

# Is a compulsory military service feasible for Kosovo?

Author: Gramos Sejdiu, KCSS

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## BACKGROUND

**DURING** the general elections of February, 2021 in Kosovo, one of the commitments of the “Vetëvendosje!” (VV) party was to introduce a national conscription model based on 3+3 months of service. The Russian invasion of Ukraine, coupled with increasing tension with Serbia, who maintains very close ties with Russia, has brought the conscription model into spotlight in Kosovo. However, as the country aspires membership in NATO, the transition from a professional military force into the conscription model could potentially undermine that process.

Currently, there are 13 countries in Europe that apply the conscription-based model for the armed forces, each facing different challenges with the system. According to the media reportings, it seems that Kosovo’s approach is based on the models of Switzerland, Israel and Norway. However, it is clear that while Kosovo can learn a lot from other countries, it needs to develop its own approach and model to conscription, and in this context certain social, political and economic aspects should be considered. In order to accommodate changing mission profiles and lowering military expenditures, European armies have been reduced in size, lessening the need for recruits. Despite the war in Ukraine, armies across Europe have focused on modernization and international cooperation such as NATO for national security guarantees. Due to the evolving modernization of army equipment, armed forces “require increasingly higher training standards”. As a result, several nations have shifted towards professional armies in an effort to standardize their militaries and improve overall operational preparedness.

## CHALLENGES

**Legal Challenges** Based on the article 126, paragraph 4 of the Constitution of the Republic of Kosovo, Kosovo’s Security Force is defined as professional, which falls in contradiction with the introduction of an all-volunteer force within the army. Thus, the implementation of compulsory military service in Kosovo will require constitutional changes and this becomes a challenge due to the double majority requirement, which is likely to be blocked by the non-majority reserved seats. Kosovo’s parliament consists of 120 members. Out of these, 100 seats are designated for the majority, while the remaining 20 seats are reserved for non-majority communities. For any constitutional changes to take place, it requires the support of two-thirds of the pro-majority seats as well as two-thirds of the pro-non-majority reserved seats. This means that the 10 seats reserved for Kosovar Serbs, who belong to the non-majority community, hold significant influence. Consequently, these 10 seats have effectively impeded constitutional changes relating to Kosovo’s Security Forces. For instance, the proposal to rename the KSF to Kosovo’s Armed Forces, as well as its constitutional mission has faced opposition from these 10 reserved seats, leading to its blockage.

## Economic and Financial Challenges

Existing research shows that the “share of conscripts in the labor force has the largest impact, followed by the duration of the military service and alternative service” in both income and growth regression. The same study suggests that the mandatory service in the military impacts both the level and the growth of GDP negatively, thus output levels and growth rates are predicted to be lower in countries which rely on conscription drafts for the recruitment of army personnel. In this sense, halting the implementation of conscription increases annual GDP growth as well as strengthens the “the peace dividend”. Alongside the macroeconomic aspect, compulsory military service costs a lot of money. It is not clear at the moment how Kosovo plans to pay for the additional costs. Another negative impact of compulsory military service is that it lowers the labor-to-capital ratio; the increase in the number of conscripts generates inefficiency in organizing the armed forces, instead of investing in productivity growth and advanced technology.

**Political Implications** Compulsory military service, is not in line with the objectives of Kosovo to join EU and NATO. The latter, prioritizes professional armies, that focus on technological advancement, rather than costly compulsory military services. In addition to this, for Kosovo to establish a compulsory military service, sends the wrong signals to the neighboring countries in the Western Balkans, and potentially undermines regional cooperation, and stability.

## WAY FORWARD

- Kosovo government should commission an independent assessment of the feasibility of establishing a compulsory military service in Kosovo. Existing research suggests, the idea is not suitable for Kosovo, and its ambitions to join NATO and the EU.
- Compulsory military services in Kosovo can potentially undermine regional cooperation and stability, and invite new security dilemmas in the Western Balkans. In this context, Kosovo should consider regional implications of a compulsory military service.
- Analysis into conscription’s relevance in Kosovo’s GDP growth and current level should be taken seriously, due to previous cases in which mandatory military service in countries impacted the GDP negatively, especially in peacetime.
- Kosovo is a multiethnic country, and as per the Law No. 06/L-123, Kosovo’s Security Force is multi-ethnic force, thus Kosovo government should prioritize a strategy of inclusion of the Kosovar Serb population and professionalization of the KSF, rather than expansion.