

Volunteer Forces and Military Reserves in Individual Contemporary European Security Systems

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Abstract

The study deals with the role of volunteering and reserve forces in the security and defence systems of selected European states in the context of a changing security environment. It focuses on the institutional and personnel anchoring of voluntary military service, active reserves and other forms of involvement of the wider public in the defence of the state, both in the field of armed forces and in the broader framework of internal security and crisis management. It seems increasingly clear that volunteer and reserve models are becoming a key tool for strengthening defence capacities, increasing the resilience of the state and deepening civil-military cooperation, especially in conditions of limited personnel resources of professional armies. The text also points out the differences between the individual states under review (Belgium, Hungary, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Romania and Slovakia) in terms of the degree of integration of volunteers, the scope of their tasks, the intensity of training and their relationship to compulsory military service. Attention is also paid to a certain extent to informal or insufficiently regulated security activities, including the potential for their politicisation or misuse by extremist actors. The study aims to contribute to the expert debate on the possibilities of effectively involving volunteer potential in complex national defence systems. The paper advances the argument that volunteering is no longer a peripheral addition to defence systems, but constitutes a structural pillar of modern defence architectures, particularly in states relying on professional armed forces and whole-of-society approaches.

KEY WORDS: *volunteer forces; military reserves; civil-military cooperation; national defence; security policy; resilience.*

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1. Introduction

The study deals with the role of volunteering (voluntarism, voluntary service) and reserve forces in the security and defence systems of selected European states. It focuses on the institutional, personnel anchoring of voluntary military service, active reserves and other forms of involvement of the wider public in the defence of the state, both in the field of armed forces and in the broader framework of internal security and crisis management [19, 24, 43]. It seems increasingly clear that volunteer and reserve models are becoming a key tool for strengthening defence capacities, increasing the resilience of the state and deepening civil-military cooperation, especially in conditions of limited personnel resources of professional armies. The text also points out the differences between the individual states under review (Belgium, Hungary, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Romania and Slovakia) in terms of the degree of integration of volunteers, the scope of their tasks, the intensity of training and their relationship to compulsory military service. Attention is also paid to a certain extent to informal or insufficiently regulated security activities, including the potential for their politicisation or misuse by

extremist actors. The study aims to contribute to the expert debate on the possibilities of effectively involving volunteer potential in complex national defence systems. The study argues that volunteering in defence-related activities should not be understood as a supplementary or auxiliary element, but rather as an integral component of contemporary national defence systems, contributing directly to force generation, societal resilience, and the long-term legitimacy of the armed forces.

2. Methods of Investigation

The paper is based on a comparative analysis of selected European countries with a focus on the institutional anchoring of volunteer and reserve forces in the field of defence. The basic methodological procedure is the analysis of primary and secondary sources, in particular strategic documents, legal regulations, official statistics and expert studies. These sources are supplemented by a comparison of organizational models, personnel capacities and typical roles of “military-related” volunteers in individual countries [7, 17, 97, 101]. A broader concept of an approach to state security and resilience is also followed, with emphasis on the relationship between professional armed forces, reserves and civilian security structures. A synthesis is also used methodologically, which allows identifying common trends, differences and potential risk factors associated with the development of security volunteering in Europe.

The authors aim to use the following methodological tools in relation to the study:

- The concept of Total Defence (Comprehensive Defence), based on the assumption that the defense of the state is not the exclusive role of the armed forces, but of the entire state and society. It includes the connection of military, civilian, economic, infrastructural and social capacities with the aim of increasing overall resilience to military and non-military threats [93, 102].
- The concept of Societal Resilience (State Resilience), which focuses on the ability of the state and society to resist, adapt and recover quickly from crises, conflicts and long-term pressure. Resilience includes institutional capacities, public trust, social cohesion and functional civil-military relations [36, 82, 100].
- The concept of Civil-Military Relations, which deals with the organization of relations between the armed forces, political institutions and society. It mainly monitors issues of control, legitimacy, professionalization and the degree of involvement of civilian actors in security structures.

In relation to the topic, there is also an effort to find answers to the following research questions:

RQ1: To what extent can the engagement of the general public in the analysed states be considered a form of volunteering? With the exception of systems based on compulsory military service, participation in military-related activities, such as reservist roles, is generally framed as voluntary, even when accompanied by financial compensation.

RQ2: Is it possible to perceive volunteer activities in the field of defense as one of the tools for maintaining the social anchoring of the army in the absence of compulsory military service? How do the concepts referred to as total defense, societal resilience, and efforts to build civil-military relations intersect and complement each other in relation to the monitored topic?

3. Mapping the Situation in the Individual Countries Monitored

Within the chapter, individual countries are monitored with regard to the following variables (see also Table 1): Basic information about the state. Basic information about the state's armed forces. Space for volunteering in the state's armed forces, including the current development. Requirements for applicants and Benefits for applicants.

3.1 Belgium

Basic information about the state. Belgium is a federal state covering 30,689 km² with an estimated population of approximately 11.9 million inhabitants in 2025 [15].

Basic information about the state's armed forces. The Belgian Armed Forces are structured into four principal components: the Land Component, the Air Component, the Maritime Component and the Medical Component, complemented by the recently established Cyber Command. Belgium maintains a fully professional military force, as conscription was abolished in 1993 [38].

Space for volunteering in the state's armed forces. Historically, Belgium operated a large conscription-based reserve system, but during the post-Cold War “peace dividend” period this model was replaced by a significantly smaller, more specialized reserve force. The contemporary reserve is designed to be highly integrated into the regular armed forces, well trained and deployable on a voluntary basis for specific missions, tasks or operational commitments. Reservists serve across all four military components as well as in the cyber domain. They include former active-duty soldiers who retain a ten-year service obligation after leaving the military, retired personnel, individuals who completed compulsory service before 1993 and newly recruited voluntary reservists. The total number of reservists currently stands at approximately 6,600, although the government has announced an ambitious plan to expand this number to at least 20,000 in the coming years (up to 2040). This expansion is driven by the need to strengthen national resilience in light of the evolving European security environment. Belgium has recently undertaken significant legal and institutional reforms to modernize its reserve

system. A major legislative amendment adopted by Parliament in February 2024 simplified the enrolment process, removed the requirement for annual re-registration and facilitated the return of former soldiers. A major reform initiative is the introduction of a voluntary military service programme scheduled in 2026. This programme, lasting approximately four months, is intended to serve as an entry point into the reserve system and to significantly increase the pool of available personnel. The Ministry of Defence aims to recruit 500 volunteers in the first year and at least 1,000 annually from 2027 onwards. Recruitment efforts target several groups, most notably young adults aged 18 to 25. In 2025, the government sent invitation letters to all 18-year-old citizens, approximately 120,000 individuals, encouraging them to consider voluntary service. Additional outreach campaigns focus on students, who may join as “student reservists” and participate in military activities during school holidays. Another important target group consists of former soldiers, who may re-enter the reserve without the need for annual re-registration, enabling long-term engagement and retention of experienced personnel. The reserve system offers several forms of engagement, which differ in duration, intensity and contractual obligations. These models collectively allow individuals to choose between short-term service, part-time engagement or full-time annual contracts, depending on their personal and professional circumstances [1, 8, 10, 13, 14, 16, 26, 73, 87, 98]:

- The voluntary military service programme consists of a one-year paid service, after which participants enter a ten-year reserve commitment during which they may be called upon for two to three days per year.
- Standard reservists typically serve five to seven days annually, depending on operational needs and in coordination with their civilian employers.
- A more intensive option is the annual contract reservist, who serves on a full-time basis for one year with the possibility of renewal.
- Student reservists serve primarily during academic breaks, with a high degree of flexibility.

Requirements for applicants. Requirements regarding the military volunteers in Belgium depend on the type of engagement. The one-year voluntary service includes comprehensive military training, specialist instruction and the development of core military competencies such as discipline, physical fitness and operational readiness. Standard reservists undergo several days of training per year, tailored to their assigned role, whether as soldiers, non-commissioned officers or officers. Selection procedures for all categories include psychological assessments, physical fitness tests and medical examinations. The general age limit for joining the reserve is 50 years, although certain categories may extend eligibility up to 60 years depending on qualifications and operational needs [44; 46].

Benefits for applicants. Related financial and other compensation varies according to the type of service. Participants in the voluntary one-year military service receive approximately 2,000 EUR net per month, reflecting the full-time nature of their engagement. Standard reservists are compensated through daily rates, which differ by rank and length of service. Typical daily compensation ranges from 80 to 120 EUR for enlisted personnel and from 130 to 180 EUR for non-commissioned officers and officers. Additional allowances are provided for field exercises, night duties and specialized tasks. Although these rates are lower than those of full-time soldiers, they are designed to ensure that reservists are not financially disadvantaged by their service. The government also aims to strengthen cooperation with employers to facilitate the compatibility of reserve duties with civilian employment, which remains one of the key challenges of the system [44, 46].

Belgium is in the midst of a substantial transformation of its reserve system, combining a new voluntary military service programme with flexible reserve models tailored to different population groups. The overarching objective is to increase the number of reservists, supported by legal reforms, targeted recruitment campaigns and improved financial and institutional conditions. The respective approach reflects a broader European trend toward strengthening reserve forces as an essential component of national defence and societal resilience.

3.2 Hungary

Basic information about the state. Hungary is a landlocked state with a total area of 93,030 km² and a population of approximately 9.7 million inhabitants (census in October 2022).

Basic information about the state's armed forces. The 2011 Constitution maintains that all adult male citizens may be required to perform military service in the event of a national crisis or if the National Assembly declares a state of preventive defence. Civilian service remains available as an alternative for conscientious objectors. The Hungarian Defence Forces (HDF) operate under a unified strategic command structure. The Central Command, directly subordinate to the Ministry of Defence, serves as the principal joint command authority. The active component of the HDF consists of approximately 6,600 officers, 10,200 non-commissioned officers, 13,200 enlisted soldiers, 800 officer cadets, 250 cadets and around 6,600 civilian employees. The maximum peacetime strength of the territorial defence forces is set at 37,650 troops. The armed forces are divided into two primary service branches: the Land Forces and the Air Force [27, 94].

Space for volunteering in the state's armed forces. Hungary maintains a fully professional military, as compulsory conscription was abolished in 2004. Since then, the reserve component has been composed of former professional soldiers and individuals who previously completed mandatory military service. A significant institutional development occurred in 2020, when two operational-level headquarters, the Transformation Command and the Territorial Defence and Support Command, were placed under the authority of the Central Command. The latter is responsible for the development and management of the Volunteer Reserve System (Védelmi Rakéta Század, VRS), whose units consist almost exclusively of reservists assigned to territorial defence tasks. The foundations of the current reserve system were established between 2010 and 2012. In recent years, Hungary has experienced a rapid expansion of its volunteer reserve

base. As of March 2026, the country maintains a growing reservoir of volunteers dedicated to the protection of critical infrastructure, support to the professional armed forces and assistance in crisis management. The National Assembly has set the objective of creating a reserve force of 8,000 voluntary operational and defence reservists (Vezérkari Osztály Rendfokozatait, VOR). In 2016 new reserve forces were created, including voluntary territorial reservists (Védelmi Tervezési Rendszerében, VTR). The 2020 National Security Strategy introduced the concept of “whole-of-nation engagement”, emphasizing cooperation between military and non-military sectors to strengthen deterrence and resilience. The 2021 National Military Strategy further defined the role of territorial defence forces, and the volunteer system is expected to undergo additional consolidation in the coming years. In June 2023 Hungary has also launched a major recruitment campaign titled “I Love It, I Will Protect It!” (Szeretem, megvédem!). The campaign aims to attract volunteers without reintroducing conscription and has resulted in more than 2,000 new recruits. Hungary currently maintains approximately 20,000 voluntary reservists across several categories. These include [3, 17, 37, 99, 101]:

- Around 6,000 voluntary operational reservists (VOR), intended to reinforce active units with specialized expertise.
- Around 2,000 voluntary defence reservists (VDR), employed by a state enterprise as armed guards of military facilities but may serve as reservists under special legal provisions.
- Around 11,000 voluntary territorial reservists (VTR), occupying positions in territorial defence regiments, which, except for staff officers and instructors, are composed entirely of reservists.
- Approximately 1,000 participants in voluntary military service (VMS).

Currently (2025), two territorial defence regiments are fully operational, and five additional regiments are in the process of being established. The reserve structure includes seven regiments supported by twenty-one battalions distributed across the country. Training is conducted in twenty-one garrisons and focuses on basic military skills, crisis response and territorial defence tasks. Reservists are regularly deployed in peacetime roles, including border patrols, flood response and cooperation with local security authorities.

Requirements for applicants. Eligibility requirements for joining the reserve include a minimum age of 18 years, full medical and psychological fitness and successful completion of security vetting. The recruitment process is open to all citizens without compulsory obligations or state pressure. The first selection procedures for the renewed reserve system took place in January 2012. Related requirements vary according to the category of service. A pilot programme launched in 2021 offers citizens the opportunity to complete a voluntary six-month military training cycle. The basic training system consists of individual and collective phases. The first phase includes five weeks of basic training, one week of administrative preparation and two weeks of basic infantry training. The second phase consists of three months of specialized training within the assigned unit. For VDRs, who often serve as military guards, basic training lasts 25 days. VORs with prior military experience undergo only a four-day refresher course. VTRs follow a specialized module training system, consisting of ten modules equivalent to the first five weeks of basic training [101].

Benefits for applicants. Financial incentives play an important role in recruitment and retention. Upon signing a contract, volunteers receive a one-time gross bonus of 150,000 HUF (approximately 400 EUR). In addition, reservists receive a monthly availability allowance of 50,000 HUF (approximately 130 EUR), amounting to 600,000 HUF (1 600 EUR) annually. During active training or deployment, reservists receive daily compensation based on rank and function, typically ranging from 8,000 to 15,000 HUF per day (20–40 EUR), with higher rates for specialized roles. These financial benefits are complemented by non-monetary incentives, including community engagement, a sense of national responsibility and opportunities for personal development [101].

Overall, Hungary is undergoing a significant transformation of its reserve and volunteer defence system. The country has developed a multi-tiered structure of voluntary operational, defence and territorial reservists, supported by training programmes, financial incentives and a strong political emphasis on national resilience. With approximately 20,000 reservists and plans for further expansion, Hungary is positioning its reserve forces as a central pillar of its national defence strategy and its broader whole-of-society approach to security. Note: As for the priorities of the Tisza party, which won the parliamentary elections in April 2026 by a wide margin, they are still quite vague in relation to the army and military volunteering, perhaps with the exception of the assumption that defense policy will be more professional and expert, or less ideological.

3.3 The Netherlands

Basic information about the state. The Netherlands is a state with a total area of 41,543 km², of which 33,671 km² constitutes European land territory and 328 km² is located in the Caribbean. The population is approximately 17.5 million inhabitants [20].

Basic information about the state's armed forces. The Netherlands Armed Forces are composed of four principal branches: the Royal Netherlands Navy, the Royal Netherlands Army, the Royal Netherlands Air and Space Force, and the Royal Netherlands Marechaussee, which functions as a military police force with combined military and law-enforcement responsibilities. All branches fall under the Ministry of Defence, with the Chief of Defence serving as the highest-ranking military authority. The armed forces currently employ approximately 69,000 personnel, including around 44,000 active-duty soldiers, 18,000 civilian employees, and more than 8,500 reservists. Personnel are distributed across the branches in proportions reflecting their operational roles: the army remains the largest component with nearly 24,000 personnel, followed by the navy with approximately 11,500, the air force with 8,200, and the Marechaussee with 7,600. An additional 17,400 personnel serve in joint support and administrative structures. The Netherlands is undergoing

a significant modernization process, including the long-term ambition to increase the total defence workforce to approximately 100,000 personnel by 2030 [23, 25, 41].

Space for volunteering in the state's armed forces. The military in the Netherlands operates on a fully voluntary basis, as conscription, although legally maintained, has been suspended since 1997. Voluntary service is complemented by a structured reserve system that plays an important role in national defence. The core of this system is the Korps Nationale Reserve (Natres), which consists of roughly 3,000 active reservists organized into regional battalions. Natres units are tasked with territorial defence, protection of critical infrastructure, support to civil authorities during natural disasters, reinforcement of public security during major events, and ceremonial duties. Beyond Natres, each branch of the armed forces maintains its own reserve component, enabling civilians, students, and former service members to serve on a part-time basis. Reservists typically commit to several days or weeks of service per year, with the possibility of participating in longer exercises or international deployments of up to six months, which remain strictly voluntary. Recent developments in the security environment, have prompted the Netherlands to expand its reserve forces and reduce the traditional distinction between regular and reserve personnel. The Ministry of Defence has introduced more flexible service models, allowing reservists to tailor their level of engagement to personal and professional circumstances. This approach aims to attract a wider pool of applicants, including specialists in cyber security, medicine, engineering, and other high-demand fields [35, 41, 54].

Requirements for applicants. Requirements for joining the reserve forces include the Netherlands or other European Union Member State citizenship, minimum age thresholds (typically 17 years), successful completion of medical and psychological examinations, a security clearance, and the ability to complete basic military training. Training for reservists is modular and significantly shorter than for full-time personnel, focusing on core military skills such as marksmanship, navigation, first aid, and legal foundations of military operations. Further specialization depends on the assigned role, ranging from drivers and medics to cyber reservists and officers [54].

Benefits for applicants. Reservists receive a range of benefits, including financial compensation, professional development, and access to military training and equipment. Pay rates vary according to rank and function, but typical compensation ranges from approximately 90 to 130 EUR per day for enlisted reservists, with higher rates for non-commissioned officers and officers, who may receive between 150 and 200 EUR per day. Additional allowances are provided for field exercises, night duties, and international deployments, where daily compensation can exceed 200 EUR. Beyond financial remuneration, reservists benefit from leadership training, team-based skills development, and opportunities to gain experience in crisis management, logistics, cyber defence, and other specialized fields. Many employers in the Netherlands support military reservists through agreements that allow flexible scheduling or paid leave during training periods, further enhancing the attractiveness of reserve service [54].

The defence system of the Netherlands contains several noteworthy features. The country is investing heavily in cyber defence, electromagnetic, and information operations – as well as general modernization of equipment, infrastructure, and personnel systems.

3.4 Norway

Basic information about the state. Norway is a state with a total area of approximately 385,207 km², comprising mainland Norway with 323,802 km², the Svalbard archipelago with 61,022 km² and other territories. As of 2025, Norway has an estimated population of approximately 5.57 million inhabitants [29, 70].

Basic information about the state's armed forces. Norway maintains a system of universal conscription for both men and women, combined with a selective model of compulsory military service (førstegangstjeneste). Although all eligible citizens are liable for service, only a proportion of each cohort is selected based on suitability and motivation. Initial active service typically lasts 12 months, although in certain units it may be extended to up to 15 months. The total service obligation, including follow-up training and refresher exercises, commonly amounts to approximately nineteen months. Norway's defence system is built upon the long-standing concept of total defence, which integrates military and civilian sectors to ensure mutual support in both crisis and peacetime. The Norwegian Armed Forces are composed of four main service branches: the Army (Hæren), the Navy (Sjøforsvaret), the Air Force (Luftforsvaret) and the Home Guard (Heimevernet). The Army focuses on territorial defence and Arctic operations. The Navy is responsible for maritime defence, including the protection of Norway's extensive coastline and strategic sea lines of communication, and incorporates both the submarine fleet and the Coast Guard. The Air Force provides air defence, surveillance and rapid reaction capabilities, including the operation of modern combat aircraft and maritime patrol assets. After completing their initial service, individuals remain liable for reserve duty. Enlisted personnel are typically obligated until the age of 44, while officers and non-commissioned officers may serve in the reserve until the age of 55. Most reservists undergo annual refresher training lasting up to nine days for officers and NCOs and six days for enlisted personnel. Some reservists participate in larger exercises. Refresher training is based on the conscription act and the maximum training period, including service as conscripts, is 19 months. Norway's defence system is undergoing significant expansion. The government has announced plans to increase the number of conscripts from approximately 9,000 to 13,500 annually by 2036, supported by investments in training infrastructure such as the expansion of the Terningmoen training centre. The long-term defence plan for 2025–2036 outlines growth in brigades, reserves, Home Guard personnel, air defence, precision fires and logistical stockpiles. The plan foresees an increase of approximately 13,700 reservists and 4,600 conscripts by 2036. The legal framework for Norwegian defence is defined by the Defence Service Act (Forsvarsloven), which regulates

conscription, service obligations and training standards. Norway's total defence concept was further strengthened by the 2025 White Paper Total Preparedness – Prepared for Crisis and War, which integrates civil and military preparedness, mandates crisis councils at the municipal level and promotes a culture of readiness across society [4, 12, 22, 32- 34, 44, 57- 59, 61, 103].

Space for volunteering in the state's armed forces. The Norwegian Armed Forces consist of a relatively small professional core supplemented by a substantial reserve component. Approximately 25,000 personnel form the standing structure of the armed forces, while the active reserve includes around 50,000 trained individuals available for mobilization. Reservists are not volunteers in the conventional sense but are obligated to serve following their initial military training. The reserve system is compulsory and structured, with the Home Guard (Heimevernet) serving as the primary mobilization force. The broader reserve pool is used to reinforce active units during crises, mobilization and international exercises. Home Guard plays a central role in territorial defence, rapid mobilization and support to civil authorities. The Home Guard comprises roughly 40,000 to 45,000 personnel distributed across eleven regional districts, supported by approximately 3,000 members of rapid reaction forces (Innsatsstyrker). It maintains its own training centres and is a key pillar of Norway's total defence architecture. The Home Guard, as a territorially organized rapid-response force, is composed primarily of reservists and tasked with protecting critical infrastructure, supporting civil authorities and ensuring local security [85].

Requirements for applicants. As said before, reservists are not “traditional” volunteers. Following selection, conscripts undergo a two- to three-day enrolment period, including medical examinations and security procedures. They then complete six to eight weeks of basic military training focused on weapons handling, combat techniques, physical conditioning and close-order drills. The remainder of the twelve-month service is spent within operational units, where conscripts train and serve alongside professional soldiers. Upon completion of their service, conscripts may participate in national or international operations with their units [22, 85].

Benefits for applicants. During basic service, conscripts receive full material support from the state, including accommodation, food, equipment, healthcare, and financial allowances, while remaining integrated into the national welfare system. Military service does not disadvantage educational or professional trajectories; on the contrary, it is institutionally recognised by educational institutions and employers, and it provides both certified technical qualifications and transferable soft skills that enhance long-term employability. Upon completion of initial service, individuals gain privileged access to further forms of engagement, such as professional service, the Home Guard, or reserve components, which allow for continued participation alongside civilian careers. Reservists are compensated for training periods and enjoy legal job-protection guarantees [22].

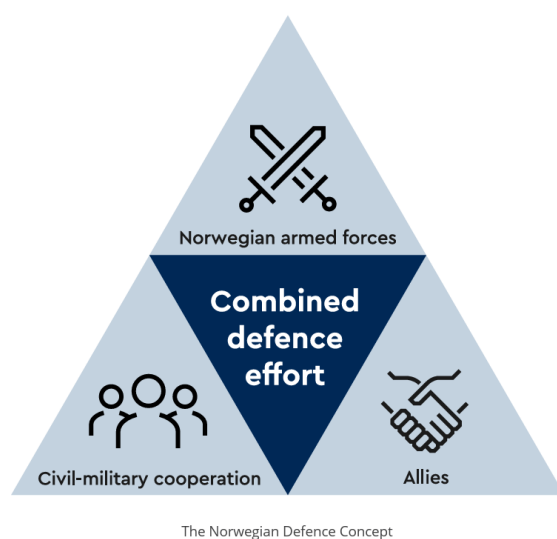


Fig. 1: Illustration, Related to the Defence Concept of Norway [97, 103].

Norway maintains a robust and deeply institutionalized defence system built on universal conscription, a large and well-trained reserve, and a comprehensive total defence framework that integrates military and civilian sectors (see also Fig. 1). With ongoing expansion of conscription, modernization of the Home Guard and increased defence spending,

3.5 Poland

Basic information about the state. Poland is a state with a territory of 312,685 km². Its population in 2025 is estimated around 38 million inhabitants [11, 66, 92].

Basic information about the state's armed forces. The Polish Armed Forces are among the largest and most rapidly expanding military institutions in Europe. Since 2014, the command structure has been modernized through the

establishment of the General Command, which consolidated the former separate commands of the land, air, naval, and special forces. The armed forces consist of five principal branches: the Land Forces, Air Force, Navy, Special Forces, and the **Territorial Defence Forces** (Wojska Obrony Terytorialnej, WOT). Their missions range from territorial defence and airspace protection to maritime security and rapid-deployment operations. The Territorial Defence Forces, established in 2017, represent a unique volunteer-based component focused on local defence and crisis response. In terms of personnel, Poland has surpassed 200,000 total military members in the mid-2020s, including professional soldiers, reservists, and members of the Territorial Defence Forces. In 2023, the active component numbered approximately 164,000, complemented by 200,000 reservists [21, 47, 52, 67, 69].

Space for volunteering in the state's armed forces. Voluntary military participation plays an increasingly important role in Poland's defence system. The country has developed a multi-layered model of voluntary service, allowing citizens to engage in defence activities at varying levels of commitment and specialization. This includes the Voluntary Basic Military Service, the Active Reserve, the already mentioned Territorial Defence Forces, and newly introduced national training programs aimed at civilians. The security environment in the recent years has significantly accelerated reforms in Poland's defence system. Public willingness to participate in defence initiatives has risen sharply, with surveys indicating that nearly 30% of Poles would join the military or paramilitary groups if the country were attacked [2, 5, 6, 63-65, 68, 84, 107].

- The Territorial Defence Forces represent the most visible volunteer-based formation, functioning as a light infantry component with strong regional ties.
- Poland also maintains several categories of reservists, including the National Reserve Forces (Rezerwa), active wartime resources, and the mandatory reserve (up to 240 000 persons).
- Poland also introduced the Voluntary Basic Military Service (Dobrowolna zasadnicza służba wojskowa) in 2022, attracting more than 13,000 applicants in its first year.
- In 2025, the government launched a National Voluntary Training Program (wGotowości) with the ambition to train 100,000 civilians annually by 2027.

These initiatives complement the ongoing expansion and the modernization of the reserve system. Current volunteer numbers are substantial and continue to grow. The Territorial Defence Forces reached 40,000–55,000 members by 2025, with further expansion planned. Voluntary Basic Military Service maintains an annual capacity of around 15,000 trainees. The most ambitious goal is the government's plan to train 100,000 civilians per year through the national program starting in 2025–2026. This reflects a strategic shift toward broad societal involvement in national defence and resilience.

Requirements for applicants. Requirements vary by program but generally include Polish citizenship, medical and psychological fitness, and age criteria. The Voluntary Basic Military Service is open to adults aged 18 and above. The Active Reserve accepts former soldiers, graduates of voluntary service, and members of the Territorial Defence Forces, with age limits up to 55 for enlisted personnel and 63 for officers. The national training program is open to civilians aged 18–60, including women, and focuses on both military and civil-defence skills.

Benefits for applicants. Poland offers a comprehensive system of incentives to encourage voluntary participation. Volunteers receive financial compensation during training and service, reimbursement of travel costs, and salary equalization if their civilian income exceeds military pay. They also gain access to specialized training, including technical qualifications, cyber-security courses, and professional driver's licences for heavy equipment. Health benefits include full medical care equivalent to that of professional soldiers and free preventive rehabilitation after foreign missions. Employers of reservists are compensated for costs associated with their employees' military duties, reducing the economic burden on the civilian sector.

Poland's Territorial Defence Forces have become one of the largest volunteer defence formations in Europe. It underscores its commitment to building a resilient, modern, and socially integrated defence system.

3.6 Romania

Basic information about the state. Romania is a state with a total area of 238,391 km². According to the 2023 census, the country has a population of approximately 19.8 million inhabitants [80, 105].

Basic information about the state's armed forces. The Romanian Armed Forces are organized into central structures and joint forces. Central structures include political-military departments within the Ministry of Defence, the Defence Staff, and the National Military Command Centre. Joint forces comprise the Joint Forces Command, Land Forces, Air Forces, Naval Forces, Special Operations Forces Command, Joint Logistics Command, Communications and Information Systems Command, and the Cyber Defence Command. The total size of the Romanian Armed Forces is estimated at approximately 73,350 active personnel and 80,000 reservists [36; 79, 104].

Space for volunteering in the state's armed forces. Voluntary service plays a growing role in Romania's defence system, particularly as the country seeks to address personnel shortages and modernize its reserve forces. The reserve system is defined by Law No. 446/2006, which divides reservists into the operational reserve, the general reserve, and the public service reserve. The operational reserve is the most relevant for voluntary service and includes active reservists, voluntary reservists, and supplementary reservists. A key pillar of Romania's voluntary defence participation is the Voluntary Reservist Program (Voluntari rezerviști), established under Law No. 270/2015 and later amended by Law No. 115/2021. This program allows citizens without prior military experience to join the reserve after completing mandatory training. In recent years, the Ministry of Defence has expanded recruitment efforts, offering thousands

of positions annually across various specializations. In 2024, nearly 5,000 positions were opened for voluntary reservists, reflecting the growing importance of this personnel category. Romania is also preparing a short-term voluntary military service lasting approximately 3–4 months, aimed primarily at young people. After completing this service, participants obtain the status of reservists and receive a financial bonus. This initiative is designed to strengthen the reserve without reintroducing compulsory military service. Amendments to Law No. 270/2015 introduced a three-month training requirement for voluntary reservists before signing a contract, followed by 15 days of annual training. Romania currently maintains nearly 80,000 reservists, though many belong to older age groups, with an average age of 48–50 years. The Voluntary Reservist Program has seen increasing interest, with thousands of positions offered annually and growing participation from both men and women aged 18–35. The long-term ambition is to build a modern, well-trained reserve force that can support active units without reinstating compulsory military service [9, 56, 78].

Requirements for applicants. Requirements for voluntary service vary depending on the program but generally include Romanian citizenship, age between 18 and 35, and successful completion of medical, psychological, and physical evaluations. Applicants must submit documentation such as an identity card, a criminal record extract not older than six months, educational certificates, and a driver's licence if required. Those without prior military experience are assigned roles based on their education and skills. For voluntary reservists, a three-month initial training is mandatory before signing a contract [56, 76, 77].

Benefits for applicants. Volunteers in Romania receive a range of financial and non-financial benefits. Voluntary reservists are entitled to a monthly allowance amounting to 10–30% of the base salary, supplemented by rank-related bonuses. Participants in the planned 3–4-month voluntary service receive compensation equivalent to that of professional soldiers, along with a one-time bonus of approximately 12,000 lei (around 2,450 EUR). These incentives are designed to make voluntary service attractive despite the relatively short duration of training and service obligations. Beyond financial rewards, volunteers gain access to military training, professional development, and opportunities to serve in specialized roles. The system also provides a pathway for motivated individuals to transition into professional military careers [81, 83].

The expansion of voluntary service is also linked to Romania's strategic position, where the need for resilient and flexible defence capabilities has grown significantly. The combination of increased defence spending, legislative reforms, and new voluntary programs demonstrates Romania's commitment to strengthening its national defence posture.

3.7 Slovakia

Basic information about the state. Slovakia is a state with a total area of 49,035 km². Its population is estimated at approximately 5.47 million inhabitants in 2025 [30, 86, 89, 91].

Basic information about the state's armed forces. The Armed Forces of the Slovak Republic (Ozbrojené sily Slovenskej republiky) are organised into a unified joint structure, consisting of the following main components: Slovak Ground Forces, Slovak Air Force and Special Operations Forces. In addition, the force structure includes supporting and enabling elements such as Military Intelligence, Military Police, logistics and training commands, and the Joint Operational Command. Personnel levels have fluctuated over time as a result of professionalisation, budget constraints, and later renewed investment. Active military personnel is approximately 20,900 uniformed personnel in 2025, supported by around 4,500 civilian employees. Reserve component was historically limited in size, with only a few hundred reservists formally maintained for rapid mobilisation. Following the end of conscription in 2006, the Slovak Armed Forces underwent significant downsizing and restructuring. Since 2022, renewed attention has been paid to resilience, reserve concepts, and societal support for defence, reflecting broader regional trends in Europe [90, 95].

Space for volunteering in the state's armed forces. Slovakia's defence policy has undergone significant transformation in recent years, particularly in the area of voluntary and reserve forces. The country is transitioning from the older **Active Reserve** (Aktívne zálohy, AR) model toward a new system known as the National Defence Forces (Národné obranné sily, NDF/NOS). This shift reflects the need to strengthen national defence capabilities, expand the pool of trained personnel, and create a more flexible system for responding to crises, including natural disasters, hybrid threats, and military contingencies. The National Defence Forces, introduced on July 2025 through Act No. 150/2025 on Strengthening the Defence Capability of the Slovak Republic, represents a major conceptual change. It is explicitly voluntary and designed to integrate civilians into defence structures without reinstating compulsory military service. The program is aligned with existing legislation on the armed forces, public procurement, and civil-military agreements, ensuring the protection of employment and social rights of participants. The older AR system, phased out by mid-2025, was designed for individuals with prior military or uniformed-service experience, but it was also open to civilians without previous service. Recruitment was conducted annually, and applicants included former conscripts, professional soldiers, police officers, firefighters, and graduates of secondary or higher education. The NOS system is built on a three-tier structure, each tailored to different levels of commitment and training intensity: Operational Reserve focuses on crisis-related military tasks and requires 20 days of training plus 10 days of readiness annually. Readiness Reserve is oriented toward civil support roles, with a similar structure of training and standby duties. Defence Reserve is intended for complete newcomers and consists of a 14-day introductory training program. Training takes place at several military facilities, and covers a wide range of competencies, from tactics, marksmanship, and survival skills to crisis management, CBRN protection, leadership, and civil-technical skills. The NOS program has generated significant public interest. Early pilot phases reportedly attracted thousands of applicants, with 3,000 applications submitted within the first 10 days, indicating

strong societal support for voluntary defence participation. AR system in the past however remained relatively small. As of July 2025, it included fewer than 200 active members [49, 50, 51, 60, 62, 71, 74, 90, 95].

Requirements for applicants. Participation in the NOS is fully voluntary, open to Slovak citizens, with permanent residence on the territory of the state, aged 18–55, with exceptional cases up to 65 years. Applicants must meet medical, psychological, and legal requirements, including a clean criminal record and permanent residence in Slovakia [45, 53, 55].

Benefits for applicants. The financial incentives are substantial: participants in the full 30-day cycle receive 3,000 EUR net, while those in the 14-day Defence Reserve receive 1,500 EUR net. All participants receive free meals, accommodation, transportation, and equipment. Rank-based pay supplements and social protections are guaranteed by law, ensuring that volunteers do not suffer financial or employment disadvantages. The minimum rank-based pay starts at 653 EUR net, supplemented by allowances. AR participants received a 600 EUR annual motivational bonus if they completed at least 75 % of the training, along with proportional salary compensation and reimbursement for employers [42, 45, 51, 106].

Summary. Slovakia’s shift from AR to NOS represents one of the most significant defence reforms in the country’s recent history. The NOS model is designed not only to strengthen military readiness but also to enhance civil-military cooperation in areas such as disaster response, crisis management, and territorial resilience. Training modules include protection against weapons of mass destruction, leadership development, and survival skills, reflecting a holistic approach to national security. The transition aims to address this limited capacity by offering a more attractive, better-funded, and more flexible model – as well as is explicitly designed to accommodate individuals with no prior military experience, offering structured entry-level training.

Table 1. Comparison of basic data on the monitored countries.

Country	Area (km ²)	Population (2025, estimate, millions of people)	Compulsory military service
Belgium	30,689	11.9	No, abolished 1993
Hungary	93,030	9.7	Not suspended 2004
The Netherlands	41,865	18.0	Formally exists, de facto suspended (since 1997)
Norway	385,207	5.57	Yes (de facto optional; both men and women), 12/15 (up to 18) months depending on unit; total obligation approximately 19 months
Poland	312,685	38.0	No (suspended since 2009/2010)
Romania	238,391	19.8	No (suspended in 2007)
Slovakia	49,035	5.47	No (professionalization since 2006)

4. Concepts for youth engagement

In **Belgium**, youth volunteering in defence-related activities is primarily organized through cadet-type organisations, most notably the Royal Belgian Sea Cadet Corps. This programme targets adolescents from approximately the age of 12 and operates as a civilian organisation supported by the Ministry of Defence. Its activities focus on maritime skills, discipline, teamwork, and leadership development. Importantly, the organisation is not formally part of the armed forces; rather, it functions as a bridging mechanism between society and the military. Participation does not entail any obligation to pursue a military career, highlighting its primarily social and educational role [28].

Hungary has developed a highly institutionalised model of youth engagement through the Honvéd Cadet Program. Implemented within secondary schools, the programme involves thousands of students and introduces them to the fundamentals of defence, crisis management, and security policy. Supported by the Ministry of Defence, it aims to strengthen patriotic values and awareness of the armed forces. Although it does not constitute full military training, it serves as a structured educational and socialisation tool with a potential recruitment function, bridging civilian education and military structures [28].

The Netherlands does not operate a unified national cadet corps; however, various youth-oriented initiatives exist in cooperation with the armed forces, particularly within the framework of the Koninklijke Landmacht. These activities focus on resilience, leadership, and crisis preparedness, often within community-based or educational settings. Although less institutionalised, they contribute to maintaining awareness of defence issues and fostering connections between society and the military, aligning closely with a whole-of-society approach [28].

Norway maintains a well-developed youth engagement system through the Heimevernet Youth (HV-ungdom), which is directly linked to the Home Guard. The programme is voluntary and typically targets individuals aged 15–18. It focuses on outdoor skills, navigation, first aid, communication, survival, and teamwork. In accordance with national legislation and international norms, participants under the age of 18 are not trained in combat skills and are classified as “aspirants.” The programme plays an important role in strengthening civil–military relations and serves as a preparatory pathway for future service [28].

Poland exhibits one of the most comprehensive systems of youth engagement in defence. A central role is played by the Oddziały Przygotowania Wojskowego, which are military-oriented classes within secondary schools operating in close cooperation with the armed forces. In addition, paramilitary organisations such as Związek Strzelecki “Strzelec” provide practical training in areas such as survival, basic tactics, and discipline. These structures significantly strengthen the relationship between society and the military and function as a form of pre-selection for future service. Public engagement in defence-related activities has expanded considerably, with tens of thousands of young people participating in such programmes [28; 108].

In **Slovakia**, there is currently no unified national cadet system; however, various forms of defence education exist, often referred to as “defence clubs” or school-based preparedness programmes supported by the Ministry of Defence and the education sector. These initiatives focus on physical fitness, crisis preparedness, and basic awareness of national defence. Cooperation with the armed forces is generally ad hoc, and the level of institutionalisation is lower compared to countries such as Poland or Hungary. Nevertheless, these programmes contribute to building a social connection between youth and the military [28].

Romania represents a more institutionalised model of youth engagement through military secondary education, such as Colegiul Național Militar „Mihai Viteazul”. These institutions admit students from around the age of 14 and combine general education with structured military training. Fully managed by the Ministry of Defence, they provide a direct pathway to a military career. In parallel, Romania’s reservist system is undergoing modernisation, with an emphasis on voluntary participation rather than reintroducing conscription. The development of new categories of professional volunteers reflects an effort to bridge the gap between civilian society and the armed forces while addressing demographic challenges within the reserve structure [28].

Table 2. Comparison: Youth Engagement in Defence (Selected European States).

Country	Main Programme(s)	Age Group	Estimated Participation	Level of institutionalisation	Key Characteristics	Trend
Belgium	Royal Belgian Sea Cadet Corps	12–18	low thousands	Low–Medium	Civilian cadet organisation, maritime focus, indirect MoD support	Stable
Hungary	Honvéd Cadet Program	14–18	10,000–15,000	High	School-based, state-supported, strong national coverage	Growing
Netherlands	Youth & reserve-related initiatives	12–18	low thousands	Low–Medium	Decentralised, community-based, resilience focus	Stable
Norway	Heimevernet Youth (HV-ungdom)	15–18	1,000–2,000	Medium–High	Linked to Home Guard, voluntary, non-combat	Stable–Growing
Poland	OPW + “Strzelec” + paramilitary groups	15–18	30,000–50,000	High	Highly developed system, strong state + paramilitary synergy	Strongly growing
Romania	Military high schools	14–18	3,000–5,000	High	Fully institutionalised, direct military career pathway	Stable
Slovakia	Defence education programmes (schools, clubs)	12–18	low thousands	Low	Fragmented, ad hoc cooperation with armed forces	Emerging

Note: Norway and Romania represent distinct models: Norway combines voluntary youth engagement with a broader total defence framework, while Romania institutionalises youth participation through formal military education. These differences reflect broader strategic cultures and defence policies, particularly in relation to recruitment, societal resilience, and civil–military relations. Participation figures are indicative estimates based on available policy documents, secondary literature, and institutional reports. Due to differences in definitions and reporting standards across countries, the data should be interpreted as approximate and primarily illustrative of broader trends.

The comparative data indicate significant variation in both the scale and institutionalisation of youth engagement in defence-related activities across the analysed states. Countries such as Poland and Hungary demonstrate highly developed and expanding systems with substantial participation, whereas states like Belgium, Slovakia, and the Netherlands rely more on decentralised or community-based initiatives with lower overall numbers.

Across the analysed states, a wide spectrum of youth engagement models in defence-related activities can be identified, ranging from purely voluntary cadet organisations to school-based programmes and fully institutionalised military education systems. Despite these differences, a common denominator emerges: all models aim to strengthen the

relationship between the armed forces and society. These initiatives not only foster civic responsibility, discipline, and resilience among young people, but also function as tools of socialisation and, in some cases, as indirect recruitment mechanisms. From an analytical perspective, these programmes support the argument that defence-related volunteering plays a significant role in maintaining the societal embeddedness of the military, particularly in countries without compulsory military service. They illustrate how states adapt to the challenges of professionalisation by developing alternative mechanisms for engaging younger generations in defence and security issues (see also Table 2) [28].

5. Potentially problematic paramilitary groups

Across several European states, there exist or have existed various forms of non-state or semi-formal organizations that can be broadly categorized as volunteer-based, paramilitary-adjacent, ideologically driven, or explicitly anti-systemic. These formations vary significantly in size, organizational coherence, and level of threat, ranging from legally recognized civic or reserve defense associations to loosely connected extremist networks. Importantly, most of these entities do not constitute conventional armed forces; rather, they operate within a spectrum of political activism, civil defense culture, and fringe radicalization [31].

In **Belgium**, the phenomenon is relatively limited in scale and organizational capacity. While far-right extremist currents have periodically emerged, particularly within Flemish nationalist milieus, they are typically fragmented and lack sustained paramilitary infrastructure. Security assessments generally characterize these groups as small, ideologically motivated networks rather than structured formations with operational capabilities. Consequently, their societal impact remains constrained and primarily monitored within broader European counter-extremism frameworks.

Poland presents a more complex case, as it combines formal state-aligned structures with parallel civic-military initiatives. The Territorial Defence Forces represent an institutionalized reserve component integrated into national defense planning. Alongside these, various shooting clubs and nationalist-oriented associations exist, some of which adopt militarized aesthetics or rhetoric. While the majority of these groups operate legally, the broader ecosystem includes nationalist subcultures that occasionally overlap with radical ideological currents. Nevertheless, the Polish case is distinguished by a high degree of state incorporation of civilian defense activity.

In **the Netherlands**, extremist formations remain generally small and highly fragmented. Intelligence services have repeatedly documented the presence of isolated far-right or conspiracy-oriented groups, often influenced by transnational ideological networks. However, these groups rarely develop into stable organizational structures and are more accurately described as fluid networks or online-activated communities. As a result, the Netherlands exhibits a low degree of paramilitary institutionalization despite periodic concerns regarding radicalization pathways.

Hungary represents a historically significant environment for nationalist paramilitary-style organizations. The most notable example, the Magyar Gárda (Hungarian Guard), was formally associated with the radical right-wing Jobbik movement and was later dissolved by judicial ruling. Although successor groups and informal “guard” associations have persisted in various forms, they tend to operate on the margins of legality and social acceptability. Contemporary manifestations are generally symbolic or ceremonial rather than operationally militarized, yet they continue to occupy an important place in Hungary’s political memory of nationalism and security discourse.

Slovakia is frequently identified as one of the more structurally developed cases of semi-paramilitary organization within the region. Groups such as Slovenskí Branci have engaged in voluntary training activities that resemble basic military preparation, often framed in terms of civic defense or national preparedness. These organizations have attracted scrutiny due to their ideological orientation, recruitment practices, and engagement with youth participants. Although not formally recognized as military entities, their organizational continuity and training practices place them closer to the paramilitary end of the spectrum compared to most comparable European cases [72].

Romania’s landscape is shaped by both historical legacies and contemporary nationalist movements. While interwar fascist formations such as the Iron Guard remain a point of historical reference, modern organizations like Noua Dreaptă represent the primary expression of radical nationalist activism. These groups are typically ideological rather than operationally militarized, focusing on demonstrations, cultural narratives, and political messaging. Romanian security institutions have periodically monitored such movements, particularly in relation to concerns about extremist mobilization, although they do not constitute structured armed formations in the contemporary sense.

Norway, while generally characterized by high institutional stability, has also experienced the presence of transnational far-right extremist networks, most notably the Nordic Resistance Movement. This organization operates across multiple Scandinavian countries and is classified by security services as a neo-Nazi militant network. Although its membership remains limited, it is distinguished by a higher degree of organizational discipline compared to many other European extremist groups. Norwegian security authorities monitor it as part of broader counter-extremism and counterterrorism frameworks.

Overall, the European landscape of non-state paramilitary or anti-systemic organizations is highly heterogeneous. In most cases, these groups do not represent coherent military threats but rather exist as fragmented networks situated at the intersection of political extremism, identity politics, and civic militarization narratives. The level of risk varies primarily according to organizational cohesion, ideological radicalization, and the degree of interaction with broader transnational extremist ecosystems. While isolated incidents and small-scale plots have occurred in some contexts, there is limited evidence of sustained, large-scale paramilitary capacity in any of the examined states (see also Table 3).

Table 3. Comparison paramilitary / radical structures in monitored states.

State	Example structures	Estimate sizes	Character	Rating risks *
Belgium	small extremely right-wing cells	tens or low hundreds	fragmented, without major organization	low
Hungary	historically Magyar Gárda (disbanded), smaller “patrols”	hundreds or low thousands (informal)	nationalistic, partly “symbolically paramilitary”	medium
the Netherlands	small extreme groups	tens or low hundreds	conspiratorial / extreme right-wing cells	low
Norway	Nordic Resistance Movement (part of Nordic networks)	tens or low hundreds	neo-Nazi network, partially organized	medium
Poland	“Kamraci”, some nationalist groups etc.	thousands (up to tens thousand for wider movements)	political radical, predominantly unarmed	medium
Romania	Noua Right + historical inspirations	hundreds or low thousand	ideological, nationalistic, limited organization	medium
Slovakia	Slovak Conscripts and other connected structures	hundreds or low thousand	the most “classic” paramilitary model in region	medium until higher

Note: Accurate numbers members are not often official, so are used estimates security services, academic studies or media. * Risk = combination radicalization, violent incidents and organization (not “military” forces).

6. Investigation Results

In the European context, the concept of volunteering in defence-related activities is inherently complex and cannot be reduced to a single, uniform definition. While some states maintain forms of conscription, others rely entirely on professional armed forces; however, even in conscription-based systems, a wide spectrum of voluntary engagement persists. This creates a layered understanding of volunteering, ranging from unpaid civic participation to compensated military service entered on a voluntary basis (see Table 4).

Table 4. Typology of Volunteering in Defence.

Country	Pure Volunteering	Compensated Volunteering	Reservist / Mixed	Conscription Context
Belgium	Medium	High	Medium	No
Hungary	Low/Medium	High	Medium	No
Norway	Medium	High	High	Yes (selective)
Slovakia	Medium	High	Medium	No
Romania	Low	High	Medium	No
Netherlands	Medium	High	Medium	No
Poland	Medium	High	High	No

Categories explanation: Pure Volunteering = unpaid, civic-based engagement. Compensated Volunteering = voluntary but financially compensated (e.g. professional soldiers). Reservist/Mixed Model = part-time, mixed civic-military role. Conscription Context = presence of mandatory service influencing volunteering.

A key distinction must be made between “pure volunteering” and “institutionalized voluntary service.” Pure volunteering refers to activities undertaken without financial compensation, typically within civil society structures such as youth organizations, cadet corps, or community-based defence initiatives. These forms emphasize civic duty, identity formation, and social cohesion rather than direct military utility. In contrast, institutionalized voluntary service includes professional soldiers and reservists who voluntarily enter structured systems of defence, often with financial compensation, contractual obligations, and defined operational roles.

A third category can be identified as “mixed volunteering” which occupies a middle ground between civic engagement and formal military structures. This includes reservists, active reserves, and youth training programs that may involve symbolic compensation, material benefits, or future career incentives. Such models are particularly significant in countries seeking to balance professional armed forces with broader societal involvement in defence.

Importantly, the presence of conscription does not negate volunteering – rather, it transforms its meaning. In countries like Norway, where selective conscription exists, voluntary engagement often extends beyond mandatory service into additional forms of participation, such as home guard activities or youth programs. Conversely, in fully professional

systems, volunteering becomes the primary entry mechanism into the armed forces, thereby blurring the line between “volunteer” and “professional” [18; 39; 75].

Across the seven analysed states, volunteering can therefore be understood not as a binary category, but as a continuum of engagement, shaped by institutional design, historical experience, and security perceptions. This continuum reflects different strategic priorities, ranging from societal resilience and legitimacy to force generation and operational readiness.

Table 4 demonstrates that compensated volunteering dominates across all analysed cases, reflecting the prevalence of professional armed forces in Europe. However, mixed forms, particularly reservist systems, play a crucial role in bridging the gap between purely civilian engagement and formal military service. Pure volunteering remains present but typically occupies a complementary rather than central role within national defence systems.

The results of the study also show that volunteer and reserve forces represent an increasingly important element of the security and defence systems of individual European states. In the cases studied, a trend of strengthening voluntary military service and active reserves can be identified as a tool for increasing personnel flexibility, ensuring the protection of territory and critical infrastructure, and supporting the management of crisis situations. At the same time, however, there are differences in the degree of integration of these structures into the armed forces, the extent of their training, and the legal definition of their competencies. Some states are successfully developing a system of institutionally managed volunteering as part of a whole-of-society approach to defence (see Fig. 2), while in others fragmented models with limited coordination persist. The analysis also confirms that the absence of a clear legal framework and strategic management can create space for informal security activities and increase the risk of their potential misuse.

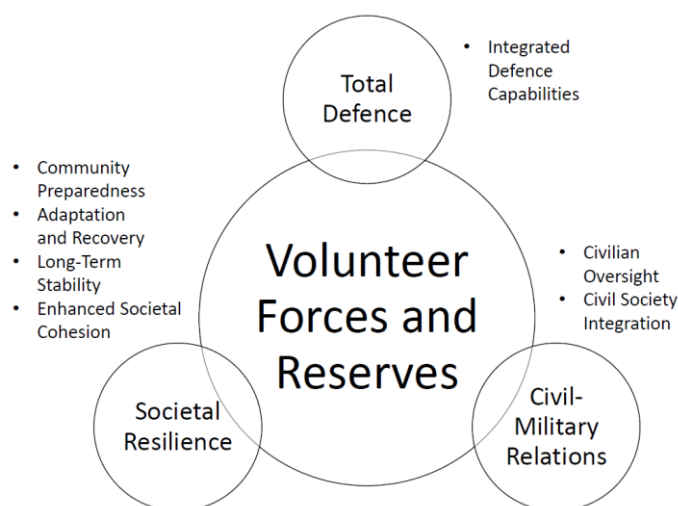


Fig. 2. Infographics: Integrated Framework for Security and Defence, related to the Volunteer Forces and Reserves (own elaboration).

In contemporary European security environments, voluntary engagement in defence-related activities can be analytically understood through three core conceptual dimensions: defence-oriented participation, civil-military bridging, and whole-of-society engagement. These dimensions do not constitute mutually exclusive models; rather, they represent overlapping perspectives through which states integrate society into their defence structures.

At the same time, these three dimensions correspond closely to broader theoretical frameworks commonly employed in security studies, namely Total Defence, Societal Resilience, and Civil-Military Relations (CMR). Importantly, these frameworks should not be understood as additional or competing concepts, but rather as higher-level theoretical lenses through which the three operational approaches may be interpreted.

Total Defence (or Comprehensive Defence). The concept of Total Defence is based on the assumption that the defence of the state is not the exclusive responsibility of the armed forces, but rather a task of society as a whole. It encompasses the integration of military, civilian, economic, infrastructural, and social capacities with the objective of enhancing resilience against both military and non-military threats. Within this framework, volunteer and reserve forces are typically viewed as a crucial bridge between professional armed forces and civil society, contributing, for example, to territorial defence, the protection of critical infrastructure, and crisis management. Added value: This concept enables comparison between states not only on the basis of military strength, but also in terms of their capacity to mobilise societal resources.

Societal Resilience. The concept of Societal Resilience focuses on the ability of a state and its society to withstand, adapt to, and recover rapidly from crises, conflicts, and long-term pressure. Resilience encompasses institutional capacity, public trust, social cohesion, and functioning civil-military relations. Volunteering and reserve forces can thus be interpreted as instruments for strengthening resilience by expanding the personnel base of the security sector, increasing societal preparedness, and reinforcing the legitimacy of security institutions. Added value: This framework captures not only “hard” military capabilities, but also the softer factors that determine long-term sustainability in defence.

Civil-Military Relations. The theory of Civil-Military Relations examines the organisation and regulation of relationships between the armed forces, political institutions, and society. It focuses on issues such as democratic control, legitimacy, professionalisation, and the degree of civilian involvement in security structures. Volunteer and reserve forces constitute a specific form of civil-military interface within this framework. Added value: The concept facilitates analysis of potential risks associated with informal security arrangements and their compatibility with democratic principles.

Building on these theoretical perspectives, it is possible to identify three analytically distinct, yet partially overlapping, operational models through which volunteer-based defence activities are framed and implemented.

The first model may be described as a defence-oriented approach, in which the primary objective is the preparation of individuals for the defence of the state. This approach emphasises the acquisition of practical skills, including tactical competencies, physical readiness, and basic survival capabilities, often resembling forms of pre-military training. Such activities are frequently embedded within structured programmes that maintain varying degrees of institutional linkage to the armed forces. As a result, volunteer participation may function as a form of “soft recruitment”, facilitating both the identification and socialisation of potential future military personnel.

The second model reflects a whole-of-society approach, where the emphasis shifts from individual preparedness to broader societal resilience. In this model, volunteer activities are embedded within a wider ecosystem that includes educational institutions, civil society organisations, and local governance structures. The focus extends beyond strictly military skills to encompass crisis preparedness, responses to hybrid threats, and the development of informational and civic competencies. The armed forces thus represent one actor among many rather than the central organising authority, with responsibility distributed across society as a whole.

The third model can be understood as civil-military bridging, with the primary aim of strengthening the legitimacy of the armed forces and reinforcing their societal embeddedness. From this perspective, volunteer-based activities function as tools for fostering public trust, enhancing identification with the military, and promoting perceptions of the armed forces as an integral part of society. Typical instruments include cadet programmes, public engagement initiatives, and various forms of voluntary service enabling direct interaction between civilians and military institutions. The key function of this model is not operational capability, but the cultivation of mutual trust and shared identity.

More specifically, the defence-oriented approach aligns with the logic of force generation and preparedness, focusing on the development of individual skills and the creation of recruitment pools. This dimension is most closely connected to traditional defence planning and partially overlaps with Total Defence in its strictly military component.

The whole-of-society approach corresponds directly to the concepts of Total Defence and Societal Resilience, as it extends beyond the armed forces and emphasises the capacity of society as a whole to respond to crises, including hybrid threats. Voluntary engagement in this context contributes not only to defence, but to the broader adaptive capacity of the state.

The civil-military bridging approach is conceptually anchored in the theory of Civil-Military Relations. Its primary function is social and political rather than operational: maintaining legitimacy, trust, and the societal embeddedness of the armed forces. Voluntary activities thus serve as instruments of socialisation and symbolic integration.

From this perspective, the apparent proliferation of concepts does not reflect fundamentally different phenomena. Instead, the same set of practices, such as reservist systems, youth programmes, and voluntary defence initiatives, is interpreted through different analytical lenses depending on the research focus.

Accordingly, it is more accurate to conceptualise these approaches not as three or six distinct models, but as a multi-level analytical framework:

- **Operational level:** defence-oriented participation, civil-military bridging, whole-of-society engagement
- **Theoretical level:** Total Defence, Societal Resilience, Civil-Military Relations

These levels are deeply interconnected and mutually reinforcing. In practice, most national systems combine elements of all three operational dimensions while simultaneously reflecting broader theoretical principles. The key distinction therefore lies not in the existence of fundamentally different models, but in the variation of emphasis. States do not choose between alternative approaches; rather, they prioritise specific functions of voluntary engagement, whether related to preparedness, societal resilience, or legitimacy, based on their strategic culture, threat perceptions, and institutional design (see also Table 5).

Table 5: Estimated Dominant Approaches.

Country	Defence-Oriented	Civil-Military Bridging	Whole-of-Society	Dominant aspect
Belgium	2	4	3	civil-military bridging
Hungary	4	4	2	civil-military bridging + recruitment
Netherlands	2	3	5	whole-of-society
Norway	4	3	5	defence + resilience
Poland	5	4	3	defence-oriented
Romania	5	2	2	defence-oriented
Slovakia	2	3	3	emerging mix

Scale explanation: 1 = very weak presence; 5 = very strong / dominant characteristic.

The table illustrates that while certain countries (e.g., Poland and Romania) lean strongly toward a defence-oriented model, others (such as the Netherlands and Norway) emphasize a broader whole-of-society approach. At the same time, civil-military bridging remains a consistently present dimension across most cases, highlighting the shared European concern with maintaining the societal legitimacy of armed forces in professional military systems.

In relation to the research topic, the study seeks to address the following research questions.

6.1 Volunteering as a Concept in Defence-Related Engagement

RQ1: To what extent can the engagement of the general public in defence-related activities in the analysed states be considered a form of volunteering?

With the exception of systems based on compulsory military service, participation in defence-related activities, such as service within reservist structures, is generally framed as voluntary, even when accompanied by financial compensation.

The analysis demonstrates that the concept of volunteering in defence-related engagement must be understood in a broader and more flexible manner than in traditional civilian contexts. In the analysed states, volunteering cannot be reduced solely to unpaid activities; instead, it encompasses a spectrum of engagement forms, including reservist service, participation in structured training programmes, and involvement in state-affiliated paramilitary organisations. In systems without compulsory military service, defence-related participation is predominantly based on voluntary entry, even when it involves institutional obligations, contractual commitments, or remuneration.

This development reflects a shift from the classical notion of “pure volunteering” towards what may be described as institutionalised volunteering, whereby individuals freely choose to enter organised defence structures that combine voluntary participation with varying degrees of professionalisation.

At the same time, elements of “pure” volunteering continue to exist, particularly within youth programmes, cadet organisations, and community-based initiatives. These activities are typically unpaid and place emphasis on civic values, identity formation, and socialisation rather than immediate operational output. Between these two poles lies a mixed category, represented primarily by reservist systems, which combine voluntary entry with partial professionalisation [88; 96].

Consequently, volunteering in the field of defence is best conceptualised as a continuum. The key defining feature is not the absence of financial compensation, but rather the element of voluntary entry driven by personal motivation.

6.2 Volunteering as a Tool for the Societal Anchoring of the Armed Forces

RQ2: Can volunteer activities in the field of defence be perceived as one of the tools for maintaining the societal anchoring of the armed forces in the absence of compulsory military service? How do the concepts of Total Defence, Societal Resilience, and Civil-Military Relations intersect and complement one another in this context?

The findings indicate that volunteer-based defence activities play a significant role in maintaining the societal embeddedness of the armed forces, particularly in countries where compulsory military service is absent. These activities function not only as mechanisms of recruitment and preparedness, but also as instruments for building legitimacy, fostering public trust, and sustaining long-term relationships between the military and society.

From an analytical perspective, this role is best understood through the intersection of three complementary conceptual frameworks: Total Defence, Societal Resilience, and Civil-Military Relations. The concept of Total Defence offers a structural perspective by emphasising the integration of military and civilian resources in ensuring national security. Within this framework, volunteer and reservist systems serve as a crucial interface between professional armed forces and the broader population, enhancing mobilisation capacity and societal preparedness.

The framework of Societal Resilience expands this perspective by focusing on the adaptive capacity of society as a whole. Volunteer engagement contributes to resilience through increased public awareness, preparedness, and the ability to respond to a wide range of crises, including natural disasters. Defence-related volunteering thus extends beyond strictly military functions and becomes embedded within a broader security ecosystem.

Finally, the concept of Civil-Military Relations highlights the social and political dimensions of volunteer-based defence activities. Programmes targeting youth or involving community participation strengthen public trust in the armed forces and reinforce their legitimacy as an integral component of democratic society. In the absence of compulsory service, such initiatives partially substitute for direct societal exposure to the military by facilitating processes of socialisation and symbolic integration.

These three frameworks do not operate independently; rather, they are deeply interconnected. Volunteer-based defence activities simultaneously fulfil:

- a security function (training and preparedness),
- a social function (legitimacy and trust),
- and a systemic function (resilience and adaptability).

Accordingly, Total Defence, Societal Resilience, and Civil-Military Relations should not be interpreted as competing approaches, but as complementary analytical lenses that together explain the multifaceted role of volunteering in

defence. Their significance lies not only in their contribution to defence capabilities, but also in their role in sustaining the social legitimacy and long-term viability of the military institution.

In response to both research questions, it can be concluded that volunteering in defence-related activities represents a multidimensional phenomenon that cannot be captured by a single definition or theoretical framework. It operates simultaneously as a mechanism of participation, a tool of governance within defence systems, and a bridge between the military and society.

The findings confirm that defence-related volunteering should be conceptualised as a continuum ranging from purely civic engagement to institutionalised, compensated forms of service, with voluntary entry remaining the key defining feature. At the same time, volunteering (volunteer-based activities) significantly contribute to maintaining the societal anchoring of the armed forces, especially in the absence of conscription. These functions operate simultaneously across the dimensions of force generation, societal resilience, and civil-military relations. As such, volunteering emerges as a multi-functional instrument that strengthens both the operational capacity and the social legitimacy of contemporary defence systems.

7. Conclusions

The conclusions of the study confirm that volunteer and reserve forces are in many cases becoming an integral part of the defence and security systems of states in contemporary Europe. Their importance is growing, especially in connection with the deteriorating international security environment, the structural shortage of personnel in professional armed forces, and the growing demands on the ability of states to respond to crisis situations of a non-military and hybrid nature. The analysis shows that the effective involvement of volunteers is conditioned by a legal framework, institutional integration into state structures, and an appropriate training and command system. States that meet these conditions can use the volunteer potential to strengthen territorial defence, the protection of critical infrastructure, and civil-military cooperation. On the contrary, insufficient regulation and coordination can lead to fragmentation of the integrated security environment and create space for informal or politicized security activities. The study thus emphasizes the need for a strategic approach to the development of security volunteering as part of a broader concept of state resilience and whole-of-society defence.

National strategic documents across Europe reveal varying emphases on societal engagement in defence, ranging from comprehensive total defence concepts (e.g. Norway) to force-generation oriented models (e.g. Poland), confirming the analytical distinction between defence-oriented, bridging, and whole-of-society approaches.

Across the analysed states, voluntary engagement in defence takes multiple institutional forms, including reservist systems, youth cadet programs, and paramilitary organizations, reflecting different national approaches to integrating society into defence structures.

European approaches to defence-related societal engagement reflect a spectrum rather than a unified model, combining elements of civil-military cooperation, total defence, and youth-oriented engagement strategies.

Jednotlivé přístupy k zapojení společnosti do obrany nepředstavují vzájemně se vylučující modely, ale spíše komplementární dimenze, které se v praxi překrývají a liší se především v důrazu na konkrétní cíle – od rozvoje individuálních obranných kapacit přes posilování civilně-vojenských vztahů až po budování celospolečenské odolnosti.

Limitations. With regard to the topic being discussed, the primary basis was the available relevant open sources, therefore no limitations are known.

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