs of the armed forces. Conscription was reintroduced again in 2015, thus making Lithuania the very first, and so far the only country in NATO and the EU to reverse a post-Cold War trend towards abolishing conscription. The initiative was announced by the President of the Republic and unanimously approved by the State Defence Council in February of that year, and on 11 May of that year, the Lithuanian Parliament (Seimas) voted overwhelmingly in favour of returning conscription to address growing concerns about Russian assertiveness in the Baltic region.³² According to the Lithuanian President Dalia Grybauskaitė, “today’s geopolitical environment requires us to strengthen the army, and to do so as fast as it is possible.”³³

It was also considered that by reinstating conscription, Lithuania was sending to its allies and partners a strong political message of resolve and will to defend itself. Concerns about poor manning of the standing units of the Lithuanian Armed Forces, where some battalions were filled just with 20%-30% of requisite personnel and where highest-readiness units did not exceed the 80% level, played an important role in this decision, as did the diminished numbers of ready

²⁸ See [Maanpuolustuskoulutusyhdistys](#)

²⁹ I owe a great amount of gratitude to Mr. Tomas Jermalavicius, my colleague and friend at the ICDS, for helping me understand the Lithuanian National Defence System. All possible mistakes and misunderstandings are of course mine.

³⁰ See, “Lithuania”, *The Military Balance 2014*, The International Institute for Strategic Studies, Routledge, London, February 2014.

³¹ Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania, [Constitution of the Republic of Lithuania](#), 1992.

³² A total of 112 parliamentarians voted in favor of the conscription’s return, three lawmakers voted against the initiative, while another five abstained.

³³ “[President Grybauskaitė: Conscription Might Remain a Necessity](#)” Delfi by the Lithuanian Tribune, October 8, 2015.

reservists (by some estimates, not exceeding 5,000 personnel).

During summer 2015 conscription notices were sent to 37,000 Lithuanian young men, out of whom about 3,000 - 3,500 per year were to be recruited, using the method of randomized selection by computer (lottery).³⁴ The conscription period is nine months, and there are exemptions offered to certain categories, such as university students and single fathers. A strong political emphasis was placed on ensuring that most if not all the conscripts volunteer to do military service rather than are coerced to do so. A package of social, financial and legal benefits was passed in Seimas, which expanded the range of privileges and benefits offered to those who join the service voluntarily and/or complete it successfully (e.g. those whose service record is marked as excellent receive a substantial financial bonus).

Whether as a result of these measures or due to the surge in patriotic sentiment to protect their homeland against resurgent Russia, the first intake of conscripts consisted solely of volunteers (more than 10% of whom were female citizens). By the estimates of the Ministry of National Defence, about one third of those who completed military draft in 2016 have applied for full-time military positions in the Lithuanian Armed Forces.

An absolute majority of the conscripts undertake their service in the Land Forces, with only small numbers directed to the units of the Navy, Air Force and Logistics Command. For the time being, all conscripts are distributed straight to the units where they undergo basic military training as well as specialist training. However, there are plans to reconstitute the Training Regiment that existed until 2008 and centralize basic training. Force development plans envisage that highest-readiness units of the "Iron Wolf" mechanized infantry brigade which constitute the spearhead of the national rapid reaction task force will re-

³⁴ "Conscription notices to be sent to 37,000 men in Lithuania", Delphi by the Lithuanian Tribune, May 11, 2015.

main manned mostly by full-time professionals, while the lower-readiness motorized infantry brigade ("Žemaitija"), which is currently established, will rely mostly on conscripted manpower.

The updated Conscription Law and the laws mandating the personnel categories and their numbers in the National Defence System initially envisaged conscription only as a temporary measure which would last for five years.³⁵ However, on 15 March 2016, the Lithuanian State Defence Council decided to make conscription permanent, while gradually increasing the annual intake of conscripts to 4,000 persons.³⁶ This should permit the total personnel to grow to 24,000 by 2021, with a total mobilization reserve of 102,000 (out of which 28,000 will have completed conscription within the past five years).³⁷

NORWAY

According to the Norwegian Constitution, all physically and mentally fit citizens - male and female - are obliged to serve in the defence of their country: "All citizens of the State are in general equally obliged, for a certain time, to protect their fatherland, regardless of birth or fortune."³⁸

Liability for military service starts at the age of 19 and continues until the age of 44. It is the operational requirements of the Norwegian Armed Forces that determine the number of conscripts called to do military service.³⁹ In other words, the practical solution to conscription in Norway is not universal, but partial, depending on the Defence Forces' needs: "Expand general conscription to include all citizens, and to modernize and develop the national service according to the Defence Forces' needs. This will also

³⁵ It is interesting to note that by May 2015, already 1,124 Lithuanian citizens have voluntarily signed up for military service since March of that year when the country decided to restore conscription. See, *ibid*.

³⁶ BNS, Baltic Press Overview, 15 March 2016.

³⁷ Tomas Jermalavicius, ICDS, 18 March 2016.

³⁸ Norwegian Constitution, Article 119.

³⁹ "Norwegian Defence 2013" Norwegian Ministry of Defence.

imply a further professionalization of operational units.”⁴⁰

In 2015, the total manpower available for conscript military service in Norway was 1,079,043 males (ages of between 16 and 49) and 1,051,278 females (also between 16 and 49). The annual cohort group was 32,290 males and 30,777 females.⁴¹ The length of conscription in Norway is one year, followed by four to five refresher training periods (which add up to 18 months in total) through ages 35-60, depending on the conscript’s position in the reserves. A small number of conscripts, on a trial project basis, were called up in summer 2013 for an eighteen-month service in the Army.⁴² The conscripts were selected based on physical and psychological tests, as well as their willingness to serve. Based on the Armed Forces’ needs, only 8,000 to 10,000 people are called up each year from among the approximately 60,000 theoretically available.⁴³

Norway is the first European country to draft all women in peacetime. Since the plan to call up women for a voluntary examination for military service was introduced in 2007, the ratio of women who have completed national service has almost doubled. An obligatory examination for women liable for military service was introduced in 2010. The aim was to increase the number of young women undergoing initial military service and basic officer training to 25 per cent of the total before 2015.⁴⁴

Norway is also able to offer the conscripts relatively substantial monetary incentives. Compensation paid for conscripts is about 5,000 Norwegian kroner per month (about 540 euros), with a completion bonus of 30,000 kroner (about 3270 euros).⁴⁵

Currently, all military units included in the Norwegian defence structures are standing units, though not all of them are at their full strength, and consist mainly of professionals and conscripts, with hardly any reservists. The whole defence structure has a total of about 75,000 men and women, with the peace-time operational structure including 11,800 military professionals and about 7,000-8,000 conscripts. If fully mobilized, the structure would include a small reserve and about 45,000 Home Guard troops in addition to the peacetime structure.⁴⁶

The conscription model in Norway is as follows: First, the entire cohort group takes part in an internet-based screening process. In 2014, the total number of eligible young people moving on to the second phase (physical and mental examination) was about 63,000 (there were about 12,000 deferrals). 14,500 men and 7,100 women then went through the second part, out of which 10,600 men and 2,000 women were assigned to units. Out of them 7,000 men and 1,000 women reported for national service. At the end, about 7,000 conscripts completed national service.⁴⁷

In the current model, the conscripts are trained for their war-time tasks while performing their national service. After their service is completed, they will be placed in the so-called CHOD’s reserve pool for 1-3 years. The total service time will be 19 months, with the national service time and refresher training time added together. About 800 reservists are placed in police reserves, while the others find military or military-related tasks in the Home Guards.⁴⁸ In today’s Norwegian reserve system, there are very few actual refresher training opportunities available for those who have completed their national conscript military service.⁴⁹

The Norwegian system is, however, in the process of being modified. A Law on General Conscription for men and women was adopted by

⁴⁰ Norwegian Government Declaration, 7 October, 2013.

⁴¹ See, “Norway”, *The Military Balance 2014*, The International Institute for Strategic Studies, Routledge, London, February 2014.

⁴² [En fremtidig vernepliktsordning](#), Anbefaling fra Vernepliktsutvalget 2015.

⁴³ Interviews by this writer at the Ministry of Defence, Oslo, 18 November 2015.

⁴⁴ Interviews at the Ministry of Defence, Oslo, 18 November 2015.

⁴⁵ Interviews at the Ministry of Defence, Oslo, 18 November 2015.

⁴⁶ “Norwegian conscription system”, 18 November 2015.

⁴⁷ *Op. cit.*

⁴⁸ *Op. cit.*

⁴⁹ *Op. cit.*

the Norwegian Parliament in 2014, and it became effective on 1 January 2015. The law applies to women born on 1 January 1997 or later. The first non-volunteer female conscripts reported for national service in the summer of 2016.

On 28 April 2015, the Expert Commission on Norwegian Security and Defence Policy presented a study, commissioned by the Defence Minister, which recommended that the Norwegian defence concept be based on four mutually reinforcing pillars:

1. National defence forces with a core of high readiness capabilities;
2. Allied military support and international defence cooperation;
3. Conscription, and;
4. Effective total defence.⁵⁰

On the basis of this study and its recommendations, the Norwegian Chief of Defence (CHOD) presented his Military Advice on 1 October 2015. It spelled out the following recommendations on conscription:

1. Continuation of conscription at the level of 8,600 conscripts a year;
2. Priority should be given to conscription from North Norway, and;
3. Trained reserves should be created and maintained by each military service.⁵¹

The CHOD estimated in his Advice that if carried out, over the next 10 years his recommendations would cost 20 billion kroner (2.15 billion euros) above current expenditures. In the event that there is no budget increase, the CHOD recommended that there should be a reduced force structure and a smaller number of conscripts per year. He did not spell out how small that number should be, but there are some indications that

this number would be around 5,000. One alternative cost-saving measure would be the suspension of conscription and the expansion of the volunteer Home Guard.⁵²

To further investigate and make recommendations on conscription, a special Commission on Conscription was also established that produced its report in October 2015.⁵³ The mandate for its work was to “assess the military professional, defence policy and civil society perspectives of conscription, and recommend a future conscription system based on the requirements of the Defence Forces.”

As the Commission on Conscription saw it, “the primary purpose of conscription is to provide the personnel and competence required for the Defence Forces to solve their missions.” Conscription must also enjoy high legitimacy in the Norwegian society. The legitimacy of conscription primarily depends on:

1. The popular perception that it is needed for the defence of the country;
2. The perception that conscripts make a real and direct contribution to the Defence Forces operational capability, and;
3. The conscripts’ own perception that their service is meaningful and necessary.

Legitimacy is all the more relevant, when only about 13 per-cent of the annual cohort actually performs military service.⁵⁴ In addition, 14 per-cent of the cohort group is of foreign origin (meaning that either the conscripts themselves or their parents were born in a foreign country).

The Commission recommended that 12 months of national military service be considered the norm. There should, however, be options of 6 or 18 months of service, with the latter being voluntary and only offered in case there is a military

⁵⁰ *Unified Effort*, Expert Commission on Norwegian Security and Defence Policy, Norwegian Ministry of Defence, Oslo, April 2015.

⁵¹ *Et forsvar i endring*. Forsvarssjefens fagmilitære råd, Forsvaret, 1 October 2016.

⁵² *Op. cit.*

⁵³ *En fremtidig vernepliktsordning*, Anbefaling fra Vernepliktutvalget, Forsvarsdepartementet, Oslo, 10/2015.

⁵⁴ *Op. cit.*

requirement. The 18-month service should be offered in those areas where there is a primary need for standing operational capability and readiness. In this option, the number of conscripts would be limited to the requirements of the Defence Forces.⁵⁵ An experiment has been launched by the Norwegian Defence Forces, in which the 18-month conscript period is being tested, with conscripts being placed with the Border Guards, Military Police and Navy personnel.

To conclude, there is a continuing military demand in Norway for conscription, especially now when there is a growing interest by Russia in the northern Nordic region and the Arctic. As the Commission on Conscription puts it, “there is at present no realistic alternative for conscription, unless there are large reductions in defence structures, tasks and levels of ambition. The current defence structure and today’s levels of threat to the Norwegian society require limited numbers of conscripts with high level of competence and training.”⁵⁶

SWEDEN

For more than a hundred years, Sweden maintained universal compulsory conscription to raise the manpower needed for its military defence. Then, on 1 July 2010, with a slim three-vote majority in Parliament, conscription was officially suspended. Before then, all able-bodied Swedish men aged between 18 and 47 years old were conscripted to serve with the armed forces over a period ranging from 80 to 450 days, depending on the tasks they would have as reservists in the war-time defence structures.

Conscription was not, however, totally forsaken. As a matter of fact, the concept of universal conscription as a means of recruiting young Swedes to be trained for the military defence of their country was to remain, and it could be re-applied, if required, for reasons of military preparedness. However, in case conscription is to

be re-adopted, compulsory military service will be gender-neutral.

In fact, even before 2010 the Swedish conscription system had grown to be notably selective. Not nearly everybody was called to do military service. At the height of the Cold War, almost 85 per cent of Swedish men performed military service, with some 50,000 men conscripted out of a cohort group amounting to about 60,000 men. With the Cold War behind, these numbers fell dramatically in the early 2000’s, with only an average of about 5,000 conscripted soldiers serving each year, including several hundred women since 1980.⁵⁷

By 2010, it was widely felt across political party lines in Sweden that, with the new demands on national security, especially with the new military requirements of expeditionary warfare emerging and with old military threats appearing to diminish in Europe, obligatory military service had become both old-fashioned and ineffective.⁵⁸

As a result, it was argued that the transition away from the old universal conscription system would produce a more functional, available, and flexible defence force that would be readily deployable for far-away operations like Afghanistan. Consequently, it was concluded that there was no need to maintain a system of large numbers of reservists ready to provide for territorial defence. Instead, what was needed was a relatively small defence force operating long distances away from Swedish borders. As a consequence, all Swedish units would be manned by personnel who had voluntarily sought employment in the Swedish Armed Forces.⁵⁹

Voluntary participation in the Armed Forces was possible either for those who had served as con-

⁵⁷ See, for example, [“Military service comes to an end in Sweden”](#), The Local, July 01, 2010.

⁵⁸ The opportunities were still there for those who wanted to volunteer for the Defence Forces. See, for example, [“A Career in the Swedish Armed Forces”](#) Swedish Armed Forces.

⁵⁹ See the full argumentation in *International Defence Cooperation: Efficiency, Solidarity, Sovereignty*, Report from the Inquiry on Sweden’s International Defence Cooperation, Ministry of Defence, Government Offices of Sweden, Stockholm, October 2014.

⁵⁵ *Op. Cit.*

⁵⁶ *Op. cit.*

scripts prior to 2010 or for those who completed an approximately three-month long basic military training programme. After completion of basic training came a trial posting with a mission-based unit or service with the Home Guards. For those who were considered potential officers or warrant officers, a preparatory officers' course was conducted over a period of up to three months. For those who chose to serve with the Home Guards, there were also preparatory Home Guards courses over a period of up to three months.⁶⁰

With the new way of recruiting for the defence forces, the end result was that in 2015, out of a total of about 18,000 persons employed by the Swedish Armed Forces almost 7,000 were civilians and the balance being officers and other ranks in the military services. However, recruiting for professional soldiers was far from successful. It has been pointed out that of the required number of soldiers about 7,500 soldiers were missing, corresponding to about a half of the strength of the Swedish defence organization.⁶¹

In 2014-2015, the pendulum of Swedish defence and national security thinking started to swing back again, and it was argued in many quarters that universal conscription should be restored. It was also clear that the prevailing recruiting system did not function satisfactorily.

At the same time, Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea, and Russian support for the separatists in eastern Ukraine were, in the Swedish view strong signals denoting that the security situation in Europe was changing. These points were strongly argued in the Swedish Government's 2015 defence policy assessments and reviews on the tasks of the Swedish defence forces.⁶² More and more support was given to the notion that

conscription had to be brought back in one form or another. This was strongly supported by Swedish popular opinion. In a poll taken in early 2016, seven out of ten Swedes wanted to bring back general conscription, and 87 per cent of them wanted to have gender-neutral conscription.⁶³

The question of what exact form renewed conscription could and should take is still under intense debate. One proposal under consideration is that out of total cohort group of about 100,000 eligible men and women, roughly 20,000 persons would be selected on the basis of information voluntarily provided in response to an internet inquiry. Out of that number, between 6,000 – 7,000 of the most suitable persons would be conscripted. These conscripts would then be formed into and trained as units, not as individuals. After a conscription period of 12 months, they would be placed in reserves. Refresher training for these units would be provided every four years to ordinary soldiers, and every two years to officers and NCO's. Training would be aimed at producing high-readiness forces for war-time service. In this model, signing up for training would still be voluntary but while participating in them, training for war-time tasks would be compulsory.⁶⁴

While the above changes are still being debated, Sweden has already begun to carry out exercises in order to retrain reservists for their war-time tasks. For example, it was recently announced that the land forces were arranging a military exercise for some of their reservists in the region of Norrbotten. According to Peter Hultqvist, Swedish Minister of Defence, about 100 reservists were taking part in that exercise, which makes it the largest repetition exercise for 18 years in Sweden. In addition, he stated that "we are just now reviewing how we could find a combination of professional military service and

⁶⁰ Interviews with Swedish defence officials, November 2015.

⁶¹ Mikael Holmström och Jens Kärrman, "Strikt stöd att införa värnplikt för båda könen", *Dagens Nyheter*, 4.1.2016.

⁶² For example, see *Inriktning för Försvarsmaktens verksamhet för åren 2016 till och med 2020*, Regeringsbelut, Försvarsdepartementet, 25 June 2015; and *En långsiktigt hållbar personalförsörjning av det militära försvaret*, Kommittédirektiv, Beslut vid regeringsammansamträde, 1 October 2015.

⁶³ Holmström och Kärrman, *loc.cit.*

⁶⁴ Interviews with Swedish defence officials, November 2015.

conscription, as they have already done in Norway and Denmark.”⁶⁵

In a recent study that was carried out by the Swedish Defence Forces it was recommended that gender-neutral conscription would be reintroduced in Sweden in 2019. It would not be a fully general conscription as it was in the Cold War years but a selective one. Perhaps as many as 10,000 young men and women would be conscripted out of the annual cohort group of 100,000 individuals. Whatever the outcome of these particular debates, it is clear that discussion on conscription will continue to be debated in Sweden over the next few years.⁶⁶

CONCLUSIONS: “THE BEST PRACTICES”

The new security environment that these generally small and, in military terms, relatively weak countries face in the Baltic Sea and Arctic regions underlines the need for high readiness, modern equipment, and societal resilience. It is also fair to talk about their “total defence”: these countries need to harness all their capabilities to defend themselves, either as non-allied or as members of the NATO alliance. Popular support in these countries for national defence efforts is unusually high: in opinion polls conducted over many decades, more than 80% of the population says that they would defend their homeland with military means even if the success of the defence would be uncertain.

Judging from the defence systems these countries have adopted, the creation and maintenance of credible national defence call for a system of conscription and reservist training. Regular forces are necessary, but they must be supplemented by a structure of conscription and consequent reservist formations. It is also necessary that the military capabilities thus acquired will be further developed and fine-tuned in fre-

quent, regular and robust refresher training exercises.

Voluntary defence and security organizations in all of these countries have a long and honoured tradition. Not only do they give the citizens a strong feeling of defence of their homeland, but they also form a basis for military defence of their countries, in addition to the regular military forces they have.

What can these small countries learn from each other? These are some of the “best practices” that can be gleaned from the ways in which conscription is carried out in the countries reviewed here. With these lessons learnt, the “best practices”, are particularly valuable right now, when by far the strongest country in the region, Russia, has chosen a policy of aggression, military assertiveness and unpredictability to further its interests in the region⁶⁷:

1. Conscription is the most cost-efficient way of producing large reserves and creating needed resilience to a country’s defence. This applies with special force to a country with a small population as compared to its territorial size. To build up defence that covers the whole country, a defence system based on conscription and regularly trained reserves is a must.
2. It is important that as high a percentage of the annual cohort group as possible will be recruited and trained. Conscription should also be extended to the female population on a voluntary basis if not as an obligation. In addition to purely military tasks, there are a great number of tasks that support the country’s societal resilience and where special education and training are needed.

⁶⁵ Mr. Peter Hultqvist, Swedish Minister of Defence, “Vill återinföra allmän värnplikt” in *Norrboten*, 23 November, 2015.

⁶⁶ “Utredning: Värnplikt återinförs i Sverige 2019”, *Svenska Dagbladet*, 1 September 2016.

⁶⁷ On purpose, this writer has drawn the conclusions, “best practices”, on a general level and not specific to any country studied here in detail. A “perfect” defence system would contain a combination of these practices, adjusted to the country’s historical experiences, resources, and military culture, as well as its status of being allied or non-allied.

3. Drafting as high a percentage of the male cohort group as possible (and the voluntary women) will mean that all possible talents embedded in the population can be utilized. This should apply in particular to young people with technical skills such as IT and cyber defence skills in addition to more traditional military skills.
4. As few exemptions from conscript service as possible should be allowed. For example, no special allowance should be given to university students. In general, these students will be most qualified to receive training to become reserve non-commissioned officers (squad leaders) or reserve officers (platoon leaders). If the university students are exempted, that will drastically shrink the talent pool for these positions.
5. The shortest required conscription service-time for the simplest basic soldiers' tasks should be no shorter than six months, nine months for more demanding technical tasks, and a year for the reserve non-commissioned officers and reserve officers. There should be special compensation for those who serve the longest (monetary benefits, easier access to university studies, better and less expensive health services etc.). Also, it is exceedingly important that the conscripts have meaningful tasks to do while they are carrying out their duties.
6. Access to reserve non-commissioned officer and reserve officer training should be made as competitive as possible. Attention should be paid to academic achievements at the secondary school level, physical fitness, and in particular to the conscripts' performance in the early "boot camp" training period.
7. The best time to enter the conscription system would be the year when the conscript becomes 18-19 years old. Conscription should be completed no later than the year the conscript turns 30. In reserves, the most fit and militarily capable units should have personnel who are between 20 to 25 years old. The leadership in these units could be up to 30 years old. After 5 years in the reserves, these units could be rotated to less demanding but still militarily important tasks. Leaders of these units could well be placed and rotated up to when they are 35-40 years old. In some higher ranks, the reservists could be as high as 50-60 years old. Reservists should be promoted only through regular training and exercises.
8. In the last 2-3 months of their service, conscripts should be trained and exercised as whole units in their war-time configurations. In particular, it is vital to have them exercise in demanding, realistic and robust conditions.
9. After the troops have fulfilled their conscription requirement, units should be kept together and exercised together each year for the first five years. These troops could also be used in foreign operations (of a crisis management type) as a unit. This would greatly improve their unit cohesion and thus increase their battle worthiness. Some of the troops should also be formed, trained, and exercised into high-level rapid deployment formations, deployable within 24 to 48 hours. Refresher training exercises, lasting from 2 to 3 weeks, should be arranged regularly, at least annually, for those troops with rapid deployment tasks.
10. In order to improve their rapid deployment quality, the troops should be trained in "snap exercises". Part of the reserves should also be formed into units that could be quickly called up by

the Chief of Defence, if the situation so requires.

11. Some of the troops should also be given territorial and local defence tasks, especially when the reservists are over 25 but not over 35 years of age. These troops would provide the vital task of “deterrence by denial”; in other words, they would be trained, equipped and exercised for delaying tasks to gain time, to bleed the enemy, and in general to slow down an attack. Such units should have high competence in particular at anti-tank, anti-air, signals, and engineering skills.
12. When reserve troops are called back to refresher training exercises, it should happen in their war-time formations. Refusal to participate in these exercises should be possible only under the strictest of conditions, such as: if the reservist is living abroad; if his health condition has badly deteriorated (a medical statement by a certified medical doctor should always be required); or if the reservist’s skills could be better used in some other task. Particular attention should be given to those reservists who have high IT and cyber skills.
13. A follow-up system to monitor reservists’ life after the conscription period should be developed, and reservists should be required to inform military authorities of any changes to their address, contact details, or place of employment, and to notify them of any special skills acquired after the conscription period.
14. Reservists should be encouraged to join voluntary defence organizations in order to keep up and sharpen their military and other defence-related skills. Voluntary organizations should be organized accordingly in order to provide professional training opportunities to their members. It would be useful if reserve leaders (in particular platoon and company commanders) could periodically call up their troops for voluntary exercises. They should of course be compensated for the costs accrued.
15. It would be helpful if the reservists were given call-up schedules, say, for the next five years. They could use that information to make themselves more available. They should also be advised of their war-time placements in order for them to sharpen their military skills voluntarily.
16. With today’s high educational background, conscripts could and should be trained to handle the most sophisticated modern weapons systems. Those conscripts who have been taught to use such systems during their conscription period, should be called back for refresher training at least once a year, if not more often.
17. IT and cyber experts should be formed into special cyber defence units and they should be recalled back to refresher training exercises at least once a year, if not more often.
18. Societal resilience to military and non-military challenges (including all kinds of hybrid war situations) could be improved by training reservists in the so-called “whole of government” or “whole of society” tasks. Such training should be offered in particular to those reservists who are more than 30 years old and who in general are no longer included in the front-line military formations. Such individuals could be also used as “enablers” in various support and logistics tasks, and tasks associated with ensuring the continuity of critical government services. All conscription-age men and women should be introduced to such “whole of society” tasks.

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