



Foundation for the Rights of Future Generations

Compulsory Social/Military Service

Position Paper



Summary

The FRFG advocates for the introduction of a **compulsory social/military service (CS/MS)** for all generations in order to strengthen social cohesion and address social challenges. This CS/MS is intended to apply to both younger and older people to ensure intergenerational justice. Such a period could help alleviate staff shortages in the social sector and strengthen the defence capability of Germany and the EU in response to current geopolitical instability.

When introducing a CS/MS, the FRFG deems the following points to be worth considering:

1. **Intergenerational justice:** In the FRFG model, a CS/MS is to be undertaken by both younger and older people – ideally one year before entering the workforce (or higher education i.e., university or apprenticeships) and one year after leaving the workforce but before starting the period of retirement.
2. **For men and women:** The CS/MS should not be limited to one biological sex.
3. **No extraordinary exemption for parents:** Nursing work in retirement homes or kindergartens would be opportunities to provide the service. Care work *within the family*, however, such as raising children and caring for elderly relatives, should not count towards fulfilling the obligation, in order to avoid disproportionately exempting parents and unfairly burdening non-parents.
4. **Fair compensation:** The CS/MS should be appropriately remunerated and accompanied by pension entitlements and full legal recognition.

The following advantages arise from the CS/MS:

- Strengthening social cohesion between younger and older generations.
- Providing meaningful experiences and orientation for young people.
- Reducing social isolation among older people.
- Alleviating staff shortages in public service and nursing care.
- Guaranteeing national defence and thereby protecting Germany's/the EU's sovereignty.

The FRFG regards the CS/MS as an opportunity to promote the common good and to address urgent social challenges in the long term. The FRFG model differs fundamentally from gerontocratic approaches that merely seek to place responsibility on young people for military/social service

We call for an open social debate between generations on how such a CS/MS can be implemented fairly and inclusively.

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Why a 'compulsory social/military service'?

Since Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier introduced the idea of 'a compulsory social service' into public debate in June 2022 (FRFG 2023)¹ Germany has witnessed an intensive discussion about its possible implementation (Haß / Nocko 2024: 6). Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, described by leading politicians as a 'turning point' (Olaf Scholz) and an 'epochal break' (Frank-Walter Steinmeier), together with the election of Donald Trump, into the White House, underscores that we are living in a profoundly shifting global environment. Yet, even in calmer times or periods of peace, there were compelling arguments in favour of a CS/MS, which could serve as an antidote to societal trends of fragmentation, radicalisation and growing pessimism about the future.

Many European countries already have some form of military or civil service. However, most of these systems reveal significant shortcomings. For instance, some countries with voluntary systems have very low enlistment numbers, ranging between one and six percent of the youth cohort. Even gender-neutral systems in countries such as Sweden and Norway have much lower enlistment numbers than countries with mandatory service, such as Finland (Besch / Westgaard 2024). Additionally, no existing model includes older age groups within its structure. Table 1 presents a comparative overview of different models, highlighting key data such as the mandatory or voluntary character of the schemes, youth participation rates, gender inclusivity, duration, and the age at which service typically begins.

Table 1: Overview of the conscription and service models across European and selected other countries (see key to the table below)

Compulsory service only for men

All men of a certain age must serve their country for a minimum period, such as in Greece, Finland, Estonia, Switzerland and Austria.

Compulsory service for men and women

All men (and all women as well) of a certain age must serve their country for a minimum period, for instance in Israel.

Selective Compulsory Service

Completing a questionnaire is mandatory for all citizens and residents, both men and women. Subsequently, a proportion of motivated citizens in good health are conscripted according to the requirements of the armed forces. Thus, Selective Compulsory Service is a military draft system in which only a segment of the eligible population is required to serve, based on specific criteria. This system is employed in Sweden and Norway.

¹ FRFG Ambassador Ben Jagasia was invited to discuss the topic as a guest of the Federal President.

Lottery-Driven Service

A random selection system (such as a lottery or drawing) is used to determine which eligible individuals will be conscripted into military service, as in Denmark.

Selective Service System

Unique to the United States, this system requires all US male citizens and residents aged 18–25 to register. There is no active draft, but the system allows for rapid mobilisation if Congress and the President authorise conscription. At present, service in the US armed forces is entirely voluntary, commencing at the age of 18.

Voluntary enlistment

This system enables citizens to select the military as their employer and serve their country as their profession or career. It is often considered the most effective and socially responsible method of maintaining armed forces, as seen in the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy, Poland, Hungary, Ireland, Spain and Bulgaria.

| Country | Participation (what percentage of each "youth cohort" does such service) | Mandatory or voluntary? For men and women? | Duration | Stage of life (at a younger/older age)? | Sources |
|--|--|--|---|--|--|
| Austria (Compulsory Military Service) | Approx. 22,000 young men drafted annually | Mandatory for men; voluntary for women | 6 months military, or 9 months civilian | From age 18 | Military Service/ alternative service Military service age and obligation Military service |
| Belgium (Voluntary Military Service) | Not specified (conscription suspended since 1994 but reintroducing a new voluntary military service in 2026) | Voluntary for men and women | 12 months (initial contract) | 18-25 years | Military service age and obligation Belgium announces record military recruitment drive with voluntary service program |
| Bulgaria (Voluntary Military Service) | 3% of a youth cohort annually | Voluntary for men and women | 6 months | 18-27 years | Military service age and obligation Bulgaria's Parliament approves voluntary military service |
| China (Selective Compulsory Military Service) | Approx. 1.5 million individuals drafted annually | Selective compulsory military service for men; women 18-19 years of age who are high school graduates and meet | 24 months | 18-22 years | Military service age and obligation Has China Ever Imposed a Draft for Military Service? Uncovering the Truth! |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|--|--|---|
| | | requirements for specific military jobs are subject to conscription (2024) | | | |
| Denmark (Lottery-Driven Service) | Approx. 3,900 conscripts annually | Mandatory to register for the military service lottery for men and women | 11 months | From age 18 | Europe's Conscription Challenge: Lessons From Nordic and Baltic States Denmark introduces mandatory conscription for women amid growing threat from Russia |
| Estonia (Compulsory Service) | Approx. 3,500 conscripts annually | Mandatory military service for men (limited Civilian alternative possible); voluntary for women | 8–11 months | 17-27 years | Europe's Conscription Challenge: Lessons From Nordic and Baltic States |
| Finland (Compulsory Service) | 70% of eligible men | Mandatory for men; voluntary for women | 6 or 12 months (military or civilian service) | Men from 18; women 18–29 (must finish before 30) | Europe's Conscription Challenge: Lessons From Nordic and Baltic States Voluntary military service for women |
| France (Voluntary Military Service) | Approx. 6,000–7,000 young people annually | Voluntary for men and women | 12 months | 18-25 years | Military service age and obligation Child Soldiers Global Report 2001 - France |
| Germany (Voluntary Military Service) | 6% of youth cohort annually (20,000 join voluntary military service) | Voluntary for men and women | 7-23 months | From age 17 | Voluntary Military Service: An Opportunity, Not an Obligation Military service age and obligation |
| Greece (Compulsory Military Service) | 90–92% of a male youth cohort | Mandatory for men; voluntary for women | 12 months for the Army; 9 months for the Air Force/Navy; 15 months civilian alternative | From age 19 | Military service age and obligation Is military service mandatory in Greece? |
| Hungary (Voluntary Military Service) | Approx. 2–3% of a youth cohort annually | Voluntary for men and women | 6-months | 18-25 years | The Defence Forces Await New Applicants |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|--|---|---|
| Iran (Compulsory Military Service) | Approx. 400,000 men annually | Mandatory for men; voluntary for women | 24 months | From 18-19 to approximately age 40; 16 for voluntary military service | Military service age and obligation - The World Factbook FCICA - Conscription in Iran |
| Ireland (Voluntary Military Service) | <1% of a youth cohort annually | Voluntary for men and women | 60 months (initial contract) | 18-25 years | Military service age and obligation General Questions on the Defence Forces |
| Israel (Compulsory service) | About 50% of youth cohort | Mandatory for men and women | 32 months for enlisted men and about 24 months for enlisted women (varies based on military occupation), 48 months for officers; pilots commit to 9-year service | From age 18 | What percent of the Israeli population is in the military? Military service age and obligation Conscription in Israel |
| Italy (Voluntary Military Service) | Approx. 50,000 young people annually | Voluntary for men and women | 12 months | 18-25 years | Military service age and obligation |
| Netherlands (Voluntary Military Service) | Not specified | Voluntary for men and women (officially mandatory, not enforced; effectively voluntary) | 12 months | From age 17 | Which countries still have conscription? Military service age and obligation |
| Norway (Selective Compulsory Service) | 15% (approx. 9,000 out of 60,000 eligible youths annually) | Selective compulsory for men and women | 12 months (with possible reserve call-ups of up to 7 months up to age 44 or 55 for those that have served in the military for at least a year after their mandatory training) | From age 19 | Europe's Conscription Challenge: Lessons From Nordic and Baltic States |
| Poland (Voluntary Military Service) | Approx. 5–6% of a youth cohort annually | Voluntary for men and women (conscription suspended since 2009) | 12–24 months | From age 18 | Military service age and obligation |

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|---|--|--|--|--|---|
| Russian Federation (Compulsory Military Service) | Approx. 250,000 men drafted annually (partially due to the dynamic development of the war against Ukraine) | Mandatory for men; voluntary for women and non-Russian citizens (18-30) | 12-24 months | 18–27 years | Military service age and obligation Which countries still have conscription? |
| South Korea (Compulsory Military Service) | Approx. 200,000 conscripts annually | Mandatory for men; voluntary for women | 18-36 months (depending on branch) | 18–35 years | Military service age and obligation |
| Spain (Voluntary Military Service) | Approx. 2–3% of a youth cohort annually | Voluntary for men and women | 24-36 months | 18-26 years | Military service age and obligation Does Spain have mandatory military service? |
| Sweden (Selective Compulsory Service) | 4% of each age cohort is enlisted annually | Selective compulsory for men and women | 12 months | From age 18 | Europe's Conscription Challenge: Lessons From Nordic and Baltic States |
| Switzerland (Compulsory Service) | Around 35-40% of male cohort | Mandatory for men; voluntary for women | 11-12 months | 19-25 years | Military service Is it possible to refuse military service in Switzerland? Mandatory military service age range (Switzerland) |
| Turkey Compulsory Service) | Not specified | Mandatory for men; voluntary for women (since 2023) | 6 months | From age 20 | Military service age and obligation |
| UK (Voluntary Military Service) | Approx. 2% of a youth cohort | Voluntary for men and women | Up to 48 months | From age 16 (18 for combat) | How long is UK military service? Military service age and obligation |
| Ukraine (Compulsory Military Service) | Approx. 18–20% of male cohort in peacetime | Mandatory for men; voluntary for women | 12–18 months | 18–27 years | Military service age and obligation Ukraine conscripts up to 30,000 people into army every month after adoption of mobilization law – NYT |
| USA (Selective Service System) | Approx. 0.6% of youth cohort annually (180,000 enlist) | Voluntary for men and women (Selective Service registration mandatory for men) | 8-year service obligation (mix of active duty or reserve) | From age 18 (17 with parental consent) | Military service age and obligation Pentagon: 7 in 10 Youths Would Fail to Qualify for Military Service |

The FRFG believes that a CS/MS could help strengthen cohesion both within society and between generations. The FRFG is based in Germany, but our vision extends beyond Germany, into the wider framework of the European Union. After all, our passports bear the words 'European Union' as well as 'Federal Republic of Germany.' A CS/MS could address pressing challenges, such as the shortage of skilled workers in the social and care sectors,² as well as deficits in Germany's and the EU's defence capacity (with a European army becoming increasingly necessary in the long run). Given the ageing population, society can no longer place the burden of civil and military service solely on the younger generation. The FRFG model aims to build a bridge between generations, relieving pressure on the younger generation, while encouraging solidarity across society. Importantly, such a system would have the potential to revitalise our community and strengthen it for future challenges, benefiting not only society but also each individual who participates. A compulsory social period offers purpose, direction, and opportunities for meaningful engagement, and would help overcome social isolation and the narrowing perspectives of filter bubbles.

How should the CS/MS be structured?

1) Fair to all generations

CS/MSS must not be limited to today's young people. As the Hertie Foundation (Haß / Nocko 2024: 13) has rightly observed, a system that only applies to the younger generation would be unfair across age groups. The public intellectual Sascha Lobo has even described the Federal President's (Frank-Walter Steinmeier) proposal for compulsory service restricted to youth as the "peak of insolence" (Lobo 2022). The FRFG shares this concern: obliging only young people constitutes a breach of intergenerational justice. In a gerontocracy, older generations impose obligations on the young, requiring them to serve in the military or in the social sector. In a democracy, however, such decisions are made collectively, and responsibility is shared more broadly. For as long as there have been wars between states, older people have been sending young people into the military (or alternative military service) and watching from the sidelines. This should be over. We no longer need such a gerontocracy.

The FRFG therefore advocates a mandatory social service applying to both young and old. This should be completed over two years – ideally one year before entering the workforce (or beginning higher education, i.e. university or apprenticeship) and one year after leaving the workforce, but before starting the period of retirement. Under the FRFG model, all cohorts born between 1958 and 2007 (those who are 18 to 67 in 2025) would fall within the scope of this obligation. However, the CS/MS system should include flexibility by allowing the service to be performed in weekly hours, for example. Importantly, the first half of the service must be completed by the age of 30 to avoid indefinite postponement. The FRFG model is based

² The CS/MS workers will not be able to replace the trained specialists but would relieve them

on the notion of intergenerational justice.³ Our model differs from approaches that simply place responsibility solely on the young. Instead, *it would strengthen cohesion across generations*. If, for instance, young and old people (both performing CS/MS) worked together in disaster relief or at food banks, such collaborations would create new encounters, as well as mutual understanding and practical cooperation. The FRFG is convinced that such intergenerational engagement can create an exchange between young and old, which would narrow the generational divide and enhance intergenerational solidarity. A society that values intergenerational fairness should also be willing to distribute responsibilities equitably across different age groups.

2) Mandatory for both men and women

In addition, CS/MS must also apply equally to men and women. In Germany, for instance, the German Basic Law currently contains an inconsistency between the principle of equality in Article 3 (3)⁴ and Article 12a,⁵ which regulates military service (currently suspended) in a way that is not gender-neutral.⁶ The FRFG firmly opposes the simple reactivation of Article 12a, which reflects an era when only men were admitted to the Bundeswehr. Today, women serve across all branches of the armed forces, including combat units. Consequently, any form of compulsory social or military service must be designed for both biological sexes. According to the general understanding of an equal society, a compulsory social period cannot refer to only one sex (men). Furthermore, anyone born in 1958 or later who has already completed several months in a comparable obligation, whether through military service, civilian service, federal voluntary service (in German: BFD), or the 'Voluntary Social/Ecological Year Program' (in German: FSJ/FÖJ), should be exempt from the new requirement. For instance, if a person born in 1960 has already served two years in the army, he or she would be fully exempted from the new CS/MS. If, on the other hand, a person born in 2005 has completed a 12-month voluntary social year program, he or she would still be required to serve a further twelve months in the new CS/MS upon leaving the workforce.

3) Exemptions

The obligation to fulfil the CS/MS should recognise voluntary work in childcare facilities and retirement homes. However, care work performed within one's own family (e.g. raising one's own children or caring for elderly relatives) should not count towards fulfilling the obligation, in order to avoid disproportionately exempting parents and unfairly burdening non-parents.

³ There are two forms of intergenerational injustice (Tremmel 2012): injustice between young and old people when looking at a point in time, and injustice between people who live today and those who will live tomorrow (time sequence view). The question of compulsory service or length of service falls into the first area.

⁴ "No person shall be favoured or disfavoured because of sex, parentage, race, language, homeland and origin, faith or religious or political opinions. No person shall be disfavoured because of disability."

⁵ (1) Men who have reached the age of eighteen may be required to serve in the Armed Forces, the Federal Border Guard or a civil defence organization. (2) Anybody who refuses military service involving armed combat on grounds of conscience may be assigned to alternative service.'

⁶ Whether this is unconstitutional constitutional law or not is a legal question that would go beyond the scope of this impulse paper.

After all, most countries do not accept parental duties as grounds for exemption from military duty.

4) Appropriately compensated CS/MS

Similar to today's federal voluntary service, the CS/MS under the FRFG model would constitute an employment relationship between the state and the citizen, rather than the employment agency and the citizen. Essential components, here, are fair remuneration and recognition under pension law. Regardless of whether this new CS/MS is served in a military or a social setting, in Germany or in another EU member state, mandatory service cannot be expected to be free of charge. Austrian citizens, for example, may choose between six months of military service or nine months of alternative civil/community service, both of which count towards social insurance. Appropriate compensation ensures fairness and encourages greater participation. Within the social sector, the aim should be to offer the broadest possible range of activities. The more diverse the options, the higher the possibility of individuals finding something that aligns with their skills and interests, therefore making it a mutually beneficial experience.

Other advantages of the FRFG model

In terms of career orientation, it is highly beneficial for young people to experience areas of life beyond the bubble in which they grew up. A year in which young people engage in practical work, distinct from the classroom environment in their previous school life, would enable them to discover personal strengths, weaknesses, and interests. Such insights can be of central importance when it comes to defining one's own professional aspirations and goals more clearly.

The FRFG model also addresses the growing problem of social isolation. The proportion of young people suffering from loneliness has increased sharply.⁷ In Germany, a look at the existing models of the federal voluntary service, or the 'Voluntary Social/Ecological Year Program', shows that young people (and in some cases even older people⁸ today) are willing to commit themselves to community service. However, participants (of all ages) attach importance to flexibility, as well as appropriate remuneration, and pension contributions. Adequate remuneration and supplementary benefits, such as health or pension insurance contributions, would be paid both to young and old CS/MS participants without age discrimination.

Finally, hardship regulations must be in place to enable exemptions from the CS/MS in individual cases. For example, people with illnesses or health conditions should not be

⁷ Pensioners (particularly the very elderly) are likewise disproportionately affected (BMFSFJ 2024). This development could be counteracted by the CS/MS through regular social contact and networks which are vital in old age.

⁸ While the two voluntary services 'Freiwilliges Soziales Jahr' (introduced in the 1960s) and 'Freiwilliges Ökologisches Jahr' (introduced in the 1990s) can only be performed by young people up to the age of 27, the Bundesfreiwilligendienst, which was introduced later, is open to volunteers of all ages.

required to fulfil the obligation. In Germany, before the suspension of military service, there was a conscription system: if someone had health problems, they were discharged. The same procedure could be applied to the new CS/MS service. Presumably, a higher percentage of older people would be discharged than younger ones. On the other hand, studies show that many people in their sixties and seventies are still in good health.

International context

It is striking that all existing models focus exclusively on young people, without any consideration for the older generation. The FRFG's non-gerontocratic model is therefore unique, as it proposes the inclusion of both the younger and older age groups in the CS/MS. If implemented, it could serve as the pioneer of a genuinely intergenerationally fair approach to social service.

The question of equality between men and women presents a similar challenge. In countries like Finland, Austria, Estonia, and Greece, mandatory service remains a legal requirement solely for men, while women may volunteer in most of these countries (CIA World Factbook, 2021).

Conclusion

A social and sustainable society thrives on cohesion between young and old, as well as on fair intergenerational contracts. It would simply be unfair to oblige only young people to undertake compulsory social service. The younger generation is already burdened with the challenges of the future. As DIW President Marcel Fratzscher has rightly observed, "the young generation (...) is already unduly burdened by the many mistakes of the baby boomers" (Fratzscher 2024). Against the background of demographic change, young people must also support an ever-growing number of pensioners through their labour. To impose a compulsory social service solely on the young would therefore be inequitable and send a deeply damaging signal. Ultimately, the gap between young and old would only widen further, placing social cohesion at risk. By contrast, the notion of intergenerational fairness could be the key to winning both young and old to the idea of CS/MS, thereby strengthening social solidarity.

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The Foundation for the Rights of Future Generations (FRFG) is a non-partisan advocacy group for future generations, led by one of the youngest foundation boards in Germany. We award prizes, conduct scientific research, publish books, position papers, and press releases, initiate campaigns for intergenerational justice, and organise seminars and symposiums. Our focus areas include environmental policy, pension policy, financial policy, education policy, demography, labour society, and political participation. The foundation is financially independent and is not affiliated with any political party.

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