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The “Scandinavian model” of military conscription: A formula for democratic defence forces in 21st century Europe?

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Das “Skandinavische Modell” der Wehrpflicht: Eine Formel für demokratische Streitkräfte im Europa des 21. Jahrhunderts?

Deutsche Zusammenfassung:

Schweden hat 2017 die Wehrpflicht wieder eingeführt, nur sieben Jahre nach der Abschaffung des allgemeinen Wehrdienstes für Männer und der Etablierung eines Freiwilligenheeres. Während die Wehrpflicht in Europa nach Ende des Kalten Krieges oftmals als ineffizient, unfair und unmodern kritisiert wurde, scheinen nun einige europäische Staaten ihre Wiedereinführung oder eine andere Art des verpflichtenden Staatsdienstes zu erwägen. Andere versuchen, ihr Wehrpflichtsystem zu modernisieren und ihre Streitkräfte inklusiver und attraktiver zu machen. Das schwedische Beispiel bietet daher eine wichtige Fallstudie, um zu verstehen, wodurch dieser Wandel motiviert ist und wie öffentliche Unterstützung für ein modernisiertes Wehrpflichtsystem im 21. Jahrhundert gestärkt werden kann. Diese Policy Analyse untersucht vor diesem Hintergrund die neue schwedische Wehrpflicht, die dem norwegischen Modell nachempfunden wurde. Die Ergebnisse der Studie legen nahe, dass dieses „Skandinavische Modell“ erfolgreich argumentiert werden konnte, da es durch Regierungs- und Militärvertreter*innen konsistent als *Neuerfindung* der Wehrpflicht dargestellt wurde und nicht als eine *Rückkehr* zu traditionellen Modellen. Dies wurde erreicht, indem zwei Prinzipien in den Vordergrund gestellt wurden: das neue Modell sei 1) geschlechtsneutral sowie 2) selektiv und kompetitiv und somit im Grund weiterhin freiwillig.

In diesem Sinne ist das Skandinavische Modell sowohl in militärischer als auch in politischer Hinsicht vielversprechend: Es stellt in Aussicht, dass Streitkräfte stets ausreichend Zugang zu kompetenten und motivierten Soldat*innen haben, während die politische Legitimität in den Augen der Öffentlichkeit hoch ist. Dennoch birgt dieses Modell einige inhärente Spannungen und Herausforderungen für eine vollständige Implementierung, der sich Politiker*innen und Militärvertreter*innen bewusst sein sollten, wenn sie dieses Modell favorisieren: Die Analyse zeigt, dass das Modell sowie seine öffentliche Unterstützung von den konkreten Bemühungen der Streitkräfte abhängt, eine inklusive und attraktive Berufs- und Ausbildungseinrichtung für alle zu werden. Diese Bemühungen können Kampagnen beinhalten, die jungen Leuten signalisieren, dass Diversität in der Institution willkommen ist und wertgeschätzt wird. Allerdings müssen gleichzeitig Maßnahmen für institutionellen Wandel und konkrete Policy-Initiativen gesetzt werden. In Bezug auf Geschlechtergleichstellung ist entscheidend, dass der Einzugs- und Selektionsprozess, aber auch das Arbeitsumfeld in den Streitkräften nicht gegen Frauen als Gruppe diskriminieren. Dazu gehört beispielsweise, dass passende Uniformen und Ausrüstung für Rek-

rutinnen zur Verfügung stehen. Zudem besteht die Gefahr, dass die jährlich steigenden Rekrutierungsziele der Regierung vor dem Hintergrund eines kompetitiven Systems dazu führt, dass das Prinzip der Freiwilligkeit nicht eingehalten werden kann. Staaten, die daran interessiert sind, die öffentliche Unterstützung für die Wehrpflicht zu erhöhen und die Implementierung eines geschlechtergerechten, demokratischen und modernen System nach dem Skandinavischen Modell erwägen, sollten daher die Herausforderungen, die im schwedischen Kontext entstehen, weiter aufmerksam beobachten.

Summary:

In 2017, Sweden reactivated military conscription, only seven years after all-male conscription first was deactivated and an all-volunteer force introduced. While conscription has been critiqued in Europe after the end of the Cold War for being inefficient, unfair and ultimately unmodern, many European countries now appear to be reconsidering conscription or some form of mandatory national service. Others are attempting to update their draft systems by making them more inclusive and attractive. Sweden therefore provides an important case study for understanding how such a shift is motivated and how public support can be gained or strengthened for a modernized conscription model that is considered fit for the 21st century. This policy analysis thus sheds light on Sweden’s new conscription, modelled after the Norwegian version. It finds that this “Scandinavian model” was successfully implemented because it entailed a *reimagination* of conscription by the Government and defence officials rather than a *return* to traditional models. This was achieved by consistently arguing that this model was 1) gender-neutral and 2) selective and competitive, and therefore in principle still voluntary.

As such, the Scandinavian model holds considerable military and political promise to ensure the armed forces’ access to competent and motivated soldiers, while at the same time garnering high levels of support among both politicians and the population. However, this model also entails inherent tensions and challenges to full implementation that policy-makers and military representatives need to consider when advocating for it: Most prominently, the analysis suggests that the model and its public support is dependent on continued efforts by the armed forces to become an inclusive and attractive professional and educational institution for all. These efforts may include marketing the armed forces in ways which signal that a diversity of young people is welcome and valued within the institution. Yet, it must also include efforts at institutional change and concrete policy initiatives. With regards to gender equality, it is pivotal to ensure that the drafting and selection process – but also the work environment within the armed forces – does not discriminate against women as a group. This entails making sure, for example, that women conscripts are provided with fitting uniforms and equipment. Moreover, given that the model is dependent on making military service competitive and therefore attractive

to young people, attempts by the Government to considerably increase the number of people selected for service each year may pose a threat to the ambition of keeping military service voluntary in principle. Countries interested in increasing public support for conscription and implementing a gender-equal, democratic and ultimately modern draft system by adopting the Scandinavian model should therefore pay close attention to these challenges and tensions emerging in the Swedish context.

Keywords:

Military conscription; National service; Legitimacy; Liberal democracy; Gender-equality; Russia; Scandinavia; the Baltic Sea

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Introduction: Conscription in Europe

When military conscription was rolled out across Europe in the 1800 and 1900s, it was broadly described as a system that not only enabled the recruitment of mass armies necessary to fight total wars over territory, but also as fulfilling other, non-military objectives for the nation-state. Besides training young men to fight wars, military service was seen as a “school of the nation” that fostered young men into patriotic and productive citizens and, in the process, contributed to form a national collective with a shared identity, history and future.

When the Cold War ended and a new geopolitical landscape emerged in Europe, a range of political, academic and military actors declared that arguments in favour of military conscription had become obsolete and antiquated. Not only was conscription perceived as less efficient than professional, all-volunteer forces in conducting joint military missions and operations abroad, draft systems were also described as conflicting with the values and ideals of the liberal democratic state. To many commentators, routinely forcing large groups of young men to serve the nation in arms under threats of legal action not only appeared ineffective but also unequal, unjust and ultimately *unmodern*.

As we now have entered the 2020s, yet another shift does, however, appear to be underway. Since 2013, Austria and Switzerland have voted to continue conscripting men for military service, Norway have expanded the draft to include women and Sweden, Lithuania, and Ukraine have reintroduced military conscription. While the latter examples reintroduced conscription with reference to military tensions in the Baltic Sea region, this trend has also been visible in Western Europe, where countries such as Germany, the Netherlands and Italy have debated reintroducing conscription in recent years, and where France has taken its first steps to introduce a uni-

versal national service scheme, including both civilian and military or security-related tasks and tracks.

Despite this apparent “comeback” of national service (*The Economist*, October 2021), the critique against conscription that abounded in Europe after the end of the Cold War has not disappeared or stopped shaping how European populations relate to the idea of conscription, or any form of mandatory service for the nation-state. When reforming, expanding or reimplementing conscription, politicians, military organisation and draft boards in liberal democracies must still be prepared to answer tough questions about why, and in what ways, conscription (or any form of compulsory national service encoded in law) constitutes a necessary and justifiable recruitment model, fit for the 21st century. Although there are many possible answers to these questions, the Swedish case is worth taking a closer look at because it provides a different answer compared to, for instance, the ongoing debates in France and Germany, where proponents of conscription primarily have called on traditional arguments about rebuilding national pride, unity and cohesion.

In 2010, the then Swedish liberal-conservative Government deactivated Sweden’s all-male conscription. Only seven years later, conscription was reactivated by the then recently elected Social Democratic and Green Party Government. Although the Social Democratic Party was hesitant to deactivate conscription in the first place, the decision to reactivate was not presented as one of political ideology or difference. Rather, the new Government described it as a necessary decision because the Swedish Armed Forces (SAF) was failing to fill the ranks with volunteers, and because growing tensions in the Baltic Sea region – understood as caused by Russia’s military rearmament and aggression – made recruitment shortages an immediate security concern. These concerns united all political parties in the Swedish

parliament and no party opposed the reactivation.

While Sweden reintroduced conscription due to military concerns and, more specifically, due to concerns over a territorial threat from Russia which gave echoes to the Cold War, the Government and defence officials took great care to explain to the public that they now were implementing a “modernized” draft system compatible with the social and political values of contemporary Sweden (*Government report 2016:63*, September 2016). The decision was not, in other words, described as a *return* to 20th century policy and practice.

When debating and implementing the new draft system, it was instead – as we shall see – described as compatible with the liberal ideals of gender equality and individual freedom, which already was assumed to dominate in 21st century Sweden. Geopolitical tensions in the Baltic Sea thus appeared to force the Swedish Government to *reimagine* what conscription ought to be and achieve, so that it could be reimplemented with support from parliament and, as it were, with minimal resistance or opposition from the public.

Taking the Swedish or “Scandinavian model” of military conscription (Braw 2019) as its point of departure, this analysis proceeds in three steps: The first step inquiries into what characterises the Scandinavian model, or what makes it “modern”, according to the Swedish Government and defence officials, and provides two answers to this questions: 1) it is gender neutral and 2) it is selective and competitive, and therefore in principle still voluntary. The second step of the analysis discusses the military and political promise of the Scandinavian model, stressing that it both ensures the SAF’s access to competence and that it enjoys high levels of support among both politicians and the population. The third step discusses tensions within, and challenges to, the full implementation of a Scandinavian model of conscription. Most prominently, the analysis suggests that the model and its public support is dependent on

continued efforts by the armed forces to become an inclusive and attractive professional and educational institution. The analysis is based on a reading of political and policy document on the reintroduction of conscription in Sweden as well as on interviews with key defence officials.

1. Key characteristics of the Scandinavian model of conscription

1.1 Gender neutrality and equality

Within Sweden’s “defence duty” legislation reactivated in 2017, women and men are attributed the same responsibilities towards the state. All people living in Sweden between the ages of 16 and 70 have a duty to serve the state in some capacity in the event of war, but only Swedish citizens, men and women, between the ages of 19 and 47, can be called upon to conduct military training, partake in military exercises and serve as conscripts in the event of war. The law further stipulates that only the number of conscripts needed for the defence of Sweden can be drafted for service and that all 18-year-olds have a duty to provide defence authorities with personal data so that they can determine who is most suitable for service. 19-year-old men and women are thereafter drafted against the same criteria and enlisted in the same set of military roles.

The gender-neutral application of conscription was not debated or contested when the draft was reactivated in 2017. The decision to make the defence duty legislation gender-neutral was taken already when the draft was deactivated in 2010. At that time, the liberal-conservative Government declared that “it is an unrealistic and unmodern idea that sex [...] should be the factor determining who is best suited for each [military] position”, further underlining that “it of course has to be the fitness of each individual” that constitutes the determining factor (*Government bill 2009/10:160*, March 2010). This guiding principle was stressed in the Government inquiry report

recommending the reintroduction of conscription, which also established that the gender-neutral application of conscription was “a principally very important step that deserved particular attention in public communication from the authorities” (*Government report 2016:63*, September 2016). To emphasise the equal treatment of men and women was seen as way to signal to the public that the reactivation of conscription did not represent “back with the old”¹.

Since conscription was reintroduced, the SAF has launched several recruitment and information campaigns in both social and traditional media directed at young women. In contrast to what research has shown about the representation of servicewomen in other national contexts, these campaigns have portrayed women in uniformed active combat roles, carrying arms. They portray the SAF as a gender equal employer and clearly signal that women are an essential part of the territorial rearmament of Sweden – not limited to serve in civilian or supporting roles (Rinaldo and Holmberg 2020; Stern and Strand 2021).

The SAF has also taken efforts to gender mainstream the military logistics machinery since conscription was reintroduced, and the organisation is working to ensure that all uniforms and equipment will be as fitting and functional for women (on a group level) as they currently are for men (on a group level). Military officials and policy documents have increasingly emphasised that uniforms and equipment designed to fit a “standard male body” counteracts efforts to recruit and retain women on all levels of the organisation, and recent gender mainstreaming efforts are meant to signal towards the population that “conscription is gender neutral” (*Government report 2016:63*, September 2016).

Consequently, even though gender neutral conscription until recently was seen a controversial and oft-criticised policy move in Sweden (Persson and Sundevall 2019), it is now frequently described as essential if the SAF is to be perceived as a modern, attractive and legitimate institution. The gender-neutral application of conscription, and the accompanying efforts to make the SAF a more gender equal organisation, should be understood in relation to a broad range of other Government initiatives to gender mainstream Swedish public policy, including the adaptation of a “Feminist Foreign Policy”.

1.2 Individual freedom and opportunity

As conscription was reactivated in Sweden, political and military officials motivated the decision using only military arguments. To provide the armed forces with personnel was described as the sole purpose of conscription; it was not about raising young men by teaching them how to “make their beds” and it was not “an integration project”.² This rhetoric is not unexcepted given that the version of conscription imagined by the Swedish Government is *selective* rather than universal. Sweden sets out to enlist only the share of the population that the military requires (and can afford to train), and since conscription was reintroduced, that has merely amounted to around 5 % of the age-group available for service each year.

This selectivity has enabled the Government and defence officials to present conscription as, in principle, still voluntary. Interviewed by Swedish news media, Minister of Defence Peter Hultquist repeatedly stressed that “conscription shall *complement* the voluntary defence”, adding that “interest, motivation and will are essential parts of recruitment” (SVT, March 2, 2017, emphasis added). The same year, a SAF magazine referred to

¹ Author interview with Annika Nordgren Cristensen, the Government appointed public investigator into the reactivation of conscription. February 2021.

² Author interview with Annika Nordgren Cristensen.

conscription as a “voluntary duty” (*Försvarets forum*, Vol 1, 2017). Moreover, the Government inquiry report described Sweden’s new conscription as a system that was “comprised of both voluntarism and duty/compulsion” (*Government report 2016:63*, September 2016).

In practice, Sweden’s so-called “voluntary duty” is a two-track system where young people both can apply, and be called upon, to muster.³ Those who are called upon to muster are selected in a two-step process. All 18-years-olds complete an on-line survey where they list and self-evaluate their health and physical status, their educational and occupational experiences, their interests and personality as well as their interest in the armed forces. The draft board (the Swedish Defence Conscription and Assessment Agency, hereafter the SDCAA) thereafter, with support in the defence duty legislation, call on the people they believe are most likely to be suitable for service to muster and be tested against the requirements of a particular military role. In evaluating suitability, the legislation stipulates that attention, to the greatest extent possible, should be given to the individual’s motivation and will to serve. There are thus two ways in which conscription in Sweden can be understood as paying attention to individual freedom and motivation: first because young people can continue to apply for basic training themselves and, second, because even those who are forcibly drafted are given a chance to indicate whether they wish to serve or not.⁴

Interestingly, the selectivity of the system has not only enabled the Government and defence authorities to describe conscription as in line with individual freedom, but also as something desirable for the individual (in contrast to desirable for the nation or the collective). Both the SDCAA

and the SAF initially received government mandates to communicate the benefits of conscription, and they have done so by largely repeating the message already used by the armed forces to recruit volunteers (Strand, forthcoming), namely that military service constitutes an *opportunity* for the individual to gain skills, strengthen the CV and become attractive in the labour market. Yet, the reintroduction of conscription has added another layer of exclusivity to this oft-repeated message. As stated in the Government inquiry report: “to have served and to have been selected for service in the armed forces should be considered a merit in itself” (*Government report 2016:63*, September 2016). In communication with young people, the defence authorities also tend to use language such as “if you get the opportunity” to serve or “if you are selected” rather than, for instance, if you are obliged to serve.

Marketing initiatives are however insufficient in making military service an attractive career and educational path for young people. SAF representatives constantly stress the importance of also treating conscripts well – like colleagues – during basic training, so that they will stay on in the organisation as officers or volunteers (*Försvarets forum*, Vol 1, 2017). Moreover, the SAF offers conscripts both material and immaterial benefits, such as training in how to present military skills on a CV so as to become employable in the eyes of civilian companies (Strand, forthcoming). The logic here is of course that, by making selective military service attractive, it will also become competitive, and more young people will volunteer or indicate a will to serve as a result. Moreover, if conscripts are told and indeed feel that they are *chosen* to serve, rather than compelled to serve – and if they feel like they not only serve

³ Also those volunteering to muster serve with compulsion, under the defence duty legislation, if they accept the role they are offered. Moreover, failure to show up to muster or serve when called upon can result in fines or imprisonment.

⁴ There are currently no civil service options for those who do not wish to serve in a military role (although the defence duty legislation does allow for such an option to be reintroduced if necessary). Conscientious objection is however allowed.

the state, but serve *themselves* as future professionals on a competitive job market – there might be less reasons to refuse service.

Consequently, when stressing that individual freedom and opportunity is compatible with Sweden’s new conscription system, the Government and its defence authorities responds to the criticism previously directed at the former all-male conscription for being both inefficient and unfair, ensuring the public in general, and potential conscripts in particular, that mandatory military service represents a modern recruitment model. Moreover, a “voluntary duty” was arguably easier to get behind for the conservative and liberal parties that recently deactivated conscription⁵, and that still propagate for a small and efficient public sector.

2. The military and political promise of the Scandinavian model of conscription

The Scandinavian model of conscription clearly holds a considerable military promise. Simply put, it is a promise of always filling military ranks from below with skilled *and* motivated conscripts who can undertake basic training and thereafter serve the nation in the event of war. Through this model, the SAF have access to the entire age group of 19-year-old men and women, and can draft whomever they choose. Moreover, given the selectivity of the system, and the attractiveness and exclusivity this is envisioned to generate, the conscripts selected are also likely to be highly motivated. This potential appears as a stark contrast to the popular image of conscription as something that young people try to avoid, and the conscript as a soldier that lacks purpose or morale. The SAF can also enlist young people with competence that they otherwise might not have been able to attract in competition with civilian

employers, as exemplified by the recent drafting and training of “cyber soldiers”.

In addition, this system also holds a considerable political, or democratic, promise. Since conscription was reintroduced, the Government and defence authorities have emphasised that a gender-neutral application and a larger focus on individual freedom and opportunity will increase the support for conscription and the armed forces. Even though such an outcome is difficult to determine causally, there is evidence that can be read as supporting this promise. Before conscription was reintroduced in 2013, and before the Government reappointed Russia as the main threat to Sweden’s territory and sovereignty, the public support for reintroducing conscription was mixed, with a slight preponderance of supporters among the population as a whole, and a slim lead for those opposed among the youngest age-group (Ydén and Berndtsson 2014). Public support has thereafter increased steadily. When asked if they supported or opposed the Government’s decision to reactivate conscription in 2019, 79 % of the population supported the shift either fully or partially, and only 9 % expressed some degree of opposition (the rest were undecided). Although opposition among the youngest age-group in service-age (16-29 year-olds) remains higher than among other age-groups, the percentage of young people indicating support increased from 27 % in 2013 to 65 % in 2019 (Berndtsson, Bjereld, and Ydén 2020). Research has shown similar upwards trends in the share of people indicating support for, or with confidence in, the SAF as an organisation. The SAF’s renewed focus on territorial defence and reliance on conscripts thus appears to be more in line with what the public expects from their armed forces than expeditionary operations abroad carried out by professional soldiers (the so-called “Afghanistan doctrine”) (ibid).

⁵ Author interview with Annika Nordgren Cristensen.

3. Challenges to the full implementation of a Scandinavian model

While it may be difficult to determine the cause of the increasing support for conscription in Sweden, it is certainly possible to ask whether or not the basic principles underpinning the Scandinavian model of conscription – i.e., the characteristics which according to the Government and defence officials make it “modern” – so far have been realized. Put differently, *is* the Scandinavian model of conscription gender neutral or equal, and is it compatible with individual freedom and opportunity? This section touches briefly on two apparent challenges to, or tensions within, the full implementation of this model, as evident in the Swedish case.

First, a gender-neutral application might contribute to offer a modern flare to military conscription, important for its public support, but it does not directly translate into gender *equality* within military ranks, either in qualitative or quantitative terms. Sexual harassment of women in the ranks are still frequent (*Radio Sweden*, 6 October, 2021) and women are vastly underrepresented both within officer ranks (around 8 %) and in basic training (*SAF Annual Report*, 2020). While the percentage of women conscripts has increased from 16 in 2018 (*ibid.*), when the draft was reintroduced, to 22 in 2021, women remains underrepresented (*SDCAA*, 1 November, 2021). This is because, although the defence duty legislation is gender-neutral, the drafting process remains gendered in a myriad of ways, discriminating against women on a group level. This is for instance evident in how “suitability” for service is evaluated by the SDCAA. First of all, women have a tendency to rank themselves less willing *and* less suitable for service in the online survey that guides who will be called to muster.⁶ Furthermore, both the

physical standards set by the SAF for each military role⁷, and the ways in which physical strength tend to be measured, favours men on a group level.⁸ Given that the defence duty legislation determines that the most suitable candidates shall be selected for service, the selection process has thus far resulted in a higher share of male conscription.

Yet, although the system appears to discriminate against women on a group level, the suitability criteria adopted in the legislation – and the fact that will or motivation is regarded as one indicator of suitability – has also enabled the SDCAA to prioritize highly motivated individual women, even in cases where the physical performance is deemed lower than the average (male) conscript.⁹ In addition, compared to the all-volunteer force, the gender-neutral draft legislation does enable the SAF and the SDCAA to establish contact with more women who – even though they may rarely be forced to serve against their will – always are forced to consider service. It is however evident that a gender-neutral legislation must be *complemented* with measures to gender mainstream the selection process, if Sweden’s conscription is to result in a more quantitatively gender equal military organisation.

Second, a lower percentage of 19-year-olds starting basic training each year has been volunteers than first predicated and preferred by the Government inquiry report. In 2021, only 19 % of conscripts applied to serve themselves, while the rest was selected and drafted based on their answers in the online survey and performance during the mustering process (*SDCAA*, 1 November, 2021). This is arguably because there are economic incentives for the SDCAA (i.e., the draft board, which in Sweden is a public authority separate from the SAF, with a separate budget) to

⁶ Author interviews with a manager at the SDCAA. October 2020.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ For international research on how Physical Employment Standards are gendered, see NATO Science and Technology Organization (2021, p. 17-21)

⁹ Author interview with a former director of the SDCAA. October 2021.

prioritize mustering and testing people that can be compelled to serve, compared to mustering volunteers, who can drop out during the process if they change their minds or are offered a position they do not prefer.

Although the SDCAA has prioritised conscripts over volunteers, they have so far largely selected conscripts who have indicated motivation or willingness to serve during the mustering process.¹⁰ Doing so will however be more difficult as the number of conscripts undertaking basic training each year are set to increase (*Government bill 2020/21:30*, October 2020). Given that the model is dependent on making military service competitive and therefore attractive to young people, a considerable increase in the number of people selected for service each year may pose another threat to the ambition of keeping military service voluntary in principle. Consequently, the Government’s promise to prioritize and protect individual freedom and opportunity can only become and hold true if the SAF continues to implement efforts to become an attractive employer for all *and* if the Government imposes stricter regulations on the SDCAA to prioritize individual motivation and will in all steps of the drafting process.¹¹ The latter seems unlikely given that the Government rather have ceased referring to voluntary aspects of conscription and held back on implementing new service incentives in recent years¹², as evident by the absence of these discussions in the Government’s most recent defence bill (*Government bill 2020/21:30*, October 2020). This tendency reveals a tension at heart of a military recruitment model that has been called a “voluntary duty”.

Concluding reflections: The future of conscription

In times when conscription is mobilized in conservative political projects to rebuild national pride, unity and cohesion presumably lost due to immigration (as evident in argumentation for national service in France) or to a combination of immigration and feminism (as evident in argumentation for conscription by far-right actors such as Alternative for Deutschland), the Scandinavian model of conscription stands out as something different. In Sweden, conscription represents no integration project, a shared experience or a “great equalizer”. To the contrary; it is described as a competitive and exclusive system that promises benefits for a selected few. It is not surprising then that the “competitive national service” system of Sweden and Norway has been described as an ideal future recruitment model also in contexts such as the UK, where the armed forces suffer from recruitment shortages, but where there is no tradition of relying on conscription as a nation or community-building project (Braw 2019).

Consequently, there are clearly different answers to how mandatory national service, be it civilian or military, can be motivated and gain support among politicians and populations. The Scandinavian model of military conscription refrains, to a large extent, from forcing young people to serve, but it is inclusive when it comes to who is allowed, and it enjoys high levels of public support. Yet, the model is also exclusive. In fact, excluding large shares of the population from service might be a prerequisite for its competitiveness and exclusivity. For any country attempting to gain support for conscription and ensure a modern and democratic defence force by moving in the direction of a Scandinavian model, it is therefore important to remember that the model sits uncomfortably

¹⁰ Author interview with a manager at the SDCAA. October 2020.

¹¹ Or, rather, if the Government changes, or indicates a different reading of, the defence duty legislation, and its privileging of “suitability”.

¹² Author interview with Annika Nordgren Cristensen.

with traditional arguments about building national unity and cohesion. Such objectives are contradictory to the exclusive opportunity that the Scandinavian model envisions military service to be, and they therefore risk being perceived as hollow. It is also important to remember that the Scandinavian model only works if conscription is considered attractive among young people. Although marketing may be an important instrument here, because it signals who and what the organisation values, any aggressive or romanticizing marketing of military force to young people is highly questionable within a liberal democracy.

If the Scandinavian model is to fulfil both its military and political promise, it must thus be combined with efforts to gender mainstream the drafting process, but also with institutional change, including effort to create an equal, welcoming and therefore attractive work environment for all.

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