



Weekly Briefing

Croatia social briefing:
Would mandatory military service
do more harm than good in Croatia?
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Would mandatory military service do more harm than good in Croatia?

Summary

The war in Ukraine has reinvigorated the discourse regarding mandatory military service in Croatia. The conflict has certainly threatened the sense of security and safety for many countries worldwide. This is particularly true for newly independent countries or those whose sovereignty has, at some point, been disputed. Indeed, as a country which gained international recognition in 1992, it is understandable why this conflict has created a sense of unease in Croatia. This article will explore the advantages and disadvantages of the requirement of citizens to be militarily trained and the impact that this decision could have on the country.

Introduction

In order to understand the way in which mandatory military service might affect a country, it is important to consider the nature of the countries which already require some form of military training from their citizens. It is striking that the countries which do have mandatory military service, share little in common. Indeed, it is not an exclusive characteristic of a specific type of political system and is not inherent to countries whose regimes or cultures uphold certain values and ideologies. What is most noticeable is that mandatory military service is usually a feature of those nations which are either considered very democratic or very autocratic. For instance, Denmark, Norway, Finland and Switzerland¹ are all countries which require their citizens to undergo certain military training (the specifics of mandatory military service differ in each country). These countries have certainly been praised as some of most democratic and freest countries in the world. For instance, both Norway and Finland have a Freedom House rating of 100/100 with regards to their Global Freedom Scores². On the other hand, countries like North Korea, Azerbaijan and Russia, which also have mandatory military service, are all considered, albeit to different extents, autocratic nations whose citizens have limited rights and freedoms. Therefore, from this information alone, it is difficult to predict whether the introduction of mandatory military service would be beneficial for Croatia. It is important to

¹ <https://www.tportal.hr/vijesti/clanak/sve-vise-govori-se-o-uvodenju-obveznog-vojnog-roka-u-hrvatskoj-istrazili-smo-gdje-je-sve-obvezan-i-koliko-traje-foto-20220312>

² <https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-world/scores>

note that Croatia is considered a free, but partly flawed, democratic country³. Therefore, upon acknowledging the nature of the countries which require their citizens to undergo military service, it is clear that few of these countries are similar to Croatia (with regards to regime type and levels democracy, freedom and human rights).⁴

However, few countries share the specifics of Croatia's tumultuous past. Since 1102, with the formation of the Croato-Hungarian state⁵, until the early 1990s, Croatia did not experience true independence. War is a reality which many Croatian citizens endured in the past. Therefore, since there are some parallels between Russia's claim to the eastern part of Ukraine and Serbia's former claims on certain territories within its neighbouring countries, including Croatia, it is understandable why the conflict in Ukraine may have prompted unease. It is important to note that the current Serbian government has in no way suggested that they intend to threaten Croatia's right to sovereignty. Nevertheless, it is clear why mandatory military service may provide a sense of security, considering that the current situation in Ukraine is reminiscent of Croatia's past to an extent.

Similarly, Croatia is a member of both the EU and of NATO. Although Russian aggression is currently directed only towards Ukraine, there is certainly hostility between Russia and the 'West' (as perceived by the Russian government). Russia, whether it is their government's genuine view or merely a justification for their actions, has blamed NATO's expansion eastwards for their actions in Ukraine to an extent⁶. Therefore, as a NATO country, one might argue that the introduction of mandatory military service in Croatia might be beneficial.

With the aforementioned in mind, it is interesting to consider whether mandatory military service is something which is necessary for Croatia. Its reintroduction could potentially increase Croatian citizens' sense of security or, contrastingly, engender fear of war in citizens and perhaps promote nationalist sentiments.

³ *ibid.*

⁴ <https://www.tportal.hr/vijesti/clanak/sve-vise-govori-se-o-uvođenju-obveznog-vojnog-roka-u-hrvatskoj-istrazili-smo-gdje-je-sve-obvezan-i-koliko-traje-foto-20220312>

⁵ https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/41146857.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3Ad5c784d579c6cd54d442a47bcc869338&ab_segments=&origin,p382.

⁶ <https://theprint.in/opinion/why-blaming-nato-for-ukraine-war-is-vladimir-putins-biggest-lie/872350/>

Mandatory military service in Croatia-PROS

It is important to note that there are certain advantages of mandatory military service which are not directly related to war, defence or fighting of any kind. MP Stipo Mlinarić, an advocate for the decision to reinstate mandatory military service, has pointed out that military training could prove useful in instances other than war. He has argued that basic military training would be helpful in the case of, for instance, natural disasters⁷. In his opinion, military discipline would train citizens to react to such occurrences in an organised manner⁸. Considering that, in the last two years, Croatia has suffered two, major earthquakes which have had a profound effect on the country, this argument is somewhat persuasive.

Mandatory military service would arguably also be advantageous to Croatia because of the country's small army. Although sources vary, the Croatian army is estimated to consist of 15,000 active military personnel and 20,000 reserves⁹. Regardless of the lack of consistency regarding the information of the size of armies, most statistics indicate that the Croatian Army is not large. To put this into perspective, Austria, whose population is only slightly more than twice that of Croatia's, is estimated to have an army of 23,000 active military personnel and 160,000 reserves¹⁰. Therefore, Austria's army is more than five times larger than Croatia's, while its population is not drastically larger. Moreover, with this in mind, perhaps there is an argument for the reintroduction of mandatory military service.

Mandatory military service in Croatia-CONS

The aforementioned MP Stipo Mlinarić also emphasised that the cost it would take to run the mandatory military service programme does not compare to the cost of human lives and freedoms¹¹ which could be threatened if Croatia's army proved too weak to withstand an attack¹². While this is valid, it is clear that many of Mlinarić's arguments for mandatory military service are based on a hypothetical situation. Indeed, the possibility of war in Croatia is highly unlikely.

⁷ <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/teme/2022/3/14/rat-u-ukrajini-pokrenuo-pitanje-obaveznog-vojnog-roka-u-hrvatskoj>

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ https://www.globalfirepower.com/country-military-strength-detail.php?country_id=croatia

¹⁰ https://www.globalfirepower.com/country-military-strength-detail.php?country_id=austria

¹¹ <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/teme/2022/3/14/rat-u-ukrajini-pokrenuo-pitanje-obaveznog-vojnog-roka-u-hrvatskoj>

¹² *ibid.*

There are also certain negative connotations regarding Mlinarić's advocacy for mandatory military service. Indeed, the political party Domovinski pokret (eng. Homeland Movement), of which he is a member, is a "right-wing populist"¹³ party. While this, in itself, does not negate Mlinarić's arguments, the nature of the party does suggest that there is an agenda behind their wish to reinstate military training for citizens. This is evidenced in that the perspectives of many party members and their ideal policies encroach on certain democratic rights and freedoms of Croatian citizens. For instance, in 2020, Domovinski pokret "voiced strong opposition"¹⁴ against the European Union's push for Croatia to "adopt a fixed number of ethnic minority deputies in its parliament."¹⁵ While this is unrelated, this one instance encapsulates the general ideological stance of Domovinski pokret. Therefore, their desire to reinstate mandatory military training, considering that their views are sometimes extreme, is worrying. One might deduce that perhaps, for them, this desire is not driven by the idea that Croatia should be prepared to defend itself and to create a sense of ease in the country, but instead, to promote nationalist values and sentiments¹⁶. Nevertheless, this is merely an interpretation of the party's agenda, based on the claims of Mlinarić and other Domovinski pokret party members.

More importantly, the main problem with reinstating mandatory military service in Croatia is that young people are largely against it¹⁷. Indeed in 2007, Croatia ceased the requirement of its male citizens to complete mandatory military service because of their lack of interest in it¹⁸. Many of those who were required to serve, opted to complete community service rather than military service¹⁹. The most recent polls all suggest that attitudes amongst young people have not changed. Thus, the investment of around 500 million HRK annually to realise this military service is too much considering that many would attempt to avoid the training²⁰.

¹³ <https://theloop.ecpr.eu/identity-versus-global-politics-eurocepticism-in-croatia-and-serbia/>

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ <https://theloop.ecpr.eu/identity-versus-global-politics-eurocepticism-in-croatia-and-serbia/>

¹⁷ <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/anketa-jutarnjeg-treba-li-vratiti-sluzenje-obveznog-vojnog-roka-u-hrvatsku-15167438>

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ *ibid.*

Conclusion

Therefore, mandatory military service could have both positive and negative effects on Croatia. Citizens would be better prepared in case of an attack on the country and Croatians would be able to better defend their nation and right to independence. Nevertheless, an attack on Croatia is unlikely and there is no indication that any country intends to question Croatia's right to sovereignty by using force. Therefore, considering the disinterest of young people to be involved in military service, mandatory military service may do more harm than good. Aforementioned, the militarization of young people might engender nationalistic sentiments. Nevertheless, the enforcement of military service for people who have expressed their opposition to the idea, may also breed antipathy towards the Croatian government. Although, in this time of global unease, Croatia should be open to discussing the possible advantages of some form of military training for its citizens, evidence suggests that mandatory military service is not necessary for Croatia to reinstate.