

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Preserving and progressing: Tensions in the gendered politics of military conscription

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Abstract

After all-male universal conscription had been deactivated in many European countries in the post-Cold War era, the past decade has seen a surprising reversal of this trend, with several countries reactivating, voting to retain, or even extending military conscription to women. Due to the strong historical link between conscription and the formation of hierarchical gender orders, this paper conducts a feminist analysis of debates on conscription in Sweden and Austria and asks how gender served to legitimise the ‘return’ of mandatory military service. We find that a neoliberal, individualistic discourse legitimised Sweden’s gender-neutral conscription as an efficient and progressive model that presents as competitive, while the Austrian all-male model was justified on the basis of conservative, communitarian sentiments of fostering responsible male citizens and preserving a solidaric national community. Moreover, while conscription was envisioned as strengthening Swedish defence and war preparedness, conscription in Austria was rather associated with containing militarism and preventing involvement in armed conflict. Despite these differences, we suggest that hierarchical notions of masculinity and femininity, intersecting with classed and racialised dichotomies, served to render conscription acceptable and even appealing in both cases.

Keywords: Austria; conscription; gender; military recruitment; Sweden

Introduction

The past decade has witnessed what commentators refer to as a ‘comeback’¹ or ‘return’² of military conscription. Since the mid-2010s, young people in Scandinavia, the Baltics, and Eastern Europe have yet again been forced to pick up arms for the nation, after several decades characterised by conscription reform and deactivation. In Central and Western Europe, the Austrian and Swiss publics voted to retain conscription in 2013; France began trying out an updated national service scheme in 2019; and German, Polish, Italian, and Dutch politicians have all debated a reintroduction of recently abandoned draft systems in the past decade. In Sweden and Norway meanwhile, conscription has been extended to women. What appeared to be an established truth in post-Cold

¹Call on me: The military draft is making a comeback, *The Economist* (2 October 2021).

²Elisabeth Braw, *The Return of the Military Draft* (Washington, DC: Atlantic Council, 2017).

War scholarly and policy debates, namely that conscription was ‘out-of-date’,³ ‘out of style’,⁴ and ultimately unmodern both in contemporary war fighting and in light of societal transformations, is clearly being reconsidered. The geopolitical, socioeconomic, and demographic factors behind this trend, such as increased military tensions between Russia and the West, mounting costs, low birth rates, and difficulties in recruiting voluntary personnel, have been discussed to some degree.⁵ Yet the question remains how it is possible for a system of forced military labour that can entail fighting, killing, and dying for the nation to re-emerge as necessary, legitimate, and even desirable.

As Strand has shown,⁶ the ‘return’ of conscription is a complex process that encompasses both change and continuity and importantly hinges on a successful ‘reimagination’ of conscription as ‘modern’ and appealing. This paper expands on Strand’s work by probing into how gender matters in this reimagination of conscription and the related justifications of young people’s duty to serve. We argue that gender is an important piece of the puzzle of how an institution of involuntary military labour that is generally seen as in tension with, or even contradictory to, liberal democracy⁷ has been able to make an alleged ‘comeback’. As we shall see, this is not only because the reintroduction of conscription in some cases is legitimised by making it gender-neutral, but also because gender – as a system of dualistic and hierarchical meaning-making based on perceived dichotomies between masculinity and femininity – shapes the diverse and sometimes contradictory ways in which conscription is reimagined. Our exploration is primarily based on an analysis of two country cases – Austria and Sweden – where political and military elites have successfully convinced the public of the necessity, rationality, and desirability of military conscription. In Austria, all-male conscription was retained through a public referendum in 2013, after being severely attacked by some parts of the political elite in a year-long public campaign. In Sweden, conscription was reintroduced in 2018 and extended to women, only seven years after its deactivation.

In order to understand how mandatory military service is ascribed meaning in gendered ways, we build on feminist scholarship showing that all-male conscription, or mandatory military service for men, has institutionalised a particular, celebrated, and ultimately superior role for men and masculinity in the nation-state project, particularly at its peak in the 1800 and 1900s.⁸ Narratives about military service turning ‘boys into men’,⁹ ‘just warriors’, and protectors of the nation,¹⁰ often upheld by constructions of innocent ‘womenandchildren’,¹¹ have justified the conscript military as a ‘school of the nation’¹² and thus something *more* than a mere military manpower system. Despite these important insights, feminist literatures have not engaged, or been comprehensively engaged, in debates about the post-Cold War deactivation of conscription in Europe, or in the more recent debates about the alleged ‘return’ of conscription. How gendered power relations enable the reimagination and reaffirmation of conscription, especially in smaller European states, has thus not received sufficient scholarly attention.

In a comparative case study, we therefore ask how gender is constitutive of contemporary reimaginations of conscription and related constructions of soldiering, citizenship, and the nation,

³Karl W. Haltiner, ‘The definite end of the mass army in Western Europe?’, *Armed Forces & Society*, 25:1 (1998), pp. 7–36 (p. 8).

⁴Pertti Joenniemi, ‘Introduction’, in Pertti Joenniemi (ed.), *The Changing Face of European Conscription* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), pp. 1–12 (p. 2).

⁵Matthias Bieri, *Military Conscription in Europe: New Relevance* (Zurich: CSS ETH Zurich, 2015); Braw, *Return of the Military Draft*; Joeri Rongé and Guilia Abrate, *Conscription in the European Union Armed Forces: National Trends, Benefits and EU Modernised Service* (Brussels: Finabel, 2019).

⁶Sanna Strand, ‘The reactivation and reimagination of military conscription in Sweden’, *Armed Forces & Society* (2023).

⁷Katharine M. Millar, *Support the Troops: Military Obligations, Gender and the Making of Political Community* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

⁸Ute Frevert, *A Nation in Barracks: Modern Germany, Military Conscription and Civil Society* (Oxford: Berg, 2004); Fia Sundevall, *Det Sista Manliga Yrkesmonopolet* (Göteborg: Makadam, 2011).

⁹Laura Sjöberg, *Gender, War, and Conflict* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014).

¹⁰Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Women and War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

¹¹Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014).

¹²Frevert, *Nation in Barracks*.

as well as how gender is discussed as a policy issue, particularly around the drafting (or not) of women. We show that reimaginings of conscription that enabled its retention and reintroduction in Austria and Sweden draw upon gender in ambivalent and sometimes unexpected ways. Our cases show that there is no unidirectional path towards the abandonment of conscription and the associated increase of women's military participation. Rather, the link between military service, draft systems, and gender integration remains subject to constant political contestation. Against this background, the gendered meanings ascribed to conscription are unstable, contingent, and shaped by different contexts in terms of security environments, military legacies, and national gender orders.

The two cases in question were characterised by different politics in terms both of women's inclusion into the draft system and of how gender constituted the reimagining of conscription. A neoliberal, individualistic discourse legitimised Sweden's gender-neutral conscription as an efficient and progressive model that presents as competitive by granting merit-based advantages. The Austrian all-male model, on the other hand, was justified on the basis of conservative, communitarian sentiments of fostering responsible male citizens and preserving a solidaric national community. Moreover, while conscription was envisioned as strengthening Swedish defence and war preparedness, conscription in Austria was rather associated with containing militarism and preventing involvement in armed conflict. Despite these differences, we suggest that hierarchical notions of masculinity and femininity, intersecting with classed and racialised dichotomies, served to render conscription acceptable and even appealing in both cases. Although the link between gender and conscription partly diverted from the historical nexus identified in previous research, this did not lead to a de-masculinisation of military service. Rather, the masculine character of conscription was reaffirmed in the context of specific gendered power relations, which importantly contributed to legitimising the return and retention of conscription. This contingency also informed whether and how gender-neutral conscription was part of the attempt to legitimise draft systems. Ultimately, these results yield key insights into the importance of gender for the contemporary justification of forced military labour for the nation-state and, moreover, into the variety of ways in which different forms of military service sustain and transform gendered power relations and vice versa.

Feminist insights on conscription and gender in the past and present

Over the past decade, news media reports, commentary, and policy analyses have observed that military conscription is gaining momentum.¹³ The reasons adduced for this arguably unexpected shift are often security related, citing Russia's military aggressions and increasing geopolitical tensions. A few academic case studies have also highlighted the societal changes and conditions that have enabled the reintroduction of conscription in several European states, either by reinvigorating so-called republican ideals, where military service is seen as a 'school of the nation',¹⁴ fostering productive citizens, patriotism, and national cohesion,¹⁵ or by reimagining the meaning of conscription as compatible with (neo)liberal government and citizenship ideals.¹⁶ Yet none of these analyses have laid bare the *diverse* ways in which conscription is being motivated in different national, geopolitical, and sociopolitical contexts. They have also not comprehensively engaged feminist literatures on conscription, despite the well-established link between the republican citizen-soldier tradition and masculinity. The question of how a system increasingly defined as unmodern and unfair after the end of the Cold War was able to regain legitimacy and how this is

¹³Bieri, *Military Conscription in Europe*; Braw, *Return of the Military Draft*; Rongé and Abrate, *Conscription in the European Union*; 'Call on me: The military draft is making a comeback'.

¹⁴Frevert, *Nation in Barracks*.

¹⁵E.g. Alexandra Gheciu, 'Remembering France's glory, securing Europe in the age of Trump', *European Journal of International Security*, 5:1 (2020), pp. 25–44; Zoltan Barany, 'Soldiers of Arabia: Explaining compulsory military service in the Gulf', *Journal of Arabian Studies*, 8:1 (2018), pp. 120–2.

¹⁶Strand, 'Reactivation'.

linked to gendered power relations thus largely remains unanswered. To fill this gap, we integrate feminist scholarship that points to the crucial role of gender in the establishment, transformation, and motivation of conscription.

Feminist work on the historical link between conscription, citizenship, and masculinity in Western nation-states theorises conscription as a phenomenon of gendered power exceeding the issue of military personnel procurement. This scholarship conceptualises the development of conscription in the context of modern nation-state formation and associated patriarchal gender relations. It highlights how conscription has produced the male citizen-soldier as the ideal embodiment of citizenship and masculinity by grounding citizenship rights in the armed defence of the nation.¹⁷ This solidified men's privileged relationship to the state and political power, entrenched hierarchical and dichotomous gender stereotypes, and justified women's exclusion from participation in the emerging democratic order. Conscription further sustained the political project of nationalism as well as enabling colonial conquest and the building of empires, which contributed to the idealisation of the citizen-soldier not only in terms of masculinity, but also in terms of whiteness.¹⁸

In the second half of the 20th century, many Western states abandoned conscription in favor of all-volunteer forces (AVFs), often seen as more appropriate in the context of the modernisation and professionalisation of warfare. Feminist research on military gender relations has pointed to this trend as an important driver of military gender integration and the quantitative and qualitative expansion of women's roles in the armed forces.¹⁹ As volunteer forces are more dependent on recruiting and retaining a female workforce, they are perceived to be more inclusive of women and more open to feminist policies towards institutional change, e.g. through gender mainstreaming.²⁰ Yet they continue to promote soldiering by promising, albeit changing and contextual, masculine-coded characteristics and experiences, such as excitement, adventure, heroism, and physical and emotional strength.²¹ AVFs also produce highly classed and racialised force compositions characterised by over-representation of minorities and marginalised populations in low-skilled, low-paid, and/or particularly dangerous capacities.²² Moreover, research on female conscription, often focusing on the Israeli Defense Forces, suggests that this system, too, maintains hierarchical understandings of masculinities and femininities institutionally and ideologically.²³ Regardless of the recruitment system, militaries thus ascribe meaning to soldiering through appeals

¹⁷Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation* (London: Sage Publications, 1997); Frevert, *Nation in Barracks*; Sundevall, *Det Sista Manliga Yrkesmonopolet*; Cynthia Enloe, *Maneuvers: The International Politics of Militarizing Women's Lives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases*; Ruth Seifert, *Militär, Kultur, Identität: Individualisierung, Geschlechterverhältnisse und die soziale Konstruktion des Soldaten* (Bremen: Ed. Temmen, 1996).

¹⁸Tarak Barkawi, *Soldiers of Empire: Indian and British Armies in World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Victoria Basham, *War, Identity and the Liberal State: Everyday Experiences of the Geopolitical in the Armed Forces* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Federica Caso, 'Settler military politics: On the inclusion and recognition of Indigenous people in the military', *International Political Sociology*, 16:1 (2022), pp. 1–20.

¹⁹Saskia Stachowitsch, *Gender Ideologies and Military Labor Markets in the U.S.* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012); Mandy Wechsler Segal, 'Women's military roles cross-nationally: Past, present, and future', *Gender and Society*, 9:6 (1995), pp. 757–75; Darlene Iskra, Stephen Trainor, Marcia Leithauser, and Mandy Wechsler-Segal, 'Women's participation in armed forces cross-nationally: Expanding Segal's model', *Current Sociology*, 50:5 (2002), pp. 771–97.

²⁰Claire Duncanson and Rachel Woodward, 'Theorizing women's military participation', *Security Dialogue*, 47:1 (2016), pp. 3–21.

²¹Melissa T. Brown, *Enlisting Masculinity: The Construction of Gender in U.S. Military Recruiting Advertising during the All-Volunteer Force* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

²²Vron Ware, *Military Migrants: Fighting for Your Country* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Jeremiah Favara, 'Good Black soldiers: Race, masculinity, and US military recruiting in the 1970s', *Critical Military Studies*, 7:1 (2021), pp. 1–22; Maya Eichler, 'Citizenship and the contracting out of military work: From national conscription to globalized recruitment', *Citizenship Studies*, 18:6–7 (2014), pp. 600–14; Deborah E. Cowen, 'Fighting for "freedom": The end of conscription in the United States and the neoliberal project of citizenship', *Citizenship Studies*, 10:2 (2006), pp. 167–83.

²³Orna Sasson-Levy, 'Individual bodies, collective state interests: The case of Israeli combat soldiers', *Men and Masculinities*, 10:3 (2008), pp. 296–321; Ayelet Harel-Shalev and Shir Daphna-Tekoah, *Breaking the Binaries in Security Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

to masculinity and hierarchical gendering, despite women's increasing inclusion in the ranks and socio-cultural change around women's military participation.²⁴

Several case studies have also explored how conscription has survived and in some cases been adapted to (gendered) processes of societal change, although not explicitly in the context of its most recent 'return'. In Israel, conscription was adapted to changing societal norms and understandings of citizenship by making the draft more selective, flexible, and competitive, and by allowing women to serve in more positions, promoting the Israeli Defense Forces as an inclusive and diverse organisation.²⁵ In other cases, such as Cyprus, South Korea, or Russia, however, public critique of conscription and new masculinity ideals has not led to large-scale transformations but rather to a re-emphasis on male conscription as a condition of masculinity and ideal citizenship,²⁶ the relinking of soldiering with political authority,²⁷ and a remasculinisation of the nation-state.²⁸

Taken together, the above research provides valuable insights into historical backgrounds of the conscription–gender nexus and the more recent transformations of military gender relations, which often link the abolishment of conscription with women's increased participation, as well as single-case studies on how conscription is challenged, changed, and upheld in gendered ways. It does, however, not address how the reintroduction and retention of conscription in some European states is justified by mobilising gendered hierarchies in the reimagination of conscription and related discussions of women's military service. This leaves an opening for rethinking the relationship between conscription and gender through a comparative approach that recognises the historical links between conscription and masculinity but also takes into account the multiple ways in which these links are challenged and transformed in the context of geopolitical environments, military legacies, and national gender orders.

Theorising the conscription–gender nexus

Our theoretical framework goes beyond instrumental views of conscription as a function of gendered military personnel demands and understands conscription as a particular way in which societies answer the question of military obligation, i.e. the idea that individuals need to contribute to statist violence as a condition for citizenship and belonging.²⁹ As Millar argues, this idea is in constant tension with liberal democracy, which foregrounds individual freedoms and rights and, in principle, prohibits excessive obligations to the state. This tension at the heart of liberal military service has traditionally been mediated by references to normative masculinity and a seemingly natural gender order in which a 'good' (heterosexual, white) man is equated with a 'good' citizen and defined as someone who is willing to take up arms to defend the nation. This 'conflation of normative citizenship with normative gender, sexuality, and race is key to understanding ... the obligation to commit and risk violence as a condition of liberal belonging'.³⁰

²⁴Vanessa S. Newby and Clotilde Sebag, 'Gender sidestreaming? Analysing gender mainstreaming in national militaries and international peacekeeping', *European Journal of International Security*, 6:2 (2021), pp. 148–70.

²⁵Eyal Ben-Ari, Elishva Rosman, and Eitan Shamir, 'Neither a conscript army nor an all-volunteer force: Emerging recruiting models', *Armed Forces & Society*, 49:1 (2021), pp. 138–59; Oren Golan and Eyal Ben-Ari, 'Armed forces, cyberspace, and global images: The official website of the Israeli Defense Forces 2007–2015', *Armed Forces & Society*, 44:2 (2018), pp. 280–300; Yagil Levy, Edna Lomsky-Feder, and Noa Harel, 'From "obligatory militarism" to "contractual militarism": Competing models of citizenship', *Israel Studies*, 12:1 (2007), pp. 127–48.

²⁶Stratis Andreas Efthymiou, 'How EU accession has affected military service in post-conflict Cyprus', *European Security*, 30:4 (2021), pp. 609–29.

²⁷Hee Jung Choi and Nora Hui-Jung Kim, 'Of soldiers and citizens: Shallow marketisation, military service and citizenship in neo-liberal South Korea', *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 47:4 (2007), pp. 515–34; Jihyun Choo, 'The spread of feminism and the silence of gendered militarism in the neoliberal era: Controversy over military conscription among members of the young generation in South Korea', *Journal of Asian Sociology*, 49:4 (2020), pp. 477–500.

²⁸Maya Eichler, *Militarizing Men: Gender, Conscription, and War in Post-Soviet Russia* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011).

²⁹Millar, *Support the Troops*.

³⁰*Ibid.*, p. 32.

Conscription – as a contentious form of organising military obligation – is therefore always intertwined with intersectional gender orders, which it contributes to reproducing and transforming. Due to the co-constitutive relationship between military service and gender, not only does conscription shape particular notions of normative masculinity and femininity, but it conversely also gains meaning and legitimacy through association with certain understandings of masculinity and femininity. Rather than focusing on women's representation and participation in the military, we are therefore interested in the role of gender as a sense-making tool in contemporary discourses on military obligation, which do not automatically lead to abandonment of conscription, but, as we will show, in many cases to a 'reimagination' of conscription.³¹ For this, we examine how gender functioned in legitimising conscription in Swedish and Austrian defence debates in the 2010s, linking military service to national identity, political authority, and citizenship rights and ideals. As neither the meaning of conscription nor the meaning of gender are fixed, we conceptualise the nexus between them as unstable and context-specific, hinging on the particular gender orders, ideologies, labour divisions, and their transformations in a given society.

This approach requires a broad understanding of gender that focuses on *gendering* as a process of hierarchical sense-making that constructs difference and assigns value on the basis of perceived dichotomies between masculinity and femininity.³² Gendering in the form of masculinisation and feminisation thus ascribes masculine- and feminine-coded attributes to subjects, objects, spaces, events, or processes in order to place them in a hierarchy. Because gender is co-constituted with other categories of difference, operating within systems of oppression, such as sexuality, race, and class,³³ gendering as a justification for conscription intersects with multiple Othering processes, such as racialisation or the reproduction of heteronormativity,³⁴ which is often constructed as a condition for security.³⁵ Together they produce Self/Other dichotomies through pairings, such as modern/backwards, rational/emotional, or productive/unproductive. In the field of security and military politics, these intersectionally gendered dichotomies shape constructions of threat, victim, and protector and contribute to the legitimisation of security actors and institutions,³⁶ including, as we will show, recruitment systems. These dichotomies are not only reflective but constitutive of hierarchical power relations and differential institutional positioning of sexed bodies ('men'/'women'). The way conscription is assigned gendered meanings therefore also informs how the state draws on men and women (un)equally for compulsory military service and its civilian alternatives and thus shapes policy reform and wider gendered labour divisions.

We follow Hutchings's understanding of the link between masculinity and war³⁷ in her radically relational view that this link does not hinge on certain historically contingent associations, e.g. between masculinity and strength, discipline, and bravery, but rather on the meaning-making capacities of gender that encompass a logic of contrasts (between different masculinities) and a logic of hierarchical contradiction (between femininity and masculinity). It is these 'formal properties' of masculinity and gender³⁸ that make conscription intelligible through gendering, even if the meanings of both conscription and gender/masculinity are changing. Since (conscripted)

³¹ Strand, 'Reactivation'.

³² Laura Sjoberg, 'Gender, structure, and war: What Waltz couldn't see', *International Theory*, 4:1 (2012), pp. 1–38; Maria Stern, 'Gender and race in the European security strategy: Europe as a "force for good"?' *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 14 (2011), pp. 28–59.

³³ Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color', *Stanford Law Review*, 43:6 (1991), pp. 1241–99; Nira Yuval-Davis, 'Intersectionality and feminist politics', *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 13:3 (2006), pp. 193–209.

³⁴ Melissa S. Herbert, *Camouflage Isn't Only for Combat: Gender, Sexuality, and Women in the Military* (New York: NYU Press, 1998).

³⁵ Jamie Hagen, 'Queering women, peace and security', *International Affairs*, 92:2 (2016), pp. 313–32.

³⁶ Annick T. R. Wibben, *Feminist Security Studies: A Narrative Approach* (London: Routledge, 2011); Iris Marion Young, 'The logic of masculinist protection: Reflections on the current security state', *Signs*, 29:1 (2003), pp. 1–25.

³⁷ Kimberly Hutchings, 'Making sense of masculinity and war', *Men and Masculinities*, 10:4 (2008), pp. 389–404.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 390.

soldiering is neither inherently feminine nor masculine and always entails both feminine- and masculine-coded attributes and tasks,³⁹ the conscript and conscription can be both feminised and masculinised. Yet, as we shall see, conscription and the conscript appear to gain or maintain their authority and appeal when their association with masculine-coded and therefore superior characteristics are safeguarded. In order to denaturalise and destabilise the links between men, particular forms of masculinity and conscription, we therefore approach gender as an open question and probe what gendering *does*⁴⁰ in ascribing meaning to conscription.

Methodology and data

In order to probe how conscription is justified through gender(ing), this study conducts a feminist, cross-national, qualitative-interpretive comparison⁴¹ of debates in two European countries during the 2010s, Sweden and Austria. Both cases are examples of countries in which political elites have engaged in reimagining conscription as necessary, rational, and/or desirable in a post-Cold War context usually associated with its abandonment. Both cases saw a reaffirmation of conscription but at the same time represent diverging contexts in terms of gender politics, military legacies, and geopolitical positionality. This allows us to carve out the context-specific relationship between military service and gender, the meanings emerging from it, and how they are shaped by a variety of overlapping and intersecting power relations. The focus on two smaller European states further enables us to add nuance to a research field that is characterised by a focus on big military powers with AVFs.

Our methodological framework is based on a case-oriented, interpretive comparison. Comparative analysis is essential for understanding the impact of social arrangements, norms, and hierarchies on societies and specific historical processes, ‘where different conditions combine in different and sometimes contradictory ways to produce the same or similar outcomes’,⁴² such as the reintroduction and reaffirmation of conscription. This approach gives ‘complexity and historical specificity’,⁴³ while providing a useful basis for theorising more general links between gender and different military recruitment systems. Our approach is not a positivist one concerned with most similar/most different cases and the a priori definition of variables but follows an interpretive tradition that foregrounds contextualised meanings and how they are produced through political processes shaped by different actors and contestations.⁴⁴

With this approach, we seek to destabilise presumed links between gender and conscription through three interrelated moves. First, we use comparison as a technique through which gender relations and conceptions of masculinity and femininity, often perceived as universal and stable, can be deconstructed.⁴⁵ We compare how gendering and racialisation inform processes of meaning-making, and how different national contexts shape the meanings of conscription, military obligation, gender, and citizenship. Second, we combine an ‘insider/outsider’ perspective within our research team, choosing countries of which one of us has deep, insider knowledge and the other can act as a more distant observer. In co-analysing data, one’s ‘own’ case and data become

³⁹ Aaron Belkin, *Bring Me Men: Military Masculinity and the Benign Facade of American Empire, 1898–2001* (London: Hurst, 2012).

⁴⁰ Jane L. Parpart and Marysia Zalewski (eds), *Rethinking the Man Question: Sex, Gender and Violence in International Relations* (London: Zed Books, 2008).

⁴¹ Maria Wendt, ‘Comparing “deep” insider knowledge: Developing analytical strategies for cross-national qualitative studies’, *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 23:3 (2020), pp. 241–54.

⁴² Charles C. Ragin, *The Comparative Method: Moving beyond Qualitative and Quantitative Strategies* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2014), p. x.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. ix.

⁴⁴ Erica S. Simmons and Nicholas Rush Smith, ‘Comparison with an ethnographic sensibility’, *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 50:1 (2017), pp. 126–30.

⁴⁵ Cecilia Åse and Maria Wendt, ‘Comparison as feminist method’, in Cecilia Åse and Maria Wendt (eds), *Gendering Military Sacrifice: A Feminist Comparative Analysis* (London: Routledge, 2019), pp. 17–49.

additionally meaningful, but also ‘strange’, when seen through the eyes of the ‘outsider’.⁴⁶ Third, we choose examples of small European states not usually at the centre of feminist scholarship, which instead has prioritised societal contexts that are understood as (heavily) militarised (e.g. United States, United Kingdom, France, Israel). Comparing these countries to previous literatures on conscription is thus another way in which this study denaturalizes links between gender and conscription and accounts for change, discontinuity, and context specificity.

Our empirical focus is on conscription debates (conducted in parliament, via political documents, speeches, op eds, or interviews in news media) during a limited time period and policy process. In Sweden, the study homes in on the reactivation period spanning between 2015 (when the parliament approved an investigation into the draft) through 2017 (when the government made the decision) and 2018 (when the draft came into effect). In the Austrian case, we zoom in on one year of public debate between pro-conscription forces (most prominently the conservative and far-right parties) and pro-voluntarism actors (led by the Social Democrats and joined by the Greens) leading up to the public referendum in 2013.

Our qualitative-interpretive research design employs a discourse-analytical methodology to deconstruct contextualised and contested meanings of conscription, the conscript, citizenship, and the nation and examines how gender – in intersection with other structures of inequality – shapes these meanings. We understand discourses as ‘systems of meaning production ... that “fix” meaning, however temporarily, and enable us to make sense of the world’.⁴⁷ As such, discourses do not only represent reality but also ‘underlie the production of knowledge and identities that make various courses of action possible’.⁴⁸ Importantly, they are produced by, as well as productive of, (gendered) power relations. This approach enables us to study how gender ascribes meaning to conscription in political or media debates, how this shapes understandings and problematisations of conscription, and ultimately how they are acted upon. From this perspective, we analyse conscription debates to discern intersectionally gendered meanings of conscription (*gender as constitutive*) as well as different meanings of gender,⁴⁹ i.e. how gender (in)equality is problematised in relation to conscription (*gender as policy issues*).

In the first instance, we looked for how conscription and the conscript were linked to differently positioned masculinities and/or femininities (e.g. characteristics and roles traditionally understood as masculine or feminine in the respective societal contexts) and thereby put in a hierarchy, i.e. linked to authority, national identity, superiority, morality, productivity, etc. We also paid attention to how race and class were constitutive of these hierarchies. In the second instance, we examined whether gender was mentioned in debates (e.g. gender-neutral conscription or gendered inequalities within the draft), how gender issues were framed (e.g. as an issue of equal rights or military effectiveness; inclusion as self-evident, desirable, problematic, or a non-issue etc.), and how they were connected to citizenship and national identity. While we also take contradictions and struggles into account, we focus primarily on the dominant reimaginations of conscription that successfully informed the related policies.

The material we have studied differs somewhat between our two cases, prioritising those spaces in which the reimagination of conscription most clearly took place. For Sweden, where the decision to expand and reactivate conscription was taken in consensus between all political parties represented in parliament without much public debate, we have primarily analysed official political documents and statements. The main corpus of our material consists of a 2015 defence bill, which ordered a public inquiry into the return of military conscription; a 2015 parliamentary protocol

⁴⁶Wendt, ‘Comparing “deep” insider knowledge.’

⁴⁷Laura J. Shepherd, ‘Veiled references: Constructions of gender in the Bush administration discourse on the attacks on Afghanistan post-9/11’, *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 8:1 (2006), pp. 19–41 (p. 20).

⁴⁸Roxanne Doty, *Imperial Encounters: The Politics of Representation in North–South Relations* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 5.

⁴⁹Johanna Kantola and Emanuela Lombardo, ‘EU gender equality policies’, in Hubert Heinelt and Sybille Münch (eds), *Handbook of European Public Policy: Interpretive Approaches to the EU* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2018), pp. 331–50.

where the bill was debated; the public inquiry report recommending when and how to reintroduce conscription, published in September 2016; and the government decision that finally reintroduced conscription, made in March 2017. For Austria, where the decision to retain conscription was preceded by a public referendum and, therefore, a vivid public debate, we analysed material easily accessible to the broader public in the form of news media reporting. For this, we examined all newspaper articles that included the keyword ‘conscription’ between February 2012 and February 2013 in four major national newspapers (*Presse, Standard, Kurier, Krone*) and one regional print newspaper (*Wiener Zeitung*). The identified 67 articles were spread relatively evenly across the four publications. These differently positioned data best capture the main arguments and narratives presented by the relevant actors for each case. Debates in other spaces, e.g. the Austrian parliament or Swedish media coverage, may differ in style and tone, but not in terms of arguments and contents in a way that is meaningful to this analysis.

Although Sweden and Austria constitute our primary case studies, we include empirical examples from other European states where a re-establishment or expansion of conscription was debated or implemented. In order to embed the Swedish and Austrian cases within broader processes and debates in Europe, we draw on occasional examples from Norway and Germany. Norway has shaped the trajectory of debates and policy changes in Sweden to a great extent (and vice versa). Germany as a central military power and Austria’s largest neighbour state has not only traditionally been seen as a role model in security policy, but the strong connections between German and Austrian right-wing networks are also continuously shaping the debates in this area.

The following section will provide an overview of how and why conscription was reintroduced and retained in both cases and discuss important contexts in terms of geopolitical environments, military legacies, and national gender orders. Thereafter, we carve out the two associated reimaginations of conscription and how gender is constitutive of them, as well as how gender featured as a policy issue within them.

Reactivating and retaining conscription in Sweden and Austria

Our analysis features two different cases in which conscription was successfully justified after being challenged and critiqued. In Sweden, the Social Democratic-led government activated military conscription for both men and women in 2017, following the recommendations made by a public inquiry approved by a broad parliamentary majority.⁵⁰ This move was somewhat unexpected given that the former right-wing government had deactivated the century-old all-male conscription only in 2010, arguing that an AVF was more ‘modern’, usable, and flexible and therefore better suited to conducting complex expeditionary operations abroad.⁵¹ While declaring that Sweden’s so-called defence duty legislation no longer would be called upon to enlist soldiers, the government also made the inactive legislation gender-neutral. It was this change, which at the time received little attention in the media or opposition from other politicians,⁵² that resulted in both men and women being enlisted for military training in 2018, after the legislation had been reactivated. Sweden’s gender-neutral conscription can be described as needs-based and selective. Only the percentage of the conscript cohort demanded by the armed forces to staff the military organisation is drafted yearly, and (although this is under reconsideration) there are no civil service alternatives for objectors. Drafted conscripts conduct military training for between 9 and 15 months, depending on role and rank, and are thereafter assigned a wartime posting to which they are obliged to report if Sweden enters a state of high readiness or war. The draft board should ‘to the greatest extent possible

⁵⁰Regeringen, ‘Uppdrag till Försvarsmakten och Totalförsvarets rekryteringsmyndighet om mönstring och grundutbildning med värnplikt’, *Regeringsbeslut*, Fö2016/01252/MFI (Stockholm, 2 March 2017).

⁵¹Sanna Strand, ‘The birth of the enterprising soldier: Governing military recruitment and retention in post-Cold War Sweden’, *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 47:2 (2022), pp. 225–47.

⁵²Alma Persson and Fia Sundevall, ‘Conscripting women: Gender, soldiering, and military service in Sweden 1965–2018’, *Women’s History Review*, 28:7 (2019), pp. 1039–56.

... consider the interests, motivation and will of each individual,⁵³ while at the same time selecting those 'best suited' for service (whereby motivation is understood as but one indication of suitability).⁵⁴ The 'best suited' candidates are selected in a two-step process. First, the entire conscript cohort self-evaluate their health and physical status and answer questions about their education, personality, interests, and attitude to the armed forces via an online survey.⁵⁵ On the basis of the survey, the Swedish Defence Conscription and Assessment Agency (SDCAA) calls suitable candidates to in-person theoretical, physical, and psychological tests. Although the number is set to increase, the SDCAA has so far enlisted only 4–6 per cent of 18-year-olds to military service yearly since conscription was reactivated.⁵⁶

The decision to bring back conscription was not preceded by noteworthy political disagreements or public debate. All parties, even the right-wing (liberal and conservative) parties responsible for its recent deactivation, stood behind the reform. Public opinion polls conducted in 2019 further demonstrate how 79 percent of the public either fully or partially supported the comeback of conscription.⁵⁷ This unity must be understood against the backdrop of mounting geopolitical tensions in Sweden's vicinity due to Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea, military actions in eastern Ukraine, and military rearmament. These tensions motivated a shift (back) from Sweden's post-Cold War focus on expeditionary operations abroad to defence of Swedish territory, perceived as threatened by Russian aircrafts and submarines infringing its airspace and territorial waters, and has led to its own rearmament project.⁵⁸ At the same time, the Swedish armed forces (SAF) were struggling to fill their ranks with volunteers. This combination constituted an immediate security concern and led to the reintroduction of reformed conscription.⁵⁹

The debates in Sweden were driven by this sense of increasing antagonism and military threat, a trend associated with militarisation and, as we will go on to suggest, masculinisation of security policy. The reintroduction of conscription transpired during a time when consecutive Swedish governments took drastic steps to abandon Sweden's Cold War neutrality and post-Cold War military non-alignment policy, eventually applying for NATO membership in 2022. At the same time, reforms were implemented in a context where gender equality was attributed both great importance and symbolic value. Since the mid-1990s, Sweden has been described as a gender-equality forerunner, repeatedly ranked highest or among the highest when gender equality is indexed by international organisations. These statistics and the way they are used are 'performative in the ongoing construction of Sweden as a specific territory, distinct from others': 'to be a Swede is to be gender equal'.⁶⁰ In the international arena, Sweden has pursued a feminist foreign policy and, for instance, pushed for women's representation in security sectors and peace processes. Gender equality holds, in other words, a central place in what Towns and Jezierska have referred to as the 'progressive Sweden' brand.⁶¹ The SAF have repeatedly employed this brand in marketing campaigns when, for instance, presenting gender equality and LGBT-rights as a national characteristic

⁵³Regeringen, 'Uppdrag till Försvarsmakten'.

⁵⁴Regeringen, 'En robust personalförsörjning av det militära försvaret', *Statens Offentliga Utredningar*, SOU 2016:63 (Stockholm, 2016), p. 69.

⁵⁵For more details, see Strand, 'Reactivation'.

⁵⁶Email correspondence with the SDCAA, 25 May 2023.

⁵⁷Joakim Berndtsson, Ulf Bjereld, and Karl Ydén, 'Svensk Försvarspolitik i Ny Terräng', in Ulrika Andersson, Anders Carlander, and Patrik Öhberg (eds), *Regntunga Skyar* (Göteborg: SOM-Institutet, 2020), pp. 337–51.

⁵⁸Regeringen, 'Försvarspolitik inriktning: Sveriges försvar 2016–2020', *Regeringens Proposition*, 2014/15:109 (Stockholm, 23 April 2015).

⁵⁹Strand, 'Reactivation'.

⁶⁰Lena Martinsson, Gabriele Griffin, and Katarina Girtli Nygren, 'Introduction: Challenging the myth of gender equality in Sweden', in Lena Martinsson, Gabriele Griffin, and Katarina Girtli Nygren (eds), *Challenging the Myth of Gender Equality in Sweden* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2016), pp. 1–22 (p. 4).

⁶¹Katarzyna Jezierska and Ann Towns, 'Taming feminism? The place of gender equality in the "Progressive Sweden" brand', *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, 14:1 (2018), pp. 55–63.

to be preserved and protected by military means.⁶² To reintroduce conscription for men only would, in this context, arguably be an impossibility or at least present an uncomfortable challenge to Swedish national identity.

In contrast to Sweden, Austria has continuously held on to universal conscription for men, which was instated with Austria's independence after the end of the Second World War in 1955. All 18-year-old men are called upon to serve in the Austrian military for six months, with the exception of those physically or mentally incapable of doing so.⁶³ All conscripts who object to the use of armed violence have the right to opt for an alternative civilian service ('Zivildienst') for nine months, which about 45 per cent of conscripts choose.⁶⁴ In the wake of several European countries abolishing conscription, the system was heavily criticised in 2012/13. The Social Democrats (SPÖ), then in a coalition government with the Conservatives (ÖVP), announced that they were in favour of abolishing conscription (at the time 10 months' military service or 12 months of alternative civilian service for all male citizens) and introducing an all-volunteer force. This was surprising, as the SPÖ, much like its Swedish equivalent, had historically been a staunch advocate of conscription as a democratising tool safeguarding against the misuse of military forces by authoritarian elites, a concern dating back to the civil war of 1934. This tradition was abandoned in the run-up to the mayoral election in Vienna, allegedly with the hopes of motivating young people in particular to vote SPÖ. The campaign was supported by the powerful and politically influential *Die Krone*, a tabloid newspaper with the highest print circulation in Austria. In this context, the ÖVP took the opposing view and launched a pro-conscription campaign. Joining forces with the far-right FPÖ, they insisted that the conscription system worked well and that an AVF would be more expensive and lead to personnel shortages. An intensive year of campaigning on both sides as well as a broad public debate ensued that led to a referendum which ended in a clear vote in favour of conscription (59.7% to 40.3%). These debates reflect Austria's marginal geopolitical positionality, post-Nazism de-militarisation of society, a depoliticised understanding of its status as a neutral country,⁶⁵ and media disinterest in⁶⁶ and political disengagement from matters of security and defence policy.⁶⁷ A peripheral status of the armed forces and perceived lack of military threat enabled the issue to become a playing field for party competition which defined the debate. The support for conscription must also be understood with regards to the centrality of alternative civilian service ('Zivildienst') in sustaining the healthcare sector and emergency services through cheap labour as well as the military's involvement in disaster response in (mostly ÖVP-governed) rural provinces.⁶⁸

⁶² Sanna Strand and Katharina Kehl, 'A country to fall in love with/in': Gender and sexuality in Swedish armed forces' marketing campaigns', *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 21:2 (2019), pp. 295–314. See also Sanna Strand and Maria Stern, 'Periods, pregnancy, and peeing: Leaky feminine bodies in Swedish military marketing', *International Political Sociology*, 16:1 (2022), pp. 1–21.

⁶³ According to the latest statistics, over 78 per cent of this population are eligible to serve (Statistik Austria, *Jahrbuch der Gesundheitsstatistik 2020* [Vienna, 2020]), p. 24.

⁶⁴ A majority serves in emergency services (ca. 40 per cent), social and disability services (ca. 30 per cent), and care for the elderly (ca. 10 per cent). They are also employed in disaster relief, refugee care, hospitals, child daycare, agriculture, Holocaust memorial sites, the justice system, youth services, and environmental protection; available at <https://www.zivildienst.gv.at/>.

⁶⁵ Martin Senn, 'Österreichs Neutralität', in Martin Senn, Franz Eder, and Markus Kornprobst (eds), *Handbuch Außenpolitik Österreichs* (Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien, 2023), pp. 23–50.

⁶⁶ Moritz Moser, 'Medien und Außenpolitik', in Martin Senn, Franz Eder, and Markus Kornprobst (eds), *Handbuch Außenpolitik Österreichs* (Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien, 2023), pp. 187–204.

⁶⁷ Laurenz Ennsner-Jedenastik, 'Die politischen parteien', in Martin Senn, Franz Eder, and Markus Kornprobst (eds), *Handbuch Außenpolitik Österreichs* (Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien, 2023), pp. 77–93.

⁶⁸ Arnold H. Kammel, 'Recruitment in Austria: A legal-political analysis', in Tibor Szvircsev Tresch and Christian Leuprecht (eds), *Europe without Soldiers? Recruitment and Retention across the Armed Forces of Europe* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010), pp. 127–44.

Against this backdrop, the Austrian debate was strongly informed by concerns over neither security nor gender equality. It rather focused on internal issues, reflecting not only different geopolitical positionalities, but also Austria's complicated relationship with its armed forces, rooted in the country's ambivalent role as both a victim and perpetrator of the Nazi regime. The Austrian conscript military was founded together with Austrian independence, which the Allied Forces only granted on the condition that the country remained militarily neutral. Neutrality thus became deeply ingrained in Austrian political identity, frequently expressed in scepticism towards the military and in anti-militarist stances across the political spectrum. This however did not lead to less hierarchical understandings of masculinity, but rather to an idealisation of 'neutral masculinity',⁶⁹ a version of 'post-heroic', paternalistic masculinity that was called upon to protect the new democracy from involvement in great power struggles and international conflict through neutrality. It underlined post-fascist Austria's status as a victim of Nazi Germany and mitigated the crisis of masculinity that came with the required rejection of militarism and heroism, by offering a superior masculine position as protector of the neutral nation.⁷⁰ These historical underpinnings continue to inform debates on military policy. In addition, Austrian society is generally shaped by conservative gender politics which are characterised by strong influence of the Catholic Church, a welfare-state model built on traditional gender roles, women's belated and partial entrance into the workforce, and parental leave policies that, combined with a gender pay gap above the European Union average, incentivise mothers to take more time off work.⁷¹

Against these different backgrounds in Sweden and Austria, support of conscription required a reimagination that aligned a system challenged as unmodern with contemporary perceptions of geopolitical environments, political identity, and gender orders. In the specific contexts outlined above, both cases diverged from what is often described as republican motivations for conscription as the 'school of the nation' and associated patriotic and militaristic notions of citizenship (i.e. the citizen-soldier), albeit to different degrees and in different ways: the neoliberal-individualistic Swedish reimagination focused on individual merit and opportunity, while the conservative-communitarian Austrian model foregrounded responsibility, solidarity, and community, presenting conscription as the opposite of militarism and individualism.

A comparison between Austria and Sweden thus reveals that the (re)introduction and reaffirmation of conscription in contemporary Europe is not a uniform process that builds on a common ideological or normative base, nor is it rooted in the same structural conditions, such as changing security environments. Rather, conscription is being legitimised for different reasons and with different outcomes, yielding context-specific and unstable reimaginings of what conscription is and why it is needed and/or beneficial. We now turn to our analysis of how gender matters in justifying and enabling both reimaginings in two interconnected ways: on the one hand, as *constitutive* of the meaning of conscription, and on the other, as an explicit *policy issue* around the inclusion of women in the draft.

Gender as constitutive of two reimaginings of conscription: Neoliberal individualism and conservative communitarianism

Due to the vastly different contexts and rationales that led to the affirmation of mandatory military service in both cases, two almost opposing reimaginings of conscription emerged. In Sweden, military conscription was reimagined as 'modern', compatible with and part of a neoliberal project

⁶⁹ Marion Löffler, 'Neutral masculinity: An analysis of parliamentary debates on Austria's neutrality law', *Men and Masculinities*, 22:3 (2019), pp. 444–64.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Éva Fodor, 'The state socialist emancipation project: Gender inequality in workplace authority in Hungary and Austria', *Signs*, 29:3 (2004), pp. 783–813; Stefanie Mayer and Birgit Sauer, "'Gender ideology" in Austria: Coalitions around an empty signifier', in Roman Kuhar and David Paternotte (eds), *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing against Equality* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), pp. 23–40.

of freedom, individualism, and inclusivity,⁷² articulated against the backdrop of criticism of draft solutions for being unequal (i.e. conscription in 20th-century Sweden excluded women), unjust (i.e. conscription granted exceptions to large percentages of the male cohort, while at the same time imprisoning or fining those who had been drafted but failed to show), and ultimately ‘unmodern’.⁷³ In sharp contrast to the 20th century, when Swedish conscription was justified as necessary not only for the defence of Sweden but also as an institution that served to foster responsible young men and integrate the population,⁷⁴ Sweden’s contemporary conscription is described as a ‘means’ rather than an ‘objective’ in of itself,⁷⁵ only serving to staff the SAF and ensure Sweden’s defence capability and preparedness. This limited and selective form of conscription, with its added emphasis on individual will and motivation, echoes neoliberal conceptions of a narrow and efficient public sector and promises to rectify the unfairness of the old draft system. This focus on individualistic motivations, selectivity, and merit-based suitability is assumed to increase the quality of drafted soldiers. In fact, the ambition set out in the government inquiry into conscription was that ‘to have served and to have been selected for service in the armed forces should be considered a merit in and of itself’.⁷⁶ This was to be achieved by public information campaigns launched by both the SDCAA and the SAF. For instance, since the reactivation of conscription, the draft authority has repeatedly marketed mandatory military service as not only an ‘obligation’, but also an ‘opportunity’, that ultimately leads to personal and professional growth and fulfilment.⁷⁷ By reimagining conscription as competitive and in principle voluntary (i.e. only enlisting those who want to and are capable of serving), conscription was contrasted with traditional, universal, and all-male models, and hence justified.

This reimagination was constituted by gender hierarchies which ascribed meaning, authority, and appeal to the conscript and the Swedish nation-state by safeguarding its links to superior masculinity. As argued above, conscription was reintroduced as a response to a perceived threat from Russia and understood as enabling a necessary build-up of Swedish territorial defence. The reintroduction of conscription can thus be understood as part of a broader military rearmament project that arguably (re)masculinises and thus seemingly strengthens the Swedish nation-state, often blamed for having pursued a ‘naïve’ foreign and security policy that ‘weakened’ its role in the international arena after the end of the Cold War.^{78,79}

Moreover, conscription in Sweden was reimagined as desirable and justified through its association with supposedly ‘modern’ market-oriented masculinity ideals, juxtaposed against ‘unmodern’ versions associated with the old, republican conscription model. The parliamentary debate preceding the decision to launch an investigation into how conscription could be reactivated contained

⁷² Strand, ‘Reactivation’.

⁷³ Strand, ‘Birth of the enterprising soldier’.

⁷⁴ Sundevall, *Det Sista Manliga Yrkesmonopolet*; Pontus Rudberg, “Armén måste bli en skola för hela folket”: Krigsmaktens fostrande ambitioner och praktiker 1901–1950; in Anna Maria Forssberg and Klas Kronberg (eds), *Lumpen: Från mönstring till muck* (Stockholm: Atlantis, 2014), pp. 72–103; Lina Sturfelt, ‘The constantly conscripted citizen: The Swedish army narrative of conscription during the early Cold War’, *Militärhistorisk Tidskrift*, 1 (2014), pp. 23–58.

⁷⁵ Regeringen, ‘En robust personalförsörjning’, p. 52.

⁷⁶ Ibid, p. 222.

⁷⁷ Strand, ‘Reactivation’.

⁷⁸ E.g. Diana Janse, ‘Feministisk utrikespolitik har försvagat vår ställning’, *Expressen* (16 October 2022), available at: <https://www.expressen.se/debatt/feministisk-utrikespolitik-har-forsvagat-var-stallning/>; Henrik Jönsson, ‘Blir detta slutet för vår fredsskadade idealism?’, *Expressen* (24 February 2022), available at: <https://www.expressen.se/debatt/blir-detta-slutet-for-var-fredsskadade-idealism/>.

⁷⁹ In the mid-2010s, this critique was mostly directed at Sweden’s post-Cold War policy of disarming its territorial defence and reorienting its armed forces towards international expeditionary operations in the name of human rights and gender equality (Annica Kronsell, *Gender, Sex, and the Postnational Defense: Militarism and Peacekeeping* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2012]). Yet the tendency to feminise Sweden’s past foreign and security policy as naïve and weak has arguably intensified after Russia’s 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, at that time also encompassing criticism against Sweden’s feminist foreign policy adopted by the Social Democratic Government between 2014 and 2022.

partly contradictory gendered constructions of the conscript. Parliamentarians conveyed nostalgic images of conscripts as productive male citizens ending up in competitive jobs in both the private business and the public sector.⁸⁰ Yet some also stressed that the practice of forcing and potentially imprisoning young people who wished not to serve was an unmodern practice with negative impacts on the motivation of soldiers. Referring to the supposedly exemplary case of Finland where conscription was never abandoned, one conservative MP argued that, in contrast to Sweden's modern military equipment, the equipment Finland provided its conscripts belonged to 'military history'.⁸¹ The same MP recalled his own experience of having to command 'drunk' conscripts during a military exercise.⁸² The solution presented by the parliamentary committee to reconcile these conflicting conceptions of the conscript was, as noted above, a 'modernised' draft system that not only took the will and motivation of the individual into account, but that also actively selected, and thereafter rewarded, 'the best' candidates.⁸³ Through its association with competition and individual agency and benefits, the conscript is here associated with a neoliberal citizen ideal, which gains appeal and authority through its links to masculinised traits and qualities such as risk-taking and decisiveness,⁸⁴ control and domination.⁸⁵

This logic of competition contrasts markedly with the idea of conscription for the purpose of national integration, also uttered in the Austrian case (see below). Instead of being positioned as a 'great equaliser' in society, conscription in Sweden is articulated as a 'competitive advantage' for the individual.⁸⁶ In fact, the architect behind Sweden's new 'modernised' conscription system, the government's principal investigator, has explicitly stressed that the new system has no integrative function and no ambition to 'foster' young citizens; conscripts learning how to clean, 'make their bed',⁸⁷ or other traditionally feminised skills should no longer be used to justify military service. What we see here is thus the emergence of, in the Swedish context, a broadly appealing exclusive, competitive, and modern conscript masculinity, associated with market rationality and individual merit and opportunity. Seemingly left behind is *both* the feminised conscript who merely cleans and 'makes his bed' *and* the unmodern, undisciplined, unskilled, ill-equipped, and unmotivated masculine conscript, both associated with Sweden's all-male conscription of the 20th century. Despite the gender-neutral legislation upon which Swedish conscription is based, and despite (as we shall see below) this equality and inclusivity being widely marketed in recruiting campaigns, arguments for its reactivation positioned Sweden's modernised conscription as *more* masculine (i.e. more competitive and more 'military'). This reimagination and (re)masculinisation of the conscript legitimised conscription as modern and progressive, while at the same time ensuring that the reactivation of – this time gender-neutral – conscription, and women's presumed increasing presence in the ranks, would not make the military less professional and capable. The gender-neutral Swedish conscript is distanced from domestic chores such as cleaning and bed-making (despite these chores inevitably still being part of their military experience) but also from characteristics such as weakness, lack of resolve, and emotionality, ultimately ensuring that potential

⁸⁰Sveriges Riksdag, 'Riksdagens protokoll', *Protocol*, 2014/15:116 (Stockholm, 15 June 2015).

⁸¹Ibid.

⁸²Ibid.

⁸³Regeringen, 'En robust personalförsörjning', p. 69.

⁸⁴Leslie Salzinger 'Re-marking Men: Masculinity as a Terrain of the Neoliberal Economy', *Critical Historical Studies*, 3:1 (2016), pp. 1–25 and Leslie Salzinger 'Sexing Homo Economicus: Finding Masculinity at Work', in William Callison and Zachary Manfredi (eds), *Mutant Neoliberalism: Market Role and Political Rupture* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), cited in Steve Garlick, 'Technologies of (in)security: Masculinity and the complexity of neoliberalism', *Feminist Theory*, 24:2 (2023), pp. 170–87.

⁸⁵Garlick, 'Technologies of (in)security'.

⁸⁶Strand, 'Birth of the enterprising soldier', p. 238.

⁸⁷Cited in Strand, 'Reactivation'.

fears about armed forces becoming ‘feminised’, which has followed women’s military integration in many Western contexts,⁸⁸ are unmotivated.

In the Austrian case, the successful reimagination of conscription was almost contrary to the Swedish one. Here, the anti-conscription campaign pushed a neoliberal narrative in favour of an all-volunteer force by attacking conscription as outdated and inefficient in the face of changing threat scenarios and European integration. The main line of argument was the promise that a professional military would ensure Austria was ‘doing its part’⁸⁹ in the international arena and thereby gaining international reputation. This was presented as compatible with Austria’s treasured neutral status and as unrelated to the issue of NATO membership. However, this critique of conscription – despite significant support from political elites, mass media, and international trends – was ultimately unsuccessful. A Conservative-led and right-wing-supported campaign advertised the retention of all-male conscription on the basis of a communitarian reimagination that reflected a traditional, republican ‘school of the nation’ approach but renounced militaristic sentiments that foreground the duty to fight and die for one’s country as the basis for citizenship. Issues of security and defence took a clear back seat in this reimagination, which focused on non-military arguments, particularly emphasising the importance of ‘Zivildienst’. High-level politicians, for example, spread fear that wait times for ambulances would increase without conscription.⁹⁰ Conscription was reimagined as a symbol of solidarity, responsibility, and community and juxtaposed against a neoliberal individualistic, materialistic, and egocentric society. In this context, conscription, and with it alternative civilian service, were seen as a tool against ‘moral poverty’, increasing the ‘emotional wealth’ of the nation.⁹¹ In a familiar vein, conscription was also advertised as an ‘equaliser’ uniting all social classes.⁹² This was combined with a purportedly anti-militarist stance delegitimising the AVF as leading into NATO and to the abolishment of neutrality, a pillar of Austrian national identity.⁹³ Further, an AVF was related to the danger of the military becoming ‘a state within the state’ and fears of international over-commitment, assuming that a conscript military would be used more cautiously in international missions. As opposed to the presumed international orientation of the AVF, conscription was linked to more traditional concepts of national/territorial defence. In this sense, pro-conscription arguments presented the draft as a way to curtail militarism and foster balanced and democratic civil–military relations.

This Austrian reimagination was equally constituted by gender hierarchies which underpinned the political debate on conscription in ways which both legitimised and delegitimised its retention. The pro-AVF camp largely presented their arguments against conscription as a narrative of de/remasculinisation. Conscription was thereby constructed as demasculinising, arguing that conscripts were not trained in the masculinised skills of warfare, such as the use of arms, but rather as cooks or waiters, or were just ‘sitting around’.⁹⁴

⁸⁸See e.g. Veronique Pin-Fat and Maria Stern, ‘The scripting of Private Jessica Lynch: Biopolitics, gender, and the “feminization” of the U.S. military’, *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, 30 (2005), pp. 25–53.

⁸⁹Christoph Prantner, ‘Wehrpflichtdebatte: Spiel ohne Plan’, *Der Standard* (6 January 2013), available at: <https://www.derstandard.at/story/1356426874899/wehrpflichtdebatte—spiel-ohne-plan>.

⁹⁰Ibid.

⁹¹ÖVP chairman Karlheinz Kopf, cited in ‘Wehrpflicht-Debatte: Darabos-Kritik an FPÖ-Formulierung “Söldnerheer”’, *Krone* (5 December 2012), available at: <https://www.krone.at/343231>.

⁹²ÖVP interior minister Johanna Mikl-Leitner, cited in “Krieg durch die Steckdose” und “Arbeitslosenmiliz”, *Der Standard* (13 January 2013), available at: <https://www.derstandard.at/story/1356427546789/krieg-durch-die-steckdose-und-arbeitslosenmiliz>.

⁹³András Kovács and Ruth Wodak (eds), *NATO, Neutrality and National Identity: The Case of Austria and Hungary* (Vienna: Böhlau, 2003).

⁹⁴See also Eichler, *Militarizing Men*, chapter 2.

'Mass armies are passé', Darabos says at a press conference, reiterating the SPÖ's stance. General conscription is a relic of the Cold War and inefficient, 'The system trains more waiters than infantry men and more cooks than pioneers', the minister explains.⁹⁵

The emasculating experience of conscription was further underscored by claims that conscripts were subject to senseless hierarchies in the military and denied the respect they deserved from their superiors and the control and mastery associated with military masculinity.⁹⁶ These claims of inefficiency and humiliation were frequently made in reference to feminised labour such as cooking and cleaning, juxtaposed with the properly masculine, professional, real soldier and the civilian that could be productive in labour markets instead of doing women's work in the military. This was presented as a loss for society but also as an economic disadvantage for young men.⁹⁷ Attacks on conscription therefore implicitly argued that conscription denied men their proper place in society. Individualised narratives of de/remasculinisation were complemented by those of the demasculinised nation that is irrelevant in the international arena and needs to regain its proper place in the world through professionalisation and modernisation.

Against these critiques, the pro-conscription camp reimagined conscription by drawing on – ultimately more successful – constructions of responsible Austrian masculinity. These constructions included familiar tropes of conscription as a 'school of the nation' that will turn young boys into responsible Austrian men, but neither in opposition to an elitist AVF, nor as a critique of the poverty draft. Rather, it was claimed that the AVF would primarily attract high-school dropouts and criminals, forming a 'militia of the unemployed'.⁹⁸ The integrative force of conscription was further based on arguments that presented it as an opportunity for immigrants who implicitly were constructed as having a particular duty to, as Ahmed writes,⁹⁹ be 'grateful' to and therefore arguably serve, the white nation:

Society is becoming more egocentric ... If young men from all social classes come together in conscript military and Zivildienst and serve the community together, this strengthens solidarity and responsibility for society. For immigrants ... conscription is a good opportunity to make new contacts beyond their communities and get to know people and country better.¹⁰⁰

The ideal Austrian conscript was therefore not only gendered as male but classed and racialised through constructed dichotomies between materialistic, low-skilled, uneducated, criminalised volunteers drawn to the mercenary military of the AVF, and the selfless, skilled, productive conscript. While attacks on conscription strongly drew on the feminisation of the conscript to delegitimise the draft, the conservative reimagining of conscription rather constructed different masculinities wherein ideal Austrian masculinity was caring and compassionate and characterised by solidarity and responsibility towards the national community. This line of argument linked conscription, national orientation of the military (territorial defence, civilian service, disaster response), neutrality, and the white masculine citizen-soldier. The Other was not constructed through feminisation,

⁹⁵ Minister of Defence Norbert Darabos (SPÖ), cited in 'Verbales Aufrüsten: SPÖ und ÖVP eröffnen letzte Schlacht ums Heer', *Kronen Zeitung* (28 December 2012), available at: {<https://www.krone.at/345797>}.

⁹⁶ Maya Eichler, 'Militarized masculinities in International Relations', *The Brown Journal of World Affairs*, 21:1 (2014), pp. 81–93.

⁹⁷ 'Verbales Aufrüsten'.

⁹⁸ Interior Minister Johanna Mikl-Leitner (ÖVP), cited in "'Krieg durch die Steckdose'".

⁹⁹ Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), pp. 122, 130.

¹⁰⁰ 'Gegner und Befürworter der Wehrpflicht befestigen Stellungen', *Wiener Zeitung* (4 January 2013), available at: {https://www.wienerzeitung.at/nachrichten/politik/oesterreich/513443_Gegner-und-Befuerworter-der-Wehrpflicht-befestigen-Stellungen.html}.

but rather through a hypermasculine image of the AVF as associated with outward-oriented militarism and the classed and profit-oriented volunteer. Here, in the words of then FPÖ leader Strache: 'Conscription and neutrality instead of mercenaries and NATO!'.¹⁰¹

Retaining conscription thereby emerged as a promise of preserving neutrality and solidarity against an increasingly individualistic, materialistic society. While this gendered reimagination of conscription is therefore closer to the republican citizen-soldier tradition, it is lacking some features of republicanism that connect national identity and all-male conscription, such as the notion of sacrifice as a masculine duty, construction of the community against an outside threat, or affirmation of armed violence, military strength, and domination. This has to be understood against the background of 'neutral masculinity',¹⁰² as an ideal defining Austrian democratic citizenship after the Second World War. These legacies of neutral masculinity are thus central to how conscription could be reconstructed as legitimate and even appealing on the basis of seemingly anti-militarist arguments. They enabled a discursive linking of conscription to Austrian masculinity that is not anchored in overt patriotism and militarism, but in masculinised constructions of neutrality, solidarity, and community.

Consequently, both the Austrian conservative communitarian and the Swedish neoliberal individualistic reimagination of conscription – despite their marked differences – did ultimately gain meaning and legitimacy in the political debate by reinvigorating the link between (white) masculinity and conscription.

Gender as a policy issue

Gender (equality) did not figure centrally as a policy issue in either the Swedish or the Austrian debate on conscription. Yet when it did, it did so in strikingly different ways, with different implications for how forced military labour for the nation-state was reimagined and justified to the Swedish and Austrian publics.

That the Swedish neoliberal reimagination of conscription included both men and women appears to have been regarded as self-evident by both politicians and public officials. No political party publicly challenged this position or made suggestions to reform the gender-neutral draft legislation. This apparent consensus in the political debate does not however reflect a consensus of opinions around women's equal integration in the military. For instance, the far-right populist party the Sweden Democrats declared that they favoured 'universal conscription' for men only in their 2019 programme of principles.¹⁰³ The consensus on women's integration merely reflects a common understanding that a gender-neutral application of conscription would gain the most support among the Swedish public. This understanding is also evident in the government's 2017 public inquiry report. In fact, the report not only positions gender-neutral conscription as self-evident but seems, in the following extracts, to also understand it as a source of legitimacy and a crucial ingredient in its 'modernisation':

it would be an unrealistic and unmodern idea for sex ... to be the factor determining who is best suited for each [military] position ... of course the suitability of each individual must be the determining factor and the duty to serve ... should also encompass women. The committee holds that this should be the core of the message [to the public].¹⁰⁴

That the reactivated draft encompasses both women and men is a new phenomenon. The public inquiry suggests that this principally very important step deserves particular attention

¹⁰¹'Wehrpflicht-Debatte: Darabos-Kritik'.

¹⁰²Löffler, 'Neutral masculinity'.

¹⁰³Sverigedemokraterna, 'Principprogram' (2019).

¹⁰⁴Regeringen, 'En robust personalförsörjning'.

in public communication from the authorities - both in information directed at women and at broader society.¹⁰⁵

In line with these recommendations, recent studies have shown how the SAF has launched a range of recruiting campaigns targeting young women by attempting to normalise their presence as soldiers and conscripts in the ranks, even in masculine-coded combat or field positions, after conscription was reactivated.¹⁰⁶ In these campaigns as well as in the quotes above, the drafting of men and women is associated with gender equality, which in turn is assumed to be 'new', 'modern', and a sign of progress.¹⁰⁷ These articulations in turn reflect and reproduce ideas about Sweden as a particularly gender-equal and feminist nation, prevalent also in Swedish foreign policy¹⁰⁸ and in public administration.^{109,110} After the reimplementation phase studied in this paper, the government and parliament have repeated the claim that a gender-neutral draft system is a precondition for gender equality in the ranks in consecutive defence bills and reports, arguing that it 'contributes to a legitimate, trustworthy and democratically anchored military defence'.¹¹¹

Sweden's selective, gender-neutral conscription however represents a neoliberal feminist vision built on competition and merit-based inclusion of particularly aspirational or entrepreneurial individuals.¹¹² In essence, young Swedish women are, through the defence-duty legislation and through explicit invitations extended in military marketing campaigns, invited or rather obligated to compete with young men over who is identifiable as 'suitable' raw material for the institutionalised production of military masculinity. In this competition, men are so far, and expectedly, the winners. A large majority (between 76 and 84 per cent) of those drafted for service every year since 2018 have been men.¹¹³ As we saw above, gender-neutral conscription, as it is envisioned in the debates studied here, does not in any significant way decouple the link between masculinity, military service, and ideal citizenship. It does not signify an embrace of femininity or difference by the state or the military.¹¹⁴ Yet what determines one's role in the defence of the contemporary Swedish nation is not - in contrast to the Austrian system - sex (difference), but one's capacity and willingness to act responsibly and serve the nation, echoing the neoliberal notion of performance-based citizenship or national inclusion. While the neoliberal politics of inclusion favoured by Sweden's conscription model is repeatedly constructed as 'modernisation' and progress in the policy discourse, it ultimately builds on and reproduces familiar gendered hierarchies. By associating the conscript with exclusive, competitive, and idealised masculinity, Sweden's 'modernised' conscription presupposes a feminised underclass of unproductive citizens not afforded the 'opportunity' and 'merit' of being selected for service. Exclusion or under-representation of women is, although repeatedly stressed

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Andrea Rinaldo and Arita Holmberg, 'Managing femininity through visual embodiment: The portrayal of women on the Instagram accounts of the Swedish and the Swiss armed forces', in Eva Moehlecke de Baseggio, Olivia Schneider, and Tibor Szvircsev Tresch (eds), *Social Media and the Armed Forces* (Cham: Springer, 2020), pp. 71-3; Stern and Strand, 'Periods, pregnancy, and peeing'.

¹⁰⁷ Strand, 'Reactivation'.

¹⁰⁸ Jezierska and Towns, 'Taming feminism?'.

¹⁰⁹ Martinsson, Griffin, and Girtli Nygren, 'Introduction'.

¹¹⁰ The integration (or not) of sexual minorities was not an issue that figured explicitly in the Swedish reactivation debate, but contemporary SAF marketing campaigns portraying Sweden as an LGBTQ-friendly country, and the military's yearly, visible presence at Stockholm Pride is undoubtedly still important for the armed force's progressive image and legitimacy in Swedish society. See Strand and Kehl, 'A country to fall in love with/in'.

¹¹¹ Regeringen, 'Totalförsvaret 2021-2025', *Regeringens Proposition*, 2020/21:30, pp. 112-13 (Stockholm, 14 October 2020).

¹¹² Catherine Rottenberg, 'The rise of neoliberal feminism', *Cultural Studies*, 28:3 (2014), pp. 418-37; Elisabeth Prügl, 'Neoliberalising feminism', *New Political Economy*, 20:4 (2015), pp. 614-31.

¹¹³ SAF, *Försvarsmaktens årsredovisning 2020, Bilaga 1, Personalberättelse* (22 February 2021); SAF, *Försvarsmaktens årsredovisning 2022, Bilaga 1, Personalberättelse* (22 February 2023).

¹¹⁴ The government's narrow definition of gender equality as the increased presence of women in the ranks is also criticised by civil society organisations such as the Swedish Peace and Arbitration Society, *Remissvar SOU 2016:63* (30 January 2017), who argued for a definition also encompassing norms and organisational culture in their official referral response to the public inquiry recommending the reintroduction of conscription.

as unfortunate, justified by market logics and can therefore hardly be challenged by rights-based approaches or demands to be equally included in the military as a nation-building project.

Similar patterns apply to immigrant groups. Previous studies have indicated that first-generation immigrants were under-represented among conscripts before the draft was deactivated in the 1990s and 2000s, as well as in the volunteer force of the 2010s.¹¹⁵ Recent statistics based on 18-years-olds born in 2002 and generated by the SDCAA confirm this underrepresentation. While 18-year-olds born outside of Sweden or with two parents born abroad constituted 21,5 per cent of the conscript cohort, they only constituted 6,5 percent of those offered the 'opportunity' to serve.¹¹⁶ While the policy debate claims that Swedish conscription has nothing to do with national integration, occasional suggestions from opinion-makers to let conscription 'serve national integration and unity' by giving immigrants the opportunity to 'contribute to their new homeland and at the same time be given a route into Swedish society'¹¹⁷ reveal how the neoliberal feminist and individualistic Swedish conscription model still is challenged by presumably 'out-dated' ideas about military service as a way to integrate and foster a patriotic, white Swedish national community.¹¹⁸ More importantly, these appeals speak to the precarious position of people racialised as non-white or immigrants within a neoliberal performance-based citizenship regime that often both excludes them from, and sometimes positions them as particularly responsible for and beneficiary of, military service for the white nation.¹¹⁹

Despite its apparent links to Swedish national identity, this reimagination of conscription as inclusive and gender equal (yet masculine) is not only identifiable in the Swedish context. When the public inquiry report argued in favour of drafting women due to its public appeal, it interestingly also accounted for the Norwegian armed forces' experience of drafting women, stating that:

Women born in 1997 and their mothers were targeted by particular information campaigns. 17-year-old women experienced the implementation of universal conscription as something positive and gender equal – and the decision was surrounded by a sense of innovation.¹²⁰

The Norwegian parliament voted to expand conscription to women with overwhelming support in 2014.¹²¹ The Foreign and Defence Committee justified the expansion by arguing that women were an untapped pool of competence: 'women are a large and important resource that the [defence] sector to a larger degree than today have to attract'.¹²² Yet, precisely as in Sweden, politicians across the political spectrum also emphasised gender neutrality as a source of legitimacy and appeal for the institution of conscription and, in extension, for Norway as a nation. Gender-neutral or universal conscription was seen as more in tune with 'the fundamental values of Norwegian society'¹²³

¹¹⁵Sveriges Riksdag, 'Totalförsvaret i förnyelse – etapp 2', Regeringens Proposition, 1996/97:4 (Stockholm, 12 September 1996); 'Försvaret väljer bort invandrare', Dagens Nyheter (5 February 2003), available at: <https://www.dn.se/nyheter/sverige/forsvaret-valjer-bort-invandrare/>; Johan Österberg, 'Preparatory military training: An experiment in integrating minorities in the Swedish armed forces', *Res Militaris*, 2:5 (2017), pp. 1–12.

¹¹⁶Email correspondence with the SDCAA, 26 February 2024.

¹¹⁷Anders Lindberg, 'Låt värnplikt bidra till bra integration', *Aftonbladet* (9 November 2015), available at: <https://www.aftonbladet.se/ledare/a/rLVR68/lat-varnplikt-bidra-till-bra-integration>; see also Diamant Salihu, 'Värnplikten blev den bästa integrationen', *Aftonbladet* (31 March 2015), available at: <https://www.expressen.se/kronikor/diamant-salihu/varnplikten-blev-den-basta-integrationen/>.

¹¹⁸Tobias Hübinette and Catrin Lundström, 'Three phases of hegemonic whiteness: Understanding racial temporalities in Sweden', *Social Identities*, 20:6 (2014), pp. 423–37 (p. 427).

¹¹⁹For more on racial segregation and discrimination on the Swedish civilian labour market, see Hübinette and Lundström, 'Three phases', p. 424.

¹²⁰Regeringen, 'En robust personalförsörjning'.

¹²¹Stortinget, 'Sak nr 1. Komiteen hadde instilt til Stortinget å gjøre slikt vedtak til lov m endringer i vernepliktsloven og heimevernloven (allmenn verneplikt – verneplikt for kvinner)', *Protocol* (Oslo, 14 October 2014).

¹²²Utenriks- og Forsvarskomiteen, 'Innstilling fra utenriks- og forsvarskomiteen om Kompetanse for en ny tid', *Report*, Innst. 384 S, 2012–2013 (Oslo, 29 May 2013), p. 3.

¹²³Regjeringen, 'Endringer i vernepliktsloven og heimevernloven (allmenn verneplikt – verneplikt for kvinner)', *Proposisjon til Stortinget (forslag til lovvedtak)*, Prop. 122 L (2013–2014) (Oslo, 13 June 2014).

and constructed as a natural and linear step on Norway's journey towards gender equality – i.e. as progress. Here in the words of Defence Minister Eriksen:

This is a historic year. ... 201 years after women received suffrage, I am proud to ... introduce universal conscription. Norway will thereby become the first NATO-country to grant men and women the same rights and duties to defend their country.¹²⁴

Gender equality and diversity in the workforce are further described as a 'trademark of a gender equal society'¹²⁵ and as important for the attractiveness and legitimacy of the armed forces among young people.¹²⁶ Moreover, it is described as 'self-evident', as 'modernisation' and as 'forward-looking'.¹²⁷ More than legitimising conscription domestically, these articulations also project Norwegian national identity towards the international arena. As the defence minister repeated in a newspaper op-ed: 'Internationally, Norway is now doing almost ground-breaking work. We have every reason to be proud of that.'¹²⁸ This sentiment was reiterated numerous times in the parliamentary debate leading up to the decision to expand conscription to women. Parliamentarians across the political spectrum described the decision as 'historic', 'a milestone', and 'a day to remember for Norway as a nation', while concluding that Norway formally has received 'a fully gender equal defence as one of the first, if not the first, county in the world'.¹²⁹ In both Sweden and Norway, pledges for gender-neutral conscription thus rely on and reproduce the gendered and racialised dichotomy of modern/umodern, progressive/traditional to gain legitimacy and appeal, masculinising Scandinavia while constructing it as a beacon of equality and civilisation to be followed.

In contrast to the Norwegian case (where the expansion of conscription was described as a gender-equality policy), and in line with the Swedish, gender did not figure centrally as a policy issue in the Austrian debate. Yet, in sharp contrast to both Scandinavian examples, Austria's main political parties agreed that conscription for women was undesirable. While the main argument for the AVF was that conscription was unmodern and unequal, the greater gender equality potentially provided by professionalisation and volunteerism was rarely mentioned. Only a few references were made to how a paid year of social service open to both genders (instead of civilian service as an alternative to forced military service for men only) would open up more paid opportunities for women, and even fewer mention the AVF as increasing opportunities for women in the military. Instead, the pro-AVF camp rather used the possibility of gender integration as an argument against conscription, claiming that, if conscription was retained, women might be obliged to serve as well. The other camp belittled these claims as a 'joke'¹³⁰ and 'dirty campaigning'.¹³¹ The conservative reimagination of conscription as a response to neoliberalism, internationalism, and militarism at the same time largely invisibilised the gender-exclusionary character of conscription, rather than openly justifying it, e.g. by foregrounding benefits for 'young people'.¹³²

¹²⁴Forsvarsdepartementet, 'Lovproposisjon om innføring av verneplikt for kvinner', *Pressemelding* (Oslo, 13 June 2014).

¹²⁵Utenriks- Og Forsvarskomiteen, 'Innstilling 384S'.

¹²⁶Regjeringen, 'Endringer i vernepliktsloven og heimevernloven'.

¹²⁷Ine Erikson Søreide, 'Allmenn verneplikt' Speech by Defence Minister Ina Eriksen Søreide at Forsvarets likestillingskonferanse, Oslo, 21 May 2015.

¹²⁸Ine Erikson Søreide, 'Verneplikt for alle vedtas i dag', *Aftenposten* (14 October 2014), available at: <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumentarkiv/regjeringen-solberg/aktuelt-regjeringen-solberg/fd/taler-og-innlegg/ministeren-taler-og-artikler-av-forsvarsminister-in/2014/Kronikk-i-Aftenposten-Verneplikt-for-alle-vedtas-i-dag/id2008297/>.

¹²⁹Stortinget, 'Sak nr. 11. Innstilling fra utenriks- og forsvarskomiteen om Kompetanse for en ny tid', *Protocol* (Oslo, 14 June 2013).

¹³⁰Vice Chancellor Michael Spindelegger (SPÖ), cited in 'Gleichstellung: Wehrpflicht für Frauen?', *Die Presse* (9 January 2013), available at: <https://www.diepresse.com/1330454/gleichstellung-wehrpflicht-fuer-frauen/>.

¹³¹FPÖ, cited in 'Gleichstellung: Wehrpflicht für Frauen?'.

¹³²Bernhard Gaul, 'So stimmen die Ex-Heeresminister ab', *Kurier* (5 January 2013), available at: <https://kurier.at/politik/inland/bundesheer-volksbefragung-zur-wehrpflicht-so-stimmen-die-ex-heeresminister-ab/2.323.875/>.

Overall, the way gender was brought up as a policy issue in Austria reflects a strong consensus against female conscription, despite women being able to serve on a voluntary basis on equal terms with men since 1998. In the referendum, this was expressed in that the only two options on the ballot were to abolish or to continue conscription for men. This is consistent not only with the wider conservative gender politics in Austria, but also with long-standing scepticism against women's military integration. Leading up to the 1998 policy change that allowed for women's voluntary military service, even progressive actors, such as the women's organisation within the SPÖ, were against it. While women within the ÖVP resisted the policy on grounds of an idealisation of women's traditional role in the family, SPÖ women worried about exploitation of the female workforce and specifically that this would be the first step toward the extension of conscription to women. They and other feminist actors in Austria also saw women's military service as contradictory to their traditionally pacifist stance.¹³³ Even though the two big party organisations eventually got behind the formal integration of female volunteers, equality in the military is not a policy issue that feminists inside and outside political institutions are engaged in in Austria.

In this context, neither the pro- nor the anti-conscription campaign were able to frame the military inclusion of women as a goal or gender equality as a positive value associated with Austrian national identity. Feminist voices beyond the party-driven camps did not feature in the examined public debates. Under these circumstances, even pro-AVF claims to being modern, European, and professional did not incorporate gender equality and even strategically used the fear of female conscription. In this setting, not only was there no space for gender equality as part of the reimagination of conscription, the reimagination was de facto an affirmation of the male-only character of military service, an institution that in turn would *preserve* (rather than progress) Austrian national identity and community.

While the possibility of gender-integrated national service was seen as a counter-argument that would risk delegitimising conscription in Austria, right-wing actors across Europe have, explicitly and implicitly, framed conscription as *protection* against gender integration and equality. For instance, in Germany, where a reactivation of conscription has been debated since 2018, recently as part of a 'Zeitenwende' politics where Germany is reconsidering its historically rooted restrictive relationship to military spending and aid, the far-right populist Alternative für Deutschland (AFD) has spoken out in favour of reactivation. Similar to other proponents for conscription (including the far-right populist Sweden Democrats and FPÖ in Austria), AFD argues in favour of conscription not only for reasons of military efficiency, but because military service is seen as a duty for all men that leads to social cohesion. Political activists associated with the far right go even further. In an interview with Swedish Radio, AFD-associated publisher and central figure of right-wing extremism Götz Kubitschek stresses the reinstatement of conscription as an important part of a larger political project of 'normalizing patriotism' and 'revaluing masculinity' in German society.¹³⁴ Fostering a new generation of men to become warriors willing to sacrifice for their nation, thereby upholding traditional gender roles, is deeply ingrained in AFD's anti-immigration platform and the wider racist project of white supremacy promoted by neo-fascist groups in Europe. While AFD's vision is far from hegemonic, it illustrates the (dis)continuities between a conservative-republican legitimisation of conscription as forming and integrating the nation, and a racist-masculinist one that defines the nation as necessarily white and masculine. Conscription can therefore easily become a policy issue that connects xenophobic, anti-pluralistic political visions with anti-feminist strategies that seek to reverse 'demasculinisation'. At its most extreme ends, we can thus see how conscription is being reimagined as in line with feminism (as in hegemonic discourses in Sweden and Norway), and as an antidote for it (by far-right parties across Europe).

¹³³ Waltraud Zirngast, 'Frauen zum Militär: ein feministisches Dilemma?', *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft* (ÖZP), 26:2 (1997), pp. 129–39.

¹³⁴ 'Hotet inifrån – högerextrem infiltration', *Sveriges Radio* (5 February 2021), available at: <https://sverigesradio.se/avsnitt/1666906>.

Conclusion

This study has offered an alternative perspective on the 'return' of conscription in Western Europe by foregrounding how debates on and motivations for conscription are intersectionally gendered. Rather than studying the impact of different recruitment systems on women's military participation, we focused on the meaning-making capacities of gender in the reimagination of conscription that this return entails. In our case studies, the particular national gender orders and (geo)political contexts of Sweden and Austria fostered neoliberal individualist and conservative communitarian reimaginings of conscription that were strikingly different. Yet both continued to gain meaning through hierarchical gendering and association with masculinity. While key proponents for conscription in Sweden envisioned gender-neutral conscription as a *progressive* policy move, enabling a stronger, more inclusive, and legitimate military defence, Austrian proponents suggested that all-male conscription *preserves* the national community in times of harmful individualism. By adapting the traditional republican model of conscription to different and changing gendered contexts, each of these reimaginings successfully fended off challenges to conscription as a forced, underpaid, and potentially deadly service to the state. They did so by linking conscription to reconstructed understandings of attractive or proper masculinity, and by strategically (in)visibilising gender equality and gender-neutral conscription in the debates. Our study has consequently demonstrated how paying attention to gender – as both a meaning-making device and a policy issue – is crucial to understanding how forced military labour is justified and the reintroduction of conscription made possible in contemporary Europe.

Overall, our results challenge the notion that liberal militarism is characterised by an aversion to conscription and a resulting reliance on professional militaries with increased women's participation. By looking at smaller European states rather than big military powers with volunteer forces, it becomes apparent that the link between military service and masculinity can be reimagined under different circumstances to bring back models of compulsory military service. The Austrian case additionally shows that affirmation of conscription can strengthen the link between the nation and masculinity without overt references to militarism.

The constantly shifting links between military obligation and gender also call into question the notion that volunteer forces, or the abolishment of draft solutions, are uniquely associated with progressive gender policies in the military. Not only can conscription easily be brought back, it can also be reimagined as gender-neutral or even 'feminist'. In this sense, the reaffirmation of conscription cannot be seen as a clear indicator for the return of traditional masculinity; nor have gender-neutral draft systems surpassed the masculinist underpinnings of conscription. While the neoliberal reimagination of conscription breaks open the tight connection between men, particular understandings of masculinity associated with duty and sacrifice, and conscription and creates opportunities for (selected) women, it also reconstructs gendered hierarchies and utilises gender integration as a way to legitimise a system of forced, unequally distributed labour. The neoliberal paradigm of merit-based inclusion that this reimagination of conscription is based on thus precludes more transformational understandings of gender equality. The conservative approach, on the other hand, prevents the state's access to women's free labour, which could be seen as preferable, especially in countries in which women remain particularly disadvantaged in civilian labour markets. However, this reimagination of conscription reaffirms national identity and citizenship as tightly bound to men and masculinity and disavows understandings of gender equality as an important political value. Moreover, reimaginings of conscription as exclusively male are open to anti-feminist and racist interpretations by the far right.

A broader critique of the injustices associated with conscription and the structures of (gender) inequality that it relies on and reproduces is thus foreclosed in both reimaginings. Such a critique would also need to account for the lived experiences of those affected by policy changes on conscription. The perspective of young people in the examined countries are largely invisibilised or presented in distorted and strategically convenient ways in public debate. Serious engagement is therefore needed in future research with the gendered, classed, and racialised differences in how

different models of military service affect the life choices of individuals, especially when taking into account that conscripts can be drafted into war and obliged to kill or be killed.

Beyond the novel empirical findings, this study developed a theoretical framework that does not start from a fixed understanding of the link between conscription and traditional gender ideologies, but centres the co-constitutive, context-specific, and changing meanings of gender and conscription. While the results on how this link played out in the specific cases of Sweden and Austria might not be applicable to other nation-states, our understanding of intersectional gendering and how it gives meaning to conscription, often in unexpected ways, provides the basis for further investigating the (dis)continuities in how conscription, and potentially even its abolishment, is motivated in relation to different national gender orders. A larger dataset on variously positioned country cases could complement and extend the identified reimaginations and potentially yield a typology of links between gender relations and conscription. This could include Germany and Norway, which we have discussed in brief above, but also countries such as Switzerland, Finland, the Netherlands and the Czech Republic, which are currently in the midst of, or have recently been through, political debates about reintroducing or expanding conscription, with both the Austrian and Scandinavian models being discussed. Our analysis therefore paves the way for a research agenda on how military conscription reproduces and transforms gendered power relations and how these relations in turn influence the way conscription is brought back, reformed, justified, and reimagined, crucial at a time when Europe is marked yet again by geopolitical tensions and war.

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