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Shifting to All-Volunteer Armed Forces in Europe: Why, How, With What Effects?

Bernard Boene

- 1 When the Cold War ended, only four European countries had all-volunteer forces (AVF): Ireland, Luxembourg, Malta and, most importantly, the United Kingdom. Soon afterwards, Belgium, the Netherlands, France, Spain, Italy and Portugal ended conscription in a quick succession. As of today, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia have followed suit, or announced their intention to do so by 2010. As a result, those states which have opted to retain the draft are now a shrinking minority. Germany, for reasons to be detailed *infra*, is one of them. Scandinavian nations likewise resist the trend. The rest are small neutral countries in the heart of the continent, and various peripheral nations that are either facing unresolved conflict or still feel threatened. One Swiss expert declared a decade ago that he could see a future in which all countries of Europe – possibly with the exception of Finland, Greece, and (though he was not too sure...) Switzerland, plus Turkey if it is included in the area considered – would go all-volunteer in the first decades of the new century.
- 2 The present article's ambition is to examine the reasons behind such a major change, the circumstances in which it was conducted, and its various impacts. Although it is sometimes very difficult to disentangle the specific effects of the newly dominant organizational format from the wider influence of the (strategic and socio-political) contexts in which it has come about, a serious attempt to do so will be made.
- 3 There can be little question of going into the details of each and every country's case. Nor would the use of an average case make much sense. As comparative methodologists know, the study of common denominators is apt to yield few or disappointing results. Instead, the analysis to follow will proceed in terms of the context, the reasons and outcomes of the logics at work, based on the specification of trends observed in countries with "old" or "new" AVF (notably though not exclusively Britain and France),

on which data are in the public domain and abundant. It is left to the reader interested in a particular country to assess, in Weberian fashion, the causes of possible deviations from the hypothetical model presented below.

Why?

- 4 In the face of the bandwagon effect outlined by way of introduction, the obvious aim of this study is to analyse the reasons behind the choice of all-volunteer forces. In fact, AVF may be regarded as the ultimate and logical culmination of a major trend dating back to the 1960s: the decline, so aptly described and analysed early on by Morris Janowitz, of the mass mobilization model (Janowitz, 1971 [1960]; Doorn, 1975; Martin, 1977, 1981; Kelleher, 1978; Burk, 1992). Two decades into the Cold War, it had indeed become clear that nuclear weapons made a major *hot* war unlikely to occur, though not impossible, on the continent of Europe technology had rendered large numbers of troops unnecessary on the battlefield anyway and that serving in the army was now regarded by citizens as a burden – a practical nuisance for students and young adults with family plans – rather than an honour. Therefore, the impact of conscription on societies, which had been so strong for some eight decades and through two world wars, began to wane. Where it had shallow historical roots, as in Britain, it was abolished immediately (1957-1962). In most other European countries, while less dramatic, the change was nonetheless real. Reserve forces began to erode steadily, soon followed by active-duty force level requirements; the proportion of enlisted volunteers started rising, and the length of compulsory service in uniform decreased by stages to the point – in the late seventies and eighties – where it was so short as to make it appear ineffective. Exemptions from conscript duty became widespread, and legal evasion was no longer frowned upon: with declining manpower requirements, defence establishments could no longer provide meaningful roles for the large age cohorts of baby-boomers now of military age. Gone for good was the charisma of the nation-state, premised on grandeur and national honour; it was replaced by economic prosperity and welfare, hedonism and cultural permissiveness as central values, which resulted in weakening citizenship norms and patriotism. With the media, welfare systems and long years of generalized public education now providing effective substitutes for it, the “school-of-the-nation” uses of conscript service for socio-political integration went out of fashion. The old social or welfare uses of conscription were no longer needed, and military service as a second educational chance for school drop-outs was rendered unreal by its now very short length.
- 5 Finally, the arguments of relative deprivation weakened the legitimacy of conscription among youths of draft age. The issue of who shall serve when not all serve, and increasing shares of successive age-cohorts legally evade service, acted like a powerful corrosive. If to the question “why me?”¹, the answer no longer is “because serving under arms is a citizen’s duty obeyed by all except for a few justifiable health or family reasons”, attitudes towards service – all things equal² – are bound to deteriorate.
- 6 The post-Cold War era has only radicalized these trends. For one thing, with the clear and present danger of confrontation between coalitions of East and West now absent from the scene, invasion defence plans were shelved. The social discipline that they involved soon appeared no longer sustainable. For another, while military action – which for three decades had been so scarce for European forces – has become more

plentiful, it was to begin with (throughout the 1990s) mostly concerned with collective security: coercion of international deviants (Saddam Hussein's Iraq, Slobodan Milosevic's Serbia), and dozens of peace support efforts on distant theatres of operations. These are types of military action for which conscripted troops are ill-adapted, because (a) draftees are normally destined for defence of the national territory, (b) such complex operations require professional skills, and (c) conscript casualties, however rare, are bound to generate negative political fall-out at home whenever the stakes are deemed of secondary importance by public opinion. In the present decade, the re-emergence of war, in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the participation of troops from a number of European nations has only served to confirm the functional and political disutility of conscripts.

- 7 Another significant factor was the lack of credible and unproblematic alternatives to the existing conscription systems. Old-style lotteries are seldom judged adequate today³: while they ensure *ex ante* equality of treatment, they still result in *ex post* inequality. Selective military service, usually accompanied by compensation in the form of immediate (pay) or postponed advantages (tax exemptions, reserved jobs in public service, etc.) for those who do serve, is much more plausible on paper. The drawback is that such schemes are complex, hence opaque and hard to read: for that reason, very few countries have elected to follow that road.
- 8 A third solution would consist in maintaining universal conscription and funnel those whose services are not used by the active-duty forces into a national guard in charge of securing national territory against various threats. The problem here is that such a scheme is costly – it implies that a large fraction of the officer corps is diverted from operational duty in order to train and supervise conscripts – and the threats that might have justified it in the 1990s were mostly hypothetical, thus likely to turn national guard service into make-work. The emergence of terrorism in the present decade hardly changed the equation as draftees cannot effectively cope with it.
- 9 The final answer often considered by would-be reformers consists in instituting civilian forms of universal national service, German style, in order to absorb the excess manpower provided by age-cohorts that far surpass the armed forces' needs. This is often legitimized in terms of fulfilling social needs which the market (due to recipient insolvency) or public bureaucracies (unable to finance such services at market rates) fail to meet. The reason why Germany retains conscription is basically that if it were abolished, conscientious objection would be deprived of meaningful justification⁴, and would cease to channel hundreds of thousands of young males each year into the civilian forms of youth national service on which the country's welfare system extensively relies. While it may sound like a good idea, this solution comes in for a number of criticisms. First, economists are apt to see it as far less than optimal in terms of manpower allocation. Second, whereas military conscription and "normal civic obligations" are exceptions allowed by the 1950 European Declaration of Human Rights, *civilian* conscription is likened by many to a form of *forced labour* – prohibited by Article 4. European case-law on this topic remains to be decisively fixed, and legal uncertainty acts as a deterrent. Third, trade-unions and volunteer associations involved in the departments of activity that would be covered by civilian national or community service are apt to resent it as unfair competition. Last but not least, if the justification is citizen duty, there is hardly any reason why female citizens should be excluded: such discrimination today would lend itself to the charge of sexism, likely to be challenged

in the courts⁵. But if females are included, universal national service becomes an inordinately expensive proposition involving whole cohorts of 18-to-20 year-olds, to be housed, fed, compensated, trained and provided with meaningful tasks... Unsurprisingly, no European country other than Germany has dared face the huge organizational burdens involved⁶. In other words, civilian conscription is much harder to legitimize than the military draft.

- 10 As a result, despite the obvious risks incurred by the absence of a recruitment safety net, a shift to all-volunteer force relying on the labour market has in many cases seemed to be a far simpler solution...

How?

- 11 In most countries, major public debate, in Parliament and in the press, that one would have expected on a topic which affects fundamental liberties and the constitutional balance failed to take place. The debates that surrounded the option of shifting to an AVF have taken place only among experts and academics. Such was the case in Britain (1957), Belgium (1992) and France (1996)⁷. The only major exception, again, has been Germany, where the Green Party agitates in favour of an AVF, but where the other parties are still against it.
- 12 The issue is openly or tacitly on the table in the countries where the draft has faced difficulties in adapting to the new strategic and socio-political circumstances; the reason behind such an intriguing silence is threefold. One aspect relates to the fact that beyond its seeming simplicity, the issue of conscription versus all-volunteer force – as the arguments expounded above as to the various solutions to the conundrum do suggest – is a fearfully complex and technical one: far too much so for the general public to take a sustained interest in it. Part of that complexity, over and above the socio-political, economic, strategic/military and legal factors involved, probably has to do with the unstated moral rejection of war (and the means it implies) that has been the subtext of grass-roots attitudes in Europe after 1945. Another aspect is that more often than not the two rival options cut across the lines that divide ruling from opposition parties: there are supporters of either in both camps. Fear of political confusion or realignment stops major parties from advertising their internal differences in public debates. A final factor in democracies premised on a Kantian rather than a Lockean/Smithian view of citizenship – i.e. the whole of Europe minus the British Isles – is the reluctance to let go of a traditional means of preserving socio-political integration – and of facing the reality that citizenship norms have been considerably weakened in the last few decades. This was especially the case in France where the 20th century consensus over conscription was imbued with sacred value as the traditional way to transcend what (up until the late 1980s) had been the otherwise disconsensual character of French politics since the Revolution. Conversely, there are countries, like Sweden, where consensus on conscription (and the belief that it can adjust to the new external and internal scene) is strong, the very idea of AVF is anathema, and a major public debate deprived of any relevance.
- 13 Where silent indecision persists, the issue is resolved by the unexpected move of a ruling politician of the first rank, or one who aspires for power⁸. Such was the case in Britain in 1957 when Duncan Sandys, the then minister of Defence, included the return to the traditional British all-volunteer format in a White Paper without further

comment. In Belgium, the government followed its Defence minister, Léo Delcroix, and caught the military unprepared and scrambling for adjustments to the new organizational format (1992). In France, Jacques Chirac, then the newly elected president, went on television in February 1996 to address the nation and announce his bold move – without warning to his Defence minister, who the previous week-end had been reassuring his German colleague that France would retain conscription come what may...

- 14 Another surprise is that such moves prove immediately popular even in countries that were supposed to be emotionally attached to the draft. In France, opinion surveys taken in the days that followed Chirac's announcement showed that 2/3 of the general public, and over 4/5 of the youths about to be called up, resoundingly approved. This belied a widely shared assumption in the political class that public opinion was in two minds at best⁹, and eventually would not go along. The strength of citizenship norms had clearly been overestimated.
- 15 Transition periods are generally shorter than provided for by laws instituting AVF. In some few cases, as in Belgium or Spain in the 1990s, it came to nothing as youths about to be called up refused to respond to the call as soon as they heard of legal provisions to that effect being processed by Parliament. In the majority of cases, transition is curtailed – in the Netherlands, it was shortened by half; in France by over a year – (a) because the recruitment of volunteers, to begin with, proves surprisingly much easier than anticipated by Defence ministries, (b) because training and supervising conscripts diverts officers from concentrating on the wave of the future, but also (c) on account of fears that attitudes among the last conscripts will deteriorate.
- 16 The reason for such initial successes is that many draftees ending their legally mandated tour of duty can be persuaded to stay on as volunteers, with much better pay. This is especially the case where or when youth unemployment is high. Another condition is that the military enjoy a favourable public image, and there be no overly high risks of war: those two conditions were fulfilled in the 1990s – at the time of the great wave of shifts to AVF. Action on distant theatres, mostly on peace support operations, added the lure of adventure in the name of peace and humanitarian assistance, and the glamour of promoting human rights. Yet, after a few years, these positive factors tend to erode as the pool of former conscripts dwindles, and labour market forces start making themselves felt.

With What Effects? Structural changes

- 17 The most dramatic effect of the change resides in a severe downsizing of the armed services. In the strategic circumstances and political atmosphere of the early post-Cold War era, reductions in force ranged from 25% to 40%. The reason is quite obvious: lower force level requirements, due to the end of hypothetical prospects of all-out war on the continent, initiated the process. Moreover, the budgetary cost per head of rank and file volunteers being distinctly higher than was the case with conscripts¹⁰, for a given budget there is now a lower ceiling to the numbers Defence ministries can afford¹¹. Finally, the lack of any safety net and a low propensity to enlist among the young set limits, yet to be tested, to the supply of actual candidates. After a while, the countries that have newly opted for an AVF begin experiencing the “law of downward pressures” that has become familiar to the oldest and largest European AVF: that of the

United Kingdom, where the slow but continuous erosion of manpower has been the rule since the 1960s. Due to a combination of budget constraints and decreasing propensities to enlist, British force levels have declined by small numbers every single year since 1963, with the exception of the periods 1980-1984, in the context of heightened Soviet threats and the Falklands War, and 2003-2004, when the second Iraq war started. While seemingly inconsequential in the short term, these steady decreases add up to dramatic long-term effects, forcing successive governments to revise manpower requirements downwards. The really worrying British trend is that even after requirements have been significantly lowered, as in the 1990 "Options for Change" strategic review, they still subsequently prove difficult to meet. The French case has so far been less problematic: since 2002 (the first year without any residual conscripts under the colours), recruitment targets and outcomes have mostly coincided. Yet, the same combination of budget pressures and declining enlistment propensities may explain why the recent Defence White Paper (Commission du Livre Blanc, 2008) has counselled decreases of overall manpower requirements by 17% (Army 17%, Navy 11%, Air Force 24%) phased over the next seven years.

- 18 The second structural change resides in a distinct alteration of the quantitative equilibrium among the three services. Because a majority of conscripts were formerly concentrated there, the army is the service most affected by the shift. While navies and air forces, in which conscripts were already a minority due to the higher technological requirements that have characterized them for decades (and the imprudence of entrusting costly pieces of equipment to short-term conscripts), see their numbers decrease only very slightly, their shares of total military manpower increase as a result.
- 19 The composition of total defence manpower has also significantly changed. The overall share of military women is raising rapidly, with air forces usually in the vanguard, navies in the rearguard and armies in the middle. The main cause of such a trend is that, consequent upon the disappearance of large numbers of all-male conscripts, the percentage of women will mechanically increase – even if their absolute numbers remain stagnant. But precisely, in the post-Cold War context, female numbers have gone up by substantial margins. Representing less than 2% in the last two decades, they now routinely approach or exceed 10 or even 15% of the uniformed workforce. Given recent, sometimes spectacular, inflows of women recruits (in France, over 20%; in Britain, close to 15%), their visibility and functional significance promises to rise further still in the medium term. Permissive reasons are the normative change which, in the parent societies, has favoured greater gender equality of access to most specialties and positions, and the fact that in contemporary armed forces, a majority of roles do not directly involve combat, or require above average bodily vigour. The main factor, however, generally is the dearth of quality male applicants prepared to face the requirements of military life (open-ended liability for service, discipline, long separations from family, commitment to theatres of operations where, however statistically minimal, the risk to life and limb, dramatized by media reporting whenever there are casualties, is not nil). Women, whose average level of educational attainment is known to exceed that of men, conveniently substitute for the missing male candidates, thus making the need for pay raises less acute. The only drawback of female recruits is that – though access to positions hitherto closed to them is widening – they are still barred from some combat roles, hence slightly less versatile than men.

- 20 Proportions (though not necessarily absolute numbers) of civilian personnel likewise increase to the point where, in some countries (e.g., Britain), their aggregate strength surpasses that of the largest uniformed service. As many support functions, following the public-private partnership trend typical of the 1990s, have been outsourced to private sector firms, the visibility of civilians is even greater than official statistics allow for.
- 21 Where allowed by law (Britain, France, Spain, and a few others), foreign volunteers, once concentrated in homogeneous foreign formations (Gurkhas, Legion, etc.) of otherwise national armies now tend to fill the ranks of many other units or branches. In Britain, where recruiting from the Commonwealth (and Ireland) has long been customary, a recent rise in the proportion of foreigners among “other ranks” (to nearly 8% overall, but 20% of new recruits this year) has prompted fears that soaring numbers of foreign troops would dilute the armed forces’ national identity, possibly weaken loyalty, and – should countries of origin ban their citizens from fighting Britain’s wars – seriously cripple military operations (Hickley and Kisiel, 2008). In Spain, large numbers of Latin American immigrants join the forces upon the promise of naturalization (as is the case also in the United States), which somewhat allays such fears. In dire situations, when the worst comes to the worst and such diversification is not enough to fill the ranks, some countries do not hesitate in recruiting convicted prison detainees upon the promise of pardon after a tour of combat duty¹².
- 22 At the same, second-generation immigrants tend to flock to the ranks of European all-volunteer forces in greater numbers than their fathers had consented to. They do so, in ways that parallel the African-American experience in the U. S. military from the 1950s to the 1980s, in order to earn subjective recognition and “first-class citizenship” by serving in a demanding public institution – one in which brotherhood of arms, equality of treatment, and the close watch kept by the media, civil liberties or human rights organizations guarantee that the discrimination they still suffer in society will be mitigated and softened. The sum total is that for the armed forces the era when they were a white male preserve is a thing of the past: in a matter of years after the shift to an AVF, they acquire a cosmopolitan, “rainbow” quality¹³.
- 23 The reserves also go through a deep transformation, from understudy formations replicating active-duty order-of-battle charts to a pool of specialist operational or support roles or units which it would be too costly to maintain on active status permanently. All reservists are now volunteers: they are thus as hard to recruit as regulars¹⁴, and their cost per head has risen. As a result, the reserves too are severely downsized¹⁵ – at least as far as operational reservists (those liable to be mobilized and committed to military action) are concerned. However, numbers tend to rise again over time as a consequence of the successive reductions in regular force. For instance, the French operational reserve now barely totals 1/6th of regular force levels, but is slated to exceed 40% by 2015.
- 24 Likewise, the services’ rank structure is profoundly altered. The old pyramid is replaced overnight by a hierarchical set-up in which privates and corporals or equivalents are no longer necessarily a majority – a trend that predated the shift to an AVF in navies and air forces but now tends to apply overall (though in army privates may, in some cases, still account for slightly over 50%). This results from the fact that a large share of officers and NCO are in highly-skilled specialist roles which do not coincide with command positions. It has also to do with anticipation of emergency

situations which could require sudden increases in the overall volume of troops. As experienced senior officers and NCO cannot be recruited and trained overnight for such contingencies, a surplus of them is prudently kept on the rolls. However, over time, as more specialist positions are entrusted to civilian defence personnel or subcontractors, the proportion, but not the numbers, of *outsourcing* tends to rise again somewhat.

- 25 If one adds the consideration that troop turnover is slower among volunteers signed up for a few years than it was among short-term conscripts, and that downsizing has reduced the number of companies or battalions to command, ships to sail or aircraft to fly, one consequence is that the pace of promotion tends to be slower in AVF than it was in the days of conscription both at the bottom and at the top. In the middle, among mid-ranking officers and NCO, careers are more often oriented to specialist functions. Another consequence is the possible rise of relative deprivation among sergeants or equivalents, whose pay differentials with privates has been reduced (sometimes considerably, due to the steep initial rise in recruit pay), and who tend to be frustrated as a result of this flattening of the pay structure.
- 26 With rank and file volunteers staying on for longer periods, the age structure undergoes a similar flattening, and the average age immediately rises from 24-25 to slightly above 30. The number (and more markedly, the proportion) of both married service members and dependents increases, generating higher family welfare costs which now take up a significant proportion of the defence budget. The same will apply to retirement pensions at a later date.
- 27 The final structural change affects the allocation of scarce resources in times of budget constraints. Higher personnel costs induce a trade-off with provision of major items of equipment – with maintenance and spare parts as the designated victims of that fearful dilemma¹⁶.

Recruitment, resettlement and retention

- 28 The shift does not affect the recruitment of military by career, which was professionalized (except for a few conscripted second lieutenants or sergeants) long before it. For any AVF, absent the safety net of a legally mandated duty to serve, the key to success or failure resides in recruiting enough rank and file volunteers, especially in countries where young NCO are not recruited (as is the case in France) directly from civilian life.
- 29 Given deliberately low force level requirements, the problem stems from supply factors which are often beyond the control of military authorities. One is the size and evolution of cohorts of 17-24 year-olds¹⁷. Another is the proportion of youths in that age bracket who intend to pursue post-secondary studies, and are therefore unavailable. That proportion has increased in the last decades to the point where, in most European countries, it exceeds 25%, and in some approaches 50% or more. Physical inaptitude or medical rejection rates of enlistment candidates have grown to be a distinct problem (they were close to 40% in the British services in the late 1990s), due to lifestyles in which physical exercise is less of a mainstream value than it used to be among the young. The net result is that the pool of potential candidates is severely restricted. While the numbers of young male recruits needed by the services may seem modest as a proportion of the youth cohorts concerned, once those in post-secondary education and the proportion of the remainder that is declared physically ineligible are deducted

from that total, the share of eligible young men the services need to attract appears much higher. In Britain, for instance, some 25,000 rank and file new recruits, i.e. 0,5%, or 1 in 200 young males of the 17-24 year-old cohorts, are required every year; but among those eligible and available for service, that number fully amounts to over 8%, or 1 in 12¹⁸. There is thus, in addition to the budgetary cap to the numbers that can be recruited, a natural ceiling which actually represents the AVF main constraint. If that is the case, the question then is of the factors and motivations that govern willingness to serve among those eligible and available for enlistment.

- 30 Though economic utilitarianism plays less of a role than is commonly assumed, youth unemployment rates obviously affect decisions to apply for enlistment at rank and file level¹⁹. So does the political context: wars are known to attract more recruits to begin with, but if they drag on the armed forces' attractiveness decreases. Conversely, peace support missions, because they are in harmony with contemporary mainstream civilian values, tend to raise the self-esteem of those who take part in them, and – all things equal – attract more people to the military services. The prestige status of the military also forms part of the recruitment equation – as it happens, on the positive side since the end of the Cold War.
- 31 Among the factors that can be managed by governments and armed forces, pay, career prospects, conditions of service, post-service resettlement and public image loom largest. For senior officers and highly-skilled specialists²⁰, pay is usually a problem but not for rank and file service members. These ones can compare their lots with that of civilian friends at corresponding skill levels and find that military allowances and bonuses place their compensation package above the median income in their segment of the labour market. That is because, in order to be attractive, the armed forces need to factor in the peculiar burdens of military service, and the recognition that such service deserves in societies where few are willing to serve. As suggested by elasticities that are fairly low when it is augmented but greater whenever it decreases in real terms, pay mostly plays a role in enlistment motivations, therefore, only when it is seen as insufficient – a suicidal situation for any AVF.
- 32 Career prospects and conditions of service are actually more important. Most AVF favour renewable contracts of medium length rather than short, non-renewable ones. Their main source of weakness in the face of competitors on the labour market is that they cannot guarantee every recruit long-term employment leading to NCO status, which means that a majority will have to leave the services after a few years. To offset that handicap, they play up adventure, travel, the chance to break with the tedium of civilian routines, the warm-hearted solidarity of primary groups, a structured and protective social environment, or the assets for second (civilian) careers of technical training much in demand in industry. The problem is that conditions of service often fall short of those promises. As the case may be, boredom, the feeling that skills and good will are under-utilized, the stark realities of military action, repeated tours on distant theatres of operations often lead to disappointment, individual maladjustment and demoralization or sheer fatigue, reflected in problematic levels of premature separation from service – unfinished non-prior service contracts – ranging from 10 to 30% and over depending on country and circumstances.
- 33 That is why resettlement prospects are key to success. Support in helping service members find suitable civilian jobs upon leaving the forces (through occupational training, outplacement, or counselling) is of cardinal importance as negative hearsay is

quick to produce deleterious feedback effects on recruitment. But equally significant is helping them re-adjust to civilian norms, especially where, as in the British Army, emphasis on military ethos, cohesion and paternalism is strong. Nothing depresses recruitment so much as media reporting that thirty-year-old former service members, maladjusted to civilian life because they miss the protective family atmosphere of service life, are over-represented among the unemployed, homeless people or prison inmates²¹.

- 34 Finally, the image projected by each service plays a very significant role. If all of the above factors impacted indiscriminately on willingness to serve, recruits in all three services would display similar characteristics, or to put it another way, the choice of service would be a matter of indifference to them. This is not the case, and the services soon discover that they each have their own markets, based on differences in their respective images in the minds of potential candidates: virility, adventure, physical exertion and solidarity for armies, technology and travel for navies, technology and mastery of complexity for air forces. That is why recruitment advertising, which represents a significant share of budget expenditures, is targeted at niches rather than at the youth labour market in blanket fashion. Contrary to common perceptions, including among recruiters, enlistment in the armed services, therefore, is not a choice by default.
- 35 Outcomes are fairly similar across countries. Rank and file recruits predominantly come from lower-middle and working-class backgrounds. Among them, over-represented are school drop-outs who, in addition to the benefits in terms of personal identity and satisfaction of certain wishes or psychological drives, see the armed services as a second chance. Hence the importance for the armed forces to be (and clearly appear to be) an avenue of upward mobility for such youths as well as (though in different ways) for sons and daughters of immigrants – rather than as a welfare refuge, or employer of last resort, for youths in need of resocialization.
- 36 In the face of such recruitment difficulties, retention is the second key to success. Keeping first-term attrition to a minimum and encouraging renewal of contracts compensates for recruitment shortfalls, keeps turnover low, and saves on training. This is a standard response to the structural risk of understaffing. However, as we shall see, it has drawbacks.

Institutional impact

- 37 A little-noticed consequence of the shift to an AVF is a liberalization of leadership styles. One general reason is increased complexity, which to a large extent makes superiors dependent on the good will of subordinates. While it is true that such a trend is also felt in armed forces that still partly rely on conscription, its repercussions are much stronger in AVF because the performance of superiors is now assessed, at least in part, on the basis of their ability to elicit contract renewals among their subordinates. Another reason is the less pyramidal rank structure already alluded to, and shorter social distances between NCO and privates. This is less in evidence, however, in elite army units where the gap between the social origins of officers and other ranks is larger, and command authority is more functional than elsewhere.
- 38 A second impact resides in the cultural change that comes from the increased presence and visibility of servicewomen and minorities. However, much more fundamental is the

exacerbation in AVF of cultural tensions, natural to military institutions, between identities based on the requirements of operational effectiveness and those induced by the need for meaningful integration into the parent societies. On the one hand, martial identities are hardened by a social composition that is less representative than in was under the draft, by the cultural in-breeding that an AVF induces, the post-Cold War return to a strategy of action, high operational tempos, long separations from family, as well as by the outsourcing of support functions and resulting concentration of uniformed personnel on core military activities. The restoration, from the early 1990s onwards, of high prestige after a three-decade eclipse – surveys now regularly place the military among the most respected public institutions in most European countries, irrespective of organizational formats²² – encourages the hardening of those facets of military identity which earn service members that heightened societal regard. On the other hand, the fact that everything in AVF has a price-tag – in sharp contrast with the old days of conscription, when rank and file labour was abundant and cheap – encourages resort to management techniques that nothing differentiates from those in use elsewhere. The consequence is that occupationalism – the attitude which holds that service is a job like any other – is now a higher risk in some quarters than before. Market philosophies and the ideological belief that public-private partnerships are more efficient – so typical of the post-Cold War era until recently – have made it more difficult for the military to maintain its functional ethos. Also, despite the return of low-intensity warfare (Afghanistan) among their missions, the winning of the hearts and minds of local populations on distant theatres involves civilian skills and universal values; likewise, increased interaction with civilian employees, the desire of military families to lead “normal” lives, and the close cultural integration of military cadres into the parent societies, tend to point the other way. Simultaneous remilitarization and civilianisation of attitudes and ethos result in what some acute observers have called “military schizophrenia”²³.

Socio-political impact

- 39 In light of such trends, two concerns come to the fore. One, voiced by civilians, is to avoid a military staffed by the underprivileged in the rank and file, and the privileged in the officer corps, both culturally (not least, ideologically) estranged from mainstream society. The other, often heard in military circles, is to preclude societal indifference towards the armed services.
- 40 The civilian concern is groundless today. For one thing, “automatic stabilizers” operate at rank and file level: complexity prevents the military from being content to recruit solely among the low-skilled, underprivileged or ideologically motivated. If it did, its public image would become skewed, and fail to attract mainstream youths, thus exacerbating its recruitment problems. Officers have for the past three decades or more been fairly representative socially, as well as become meaningfully integrated into society in terms of family lifestyles, and there is no sign that this is about to change unless the parameters are fundamentally altered. For another, AVF are much more closely dependent on society for material and moral support than they were in the days of abundant, cheap and legally guaranteed conscript labour. However, the risk exists of a deterioration of the existing state of affairs. The conjunction of still lower manpower requirements and high youth unemployment would most certainly disturb

the automatic stabilizers alluded to, and allow social and cultural/ideological estrangement (as well as loss of functional effectiveness through a lowering of average manpower quality!). The military's preference for retention through long, renewable contracts would accentuate such a negative trend²⁴. The elitization of officer corps entailed by low numbers would lengthen social distances with other ranks, and bring back authoritarian leadership styles – in contradiction to wider societal trends. Vigilance is thus required.

- 41 The military concern is more serious. Lower force levels and numerous missions on distant theatres translate into much less visible forces at home. No longer in the public eye, they run the risk of being forgotten, despite the heightened prestige they have earned in the last two decades – with serious consequences on recruitment, or when it comes to budget debates. Constant public relations efforts are therefore necessary, especially at local level. Avoidance of bad press, due to scandals²⁵ or statistics on former service members now homeless or in jail, is of the essence. One good way of securing a favourable public image is to cultivate the perception of the defence establishment as an avenue of upward mobility.
- 42 The political dimension follows much the same pattern, though it is moot whether that state of affairs follows entirely from the new organizational format: it pre-dated the shift among cadres, and there are counter-examples outside Europe – notably in the United States. But it is clear that rather than “radical professionalism”, all-volunteer formats in European countries have accentuated “pragmatic” orientations – i.e., non-ideological conservatism premised on the defence of existing institutions whatever the political options of those in office at national level. This is reflected, again unlike the U. S.²⁶, in the absence of open partisanship among military personnel: while the political centre of gravity is slightly right of centre, the full spectrum of political attitudes (with the possible exception of extreme-left views) can usually be observed in European military settings. Generally recognized and accepted is the need for accommodating both the functional imperative of unique norms and the socio-political imperative of closeness to the social environment – for being distinct, but not distant from society. There are, as could be expected, those (usually in the combat arms of armies) who regard themselves as soldiers first and foremost and cultivate traditional martial identities, but a majority, when asked in interviews or questionnaire surveys, say they are citizens as well as soldiers.
- 43 This precludes praetorian attitudes, facilitates interaction at the top between ruling politicians and military leaders, and mitigates frustration at the loss of professional autonomy whenever political goals change or override military objectives in action or policy. European military leaders are more often than not more politically flexible than their U. S. counterparts.
- 44 At the same time, this makes for less politically inhibited officers, unafraid to play political games whenever frustration grows out of control. This notably happens, as has been observed in many countries, when military leaders (and their subordinates) feel that politicians at the top do not sufficiently take their professional viewpoints into account when formulating policy. And indeed, under the Cold War, politicians had formed the habit of making decisions on defence, for instance using military expenditures as a major adjustment variable in economic policy, without consulting generals or admirals whose counsel, in the absence of operations, could be dispensed with. Repeated incidents over the last fifteen years (resignations, public protests by flag

rank officers in the press, etc.) conspicuously show that this will not do any more, especially as in terms of prestige and public respect, the differentials between military leaders and politicians today are clearly in favour of the former in most European countries²⁷. Another factor is that, whereas in the days of the draft the presence of citizens in arms serving with little at stake in terms of economic reward or identity interests discouraged cadres from publicly articulating such claims, they now feel freer to act as pressure groups²⁸. A final factor resides in the dwindling proportion of civilian elites (politicians, but also ranking bureaucrats, journalists, teachers and others) with first-hand experience of military life after several decades of all-volunteer recruitment – a serious source of potential misunderstanding for the future (witness the U.S. case) between them and service members.

Concluding remarks

- 45 All-volunteer armed forces are a growing majority in Europe. In the strategic circumstances that have prevailed since the Berlin Wall went down, conscription has only survived in nations where citizenship norms have suffered less than they generally have elsewhere, or are still in the throes of unresolved tensions or threats on the periphery. The shift came as a surprise in a few key countries soon after 1990, triggering a dramatic bandwagon effect which has since considerably altered the military scene throughout the continent.
- 46 Transitions have been much easier than expected. Defence establishments have in the main shown great skills in negotiating the deep structural changes that come with such a major turning point. Initial recruitment figures allayed the fears expressed by military leaders used to the safety net of conscription. But soon, the law of downward pressures has made itself felt, and the hard realities of managing AVF have set in. The main obstacle inheres in pools of eligible and potentially willing young men that are too limited to fill the ranks. Part of the problem is that the services can guarantee promotion and secure long-term employment only to a minority. Women are used in rising numbers to fill the gap (and ensure quality), and some countries faced with serious shortfalls resort to enlisting foreigners or even prisoners upon the promise of naturalization or pardon. Managers soon learn the importance for the armed forces not to appear to be an employer of last resort, and understand that resettlement and the prospect of upward social mobility upon leaving the services help recruitment. They come to value retention as a key substitute for scarce new recruits.
- 47 AVF impact on military identities. Leadership styles become more liberal, and labour market realities induce management practices which erode the old normative character of martial institutions. Military culture registers the change in social composition, most visibly the increased presence of servicewomen. The basic tensions that undergird it are heightened by the shift. Remilitarization, partly due to the new strategic context, and increased civilianisation trends result in uneasy compromises or unresolved policy, social or even psychological contradictions.
- 48 The shift to an AVF carries important consequences for society at large. It comes about in part on account of weakened citizenship norms, and further weakens them. It brings to the fore concerns about social and cultural isolation and estrangement of the armed forces. These fears prove mostly ungrounded thanks to “automatic stabilizers”, sure to operate as long as manpower requirements go beyond the narrow segment of youths

spontaneously inclined to join for social, cultural or ideological reasons, and oblige the services to recruit from the mainstream. The military's main problem is to be kept in the public eye and, despite the respect and prestige earned the last two decades, avoid societal indifference. For that purpose, they are brought to reach out to society through advertising, open days or sponsoring of leisure activities.

- 49 Finally, the political dimension is less problematic in Europe today than it would have been in other historical contexts (say, in the 1920s and 1930s), or than it is in America. The reason for this is that the shift has confirmed and deepened the pragmatic professionalism of earlier decades. This makes for more flexibility on the part of officers in their relations with ministers, parliamentarians and civilian bureaucrats. If it also encourages them to play political games, their pressure group tactics have so far remained well within the bounds of democratic practice, and underline their loyalty to the system. However, civilian-military misunderstandings are made more likely by reason of the lack, growing as a function of time, of any first-hand experience of military life among civilian elites.
- 50 One consequence seldom brought up is that, with dwindling numbers and the attendant risk of pricing military action out of battlefields, AVF encourage the internationalisation of security through joint operations or institutional arrangements: even major powers have come to realize that there is little they can do alone. Likewise, they have, by sheer necessity, greatly boosted the trend towards closer inter-service cooperation brought on by the post-Cold War strategic context.
- 51 All in all, then, all-volunteer forces are neither the resplendent success nor the disaster that some had predicted. Despite the inherent difficulties detailed in this article, they valiantly survive, and mostly give satisfaction in their conduct of the missions assigned to them as well as in relations with state and society.
- 52 There are, however, two bold question marks today and for the future. As exemplified by Iraq and Afghanistan today, one is sustainability: all-volunteer formats turn force regeneration in the field into a major difficulty, with no satisfactory solution in sight. And should major international tensions re-emerge and require substantially higher force levels, reverting to conscription would most probably be the only way.

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NOTES

1. "Why me?" is the question asked when service is seen as a burden. Where, due to ingrained cultural patterns, service is still regarded as an honour, the question is "Why *not* me?". Such rare cases can still be observed in Scandinavia, where, owing to the Lutheran tradition of exalting service to the community, conscripts enjoy high social honour, and youths tend to feel deprived when exempted from service. To illustrate: in Sweden, recently, feminist militants have been campaigning for the extension of conscript duty to young females.
2. Other factors may compensate for, or even contradict, this hypothetical trend. Such was the case, for instance in the last years of conscription in France, where despite its obvious unequal impact on various social groups (legal evasion was strongest among both the most underprivileged and privileged in terms of aptitudes and educational attainment, while the draft affected all others more than proportionately), draftees declared that service was meaningful to them, and responded positively to call-ups until the very end.
3. Lotteries to designate those in the minority who will be called up were common practice in the 19th century, but mostly disappeared in the 20th: equality gained strength as a value, and made consensus over unequal treatment of equals much harder to come by all things equal.
4. Germany introduced such a system in the first place because conscientious objection is a German citizen's constitutional right, and in the name of equality it had to provide a mandatory civilian alternative to conscripted military service. When, in the 1990s, conscientious objection became the majority option among youths of draft age, such cheap manpower created an addiction that is difficult to remedy without renouncing its obvious economic and political advantages for the welfare system...
5. This is another reason why Germany sticks to the military draft even though only a minority are now affected by it: only males are concerned. Females were long barred from serving in the Bundeswehr, and therefore conscientious objection, the main driver of *Zivildienst* applications, does not affect them.
6. Some have instituted *volunteer* forms of civilian service, which in most cases only attract tiny minorities among the targeted youth population.
7. The situation in the United States (1966-1969) was very similar.
8. In America, Richard Nixon, then campaigning for his party's nomination in the 1968 presidential race, surprised everybody – he had been known as a staunch supporter of universal military training as Eisenhower's vice-president a decade or so earlier – by including a return to an all-volunteer military in his platform. Once elected, he appointed a presidential commission to think through and organize the shift.
9. In the years preceding the announcement, opinion surveys regularly showed that some 2/3 of respondents believed that France could not do without conscription, but about 3/4 added that an all-professional force would be more effective...

10. Conscript pay levels ranged from the minimum wage to as low as 10% of it. By contrast, under new AVF in many countries, labour market rates for quality manpower at rank and file level had to be supplemented by bonuses and allowances to compensate for the potential hardships of military life.
11. This was especially the case in the 1990s, when peace dividends were the order of the day. The post-9/11 era hardly changed the equation: while downward defence budget trends were reversed, the increments were mostly allocated to resources other than force levels.
12. That has been the case recently in the United States: see, for instance: TURSE, N. (2006), "U.S. is recruiting misfits for army: felons, racists, gang members fill in the ranks", *San Francisco Chronicle*, Sunday, October 1, 2006; p. F-6. This extreme solution has been examined in Britain, for the same reasons, but applied on a much lesser scale.
13. This is of course more in evidence in former imperial powers than in Central European countries.
14. If not harder actually, as civilian employers are generally reluctant to allow employees to leave their positions temporarily in order to respond to a call to military training periods or distant operations.
15. It is true, however, that the huge reserves formerly generated by conscription existed mostly on paper, and were seldom called to the colours.
16. The dearth of spare parts and maintenance funds was particularly acute in Britain and France earlier this decade. See LOGAN, G., "Veterans blame Army for massed ranks of ex-soldiers in UK jails", *Personneltoday.com*, 5 September 2008.
17. One further difficulty stems from the demographic decline affecting regions or segments of the population which traditionally generate more enlistments than others (in Britain: Northern England, Scotland and the industrial working-class).
18. By comparison, the same proportion is 1 in 83 for young women, in whose case the limiting factor is not supply but institutional demand. One does not wonder, therefore, if that demand increases the way it does at present.
19. However, the elasticities of recruitment as a function of youth unemployment are generally weak, and labour market influences are registered with a time-lag of at least six months. Such influences are complex, and involve many intervening variables. Unemployment impacts on quality more than on numbers of applicants, as if the least qualified withdrew from the enlistment market based on the perception that better profiles will reduce their chances of success.
20. This was already the case before the shift to AVF, and is therefore unrelated to it (though indirectly, the rise in the expenditures allocated to rank and file pay makes pay raises for senior and highly-skilled personnel more problematic for budget managers).
21. This has plagued the British Armed Forces over the last few years through press report upon press report that the unemployment rate of former service members is nearly double the general rate, or that some 20% of homeless persons in the London area and 9% of the UK prison population are ex-servicemen. On this last point, see for instance: Logan (2008), "Veterans blame Army for massed ranks of ex-soldiers in UK jails", *Personneltoday.com*, 5 September 2008.
22. Cf. successive edition of Eurobarometer surveys.
23. The best example of this was the French military's response to the law instituting a 35-hour workweek in street as from 2000. On the basis of its legal status, military authorities (but also a vocal majority among service members) proclaimed that it was not concerned, and open-ended liability for service remained central to the military ethos. Yet, in a matter of months, the military came up with its own modified version of the 35-hour workweek: while the principle of unlimited availability for duty was upheld, if nothing urgent was on the front burner, battalion or base commanders could now allow their subordinates to take Friday afternoons off. The rationale was that civilian defence employees enjoyed the benefit of the new law, and it was

necessary to avoid relative deprivation among uniformed personnel as well as among their families. Thus did two cardinal principles collide: functional effectiveness and socio-cultural integration, which though often pointing in different directions must never be lost sight of. But in this case, harmonization between them proved difficult, and led to an uneasy compromise.

24. All-volunteer formats and ideological conservatism seem related only when long careers or extended periods of service in uniform are dominant. This was suggested long ago by an American study: controlling for education, among service members conservative views are a positive function of seniority, or of plans to remain in the armed services for as long as possible. The study's authors advised caution in maintaining a balance between long- and short-termers – despite, one might add, the understandable preference of personnel managers for retention and low turnover. Cf. BACHMAN, J.; J. Blair and D. Segal (1977), *The All-Volunteer Force: A Study of Ideology in the Military*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press.

25. The usual instances concern hazing of new recruits, racial discrimination or sexual harassment.

26. Another, more recent, American study showed that nearly 2/3 of U.S. officers are registered Republicans. Cf. HICKLEY, M. and R. Kisiel (2008), “Army's demand for 15% limit on foreign recruits to safeguard *Britishness* upsets race watchdog”, *Daily Mail*, 26 September. This is bound to raise problems as liberal democracy is premised on the notion of objective neutrality on the part of those serving the state.

27. Eurobarometer, *loc. cit.*

28. This is clearest in the French case, where gendarmes have been known to stage street protests in uniform recently (2001). But, confirming that this is not necessarily related to AVF, Swedish military cadres, while refraining from taking to the streets, have become adept at publicly negotiating benefits and allowances before accepting overseas missions.

ABSTRACTS

Countries with conscripted troops became a minority since the end of the Cold War. In this new reality it is essential to understand why the shift to all-volunteer forces happened, how occurred and the impacts caused in European societies. Large number of troops became pointless, the service was now seen as a burden and different types of military action implied a new system. Public debate has not taken place, mainly occurring among experts. In general the transition periods are shorter than the ones determined by law. There are several kinds of impacts in this change: structural changes (e.g. downsizing of the armed services and distinct alterations among the three services); recruitment, resettlement and retention; institutional impact (e.g. liberalization of leadership styles and the cultural change caused by the increased presence of servicewomen and minorities); and socio-political impact. AVF still need to respond to the sustainability issue and to the need of higher force levels.

Desde o fim da Guerra Fria os países com tropas recrutadas tornaram-se uma minoria. É essencial compreender o porquê da mudança para forças exclusivamente voluntárias, como ocorreu e os impactos nas sociedades europeias. Um grande número de tropas torna-se inútil, o serviço passou a ser visto como um fardo e diferentes tipos de acção militar implicam um novo sistema. O debate público não se verificou e só ocorre entre especialistas. Em geral, os períodos de transição são mais curtos do que o determinado por lei. Existem vários tipos de impactos desta mudança:

estruturais (como a redução das forças armadas e alterações distintas entre os três ramos); recrutamento, reinstalação e retenção; impacto institucional (como a liberalização dos estilos de liderança e a mudança cultural causada pelo aumento da presença de mulheres e minorias), e impacto sociopolítico. AVF (Forças Armadas Voluntárias) ainda precisam de responder à questão da sustentabilidade e da necessidade de maiores níveis de força.

INDEX

Keywords: All-Volunteer Forces, military service, change effects, sustainability

Palavras-chave: Forças Armadas Voluntárias, serviço militar, efeitos da mudança, sustentabilidade

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