

VISEGRAD / INSIGHT

Conscription | Visegrad Group | UvdL Commission 2.0

Problem

Despite the looming threat of war, the EU's preparedness needs improvement. The current state of trained military personnel is poor, alongside demographic decline, low female participation and limited civic education.

Key facts

- There are over 800k soldiers in Ukraine, compared to 200k in Poland, 60k in Czechia, 25k in Slovakia and 40k in Hungary.
- CE armies rank 20th among the world's most powerful armies as of 2024
- Personnel expenditures range from 23% of overall defence spending in Hungary to 40% in Slovakia.
- The Baltic states aim to double their active-duty forces through reservist forces training, with 90% of Estonians supporting conscription.
- Female military participation ranges from 7% in Poland to 20% in Hungary.

Foresight

As the West repeatedly calls for diplomatic solutions, its weakened military capacity risks undermining the credibility of such appeals. The majority of our democratic societies remain unwilling to take up arms to defend them.

Foster societal readiness for EU armies

RECOMMENDATIONS

Central European nations must strengthen their defences, which requires more than investment. It demands a sense of the importance of EU citizens in aligning member-state armies with EU values.

The EU's armies are not merely tools of war; they embody democracies' defence posture built on a strong moral bedrock. Therefore, EU member states must ensure their armies represent values like the EU's fundamental rights.

The EU should take a more active role in sponsoring specific policies among member state armies to foster a more coherent approach to defence. This would ensure that European defence capabilities effectively and genuinely represent the Union and its citizens' defence posture.

To evaluate human resources, and conscription systems, and enhance societal readiness, the EU must:

1. Ensure the new Defence Commissioner audits the current human resources of the member states' armies, including equal access policies for women, to propose unified and solidarity-based conscription later.
2. Revise obligatory conscription models, which were re-introduced in NATO's Eastern Flank countries, to increase the number of soldiers ready for the battlefield.
3. Increase female involvement in the military to grant equal access and address personnel shortages.
4. Direct CERV programming to include pro-defence CSOs, provided they promote the EU as a unified and solidarity-based project rather than a nationalist agenda.
5. In legal and political communication, emphasise that defence is a common good for the EU. Refer to the Charter of Fundamental Rights, which states that enjoying these rights involves responsibilities towards others, the community, and future generations.
6. Ensure that army training includes civic education in line with EU values and does not discriminate against migrant backgrounds; prevent nationalist agenda buildup.

About

Project

Foresight on European Values and Democratic Security (FEVDS). This project engages CEE civil society leaders in a foresight-driven debate on the future EU policy developments to protect European values and freedoms. visegradinsight.eu/foresight-european-values

Visegrad Insight, a pro-democracy think tank established in 2012 by the Res Publica Foundation, is Central Europe's top platform for a debate on Europe's future.

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BACKGROUND

State of Central European armies

- The discussion on conscription is yet to be mainstream, but countries are beginning to strategise on how to expand their armies. V4 accounts for 350k soldiers – versus 800k in Ukraine.
- The numbers have dropped sharply since conscription was put on hold in CE in the 2000s. Before 2010, Poland's army had 670,000 reservists.
- Czechia's KVAČR 2030 plan calls for 2,400 new recruits annually, but in 2022, only 1,600 new soldiers joined, [resulting](#) in a net gain of just over 200 due to turnover. However, the total volume of applications for military service has increased dramatically since 2022. In Slovakia for instance, the first six months of 2023 saw 215 more applicants compared to 2022. Even polarised Poland offers an example of a bipartisan agreement to [increase its army ranks](#) to 300,000.
- Despite Viktor Orbán's appeasement communication, Hungary is doubling its defence efforts through the [Zrinyi programme](#) and plans [to grow the army by 30%](#), to include 37,000 active personnel. Its first steps involved a mass layoff of experienced officers, which critics see as an opportunity to enlist primarily party loyalists.

Attitudes towards conscription

- 40% of eastern EU citizens say they would fight on the frontlines, compared to the 32% average across the bloc.
- Four out of five countries whose citizens are least willing to fight are in Western Europe: Spain (29%), Austria (23%), Germany (20%) and Italy (14% yes, 78% no).
- [Hungary](#) has seen a sharp increase in the number unwilling to fight, from 45% in 2022 to 63% in 2024.
- Reasons for reluctance vary by national context. Victor Orbán used 'appeasement ideology' as a key pre-election tool, encouraging citizens not to fight – a stark twisting of the Hungarian historical tradition of 1848 or 1956.
- CE attitudes range between countries like Bulgaria (30% yes), Romania (42%), Poland (46%) and Moldova (55%).

Defence as a common duty for EU citizens

- EU citizens have duties as well as rights, including a duty to support and uphold EU peace and security. The Treaty on the European Union calls on member states to provide

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military *and* civilian capabilities (Article 42.3). Also, any measures are insufficient unless defence is seen as a shared, not national, duty (as called for in Article 42.2).

- Value-driven military training would encourage soldiers to fight for universal, democratic principles, not national pride. It would foster solidarity and regional cooperation.
- The Defence Commissioner must collaborate closely with the Industry Commissioner and, more importantly, the Security and Democracy Commissioner.
- Legal grounds for defence as a common good should name clear responsibilities and rights for individuals and states within the EU to ensure accountability.

A revised, solidarity-based conscription strategy

- There is a [positive correlation](#) between conscription and willingness to fight, needed for defence posture. It can promote social cohesion and a shared sense of purpose.
- Human resources should be thoroughly audited, to find strategic responses to demographic challenges, female engagement improvements and give grounds to public debate over the duty of defending our common good.
- A revised [obligatory conscription model](#) could greatly increase and secure soldier numbers on the battlefield.

Female involvement in collective defence

- Female involvement in the defence sector has long been neglected. Military service is not considered an option in CE. Factors include a lack of adjusted training programs and auxiliary logistics, men-only facilities, societal role perceptions and harassment.
- Women comprise 7% of the Polish armed forces, 10% in Slovakia, 13% in Czechia and 20% in Hungary.
- Yet, roles in the armed forces should be determined by ability, not gender. Women must enjoy equal access since they will equally share the burdens of war. There are historical examples of female service, including in Poland during WWII and in the 1956 Hungarian Revolution.
- Feasibility should be studied to assess how and where to include women to enhance capabilities. Participation should meet a 30% threshold – just as in business.

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