

Lithuania's reintroduction of conscription is a clear response to the threat posed by Russia in the Baltics

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Lithuania's President, Dalia Grybauskaitė, has announced that the country will reintroduce conscription. Gerda Jakštaitė and Giedrius Česnakas write on the factors underpinning the policy, noting that while the decision was unexpected, it builds on growing concern within the country over its susceptibility to a Russian military intervention. The reintroduction of conscription is also likely to have an impact on key domestic issues, including Lithuania's relatively high rate of emigration.



The National Defence Council of the Republic of Lithuania, under the leadership of President Dalia Grybauskaitė, has **decided** to reintroduce conscription in the country. The law on conscription still has to be approved by Lithuania's Parliament, but the new rules are already clear. Conscripts will be randomly picked from all men fit for military service aged between 19 and 26.

However, there will be a number of exceptions related to their marital status, education, employment and financial liabilities. Service in the army will last 9 months. In 2015 it is anticipated that the new conscription rules will recruit around 3,000 to 3,500 men. Conscription will be reinstated for a period of five years and during this time it is expected to contribute to the country's reserve of 16,000-17,000 soldiers, constituting 75 to 90 percent of the total reserve forces required.



Lithuanian conscription: a response to Russian aggression?

Since 2008, when Lithuania abolished conscription, a well-trained professional army has been the main military priority. Currently it consists of 12,000 professional soldiers and due to the lack of professionals and volunteers, most of the battalions are incomplete with only a third of the required numbers of soldiers recruited. In 2014 there were between 4,800 and 6,000 soldiers in the active reserve.

The professional army of Lithuania has proved to be capable of participating in international military missions with NATO in Afghanistan and Iraq. However, military experts claim that Lithuania's professional army would be incapable of repelling aggression on its own. Thus, the conscript army is considered to be vital in order to ensure public resistance against possible aggression and occupation. This policy originates from the Soviet occupation period from 1944 to 1953, when partisan resistance was active in Lithuanian territory.

Dalia Grybauskaitė, Credit: European Council (CC-BY-SA-ND-NC-3.0)

In the case of aggression the conscript army will reinforce the army led by professional soldiers and, at the same time, ensure public resistance against occupational forces. The current idea is to have professionals as the core of the military, while volunteers and conscripts would guarantee the reserve and support, which is nearly absent today.

Granted, Lithuania's army would not be capable of resisting for a long period of time in the case of aggression from Russia, but the hope is that the Lithuanian army, together with NATO soldiers deployed in Lithuania for long-term training, would ensure resistance until the NATO member states could come to the country's aid. International headquarters in the Baltic States and eastern member states of NATO would have to ensure capabilities for accepting incoming support.

The decision to restore conscription in Lithuania was induced by both external and domestic factors. The threat of Russia played a huge role in fostering the idea to increase defence capacity and security in the Baltic States. In 2014 Lithuania's defence budget was increased from 0.78 per cent of GDP in 2013 to 0.89 per cent of GDP in 2014

and 1.11 per cent of GDP in 2015, for the first time since the beginning of the financial crisis in 2009. Moreover, the political parties represented in the Parliament reached an agreement to increase the military budget to 2 per cent of GDP by 2020.

The increasing budget provides the possibility to purchase new military equipment and renew existing equipment; however, the government of Lithuania has also realised that the country lacks manpower to ensure its defence in cooperation with NATO. Russian aggression was a key factor in shifting public opinion in favour of this increase in Lithuania's spending on defence. Thus, the presence of such a clearly perceived threat made it easier for the government to reinstate conscription. Nevertheless, the decision was unexpected and society was not entirely prepared for it.



Conscription and domestic politics in Lithuania

Generally speaking, previous Lithuanian governments have not been particularly consistent in terms of the army. After the restoration of its independence, Lithuania's army consisted of both conscripts and professionals. However, a few years after joining NATO the state scrapped conscription and focused only on professionals. This may be, in the first instance, a result of Lithuania beginning to feel more secure under the NATO umbrella. However it was also a function of the fact that Lithuania made a significant contribution to international missions where only professional soldiers participated.

Within the political and military structures there prevailed an opinion that the Lithuanian military would stay focused on international missions and therefore should have well trained specialists and special forces. On 15 September 2008 a decision was therefore made to abolish conscription. This was not unique among NATO member states as many of them had also shifted from conscript armed forces to professional armies: Romania abolished conscription in 2006, Latvia in 2007 and Germany in 2011.

Nevertheless, the international context at that time was becoming less predictable and more insecure: Russia invaded Georgia and occupied Abkhazia and South Ossetia just one month before the decision to scrap conscription was made. Against this backdrop maintaining conscription would have perhaps been more rational. On the other hand, the abolition of conscription enabled the government of Lithuania to reduce military expenditure in line with the austerity policies brought on by the emerging global economic crisis.

In the period from 2008 to 2014 members of the dominant political parties of Lithuania accentuated the threat from Russia, while Lithuanian diplomats were active in sharing their concern about Russia's intentions on the international stage. Despite this, Lithuania's defence budget consistently decreased. Only after the occupation and annexation of Crimea did the focus on defence increase again in Lithuania. The aggression of Russia and its support for fighters in the regions of eastern Ukraine continued to raise concerns over possible Russian interventions in the Baltic States and prompted the need to strengthen defence capabilities. These circumstances produced the impetus behind the decision to reinstate conscription.

Domestic developments were also important. Lithuania's new Chief of Defence, Jonas Vytautas Žukas, was appointed in 2014, and since the appointment he has been actively trying to reorganise Lithuania's army and increase the country's military capacity. It is evident that he played a significant role in taking the decision to restore conscription.

Moreover, the decision will affect a number of areas of Lithuanian domestic politics. It is not yet clear how the decision will impact on emigration, which is a big problem for Lithuania's demography and economy. It is possible that the law on conscription will lead to lower emigration and some emigrants who return for their mandatory military service will stay in Lithuania.

The decision has also raised issues surrounding gender equality. The Equal Opportunities Ombudsman's Office has already received petitions to draft women into military service and follow the examples of Israel and Norway. Politicians have noted in this context that women are already allowed to join the army as volunteers. Alternatively, the question of benefits for men who serve in the military has also been raised, but these issues still remain open for debate as the decision has not yet been fully adopted. Finally, the promotion of patriotism through military service has been underlined and this could have implications for the future. However, there is a thin line between patriotism and nationalism and this effect could equally be a negative one.

In the future Lithuania will rely on professional soldiers, who will constitute the core of the army, while conscripts and volunteers will make up the active reserve, increasing the defence and resistance capacity of the country. After a period of five years, the government of Lithuania is likely to make a decision to keep conscripts for an indefinite period of time. Time will tell whether Lithuania's decision will precipitate the restoration of conscription in other small NATO member states.

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