

ISSUE BRIEF

The Return of the Military Draft

FEBRUARY 2017 ELISABETH BRAW

Norway has healthy and well-educated teenagers with low rates of obesity. Fortunately for the armed forces, which draft eighteen- and nineteen-year-olds for ten months of mandatory conscription, Norway needs an annual class of only ten thousand conscripts—around one-third of the male population born annually. Still, last year the Scandinavian country began drafting girls as well. It is part of a growing trend: the return of the military draft. Unlike the draft of past centuries, the new draft is for top achievers.

Doubling the talent pool may not seem necessary when there is no shortage of qualified candidates. But four years ago, in 2013, the Norwegian Parliament passed a law making conscription gender-neutral.¹ “Though we weren’t having trouble finding able and motivated male conscripts, doubling the talent pool has been an extremely positive step,” said Navy Captain Per-Thomas Boe. “And conscription is not just about training soldiers; it’s about young people making a contribution to society. And we, the armed forces, represent the people we protect.”²

Norway’s decision-makers and military leaders had, in other words, concluded that the armed forces would benefit from having twice as many conscript candidates to choose from—and that in modern society it does not make sense to require men to perform military service while women have no such obligation. In July of last year, the first class of women reported for duty, having been selected using the same physical and aptitude tests as men. Women made up 27 percent of the conscripts selected among all Norwegians born in 1997. There is no official quota and Boe insists the armed forces did not use an unofficial one either: conscripts were selected purely based on aptitude. “There’s an army battalion that ended up with 50 percent women [conscripts], and they carry heavy loads,” Boe said. “It’s not just the units that don’t require a lot of heavy lifting that selected a large number of women.”

Until a few decades ago, the draft was a ubiquitous part of life for young men, not just in Norway but across Europe (and at times even in the United States). But after the Cold War, countries decided the draft

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1 David Vojislav Krekling, “Ap vil ha kjønnsnøytral verneplikt” (“AP party wants gender-neutral military draft”), NRK, April 21, 2013, <https://www.nrk.no/valg2013/ap-vil-ha-kjonnsnoytral-verneplikt-1.10994179> [in Norwegian].

2 Interview with the author, December 15, 2016. All the quotes by Boe in this issue brief are taken from this interview.

was obsolete. France, for example, suspended military service in 1996,³ Sweden in 2010,⁴ and Germany in 2011.⁵ During the Cold War, all had been considerable military powers—Sweden primarily due to its status as a non-NATO member—where personnel-intensive territorial defense had been crucial throughout the Cold War. But countries saw no need for vast draft armies unlikely to ever have to defend their countries from an invasion. Indeed, some countries also sold off the barracks that used to house them. At their governments' instructions, the armed forces began focusing on foreign missions, such as the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

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But now, with the threat scenario changing in Europe, the draft is making somewhat of a comeback. In 2015, Lithuania's Parliament voted to reinstate the draft, which had been suspended in 2008. Since the summer of 2015, Lithuania's Ministry of Defense and armed forces have thus found themselves in the unusual situation of recreating infrastructure and building human resources they dismantled not very long ago. Because the Parliament's vote in March 2015 stipulated the arrival of the first conscripts only five months later, the Ministry of Defense and the armed forces had to quickly find temporary solutions—as is likely to be the case if and when other countries reinstate the draft. Kristina Šapkinaitė, the official in charge of soldier logistics in the ministry's Defense Policy and Planning Department, said that the ministry had to speed up infrastructure repair and renovation. “We still had barracks, but they had been repurposed for administration,” Šapkinaitė said. “We put the soldiers

there, but we improved the facilities as much as possible to make them nice and comfortable. We want them to see military service as an attractive option, not a punishment.”⁶

Now, with the second class of conscripts currently performing their nine months of military service, the Ministry of Defense is continuing infrastructure upgrades as well as building new barracks that Šapkinaitė says will also later include sports facilities and rec rooms. As a temporary solution, the ministry is adding containers for use as conscript housing and other facilities. Indeed, with a thousand NATO troops expected for permanent rotation this spring as part of NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence initiative, and the number of conscripts set to rise to thirty-five hundred this year, infrastructure becomes an even more pressing issue. Completely new military infrastructure is being built in the Vilnius area; it can host both NATO and Lithuanian troops.

For the time being, the Lithuanian Armed Forces can be highly selective in choosing conscripts: according to Statistics Lithuania, the country's statistics agency, 37,812 Lithuanians (about half of them men) were born in 1997 and about the same number the year after. But birth rates are declining—only 30,459 Lithuanians were born in 2012—and a significant number of Lithuanian citizens have migrated to other EU countries. In the future the country may, in other words, have to force young and fit men to perform military service. Making the draft attractive helps the armed forces avoid that unenviable situation.

Indeed, making conscription attractive is more important than it may sound. For centuries, teenagers have endured hazing and worse at the hands of other soldiers and tough—or even mean-spirited—drill sergeants. But today, because no advanced country sees a need to draft every eligible person, the armed forces have to make military service attractive. Since military service is by definition tougher than attending university or working in an office or in a service job, it will always be a hard sell. And if potential recruits do not deem the draft attractive, some of them will try to dodge it using both legal and illegal means. Yet, having motivated soldiers is even more important today than during centuries of trench warfare. Each soldier has more responsibility and carries more expensive kit.

3 Ian Phillips Paris, “Conscription Drummed Out as France Gets Professional,” *The Independent*, May 28, 1996, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/conscription-drummed-out-as-france-gets-professional-1349677.html>.

4 “Nu har riksdagen avskaffat värnplikten” (“Now parliament has abolished the draft”), *Sveriges Radio (Swedish Public Radio)*, May 19, 2010, <http://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?program-id=3993&artikel=3709597> [in Swedish].

5 “Aussetzung der allgemeinen Wehrpflicht beschlossen” (“Suspension of general draft passed [by the Bundestag]”), Bundestag, https://www.bundestag.de/dokumente/textarchiv/2011/33831649_kw12_de_wehrdienst/204958 [in German].

6 Interview with the author, December 1, 2016. All the quotes by Šapkinaitė in this issue brief are from this interview.



Swedish soldiers on mountain training in the country's north. *Photo credit:* Swedish Armed Forces.

Each soldier has to be motivated, even if he is “just” a conscript.

Sweden, which is not just facing a worsening security environment but is also having serious problems recruiting enough professional soldiers, is likely to decide this spring that the draft will return—this time for both men and women. Two years ago, Annika Nordgren Christensen, a former member of Parliament and member of the defense committee for the Green Party, was commissioned by the Social Democratic-Green government to deliver recommendations on recruitment and retention in Sweden's armed forces. Though the subject may sound dry, Nordgren Christensen was essentially asked to study whether Sweden should reinstate the draft.

That is because professionalization of the armed forces has not worked so well for Sweden. When Parliament suspended the draft six years ago it reasoned that in a country of over 9.6 million residents, with some 90,000 children born each year (90,502 children were born in Sweden in 1997, making them the perfect age to become

soldiers now), recruiting soldiers would be easy. Not so. Every year since professionalization, the armed forces have struggled to recruit the soldiers Sweden needs—3,000 new ones per year until 2015, and 4,000 per year as of 2016. “Recruiting active-service soldiers hasn't been too difficult,” Major-General Klas Eksell, the Swedish armed forces' personnel chief, said. “Out of 6,600 full-time positions, 5,325 are currently filled. But reservist positions have been trickier. Currently 3,875 of 10,400 positions are filled.”⁷

Sweden also has a 22,000-soldier-strong home guard, essentially a force of trained soldiers and officers that is even more part-time than reservists. But though the home guard's ranks are currently filled, Eksell said the vast majority of new joiners are men in their thirties—in other words, men who did their national military service before it was abolished. Joiners who have not done military service first have to do basic training, which is apparently holding untrained Swedes

⁷ Interview with the author, December 7, 2016. All the quotes by Eksell in this issue brief are from this interview.

back from joining the home guard. “Without military service, the current recruitment situation for the home guard will only last for several more years,” Eksell said.

With the armed forces unable to reach their annual recruitment target of four thousand soldiers, they were in no position to fill the overall force that has become necessary as the region’s security situation has worsened. “When the government commissioned the study, some people thought, ‘oh, the Social Democrats are suffering from phantom pains over the lost military service; they want to bring it back for ideological reasons,’” Nordgren Christensen said. “There might have been some of that, but the most important reason was the recruitment problem combined with the changing security environment. The underlying task was: we need to improve our operational capabilities. The sociological aspect—military service as a virtue because it means young people do something for the wider society—was not part of my brief.”⁸

In the past two years, Sweden has been subjected to Russian air incursions, a suspected intrusion by a foreign submarine, and—as documented by its military intelligence agency, MUST—massive Russian influence operations. Its Baltic Sea neighbors Finland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, too, have been subjected to regular Russian air incursions. When Nordgren Christenson delivered her report to Minister of Defense Peter Hultqvist this past November, it surprised no one that she recommended a return to conscription. Indeed, in 2015 the government decided that in case of an emergency the armed forces could fill their gaps by obliging conscripts from previous years to serve—half a step in the direction of reinstated military service. “We have completely different manpower needs today than we did just a few years ago,” Eksell explained. “Then we only trained soldiers for relatively small international missions.”

If the government, as is widely expected, follows Nordgren Christenson’s recommendations, Sweden will reintroduce the draft this year, with the first conscripts reporting for duty next year. Unlike the draft system that was abolished in 2010, the new system will draft women too.

For the first two years, four thousand soldiers will be drafted annually; after that, the number will gradually increase to eight thousand per year. That means that

for the next several years, the young men and women drafted will primarily be people who are at any rate interested in the military. That figure, Nordgren Christensen discovered, is rather high: some twenty thousand of the annual pool of ninety thousand. The government has these figures because even though mandatory military service has been suspended, each year Rekryteringsmyndigheten,⁹ the government agency in charge of armed forces recruitment and contingency defense planning, asks every Swedish citizen turning eighteen that year to complete a questionnaire. The questionnaire can be used in cases of extreme emergency, as all healthy Swedes are obliged to provide some sort of service to the community in such cases. These questionnaires also ask whether the eighteen-year-old would be interested in serving in the military; as Nordgren Christensen found out, each year some twenty thousand people—including seven thousand women—indicate interest. But for privacy reasons, the recruitment agency never shared these names with the armed forces, which as a result had to fumble in the dark to identify potential recruits.

This survey, Nordgren Christensen has advised the government, should be used to identify the most motivated conscripts. And the fact that eighteen-year-olds will fill it out knowing they may be drafted, she said, will add important considerations to their thinking: “Will they choose me?” versus “Will they force me?”

That is exactly the question: how do you make military service a station in life that teenagers approach with the question “will they choose me?” rather than “will they force me?” While Lithuania hopes that good living quarters will entice potential recruits, through decades of uninterrupted male conscription Norway has found that the selective aspect makes military service attractive: being selected shows that a teenager is more fit and intellectually able than the majority of his peers.

That selective status seems to make the armed forces attractive as a career option as well. In surveys among Norwegian university students, the armed forces consistently rank as one of the country’s top twenty employers. In a recent survey by the firm Universum, liberal arts students rated the military their twelfth-favorite employer, two steps above the leading humanitarian charity Norwegian Refugee Council.¹⁰ As

8 Interview with the author, December 6, 2016. All the quotes by Nordgren Christensen in this issue brief are from this interview.

9 “Vårt uppdrag” (“Our task”), Rekryteringsmyndigheten (Swedish National Service Administration), <http://www.rekryteringsmyndigheten.se/om-rekryteringsmyndigheten/vart-uppdrag/> [in Swedish].

10 “Mest attraktive arbeidsgivere” (“Most attractive employers”),

“We will train them exactly like we train our professional soldiers. . . . They are our future colleagues, so of course we want them to have a positive experience.”

of last year, of course, being selected for conscription is twice as hard, which further increases the value of military service on a person’s resume.

Sweden’s teenagers will approach the draft with a similar attitude, the government’s thinking goes. “We will train them exactly like we train our professional soldiers,” Eksell said. “They will live in the same barracks, eat in the same canteens. They are our future colleagues, so of course we want them to have a positive experience.” Indeed, even when eight thousand men and women are drafted each year, the selection rate will still be only 9 percent, making the draft as hard to get into as Brown University or CalTech.¹¹ As in Norway and Lithuania, it means that the armed forces can choose the most fit and motivated teenagers.

Fortunately for the Swedish government and armed forces, reintroduced—and gender-neutral—military service is widely popular, with a September 2016 poll showing 62 percent of Swedes supporting it.¹² This sentiment is apparent in Lithuania and Norway as well. According to an April 2016 poll commissioned by Lithuania’s Delfi news outlet, 52 percent of Lithuanians support the return of male conscription in their country.¹³ And Norway’s first year of gender-neutral conscription has largely been extraordinarily successful. While selection was completely gender-

blind, several regiments now have female rates of nearly 40 percent, and only a miniscule number of female soldiers have reported experiencing sexual harassment or discrimination. “They are nineteen years old and have grown up with the other gender ever since they went to daycare,” Boe pointed out. “It’s us adults who have blocks about young people interacting with the other gender. Some fall in love. Fine! But we’re the military. Don’t do your thing during working hours and not in a military area.” A Norwegian armed forces survey that can be completed on a smart phone, with questions about everything from the mixed-gender bedrooms that all soldiers sleep in to future career plans, shows that 90 percent of the female conscripts and 83 percent of the males are pleased with their conscript experience.¹⁴

Since military service redux relies so heavily on conscripts being motivated rather than forced to serve, before testing and selecting its first class of female conscripts the Norwegian armed forces launched a public information campaign aimed at young women and their parents. “We spent a lot of time informing them,” Boe said. “With information comes knowledge, and with knowledge comes interest. We especially wanted to reach women, as this was their first time being considered for the draft. We wanted to explain questions like, Who are we?, What do we do?, Why does Norway need the armed forces?, What does it mean for you?” As soon as the Swedish government decides on military service, Eksell’s staff will launch a similar information campaign.

And Eksell points out that the reintroduction is likely to happen very quickly, starting with a government decision this February or March. If that happens, as seems certain, the armed forces can launch selection this summer, which would allow the first class of conscripts to report for duty in January 2018. Swedish military officials have already visited Norway to study its gender-neutral regiments. Boe said the only complication so far, in addition to the backlog of women’s showers, has been a shortage of uniforms in smaller sizes that fit women.

Since Sweden had planned for four thousand professional soldiers each year even though it never managed to fill the class, the armed forces have space for new conscripts up to that number. In fact, Nordgren Christensen said, though the Swedish

E24, <http://e24.no/spesial/universum-lister/studenter/?sector=humaniora-studenter> [in Norwegian].

11 “Top 100 – Lowest Acceptance Rates,” Best Colleges 2016, US News and World Report, <http://colleges.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-colleges/rankings/lowest-acceptance-rate>.

12 Mikael Holmström, “Ny mätning: Plikt för båda könen får stort stöd” (“New poll: mandatory draft for both genders widely supported”), *Dagens Nyheter*, September 27, 2016, <http://www.dn.se/nyheter/sverige/ny-matning-plikt-for-bada-konen-far-stort-stod/> [in Swedish].

13 Rūta Pukenė, “Patriotizmas: šauktinių grąžinimas daug geriau nei didesni mokesčiai (486)” (“Patriotism: return of conscripts much better than higher taxes”), Delfi, May 13, 2015, <http://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/patriotizmas-sauktiniu-grazinimas-daug-geriau-nei-didesni-mokesciai.d?id=67952602> [in Lithuanian].

14 Figures supplied to the author by the Norwegian Ministry of Defense.



Soldier during the exercise YMER 2016. *Photo credit:* Norwegian Armed Forces.

government sold large quantities of armed forces facilities after conscription was suspended, the military can accommodate the total annual conscript class of eight thousand by converting buildings currently used for administration.

While making military service attractive to those eligible for it is one challenge, housing them and providing enough equipment and training ranges to make the training worthwhile is another. As Lithuania has already discovered, the regular procurement and construction schedule is insufficient when a country's security situation is deteriorating. As in Lithuania, Sweden's first couple of conscript classes will thus likely be trained under interim arrangements while permanent structures are being built and equipment acquired. "It just doesn't work to say, 'sorry, the war has to wait, we have to build barracks first,'" Nordgren Christensen pointed out.

Unlike Sweden, Lithuania can make facilities it is currently building available to NATO troops. It is already planning for such an arrangement in Rukla,

an ex-Soviet garrison town that continues to host Lithuanian forces and, soon, NATO troops.

An issue less easily solved is management. "We can draft as many thousand conscripts and order as much equipment as we like, but without officers it doesn't work," Nordgren Christensen said. Officer recruitment is, in fact, the main challenge as countries reinstate or expand conscription. While training a soldier can take as little as several weeks, officers undergo lengthy training, usually one to three years. While gradual introduction of military service helps solve the question of who will train the conscripts, it runs counter to the very manpower need that is motivating countries to take a new look at military service. Thus, to make expansion or reintroduction of military service work, countries need to plan several years in advance, not just accounting for the time it will take to train more officers but also for the time needed to recruit them. In Sweden, Nordgren Christensen advises that officers will also need to be paid more and receive additional perks such as opportunities for further education,

which would help stem the armed forces' high officer attrition rate.

But conscription is not just about temporarily filling soldier ranks: it is also the best way of making young men and women interested in a military career. Most people have regular interactions with teachers, doctors, dentists, journalists, engineers, consultants, and bankers, but in peacetime most people never meet a soldier or officer or experience the armed forces' activities close up. As a result, a career in the military often does not register as an option on many young men's and women's radars. As Eksell knows, having access to motivated conscripts would also help Sweden recruit future officers and professional soldiers. Of the 2015 Lithuanian conscript class, 15 percent chose to stay on as professional soldiers. "Conscription is a gateway," Šapkinaitė said. "But we'd like the rate of conscripts who opt for a military career to be higher, ideally around 30 percent."

In Norway, some of the first drafted women are already considering a military career. "Women are good at thinking farther ahead than men; just look at universities," Boe said. "We want them in the armed forces." Even though both Norway and Sweden have for years gone to extreme lengths to attract women to the armed forces, both currently have a female rate of only 11 percent. About the same rate of females holds true in other Western countries, with only some military branches such as logistics corps registering higher rates of women. With women having performed military service—or even just entertained the thought in connection with the armed forces' conscript admissions tests—the number of women choosing a military career is certain to rise with each class of Norwegian female conscripts graduating. The same scenario is likely to take place in Sweden if, or when, it reintroduces the draft.

To be sure, Sweden, Norway, and Lithuania are just three countries, none of them leading military powers. But the fact that these nations are seriously contemplating bringing the draft back or have already done so shows that today military service can be very different from the grinding duty endured by generations of men. With small numbers of teenagers chosen, the new military service is already selective. By also making the setup attractive, the countries can ensure that soldiers are motivated. Their reward: more efficient armed forces—and a pipeline for professional recruitment. Should Sweden, the largest of the three, bring the draft back,

other countries that abolished it would do well to study the Swedish model.

Policy recommendations:

- The highly selective draft offers an opportunity for conscription surges. To accommodate such potential surges, armed forces should consider moving officers to training roles for part of the year.
- Armed forces should offer conscripts performance incentives such as awards, (non-monetary) bonuses, and especially report cards. Given that military service tests conscripts in many crucial ways—hard work under stress, teamwork under pressure, leading one's peers, physical fitness, aptitude for using advanced technologies, long periods away from home, working while tired—such reports can offer better insights than academic grades and would be crucial when conscripts apply for their first jobs. High-scoring military recruits could also be given advantages when applying to university or security-related government jobs, such as police officer or customs officer.
- In addition to generally selecting the top candidates, armed forces should create detailed systems to select the top candidates within each specialty.
- After draftees serve for several years, countries will have the manpower to set up new military units on short notice. To do this, armed forces need to implement a detailed system of refresher exercises for ex-conscripts. Armed forces also need to consider the age at which an ex-conscript ages out of the military system. During the Cold War, former conscripts usually aged out at forty-seven, but with people living longer today, it may be feasible to raise the age limit.
- Immigration is increasing across Europe, but the military is traditionally not a career pursued by immigrants. The draft has the potential of acting as an integration tool, and by recruiting conscripts from immigrant backgrounds armed forces could also grow the pool of potential officers and professional soldiers.

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