

Gesture Politics and the Symbolism of Compulsory Military Conscription

The Lithuanian Government sends signals to Russia and to its own public

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Since the end of the Cold War it has been a general trend in Europe to [phase out mandatory military conscription](#). Only [thirteen European countries](#) – including some NATO members – nowadays still retain compulsory national service. If agreed by the parliament, Lithuania, which ended mandatory army service in 2008, will soon reinstate army conscription and join the ‘European thirteen’. Starting this September, for a period of five years, 3 500 men ages 19 to 27 should be enlisted yearly to Lithuanian national service. The Lithuanian president and senior military personnel claim that this move stems from the need to counter [Russia's aggressive posture in the Baltic region](#). While portrayed by the Lithuanian authorities as a matter of [national security](#), re-introducing conscription can also be interpreted as a symbolic gesture directed at Lithuanian as well as Russian audiences.

Analysis: The Symbolic Importance of a Token Gesture

While during the Cold War and the 1990s compulsory conscription was the norm among European countries, more than twenty NATO and EU states have now abolished mandatory conscription in favour of full-time professional armies, although it remains in [several member states](#) of both organisations. Although the abolition of conscription was not imposed on acceding NATO members, better trained, specialized and mobile armies that could contribute to NATO “out of area” operations were preferred. In a world where “[air power, cyber warfare and small groups of special forces engaged in counter-terrorism operations](#)” play a much greater role, the advantages of having a professional military, compared to conscripts, have been widely recognised and this model has become the norm.

European countries adopt diverse rhetoric in justifying conscription. Attracting more recruits to join the country’s military, budgetary reasons, instillation of discipline and production of a sense of national pride are often cited as reasons for keeping mandatory conscription alive. For example [in Austria](#), where the conscription draft survived the referendum in 2013, the national budget but also Austria’s perceived neutrality were cited as reasons for not adopting professional army. Compulsory military conscription can be further seen as a tool for increasing national unity and socio-political cohesion – this serves the interest of political elites as it induces a sense of obedience and national pride based on contribution and potential sacrifice, which can be a powerful force in silencing critiques of dominant political discourse. For NATO members, mandatory military conscription can also provide a means for boosting the size of country’s standing army. This is potentially significant in terms of allowing a country to hold on to its territory long enough for NATO Article 5 processes to take effect, but these collective defence processes can only be meaningful if there is something left to defend.

In the case of Lithuania, Russia is currently seen to be the most likely source of such an external attack. The re-introduction of mandatory military conscription can therefore be partly seen as a move to buy Lithuania enough time in case of any direct confrontation with Russia. However, the Lithuanian mandatory military conscription can be also treated as a symbolic gesture carrying several meanings. The Russian annexation of Crimea has escalated the Ukraine crisis and has raised fears in the Baltic states, including Lithuania, that [“unrest could be stirred up among its tiny minority Russian population”](#). Russian military drills near Lithuanian borders and in Kaliningrad, a Russian enclave near the Lithuanian borders, have further fuelled these fears. While the threat is far from certain, the fear that [“we could be next”](#) is. The re-introduction of conscription by the Lithuanian authorities can be seen as a symbolic counter-action intended to tell Russian audiences that “we are ready for you”. However, compulsory conscription can also be seen as a signal to the Lithuanian public that, in matters of national security and foreign policy, action is being taken – as a message for the Lithuanian public that their government “is doing something” to counter the Russian threat.

Outlook: An Ineffective and Potentially Dangerous Move

The renewal of compulsory military conscription in Lithuania does not seem to be the best choice for a symbolic action. Conscription may increase the size of Lithuanian army, which could buy time in any direct confrontation with Russia before NATO steps in. However there are other, more effective measures symbolically and in terms of strengthening national security. Boosting defence spending to purchase new weapons or the Baltic states’ agreement to increase [funding to NATO’s air mission in the Baltics](#) are preferable to re-introducing conscription in this regard. The increased national unity and socio-political cohesion that conscription may engender can also be seen as manipulation into supporting the government’s stance. In this case, attention would be diverted away from alternatives to solve the problem of the current Russian threat, which prevents other policy options to be explored. However, the selective nature of the conscription could also create a sense of segregation from the Russian minority, which may thus increase the potential threat rather than reducing it.

Recommendations:

- ◆ Should it wish to support the Lithuanian strategy, **NATO** should step up its involvement in the Baltic states in order to provide real rather than symbolic deterrent capacity.
- ◆ **NATO** should focus on the implementation of the Readiness Action Plan agreed at the NATO Wales Summit in September 2014 and adopt its Assurance and Adaptation Measures to increase its readiness to counter new security challenges in the Baltic’s.
- ◆ **Lithuanian Civil Society** and **Opposition parties** should strive to maintain space in the public sphere for discussion of alternative responses and strategies with relation to Russia.
- ◆ **Lithuanian Civil Society**, in co-ordination with **EU member states** should publically explore options de-escalating rather than escalating tensions with Russia.

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