



THOUGHTS ON 21st-CENTURY COMPULSORY MILITARY SERVICE IN HUNGARY

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ABSTRACT

Due to the rapid changes in the global and European security environment and the threats they mean to EU citizens, the idea of introducing compulsory military service has been put on the agenda in several European countries, for which many arguments for and against can be listed. Which is the right response to the change of the security environment? Introduction of compulsory military service or prevention? That is extremely important for the countries of the Central European region, including Hungary, to find a suitable solution to deal with the situation. Analysing the courses of actions in the Central Europe region countries can help us to find the best solution. The topic is socially divisive and politically sensitive, but we need to talk about it. The essay summarizes the antecedents that could lead to the reintroduction of compulsory military service in one or more European countries. It also examining the Hungarian aspect of this issue and presents one of many possible training-based alternatives to compulsory military service in Hungary.

KEYWORDS

security environment, compulsory military service, force, Hungarian Defence Forces, Central European region



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INTRODUCTION

After the end of the Cold War by the vanish of the bipolar world order, the risk of a global war decreased. During a rather peaceful period of the millennium, the NATO¹ member countries focused on peace support operations and did not develop their national defence capabilities. The armed forces in numbers were significantly reduced, the conscription-based model of military augmentation was replaced by the professional forms of military service in most of the allied countries. In terms of efficiency, the volunteer-based armies were more capable conducting peace support operations (PSO) rather than fighting conventional wars.

¹ North Atlantic Treaty Organisation

A similar trend was observed in Hungary in the period following the regime change. After the Warsaw Pact ended, Hungary, as a Partnership for Peace (PfP) nation, declared its intention to join NATO. The Hungarian Defence Forces (HDF) began to participate in different NATO PSOs. Subsequently, in 2004, the conscript-based army was replaced by professional forces. In fact, this new force was able to adapt to the challenges posed by peacekeeping missions but not fully capable of conducting conventional warfare. Due to the new type of peacekeeping needs, the military equipment and weapons of the HDF became obsolete. On the other hand, the organizational structure was also transformed, the skills of traditional military domains reduced.

In the mid 2010's, the security environment of Europe significantly changed. Mass migration caused by local wars and environmental effects as well as the Russian-Ukrainian war put an end to a peaceful period. This new situation sets Hungary and the other countries of the Northern and Central European region with a new challenge. The forces mainly specialized in peacekeeping operations must once again be open up to the territorial defence and rebuild their traditional military capabilities that effects all areas of expertise in all domains.

Some states in the region are looking for solutions to the challenge of changed security environment. The main challenge is the ensure adequate strength of the armed forces, which has been a problem in all Central-European countries. One possible reason behind this problem could be globalization, that not just caused economic boost for the countries. Globalization brought the so-called interstate freedom of movement for the young population by interconnecting the mid- and high-level education. It also gives the possibility for an achievable inter states way of living, a kind of a labour migration for people at their conscription age, too. In this new educational and labour environment, a so called "limited" domestic or homeland occupation, like being a soldier and serving the country, is not as tempting any more as studying or working abroad.

Due to wars taking place in our region, for topics that have not been valid for decades, such as the volunteerism or the conscription, a possible hybrid system can be one solution. Should the military pre-training start for the people at the age of conscripts already in peacetime? In the spirit of gender equality can conscription be limited to men only or should women also take share in the compulsory military service?

1 EUROPEAN STEPS FOR THE SOLUTION OF CHALLENGES CAUSED BY THE CHANGED SECURITY ENVIRONMENT

Moving from north to south on NATO's eastern flank, in the new NATO member Finland, the institution of conscripted military service is traditionally held in high esteem by its citizens. The service period lasts from 6 to 12 months depending on the type of service, where the unarmed service time is longer than the armed military service period. During their duty period, the soldiers get salary which meets the average of the society wages. Despite the

fact that no strict sanctions are against the defaulter, large majority of the citizens of the country between the age of 18 and 28 complete their military or civil service. (KOSONEN ET AL. 2022) However, the defaulters or who do not complete their military or alternative service time can not receive passport until the age of 28. The question arises whether military service, having high prestige of conscription, will change soon in Finland due to its NATO membership or the possibility of war escalation?

Following the break out of the 2014 Russian-Ukrainian war, the other new NATO member Sweden reviewed its military augmentation system, which had been organized on a voluntary basis since 2010. Due to the threat of war in the region, a modernized type of conscription service (the Swedish model) was brought back in 2018, that has been analysed in many European countries. According to the Swedish conscription model, all the citizens (both men and women), upon finishing their high school studies, must take part in an aptitude test, where their suitability for the military service is being determined. After the determination process the Army discuss the details of military service with the qualified military candidates, so the recruits can tell their intent about their chosen branches, the starting date of their duty time and the garrison of the military service. (BARNDOLLAR 2024)

In Denmark the existing 4-month long compulsory military service period will be increased to 11 months in 2026. As per planned, the compulsory military service will comprise of a 5-month long preparation phase and a 6-month long operational period, where the conscripts will participate in additional trainings (DISS 2024). Also from that year, in the spirit of gender equality, the compulsory service will be expanded to qualified women too, which gives greater and more complex military strength to Denmark. (NÉMETH 2024/2).

The next Scandinavian country, Norway, also feels threatened by the proximity of the Russian-Ukrainian war, so conscription and compulsory military service was introduced for both sexes in 2013. (BRAW 2024)

It is clearly visible that in one of the rising countries of Central Europe, in Poland, people feel jeopardized the most by the Russian aggression, which can be lead back to the proximity of the battlefield, the historical experiences and their famous anti-Russian attitude. Despite the threat, the Polish society is being divided by the reintroduction of conscription.(BESCH ET AL. 2024) On the other hand, the majority of the Polish people believe that the development of territorial defence system could be the solution for the changed security environment.

According to the current Czech president, who is a former military general, compulsory military service will not be reintroduced in the Czech Republic, however the conscription itself is being supported by the majority of its citizens. He said that there should be more reservists than active-duty personnel so that the society could be more prepared for countering enemy attacks (ORTMANN 2024).

There is no social support for the reintroduction of conscription in Slovakia neither. At the end of the 2010s, due to the changes of the security environment, some political leaders raised the possibility of a short, training-based compulsory military service, that could be one of the solutions for any war threats. The idea was not supported neither by the political parties nor the society, so they introduced the training-oriented voluntary reserve service for the Slovakian citizens between the ages of 19 and 55, who meet the required pre-requisites (DOBROVOL'NÁ VOJENSKÁ PRÍPRAVA). During the 11-week long basic training, the volunteers receive a monthly based regular allowance and full care until the end of their military training. After the preparation phase, the soldiers are placed in the active reserve force, which can be activated in times of crises.

In the Central European region, Austria's historical past was shared at several points with Hungary until the end of World War 1 (WW1). After the 1867 Austro-Hungarian Compromise, the two countries formed a federal state establishment and introduced the general compulsory military service in 1868. After WW1 the Monarchy was dissolved and Austria became an independent state until the Anschluss, when Austria was occupied by the German Empire. Austria, as part of Germany, participated in the warfare so after the capitulation it became an occupied state. In 1955, Austria declared eternal neutrality and the Soviet troops withdrew from the Austrian area. Due to eternal neutrality, Austria has retained conscription-based compulsory military service, which is confirmed on a referendum in 2013. (CORA 2013)

In Germany, the reintroduction of the compulsory military service, that was suspended in 2011, has been on agenda in 2024. Due to the proximity of the Ukrainian combat area and the relatively high level of the lack of military personnel, the German government developed a plan, based on the Swedish military augmentation model. Handling of this challenge in Germany, as one of the leading countries of the European Union and NATO, could be a guide to other allied countries in the question of voluntary-based or conscription-based force. (HÖPPNER 2024)

In the NATO member Croatia, from 2025, a short-term compulsory military service will also be reintroduced, that will be strictly a basic training for the men only (NÉMETH 2024/1). The initial intent of the service time is 3 months, and it will be extended for all adult male citizens who are qualified for the military service. During this basic training, the recruits are going to get the bases of weapon handling and combat basic procedures. (HORVAT 2024)

In Serbia, as a NATO membership candidate country, there is an agreement between the political and military leaders. If the financial and logistics conditions are provided, as one of the counter measures for the changed security environment, the reintroduction of the compulsory military service could be expanded to all adult male citizens. The Serbian model is also a training-based military service that would last for 4 months. (JONES 2024)

We must keep our eyes opened for the actions and reactions of the so called Balkan countries, as this is the region where people are still having their combat experiences from

the Balkan Wars of the 90's. Their system of military preparations and training, tactical procedures and military experiences can provide a good base for other countries in their current challenges. Could this be the reason why a gender-neutral approach² is not a priority in the compulsory military service in these Balkan countries?

Romania, as being the direct southern neighbour of Ukraine, is also looking for solutions for the current and longer term security challenges. Due to the proximity of the battlefield, in addition to the reintroduction of the compulsory military service, Romanians are more open to host NATO troops in their territory. (DUMITRESCU 2024)

In some European countries that are located further from the Ukrainian battlefield, and they are not in direct threat by the escalation of the Russian-Ukrainian war, the political leaders make numerous irresponsible offers. France, which is located in the distance of 3000 km from the battlefield, is planning to deploy a French training mission in Ukraine, and the British also do not reject the idea of sending military troops to the war zone. A question can arise whether they would have the same promises if they located nearer to the war zone? Haven't these offers been generated only due to the relatively more safe distance of these countries from the battlefield?

2 THE HUNGARIAN EFFECTS

During the time of the change of regime in Hungary, the Hungarian Defence Forces (HDF) was a compulsory military service-based mass army, where the crew ranks were provided by the conscripts. After the Warsaw Pact broke off, Hungary quickly declared its intention to join NATO, and therefore joined the NATO Partnership for Peace Program in 1994. It became a full member of the NATO in 1999. In the mid 90's the HDF operated a mixed-based military augmentation system³ and then the last conscripts were demobilized in November 2004 (BODÓ 2022). The compulsory military service ended and the peacetime conscription was suspended, disregard to the Hungarian Basic Law⁴ declares, that the defence of the Hungarian homeland is the duty of all Hungarian citizens. (THE HUNGARIAN BASIC LAW ARTICLE XXXI.)

The voluntary-based Hungarian armed⁵ forces were able to meet its alliance obligation until the mid-2010's, as it successfully participated in several PSOs in various areas of the world. Hungary established a Voluntary Reserve System (VRS) in 2010 and since then Voluntary Reservists (VR) have been taking part in military trainings, exercises and support the

² Involving female conscripts in the army

³ A combination of the compulsory and voluntary based models

⁴ The Hungarian Constitution has been called Hungarian Basic Law, which includes the national defence obligations in wartime

⁵ A volunteer military system or all-volunteer military system is a military service system that maintains the military only with applicants without conscription. A country may offer attractive pay and benefits through military recruitment to attract potential recruits

HDF regular elements, mainly in different crisis management operations. Besides carrying out its peace mission tasks the HDF did not develop its national defence capabilities, so the situations of the illegal migration wave and the Russian-Ukrainian war caught it unprepared. The Hungarian military equipment and weapons had been obsolete, the troop registries were not up to date, and the training system did not focus on the classic military tasks. The Hungarian government decided to introduce a military development program for the replacement of the obsolete former Soviet military equipment and it started replacing them with modern pieces of military equipment and weapons. The military training system was upgraded and developed to meet the requirements of the current times, so simulation systems and technological innovations became part of the training events. Due to the lack of military personnel, the HDF developed different strategies, such as motivation elements for the retention of active-duty personnel and the development of the reserve system. The structure of the Territorial Defence Forces' (TDF) was established immediately after the NATO Warsaw Summit in 2017, in line with the adopted Strengthened Resilience Commitment,⁶ in order to develop Hungary's self-defence military capabilities according to the North Atlantic Treaty Article 3.⁷ The first strategic document that determined precisely the role and tasks of the TDF was the National Military Strategy 2021. However, the effects of this did not bring the expected results, so the HDF continues to struggle with staff shortages.

On 24th February, 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine. The initial period of the war was characterized by the success of Russia, but later the frontlines were stuck due to the arms support provided by Western countries to Ukraine. In order to deal with the risk of war escalation, European countries are examining various scenarios, starting with the support of armaments, sending training forces to Ukraine and the possible reintroduction of compulsory military service and preparation for war. Since the beginning of the war Hungary has been providing humanitarian aid to tens of thousands of Ukrainian refugees fleeing from Ukraine to Hungary. Besides, the Hungarian government negotiating the transfer of Ukrainian prisoners of war to Hungary from Russia. The Hungarian government firmly rejects either the arms and ammunition support for the warring parties, and the sending of training or fighting forces to Ukraine, as it could lead to a possible prolonged war. Hungary also rejects the reintroduction of compulsory military service and instead of it there is an intend to strengthen the volunteer-based armed force with the allocated number of 30.000 active troops and 20.000 volunteer reserve duty personnel in peacetime. The Hungarian government sees the

⁶ *Allies made a commitment to continue to enhance NATO's resilience and to develop individual and collective capacity to resist any form of armed attack. Civil preparedness is a central pillar of Allies' resilience and a critical enabler for Alliance collective defence. NATO can support Allies in assessing and, upon request, enhancing their civil preparedness. Allies will improve civil preparedness by achieving the NATO Baseline Requirements for National Resilience, which focus on continuity of government, continuity of essential services, security of critical civilian infrastructure, and support to military forces with civilian means. (Fact Sheet – Warsaw Summit Key Decisions, February 2017)*

⁷ *„In order more effectively to achieve the objectives of this Treaty, the Parties, separately and jointly, by means of continuous and effective self-help and mutual aid, will maintain and develop their individual and collective capacity to resist armed attack“*

provision of this number as a peacetime guarantee of its territorial integrity, hence, serious efforts are being made to achieve these goals. In periods other than peace, however, it still wishes to supplement its peacetime strength to a higher number, based on conscription. Due to the presumably rapid transition time between peace and war, military pre-training of potential conscripts is necessary.

3 A POSSIBLE VERSION OF MILITARY PRE-TRAINING FOR POTENTIAL CONSCRIPTS IN HUNGARY

Is conscription or the voluntary based military service could be a better solution in peacetime to protect the sovereignty of a country, in order to more effectively being able to the respond for the rapid changes in the security environment?

In the last 1,100-year-old history of Hungary, the obligation to serve in the military and fight for the country was constantly present, but in a legal sense, this could not be called generally conscription until the mid-19th century. In the decades following the Napoleonic wars, there was a need for the creation of a mass army in Hungary for the first time. In 1868, general conscription was introduced, obliging men fit for military service to undergo on military trainings and serve the country in peacetime too. This institution ensured the military augmentation of the armed forces during the first and second World Wars, as well as during the Cold War. Following the end of the Cold War, after a short transition period, in 2004, the institution of compulsory peacetime military service was abolished in Hungary, which was replaced by a voluntary based military service. (BODÓ 2022)

However, in the mid-2010s and early 2020s, the rapid change in the European security environment created a sort of a new "Cold War" situation. Under these circumstances, the subject matter experts responsible for defence politics and army organizational concepts need to re-think each of the military service forms.

To eliminate the challenges caused by the Russian-Ukrainian war, we saw in the previous chapters a number of scenarios. The Hungarian government can not ignore the risk of the escalation of the war. In case of the Russian-Ukrainian war were to spread to other countries, Hungary would be forced to declare a state of war, when conscripts are called-up for military service. In that case, men between the ages of 18 and 55, who are conscripted on legal obligations, owning a Hungarian citizenship and qualified for military service, should start their military training. This preparation comprises of basic training, individual vocational training and unit-level preparations. In such an unsettling situation, where the society accustomed to military service, such as the HDF itself, too. Under these circumstances a new military augmentation system should be introduced and implemented, that is not fortunate at all. Unlike the wars of the last century, I assume that the transition between peace and a legal order other than peace will be rapid and every step of it will take place very quickly. The war success of each state will decisively be influenced by the reaction time in preparing

their forces for deployment by ensuring conscription. In this regard, whether the conscripts already have military pre-training will play a crucial role.

Military service can basically be divided into two major elements: the training element and the military socialization. Given the fact what the Hungarian government stated, for the time being, it does not intend to bring back compulsory military service in peacetime, but as an alternative solution the military pre-training of the potential conscript-aged men could be a must. Since the government does not count on the restoration of the classic military service, I do not count on the peacetime acquisition of military socialization.

Currently, Hungary has 7 Territorial Defence Regiments (TDR) with each having 3 subordinated Territorial Defence Battalions (TDB). The structure of the TDR's and TDB's are based on a territorial principle, which means that the areas of responsibility (AoR) of the units and subunits are the same as the administration area of their recruitment districts. The 7 TDRs consist of 19 TDBs at county level and 2 additional TDBs in Budapest. The Hungarian Defence Forces Territorial Defence Forces Command (HDF TDFC) was established in April 2023 and its headquarter is located in Budapest.

In September 2022 the HDF launched its Standard Basic Military Training Program (SBMTP). The goal of the new training system was to standardize the conditions and requirements of the training of all the Hungarian soldiers, since the basic training of the active and reservist soldiers were different previously. This approach is also considered as a step forward to strengthening the interoperability between our regular and reservist soldiers.

The current 1-pillar Hungarian Territorial Defence Reserve training system is illustrated on the next picture:

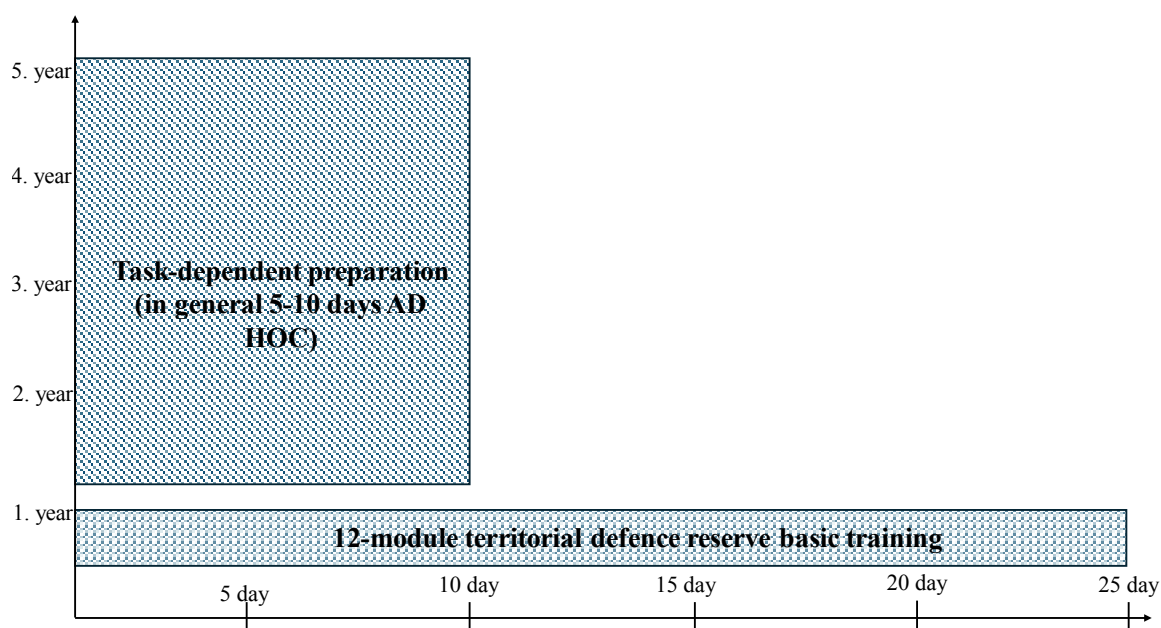


Figure 1.: The current 1-pillar territorial defence reserve system.

Source: by the author

The solution I propose here is a mandatory reserve training, that provides trainees basic- and individual infantry training. The training must be adapted to their civilian life, so the training time must be planned for the weekends and can not exceed 8 hours a day. When the daily training events concluded, the trainees can go home and stay there until the next training day.

My suggested 3-pillar based Hungarian Territorial Reserve training system is illustrated on the next picture:

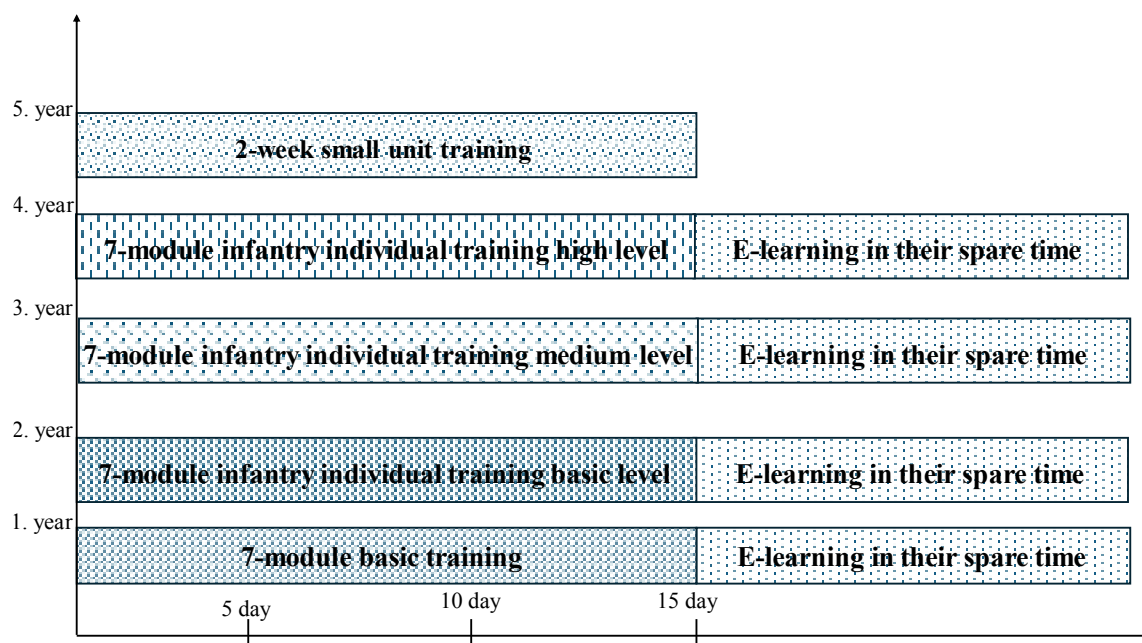


Figure 2.: My suggested territorial defence reserve training system.

Source: by the author

The territorial defence reserve training system includes individual basic training, basic infantry individual training, and training at small unit levels such as fire pairs, fire group, squad and platoon trainings.

In the first year of the reservists' service time the basic training consists of 12 thematic modules at the first level of the training (1st pillar). In the future, with the transformation of this system, it will be more adjusted to the reservists' civilian lifestyle. The 12-thematic modules will be reduced to a more practice-oriented 7-thematic modul system by supplementing the training system with distance learning. In this way, the trainees would learn the theoretical subjects via the distance education-based system with the online support of a designated instructors. The participants prepare themselves for the physical part of the training by developing their stamina in their free time at home, as a matter of fact, in the physical training (PT), we need a completely new training approach. Both the procession of the theoretical course material and the physical preparation could be monitored by the regiments' designated instructors, as the distance learning system records detailed statistical data, such as the total time used for studying the course material. In addition the system

capable of registering the results of the written tests at the end of each learning section. part. A special mobile phone application will support to monitor the physical preparation of each trainee, in which, like other applications, you can follow the details of their PT status and the current training achievements.

In the 2-4th of the reservists' service time, the next level of the training structure consist of the individual special infantry training (2nd pillar), that can be further divided into basic, intermediate and advanced level of trainings. Each of these three levels consist of 7 thematic modules, which prepare the reserve forces for the basic tasks of territorial defence, and in addition, for host nation support tasks. According to the principle of gradation, the modules of the special infantry training are in a two-day continuous 48 hours program.

Like in real operations, during the implementation of the modules, the instructors strive continuously occupying the reservists' time with no downtimes. In between two modules, the reservists must learn the theoretical part of the forthcoming module via a distance learning course.

In their 5th year of service time, the reservists complete the small unit training (SUT), where they learn to operate in unit formations. During the SUT, military tasks are carried out at the level of fire pairs, fire groups, squad and platoon. The unit preparation is a continuous, 2-week military exercise, where reservists perform their duties in camp conditions.

As I mentioned earlier, the voluntary reserve system would be able to provide an alternative compulsory military service form, both in its dislocation, training procedures, and processes. The training centres are located in every county, which can be expanded to serve a possible preparation facility to all service forms in peace and in a legal order other than peace. The effectiveness of the training may significantly depends on the extent to which potential military candidates understand the importance of military pre-training. The implementation of these trainings would not only provide a solid base for compulsory military service, but would also significantly increase the survival capabilities of the conscripts. In accordance with the layered resilience concept (NATO WARFIGHTING CAPSTONE CONCEPT – LAYERED RESILIENCE WARFARE DEVELOPMENT IMPERATIVE) protecting the homeland is the responsibility of the entire Hungarian society.

CONCLUSION

As a result of the changes in the European security environment, in the last decade, European countries have been developing different scenarios to put their resilience on new foundations or to strengthen their existing defence management systems. The illegal migration and the Russian-Ukrainian war forced Europe to review its post-Cold War security and defence policy and more over the system of military augmentation. There is not a collective European solution, however there are lots of national courses of actions that try to handle the arisen security challenges. On one hand, some European countries support the

Ukrainian side with weapons and ammunition, on the other hand, some countries are even thinking of sending troops to the theatre. Finally, there are countries that are preparing for the envisioned European war by bringing back compulsory military service. Hungary has already developed its position, according to which it sees the solution in the provision of humanitarian aid and in diplomatic negotiations between the warring parties. Despite the official Hungarian position in terms of reintroducing compulsory military service, the risk of the escalation of the war should not be ignored. It is necessary to prepare the Hungarian armed forces for a possible European war, that Hungary, due to its territorial location, most likely can not avoid. I therefore propose in the study an alternative military pre-training option for potential conscripts, which is similar to the current training system of the Hungarian territorial reserve elements. In order to ensure an efficient defense capability of the HDF in case of war, the survival potential of the conscripts should be increased. The infrastructure and training system of the current Voluntary Reserve system, after minor transformation, could serve as the preparation and training phase of the potential soldiers. Like Hungary itself, other states in the Central European region would not be able to avoid a possible war should the escalation of the Russian-Ukrainian war happens. Hence, the solution I propose can serve as an example for those countries in preparing for war.

According to the viewpoint of the Hungarian government, „the peace requires strengths,”⁸ a successful peacetime military preparation and rapid reaction in the future could be the key of the success in a fight. In Hungary this question is politically sensitive, socially dividing, however, I am convinced that in this rapidly changing security environment we need to introduce some preventive procedures for national defense. As far as I am concerned, bringing back compulsory military service would be an unpopular political decision for the majority of the Hungarians, but only the peacetime preparation of the potential military persons could lead to an effective national defence. In the near future, the risk of an escalated war may increase, so it is high time to act for being prepared and win it.

In my essay, I mentioned 2 different types of the modern compulsory military service. The first one is the gender equality-based Swedish military augmentation model, where the compulsory military service is for women as well, not only for men. In this model, the gender equality is as important as the complement of the army. In general, the northern and western European countries prefer the Swedish model, because the gender-neutral ideology is one of the most important social aspects for them. The other augmentation form is the Balkan-type model, where the military service is compulsory for men only. In most of these countries the male population has combat experiences from the mid-90's Balkan wars. Hence, the current leadership may have a viewpoint that fighting in conventional warfare is unfit for women, so no compulsory military service is planned for the female population in these countries. In my opinion, the Balkan model is more suitable for the countries of the Visegrad Group (V4),⁹

⁸ *The motto of the Hungarian Defense and Force Development Programme*

⁹ *V4 countries includes the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia, which is a political and cultural alliance, with the aims of advance co-operation in military, economic, cultural and energie affairs.*

because our societies and the way of thinking are more similar to the Balkani way of thinking. Either way, my suggested solution for the preparation of an escalated war could be valid for the V4 countries, too.

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