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Women in the Army. Compulsory military service in the Nordic and Baltic states

Presently, only two European countries, Norway and Sweden, have introduced gender-neutral military conscription. Denmark will be joining this group in 2026. Finland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia are also considering the possibility of introducing compulsory military service for women. This is driven by two key factors. Firstly, there is a need to strengthen the country's military potential. Secondly, there are recruitment challenges stemming from demographic decline. However, the adoption of this solution in the Baltic Sea region is unlikely in the near future due to a number of challenges, including personnel, financial and infrastructure issues, and limited public support.

Women for Peace and Security. At the NATO Summit in Washington in July 2024, Allies approved an updated NATO Policy on Women, Peace, and Security (*NATO Policy on Women, Peace, and Security 2024*), with the aim of implementing UN Security Council Resolution 1325. The first such document was adopted in 2007. The new guidelines encompass four strategic objectives: 1) Fostering gender-sensitive leadership and accountability; 2) Enhancing women's participation at all levels of management; 3) Preventing threats that disproportionately affect women; and 4) Protecting women and girls from gender-based violence. The Alliance is committed to promoting gender balance in all areas of its operations, including in decision-making and leadership roles. We are dedicated to ensuring that women have full, equal, safe, and meaningful participation in security provision at all levels: local, national, regional, and global. In particular, nations are working to increase women's participation and representation in NATO forces at all levels, as well as to remove barriers to women's recruitment and career advancement.

Universal conscription. As already stated, so far, only two European countries, Norway and Sweden, have introduced gender-neutral conscription¹. According to the Norwegian Constitution, every citizen aged 19–44 is obligated to defend the homeland, regardless of birth or wealth. The service lasts for a maximum of 19 months, typically including a 12-month initial service, after which the recruit may be called up for an additional 7 months. In 2015, Norway became the first NATO member and the first country in Europe to introduce gender-neutral compulsory military service. The model was supported by two arguments: Firstly, from an equality perspective, all citizens should have the same rights and responsibilities, including the duty to defend the nation. Secondly, it is necessary to maximise operational capacity and effectiveness by employing the best-trained citizens and considering diverse perspectives. Since then, the percentage of women in the Norwegian Armed Forces has increased steadily: in 2017, it was 21%, in 2020 – 33%, and in 2024 – 34%. This indicates that of the approximately 10,000 annual conscripts (with an objective to reach 13,500 annually by 2036), one-third are women.

Conscription in Sweden was abolished in 2010 and reinstated in 2018. This applies to both men and women who are Swedish citizens and permanent residents. The service lasts from 6 to 15 months and, in exceptional circumstances, it can be replaced by civilian service, such as in emergency services or care facilities. The number of recruits in 2024 reached approximately 8,000, a significant increase from 4,000 in 2017. Initially, the percentage of women was 15% and this has gradually increased in subsequent years. In 2022, it reached 20%, and in 2023, 24%.

In Denmark, mandatory military service applies to men over the age of 18. At present, military service lasts four months (from 2026, this period will be extended to 11 months) and can also be replaced by civilian service in exceptional circumstances. Approximately 5,000 conscripts are drafted each year. Women can volunteer for

¹ Compulsory military service for women has also been introduced in the Netherlands, but is currently suspended.

military service (in 2023, they constituted approximately one-quarter of the conscription), and from 2026, it will be mandatory. It is anticipated that this figure will increase to 30% over the next few years. If the target level of voluntary conscription is not met, both men and women will be subject to a selection process based on random selection.

Conscription exclusively for men. According to the Constitution of Finland, all Finnish citizens are obliged to participate in national defence. Men aged 18–30 are obliged to undertake military service, while women are obliged to do so on a voluntary basis. The duration of the training programme is contingent on the specific type and ranges from 165 to 347 days. Those who complete their military service are conscripted into the Finnish Defence Forces reserve. Approximately 1,000 women, constituting around 5% of the total, enlist in the Finnish army each year. However, the majority of the population opposes a gender equality system regarding compulsory conscription – only one-third of the population would support it (Uutisuomalainen, 2022). According to former Prime Minister Sanna Marin (Social Democratic Party of Finland), military and civilian service leave much untapped potential and, therefore, a broad public debate on universal conscription is needed in Finland.

In Lithuania, the reintroduction of compulsory military service in 2015 was prompted by the changing geopolitical situation and the insufficient capacity of the Lithuanian Armed Forces (LAF) units. According to the amended law, conscription will apply to men aged 18–22 from 2026 onwards, and service will last nine months. Individuals who have completed their mandatory military service may be eligible for additional points when applying to Lithuanian universities. Upon completion of military service, soldiers have the option to apply for professional military service, volunteer military service, or be assigned to the active reserve of the LAF. The current model applies only to men, while women can serve on a voluntary basis. However, opinions on this matter are divided. According to Lithuanian Army Commander Raimundas Vaikšnoras, there is currently no need to conscript women; however, it is necessary to optimally utilise the available number of men and create conditions for all to perform their duties. Ingrida Šimonytė, former Prime Minister, expressed a sentiment that was similar in essence. Dovilė Šakalienė, the current Minister of National Defence, and Giedrimas Jeglinskas, the Chairman of the Parliamentary Committee on National Security and Defence (NSGK), have both indicated that the introduction of gender-neutral conscription is a possibility in the long term.

In 2023, Latvia reinstated compulsory military service. The programme is open to men aged 18–27 and lasts either 11 months (permanently in the National Armed Forces) or 5 years (irregularly in National Guard units). At present, approximately 1,000 people are being recruited, with plans to reach 4,000 per year. The ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war and the difficult demographic situation have also intensified the discussion about the introduction of compulsory military service for women. The Commander of the National Armed Forces, Leonīds Kalniņš, as well as Andris Sprūds, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, expressed their support for this option. However, a 2024 public opinion poll (Norstat, LSM.lv) showed that the majority of Latvian society (73%) does not agree with gender-neutral conscription. Women have the option of volunteering for military service, and there is currently no parliamentary support for changing this model. It is interesting to note that Latvia has a relatively high percentage of women in the army, with the female share remaining above 15% for a number of years. At present, women make up 16.5% of the army's total military personnel, out of a total of 6,700. The ambitious goal for 2026 is to increase this to 25%. In the 10,000-strong National Guard, which is a volunteer force, the percentage of women is approximately 20%.

In Estonia, the duration of conscription is 8 or 11 months, depending on factors such as educational qualifications and the role of the individual. This applies to all men aged 18–27. Women are also able to serve on a voluntary basis, after which they can pursue a military career on equal terms with men. The Estonian Defence Forces currently have approximately 4,200 soldiers, of whom approximately 8% are women. The debate on gender-neutral conscription highlights that men and women do not have to undergo the same training with the same physical demands, and that citizens could contribute according to their abilities. In contrast, despite the long-



standing mandatory conscription and high support for compulsory service among men (84%), only 5% of Estonian society believes that conscription should also be mandatory for women².

Conclusions. All the countries discussed have adopted National Action Plans for the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and the *NATO Policy on Women, Peace, and Security*. In the Nordic and Baltic countries, the participation of women in professional armies varies – from 5%, 9%, and 10% in Finland, Denmark, Estonia, and Sweden, respectively, to 12% in Lithuania, 15% in Norway, and 16% in Latvia (the NATO average is 12.5%³). Latvia is an example of a country that has made significant progress in promoting women's roles in society since the 1990s. Women have held key positions in the country – Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga was the first female president in the post-Soviet era (1999–2007); currently, Evika Siliņa is Prime Minister, and Baiba Braže is Minister of Foreign Affairs.

In the Nordic and Baltic countries, the percentage of women among those recruited for military service is relatively high, but only the Scandinavian countries – Norway, Sweden, and Denmark – have introduced gender-neutral conscription. Above all, the provision of universal service for all citizens – both men and women – sends a strong deterrent signal. States operate under the assumption that, in dangerous situations, a trained population can confidently and effectively resist. Therefore, knowledge of weapon use, survival, first aid, crisis psychology, and other essential areas should be imparted to the entire population. Furthermore, due to the highly selective recruitment process, military service is prestigious. Securing acceptance into service in Norway is a more challenging process than gaining admission to most universities. After all, a specialised army, based on modern technologies, does not require physical strength in all soldiers; only appropriate skills and knowledge.

For countries lacking substantial population potential, such as Finland and the Baltic states, enhancing their military capabilities could be achieved by implementing compulsory military service for women. At present, national armies are facing serious recruitment shortages, so expanding conscription to include women would be a partial solution to this problem. Latvia and Lithuania, in particular, face some of the most challenging demographic prospects of all European countries.

The relatively low readiness of societies to defend the state remains a challenge. Finland and Estonia have the highest rates of armed combat readiness, while Latvia has the lowest. Furthermore, increasing the number of conscripts requires expanding existing infrastructure and increasing the number of instructors. Therefore, the adoption of a gender-neutral conscription model in these countries in the near future would be a significant challenge.

² A. Banka, K. Zalāns, "A Duty to Serve? Rethinking Women's Military Conscription in Latvia," *The RUSI Journal*, 2025, 170(2), pp. 58–67, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071847.2025.2477705> [5.06.2025].

³ For further information: https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2023/6/pdf/2020-summary-national-reports.pdf; <https://www.nato.int/nato>.