

ELERI LILLEMÄE

Pragmatic conscription:  
Perceptions and experiences  
of conscripts in Estonia





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## LIST OF ORIGINAL PUBLICATIONS

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### Related studies:

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- Kasearu, K., Lillemäe, E., & Ben-Ari, E. (2022). The military covenant, contractual relations, and social cohesion in democracies: Estonia as an exploratory case study. *Armed Forces & Society*, 49(3), 729–751. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X221100769>
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## AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTION

The author of this thesis made the following contribution to the four studies listed below:

- Study I:** The author contributed to the data collection and was the main contributor to all phases of the study, taking the lead in producing the theoretical framework, analysing the data, interpreting the results, and writing the article.
- Study II:** The author initiated and designed the study and led the data collection. The author was a main contributor to all phases of the study and took the lead in producing the theoretical framework, analysing the data, interpreting the results, and writing the article.
- Study III:** The author is the sole author of the study and was fully responsible for all parts of the article. The author also contributed to the questionnaire design and was responsible for acquiring the rights to add the Hardiness Resilience Gauge scale to the questionnaire and adapt it to Estonian.
- Study IV:** The author contributed to the conceptualisation of the article and data collection and participated in writing various sections of the article.

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## INTRODUCTION

Considering the tension between the relatively closed, traditional institution of the military and rapidly changing societies, this thesis examines the interplay between individual, organisational and societal level factors in shaping perceptions and experiences of conscription based on the case study of Estonia. It describes how conscripts negotiate the terms and meaning of conscription, re-evaluate it in response to institutional practices, and how these negotiations, in turn, influence the military organisation, situating it within the wider framework of macro societal transformations. This is analysed using Erving Goffman's concept of total institutions as the theoretical foundation.

For much of the 20th century, conscripted armies formed the backbone of military organisations. However, the decades following the Cold War saw a significant shift toward all-volunteer forces, a trend extensively documented by scholars (e.g., Ajangiz, 2002; Haltiner, 1998; Leander, 2004). The end of the Cold War, and consequently the end of superpower rivalry, led to changed threat perceptions and compelled militaries to reorganise their aims and priorities, focusing increasingly on managing internal crises and participating in peacekeeping missions abroad (Holmberg & Alvinus, 2019). At the same time, modernisation, accompanied by the rise of individualism, had spread across almost the entire world by the beginning of the 21st century (Allik & Realo, 2004), challenging the traditional characteristics of military organisation. While historically, military service had been tied to the ideals of civic duty, self-sacrifice, and nation-building (Moskos, 1977), the rise in individual values and practices and increased autonomy (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Inglehart & Welzel, 2005; Santos et al., 2017) has questioned the traditional military ethos.

Already in the 1970s, when the United States abandoned the draft and transitioned to an all-volunteer force, professional armies were described going through a transition from a traditional "institutional" format to an "occupational" format, where military service increasingly mirrors civilian employment, emphasising personal career development and material incentives over intrinsic values and civic responsibility (Moskos, 1977). In later years, scholars have further characterised this trend as a shift toward post-Fordist militaries (King, 2006) or a transition from a "citizen army" to a "market army," (Levy, 2010) where the focus is on efficiency, efficacy, and the development of smaller, more agile forces.

In the case of conscript service, this shift has been described as a transition from "obligatory militarism" to "contractual militarism," signifying a move away from unconditional national duty toward a service characterised by catering to individual utility and furthering personal interests (Levy et al., 2007). This shift does not necessarily imply that the ideals of patriotism are fully abandoned but rather highlights that, alongside them, there is a rise in another, practical set of motives, which has been termed "pragmatic professionalism" in the case of professional armies (Segal, 1986) and, in the context of conscripted armies, what I propose to term in this thesis a "pragmatic conscription."

These changes emphasise that the characteristics of military organisations are becoming more negotiatory. Conscription in countries adhering to Western values is becoming more individual-centred, considering conscripts' motivation in the recruitment process and offering tailored service options that align with their skill sets and interests (Jonsson et al., 2024; Strand, 2021, 2024). It would be expected that militaries accommodating such pragmatic motives contribute to more positive conscription experiences, which have been shown to support reservists' military readiness (Laanepere & Kasearu, 2021) and are therefore beneficial for the military. However, managing value-related normative pressures has been identified as one of the most significant challenges for the military as an organisation (Holmberg & Alvinus, 2019). This tension highlights the central question of this thesis about how these dynamics play out and what consequences they have for conscripts as individuals and military organisations.

How to adapt the traditional tool of conscription to simultaneously respond to the needs of today's militaries and expectations of conscription-aged youth has gained significant relevance since the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The threat perceptions have shifted remarkably, and this has prompted many European democratic countries to either reinstate or consider reinstating conscription (Jonsson et al., 2024; Jäckle, 2023). This shift has even been described as the end of the all-volunteer force (Bury, 2024), highlighting the ever-changing nature of military organisations. This, however, may mean a move away from pragmatic motives and the military organisations catering to them, as the core role of the military – to fight and win wars – becomes more central again with countries rearming, potentially leaving less room for individual tailoring of service. While this perspective is not the focus of this thesis and is therefore not discussed in length, it shows the importance of viewing the military as a context-dependent institution.

This thesis builds on Erving Goffman's theory of total institutions (1961). According to Goffman (1957, p. 45), a total institution is an environment where life is governed by strict schedules and formal rules within a single physical space, with daily routines carried out in large groups under uniform treatment and shared tasks, all serving the institution's overarching goals. Total institutions include prisons, psychiatric hospitals, but also conscription-based armed forces (Goffman, 1957, p. 44). Goffman examines the total institution through the micro-level experiences of individuals and their interactions, making this approach a well-suited analytical tool for the present thesis, which focuses on conscripts' experiences and, through them, the organisational change of the military.

In previous research, there is limited direct reference to the use of the total institution framework specifically for studying the military. As Goffman focused primarily on prisons and mental health institutions, research in these fields has more commonly employed the framework. Among military studies that do use the total institution concept, the focus is on either socialising youth into the organisation or resocialising soldiers back to civil life. For instance, there are studies that look into the fresh recruits and their socialisation into the military institution, either in military academies (e.g. Jansen & Kramer, 2018) or during

the initial training stages of professional armies (e.g. Swain, 2015). Others examine the resocialisation of veterans into civilian life and the challenges they face after having been long-term members of the military organisation (e.g. McGarry et al., 2015; Swed, 2014). There are very few studies on conscripted armies as total institutions. One of the most comprehensive studies by Bjerke and Ronnes (2017), carried out in the Norwegian armed forces, explores how conscripts use humour to cope with the characteristics of a total institution. However, only a few studies use the concept as a central analytical tool, while many more mention it in passing as a contextual reference. This suggests that the military's status as a total institution is often taken as self-evident.

The current study offers a novel perspective in three ways. First, while the move towards more negotiatory militaries has been extensively studied in the context of all-volunteer forces, less attention has been given to how these transformations impact both militaries and individuals therein in Western post-industrial democracies that continue to uphold conscription. Second, although it is often taken as self-evident that militaries are total institutions, they are rarely analysed in nuanced detail as such. Third, studies on the military have historically paid little attention to soldiers' own subjective experiences and narratives, whereas this study focuses specifically on conscripted soldiers' perceptions and experiences.

The aim of this thesis is to understand the implications of the interplay between conscripts as agents, the military as a structure, and societal values on both the military and the conscripts therein. This analysis is conducted through the case study of Estonia, which reinstated conscription after regaining independence in the 1990s. Estonia's postsocialist economic transformations have been characterised as a benchmark for neoliberal reforms (Hansen & Sorsa, 1994; Panagiotou, 2001), driven by an emphasis on a self-directing individual – a concept that held particular appeal after living under authoritarian rule (Mikecz, 2023). Therefore, the freedom to make one's own choices holds significant importance in Estonia, with younger generations tending to prioritise self-enhancement values more than older generations (Lilleoja & Raudsepp, 2016). These changes have also affected the Estonian Defence Forces, which publicly signal their functional effectiveness and economic efficiency in response to new public expectations regarding the military's effective use of resources, both in economic terms at the macro level (price and quality of weaponry) and in human resource management at the micro level (ensuring that conscripts' and reservists' time is used efficiently) (Kasearu et al., 2022). Therefore, Estonia provides a valuable case for studying the dynamics between conscripts, armed forces and wider societal context.

The thesis poses three research questions (RQ):

1. How are the conceptualisation and ramifications of conscription rethought and reframed by conscripts during the service? (**Study I, Study II**)
2. How are conscripts' interpretations of their service shaped by their personal orientations and immediate social context? (**Study I, Study II, Study III**)

3. How are wider societal processes reflected in conscripts' interpretations of conscript service and the military's organisational practices? (**Study I, Study II, Study IV**)

These research questions are approached through four original studies. Addressing **RQ1, Study I** and **Study II** provide insights into the lived experiences of conscripts during their service, exploring how their perceptions and meaning-making change throughout their time in service. Both studies also contribute to **RQ2** by highlighting the role of individual agency and motivation in how conscripts interpret their experiences in service. In addition, both studies highlight how the surrounding social context is related to conscripts' interpretations. **Study I** brings forward wider societal perceptions regarding the competencies acquired through conscription and their applicability to youths' future careers from the perspective of employers, as well as their relation to what conscripts themselves consider convertible from their service. Meanwhile, **Study II** highlights the role of the closer social circle of family and friends in conscripts' reflections on their service. While **Study I** and **Study II** are based on qualitative data, **Study III** can be seen as exploring these concepts quantitatively, integrating both inter- and intrapersonal resources of conscripts and examining how they are related to the perceived benefit of conscription. **RQ3** is looked into from two different perspectives. **Study I** and **Study II** provide insights into how societal processes are reflected in conscripts' own interpretations of their service and what these reveal about shifts in organisational practices of the military, while **Study IV** offers an alternative perspective and analyses the military's publicly voiced organisational principles and practices related to conscription.

The structure of the thesis is as follows. The theoretical section gives an overview of the concept of total institution and examines how changes in military organisations relate to the essence of the military as a closed and hierarchical institution. It also provides context for the current thesis with an overview of the Estonian conscription system and its placement within the broader societal framework of Estonia. Then, the methodology of the studies is introduced by describing the data collection and data analysis procedures used in the studies and reflecting on the challenges specific to conducting research in the military. The results section brings out the main findings of the studies, which are elaborated further in the discussion section. The cover article ends with the conclusions and a summary in Estonian.

# 1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

## 1.1. Classical Ideation of the Military as a Total Institution

In the 1960s, a highly influential concept emerged concerning institutions that exert power over individuals: Erving Goffman's "total institutions," initially presented in 1957 at the Symposium on Preventive and Social Psychiatry and later elaborated in Donald Cressey's collection *The Prison* (1961) and Goffman's own collection *Asylums* (1961). Goffman's primary focus and examples were drawn from mental institutions and asylums, though he also examined prisons in greater detail. He also discussed other institutions, such as monasteries, boarding schools, and the military, which is the central topic of the current thesis.

Goffman focused on micro-level interactions inside such institutions and the questions of identity adaptations to the institution that yields power over them, examining the internal dynamics of different total institutions and their impact on the self. In this section, the main and central characteristics of such institutions are drawn out. As Goffman describes the general principles of all kinds of total institutions, the following overview will also highlight the main characteristics applicable to different types of total institutions, including the military. Understanding these characteristics provides a framework for contextualising the experiences and perceptions of conscripts within the military.

### 1.1.1. Defining Total Institutions

Goffman highlights that while all institutions exhibit encompassing tendencies and create a distinct world for their members, some institutions are significantly more all-encompassing than others (Goffman, 1957, pp. 43–44). He distinguishes between five different types of total institutions based on their aim and mission (Goffman, 1957, p. 44):

1. institutions for caring for those who are incapable of taking care of themselves and who are harmless, such as nursing homes;
2. institutions for caring for those who are also incapable of taking care of themselves but pose an unintentional threat to the community, such as mental health institutions;
3. institutions designed to protect the community from what are thought to be intentional threats, and therefore, the welfare of the institutionalised is not an immediate issue, such as prisons;
4. institutions designed to collectively pursue specific technical tasks, such as boarding schools;
5. institutions that act as retreats and training stations for religious purposes, such as monasteries.

With the aim to keep states protected, militaries are highly structured and organised institutions with clearly defined roles and, according to Goffman, fall under the fourth category of institutions that function to pursue some technical task col-

lectively and “justifying themselves only on these instrumental grounds” (Goffman, 1957, p. 44). Under this category, Goffman also includes examples such as ships and boarding schools; however, I argue that the military should be considered a somewhat distinct case. What sets the military apart is that its everyday life revolves around training for armed conflict, which could result in either the necessity to take someone’s life or the need to be ready to sacrifice one’s own life, which significantly shapes the essence of the military as a total institution.

Goffman acknowledges that this list of total institution types is not exhaustive but considers it a foundation for defining total institutions (Goffman, 1957, p. 44). Notably, Goffman does not provide a straightforward, concise definition of total institutions. Instead, he identifies four defining totalistic features (Goffman, 1957, p. 45). The first defining feature of total institutions is that all aspects of life occur in the same physical space under a single authority. Secondly, daily life is conducted in large groups, where all individuals are treated uniformly and perform identical tasks. Thirdly, all daily activities are tightly scheduled and regulated by formal rules. Fourthly, each singular activity serves a broader purpose, contributing to a rational plan aligned with the institution’s official objectives.

While these characteristics can individually be observed in other, non-total institutions as well, the key defining feature of a total institution lies in “the handling of many human needs by the bureaucratic organisation of whole blocks of people” (Goffman, 1957, p. 45). Total institutions are thus described as “social hybrids,” functioning partly as formal organisations and partly as residential communities (Goffman, 1957, p. 48).

Goffman (1957, p. 45) brings out that, contrary to common social arrangements, where distinct spheres of life occur in different locations, with different people, under separate authorities, and without a unifying rational plan, total institutions break down all these barriers. Simultaneously, other types of barriers are created. He describes that the total character of such institutions is symbolised by barriers, which restrict interaction with the external world and departure from the institution and what “is often built right into the physical plant, such as locked doors, high walls, barbed wire, cliffs, water, forests, or moors.” (Goffman, 1961, pp. 4–5).

### **1.1.2. Central Themes in Goffman’s Framework**

Deriving from how the total institution is organisationally arranged, Goffman highlights the implications of these arrangements for individuals within them. To manage the lives of large groups of people effectively, Goffman emphasises the necessity of supervisory personnel. The primary role of this staff is surveillance – ensuring that individuals adhere to institutional rules and fulfil their assigned tasks (Goffman, 1961, pp. 6–7). Within these confines, Goffman calls these two main groups the *staff* and the *inmates*. The inmates reside within the institution, are separated from the outside world, and occupy a subordinate position, while the supervisory staff operate on a regular eight-hour workday, remain well-integrated into the external society, and tend to perceive themselves as superior,

creating a significant social distance between the two groups (Goffman, 1961, p. 7). This stratification fosters a clear power dynamic, which can be seen even more strongly in the military setting as the military hierarchy sets out a strict chain of command that separates regulars from conscripts. However, I would also highlight that, in relation to the military being a distinct case among total institutions due to its potential need to send its members to fight for the country, unlike most total institutions, staff (the regulars) and inmates (conscripts) must function as a team, relying on each other. Therefore, the military must maintain a balance between a chain of command and strict hierarchy while also ensuring trust between the parties.

Another central theme in Goffman's work is the process of moulding individuals to meet institutional needs, effectively making them similar to one another and institutionalising them. This is captured through the concept of the *mortification of the self* occurring through the *stripping process*, which includes the removal of personal possessions and other items that individuals entering a total institution have relied upon to maintain and construct their sense of self and substituting them with standardised institutional possessions (Goffman, 1957, p. 50). This leads to gradual changes in an individual's sense of self and a break with past roles. The recruit, according to Goffman (1961, p. 14), "begins a series of abasements, degradations, humiliations, and profanations of self" to render them more compliant with authority and institutional control. This is something that Goffman (1961, p. 14) calls the *moral career*, which refers to the process of changes in the beliefs inmates have about themselves and significant others. Different total institutions impose the mortification of the self for varying reasons. For instance, prisons' rationale is to ensure security and simultaneously deliver punishment (Goffman, 1957, p. 50). However, Goffman (1957, p. 51) argues that these justifications are, to an extent, merely a rationalisation, and the underlying, practical reason is the need to efficiently manage the daily lives of a large group of individuals.

This leads to another inherent feature of total institutions, which is how members' activities are tightly scheduled. The schedule and sequence of activities are "imposed from above by a system of explicit formal rulings and a body of officials" (Goffman, 1961, p. 6). This scheduling means that there is no room for individuals' autonomous decisions, and communication with the outside world is restricted (Goffman, 1957, p. 50). He also introduces an additional perspective on time from the viewpoint of the inmates. He describes how inmates often feel that the time spent in the institution is wasted or destroyed, caused by their seclusion from the social world outside and the inability to gain anything transferable to life outside the institution (Goffman, 1961, pp. 67–69).

Goffman highlights the individual's lived experiences within the institution, particularly the strategies individuals use to resist, adapt to, or survive its oppressive conditions. One example is *secondary adjustments* – covert or unauthorised actions individuals undertake within institutional settings to assert autonomy and individuality (Goffman, 1961, p. 189). These might be "disallowed satisfactions

or allowed ones by disallowed means,” which give the inmate the sense of maintaining their autonomy and individuality (Goffman, 1957, p. 56). It demonstrates that members of such institutions retain agency, though this agency is significantly constrained and shaped by the institutional restraints they are subject to.

## 1.2. Agency, Structure and Military as a Total Institution

Goffman’s approach to and analysis of total institutions provide valuable insights into the interplay of structural forces and individual agency within the military, addressing one of the central concerns of sociological theory: the tension between structure and agency.

This tension has been described by Sztompka (1994/2015:28) as “the opposition of autonomy and constraint,” wherein individuals, on the one hand, are bound by societal norms and rules yet simultaneously perceive themselves as unique agents responsible for their own decisions. The opposition of people constantly (re)producing their realities with their actions and structures simultaneously forming and being formed by these actions creates a dynamic nature of social life (Sztompka, 1994/2015:35).

This idea aligns with the school of practice theory, particularly Anthony Giddens’ structuration theory (Giddens, 1984), which also draws partially from Goffman’s work (Inglis & Thorpe, 2023; Whittington, 2010). Giddens (1984, p. 25) posits that structure is “always both constraining and enabling,” asserting that “the structural properties of social systems are both medium and outcome of the practices they recursively organise.” Therefore, he claims that human actions both draw upon and reproduce structures, resulting in his key notion of the *duality of structure* (Giddens, 1984, p. 25).

The characteristics of the military as a total institution can also be examined through the lens of such practices. Social practices can be defined as recurring actions performed consistently by large groups, often driven by pragmatic considerations (Vihalemm et al., 2025, pp. 16–17). These practices constitute routines, which in turn form the social structures (Reckwitz, 2002). Total institutions are well aligned with these descriptions as the military inherently relies on various routines that define its way of life, thereby establishing distinctive social practices integral to the military’s structure and functioning.

Routines play a central role in fostering a sense of stability, which Giddens (1991) refers to as *ontological security*. However, this does not imply that the self is static; rather, it is continually recreated “in the reflexive activities of the individual” (Giddens, 1991, p. 52). This understanding transitions to the concept of agency, which Giddens defines not in terms of the intention to act but as the capability to act (Giddens, 1984: 9). According to Giddens (1984: 14), agency is the ability to “intervene in the world, or to refrain from such intervention, with the effect of influencing a specific process or state of affairs.” Thus, agency encompasses the capability to exercise power and effect change.

Vihalemm et al. (2015, pp. 35–38), drawing on and developing further the work of Shove et al. (2012), propose four components of social practices: meaning (interpretations that people attribute to practice), materials and things (objects, material space, infrastructure), skills and competence (cognitive and bodily), and social interaction (communication and interaction between people). However, social practices vary in flexibility, and while some practices are more flexible, others are densely organised and, therefore, more resistant to change (Vihalemm et al., 2025, p. 17). This distinction is central to understanding how conscripts, as agents, operate these interactive components of the social practices that the military imposes on them and also how they can exercise their agency.

### **1.3. Intertwined Transformations Shifting the Paradigm**

Goffman explicitly acknowledges that the concept of total institution is an ideal type of theory, emphasising that there is variation in total institutions and not all characteristics and not in the same intensity are present in every one of them (1961, p. 5). This section examines the military setting more closely, situating it within the framework of how various transformations affect the characteristics of the military as a total institution in contemporary post-industrial democracies. Three intertwined changes are highlighted to understand the characteristics of contemporary militaries and how they are studied and made sense of.

First, societal norms and values have shifted towards individual practices and values and the expectation that individuals actively contribute to the creation of their lives (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Inglehart & Welzel, 2005; Santos et al., 2017). Second, military organisations have changed and gravitated towards a more negotiatory character and are becoming increasingly similar to the civil sphere in terms of internal structures and organisational norms (Moskos, 1977; King, 2006; Levy et al., 2007; Levy, 2010; Norheim-Martinsen, 2016; Holmberg & Alvinus, 2019). Third, there has been a change in the social sciences and sociology themselves. Alongside the macro-sociological focus on social and symbolic structures, there has been a rise in micro-sociological approaches that study interactions, lifeworlds, and agency (Ritzer, 1985; Wiley, 1988; Krause, 2013). While the older sociological tradition leaned toward positivism and objectivity, newer approaches are more likely to embrace constructivist and interpretivist perspectives. This theoretical shift is what allows us to study the first two empirical changes. It enables paying closer attention to individual differences and not only how social change drives military change, but also how societal values are related to individuals' perceptions of their service and how changing attitudes and behaviours toward authority call for institutional change.

### **1.3.1. The Interplay of Drivers for Change in Military Organisations**

In order to describe and understand today's conscripted armed forces in Western post-industrial democracies and their characteristics, it is important first to look at how military organisations overall have changed and what has driven this change. Holmberg and Alvinus (2019) have clustered these factors into three categories: structural, normative, and functional drivers or pressures for change. Together, these elements shape how military institutions adapt to evolving societal, political, and technological contexts.

The central aspect of structural pressures for change is the end of the Cold War in the 1990s, which marked a pivotal shift in the military's role, extending its focus beyond national territory (Holmberg & Alvinus, 2019). Globalisation and internationalisation acted as significant structural drivers, influencing modern militaries' organisational frameworks and operational goals. During this time, with changes in threat perceptions and the emergence of new tasks, many nations transitioned from conscription-based forces to professional all-volunteer forces. This change sparked extensive discussions about the changing nature and character of the armed forces.

The military transformation is often described as post-modern or post-Fordist, emphasising the development of smaller and more flexible military organisations in the context of globalisation and an era of unpredictability in terms of future missions and tasks (King, 2006; Booth et al., 2001; Levy, 2010). This trend was introduced as early as the late 1970s by Charles Moskos (1977) in the United States, which at the time had transitioned from a conscription-based model to an all-volunteer force. A central claim of this transformation was that militaries were shifting from an institutional model to an occupational one, aligning more closely with civilian institutions and making the military "just a job" (Moskos, 1977; Moskos & Wood, 1988). This perspective, known as the Institutional/Occupational (I/O) thesis, posits that the military is exhibiting fewer traditional institutional characteristics – such as a sense of duty, collective identity, and non-monetary rewards – and increasingly adopting traits typical of civilian occupations, including market-driven compensation, individual career management, and negotiable working conditions (Moskos, 1977). The I/O model and the shift proposed by it have remained acute throughout the following decades, with many scholars further developing this notion by adapting it to new changes in the security landscape and societal values (e.g., Sørensen, 1994; Griffith, 2008; Woodruff et al., 2024).

This ties closely to another set of factors driving change in military organisations – the normative factors, including shifts in societal values and norms (Holmberg & Alvinus, 2019). The increasing disintegration of traditional social structures and roles has given way to a process where individuals must construct their own identities and navigate their lives independently, leading to greater personal freedom but also heightened responsibility for making choices and bearing

their consequences (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Socioeconomic development and globalisation have driven the rise in individual values and practices almost all over the world (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005; Santos et al., 2017). This has led Western societies to adopt a more individualised and hybrid model of conscription, which allows the service to be tailored to youths' individual aspirations and account for their agency and motivation in the recruitment process (Ahlbäck et al., 2022; Jonsson et al., 2024; Bury, 2024).

Functional drivers include the need to keep up with technological advancements, which in turn require increased specialisation and professionalisation, and this supports the efforts to retain the exclusivity of military organisations (Holmberg & Alvinus, 2019). In contrast, there is a contradicting trend toward the normalisation of the armed forces, meaning that the management practices from the civilian sector are increasingly integrated into military institutions (Norheim-Martinsen, 2016). This trend of military organisations becoming more similar to civilian organisations can be explained through institutional isomorphism, introduced by DiMaggio and Powell (1983). According to their theory, organisations operating within a shared environment tend to become increasingly similar over time due to external pressures, norms, and the pursuit of legitimacy. While the original concept refers to workplaces generally becoming more similar to one another when operating in the same environment, it can also be extended to explain how the military models itself after civilian organisations by adopting traits inherent to civilian workplaces, such as negotiating and bargaining. However, this process creates tensions within the military. What has been termed a normalisation process fosters a sense among regular service members that the organisation is losing its exclusivity while simultaneously increasing the burden of management tasks, distracting them from fulfilling the organisation's core task – defence (Holmberg & Alvinus, 2019). These dynamics not only reshape the military's internal structure but also influence how service members, including conscripts, perceive their roles and responsibilities.

Military organisations are also affected by the process of social acceleration, which Hartmut Rosa (2013) defines in three forms: technical acceleration, the acceleration of social change, and the acceleration of the pace of life. Interestingly, and ironically, military organisations are considered to be drivers of social acceleration, as they have driven technical innovation and, considering the periods when most countries followed conscription, contributed to structuring the lives of a large part of the population (Rosa, 2013, pp. 195–199). Social acceleration, however, presents challenges for militaries on several fronts, as the pace of work increases, the flow of information intensifies, and a new need has emerged to manage external information – social media and news (Holmberg & Alvinus, 2019).

### **1.3.2. Contracts and Negotiations Between the Civil and Military Sphere**

The organisational changes outlined in the previous section show that the armed forces are acquiring a more negotiatory character. This character is not limited to all-volunteer forces or regular members in the conscripted armies. Studies have shown that conscript service is also increasingly questioned in terms of personal benefits (Kosonen et al., 2019), and an individual's higher levels of globalism and consumerism, along with lower levels of individualism, are associated with a greater tendency to evade conscription (Adres et al., 2012). This has led to what has been described as a shift toward "contractual militarism," where conscript service is increasingly viewed through the lens of personal choice, compensation, and individual benefit, being related to societal attitudes prioritising individual rights and interests over collective responsibilities (Levy et al., 2007).

However, scholarly focus on the negotiatory nature of military service has been mostly directed toward reservists, emphasising their need to balance civilian and military identities and drawing a metaphorical comparison to reservists as transmigrants who move continuously between two spheres, and therefore navigating different cultures and social spaces (Lomsky-Feder et al., 2008). Gazit et al. (2021) have illustrated such negotiations through a three-level approach, where the first level, the micro-sociological level, includes negotiations between soldiers, their families, employers, studies, and the units they belong to, the second, mezzo-sociological level, focuses on negotiations within the military organisation between groups of soldiers and the military itself, and the third, macro-sociological level, addresses expectations and negotiations between the military as an organisation and society.

Although this approach is primarily based on reservists and regulars, it is equally relevant to conscripts. Conscripts' identity is, similarly to reservists, fundamentally linked to their civilian lives, and they are as well in the military temporarily (Griffith, 2011). When it comes to reservists, it has been noted that their dual identity gives them a stronger position to voice concerns and negotiate compared to regulars, as they are not constant members of nor entirely dependent on the armed forces (Gazit et al., 2021). Conscripts, on the other hand, might be more bound in their negotiations similarly to regulars, as, during their time of conscription, they are highly dependent on the military, even more so than regulars, and belong to the bottom part of the institution's hierarchy. For this reason, conscripts may choose not to voice their concerns. Additionally, conscription tends to be tied with strong socio-normative pressure, and its purpose may not be questioned by youth in that life stage but accepted as an unquestionable obligation (Kosonen et al., 2019).

The opportunities for negotiation, however, are also highly context-dependent. In studying the tensions and negotiations arising from reservists' dual role as reservist-employees in the Estonian context, findings indicate that as contracts at one level influence those at another, the lack of contracts at the mezzo-level in Estonian system places a heavier burden on reservists' individual agency and

hinders the possibilities to express their concerns and proposals (Lillemäe et al., 2022). This lack of mezzo-level agreements reflects Estonia's broader societal context as Estonia overall has very low and declining union membership and collective bargaining across the country as a result of the rebuilding of the state in the 1990s when the prevalent attitude was that working conditions should rather be regulated by law and not left to collective bargaining, effectively stripping trade unions of their main role (Kallaste, 2023).

The dynamics of negotiations align well with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, which emphasises the interplay between different systems that shape individual experiences. The micro-sociological, mezzo-sociological, and macro-sociological levels of negotiations described by Gazit et al. (2021) correspond to Bronfenbrenner's (1979) microsystems, mesosystems and macrosystems, highlighting how immediate relationships, institutional interactions, and wider societal expectations influence individual experiences and how changes in one system can affect others.

At the microsystem level, direct interactions between conscripts, their families, friends, and immediate commanders play a role in shaping their perceptions and experiences of service. The mesosystem, which involves interactions between two or more microsystems, is evident in the dynamics between military organisations and civilian institutions, such as employers or educational entities. At the macrosystem level, societal attitudes and norms not only directly influence individuals but also shape the micro- and mesosystems. These dynamics altogether underscore the unique challenges conscripts face in their negotiations with the military.

#### **1.4. Contemporary Conscripted Armies as Total Institutions?**

The wider changes in military organisations are also reflected in how conscripted armies function. While the shift towards all-volunteer forces initiated many discussions about its implications for the armed forces, these debates primarily focus on armies that transitioned to a fully professional model. In comparison, conscripted armies can still be seen as adhering more closely to a classical model of total institutions. In this traditional framework, conscripts enter the military through coercion, and the basic split between regulars and conscripts remains intact.

However, while Goffman highlights the mortification of the self, pointing to the negative effects of total institutions on individuals, studies on contemporary conscription models in post-industrial democracies also emphasise positive traits. Although such institutions are restrictive by nature and contrast with the individualistic values prevalent in Western contemporary societies, they can also offer opportunities for self-development. Military service can foster courage and self-confidence, providing a chance to step outside the encapsulating family circle and meet new people (Davies, 1989). It can serve as a "gap year" before

entering higher education, offering time to work out future plans, make new contacts, and gain greater independence in life (King, 2011).

This idea aligns with Susie Scott's (2011) work on the further development of the concept of the total institution, introducing the notion of a *reinventive institution* characterised by voluntary membership, where individuals willingly embrace the opportunity to shed their former identities. Unsurprisingly, all-volunteer forces have been described as reinventive institutions, given that individuals voluntarily join the military to transform themselves (Kaspersen, 2023). However, with increasing emphasis on individual agency and motivation in the recruitment of conscripts in various Western countries (Jonsson et al., 2024), conscript service may also exhibit reinventive characteristics.

While mentally and physically stressful, conscript service has indeed been found to be a time for personal growth, reflecting the moratorial nature of conscription (Dar & Kimhi, 2001). The term *psychosocial moratorium* describes a period during which individuals are permitted to explore various roles and possibilities before committing to a specific life path (Erikson, 1968). Conscription can be seen as a psychosocial moratorium, offering young adults a unique opportunity to explore different roles and identities within the structured context of the military. However, contemporary youths are faced with contrasting demands, as society permits and considers it typical for young people to experiment with their identity and postpone taking on their adult role, allowing them time for self-exploration, while simultaneously, social acceleration generates a constant sense of busyness, pressuring them to accumulate qualifications and experience useful for their future lives (Cuzzocrea, 2019).

The concept of moratorium also relates to the perception of conscription as one of the rites of passage for young men into adulthood, where “the boy becomes the man” and which emphasises traits such as toughness, perseverance, and masculinity (Lowe, 2019; Klein, 2002). However, the wider societal changes have led the hegemonic masculine norms to be questioned. While hegemonic militarised masculinities are found to be still reproduced in conscript service, the neo-liberal era has made conscripts on the individual level question hegemonic masculine norms and value softer masculinities (Chung, 2023). Another aspect is the growing emphasis on increasing the participation of women in the armed forces as discourses of gender equality continue to gain prominence in various countries (Carreiras, 2006; Duncanson & Woodward, 2016; Ahlbäck et al., 2024).

Davies (1989) highlights that armed forces are not totally closed hierarchies, and while the freedom to enter and leave the institution is indeed limited, it is not absolute, much as there is no absolute divide between officers and other members. In his work, he brings in the distinction between conscripted armies and volunteer forces in terms of how compliance is established and while the armed forces overall practice normative compliance, volunteers tend to shift toward the remunerative side, whereas conscripted forces rely on coercive compliance.

This distinction is further studied by Levy (2007) through the symbolic and material rewards that the military rewards to soldiers that are convertible to and valuable in civil life. He points out an inverse relationship between symbolic and

material rewards: when one is high, the other tends to be low. While the shift toward occupational values in the military (Moskos, 1977) has directed regulars more toward material, remunerative rewards, the conscripts are still on the side of symbolic rewards and coercive compliance (Davies, 1989; Levy, 2013). This reflects an inherent tension built into the conscription system, where two groups – conscripts and regulars – hold distinct positions and rights within the institution.

However, conscripted armies in Western post-industrial democracies also show signs of a shift in conscript service towards a more mixed organisational format in terms of Moskos' I/O thesis. For instance, it has been brought out that next to the rhetoric of contributing to state defence, a second set of motives is apparent, related to personal growth and self-fulfilment, indicating a convergence between institutional and occupational motivators (Waldman et al., 2022). Another set of arguments focuses on the value shift in contemporary Western militaries, underlining the importance of complying with societal values to maintain their attractiveness. For example, the Scandinavian model of military conscription now emphasises inclusiveness more, with its successful implementation attributed to the “reimagining” of conscription rather than a return to the traditional model (Strand, 2021, 2024).

## **1.5. Conscription in Estonia and Its Context**

In order to study the interplay between societal transformations, military organisational change, and the lived experiences of conscripts, this thesis relies on the empirical examples of the Estonian armed forces. As the conscription systems differ across countries in their objectives and design and have adapted according to changing societies and security contexts (Jonsson et al., 2024), the next section will give an overview of Estonia's conscription system and its wider positioning in society.

Estonia, located on NATO's northeastern flank, regained its independence in 1991 and has built its national defence on the principles of comprehensive defence and a reserve-based army. Nowadays, conscription is mandatory for all medically eligible males aged 17 to 27, as stipulated by the Military Service Act (2012). Each year, approximately 3,300 conscripts begin their 8- or 11-month service, depending on the branch of service and the speciality to which they are assigned, and while women can enter the service voluntarily, their share remains low, with only around 1–2% of conscripts being women (Kaitseministeerium, 2023).

Estonia's smallness, both in terms of size and population, has been both a challenge and an opportunity – while maintaining a sustainable economy and culture has been a challenge, its smallness also grants flexibility and adaptability (Masso et al., 2020). Since the 1990s, after regaining its independence, Estonia has experienced rapid societal changes and development, emerging as a benchmark for successful neoliberal economic reforms and embracing a neoliberal culture (Hansen & Sorsa, 1994; Panagiotou, 2001). The driving force behind it has

been a turn away from the legacies of the occupied past and an orientation towards Nordic and Western practices (Jurkynas, 2021). One of the central developments for Estonia has been government-driven digitalisation, leading to a highly digital society (Björklund, 2016). Coupled with an innovative mindset and personal freedoms, the development of e-governance was considered among Estonia's greatest achievements during the period of 2000–2010 (Lauristin & Viha-lemm, 2020). Over the years, Estonians have also become happier, more trusting, and tolerant, valuing free time over work and placing less emphasis on achievement and success, aligning with the post-materialistic value shift observed in nations experiencing economic development (Ainsaar & Strenze, 2019).

Interestingly, improvement in life opportunities has been shown to decrease the willingness to fight in wars, as individualised societies tend to have lower tolerance for casualties (Inglehart et al., 2015; Luttwak, 1995; Tomforde, 2018). Additionally, it has been argued that the totality of institutions, such as the military, is perceived more strongly in Western societies, where the contrast with societal freedoms makes these institutions appear more oppressive and opposed to individual autonomy (Davies, 1989). Given these developments, one might expect a decline in attitudes toward armed resistance and mandatory military service in Estonian society over time. However, public opinion data does not support this assumption. Over the past 20 years, public assessments of the need for armed resistance have remained consistently high. Approximately 70–80% of the population agree that armed resistance is necessary in the event of an attack, and 80–90% support the necessity of conscript service for young men (Eesti Uuringukeskus, 2024).

Explanations for these attitudes lie in historical experiences, geographic positioning, and perceived threat level. Similarly to the Nordic countries, a parallel can be drawn that Estonia's proximity to an ambitious neighbouring empire – historically an occupying force – sustains a strong will to defend the nation (Inglehart et al., 2015). The historical experience of losing independence in 1939–1940 through “silent submission” left a profound mark of humiliation on the nation, instigating the adoption of comprehensive defence principles in the re-establishment of the republic, emphasising that every citizen has both the duty and the right to defend the country on their own initiative (Ilmjärv, 2004; Cieślak, 2022; Kasearu et al., 2024).

The fact that the will to defend in Estonia has remained consistently high since the 2000s, when public opinion polling began, suggests that the defence of Estonian independence and individual contribution to it has become a strongly internalised norm (Kasearu et al., 2024). However, while the Nordic countries have also maintained a high level of will to defend, this has been attributed to a shift in the meaning of fighting for one's country alongside the changing role of the military, where military service came to be understood as a commitment to international aid, democracy promotion, and peacekeeping (Puranen, 2015). In Estonia's case, this does not hold true. While the abolition of conscription was indeed a topic of societal discussion around the time of NATO accession in 2004 – when

joining NATO raised the question of shifting the focus to expeditionary capabilities rather than traditional military threats – the perceived threat of potential Russian aggression and the need for independent defence capabilities ultimately prevailed as the overriding argument (Männik, 2005). Since then, there have been no major discussions on abolishing conscription, indicating that continued support for conscription and high levels of will to defend are closely tied to the persistently high threat perception and, as mentioned above, retaining independence and everyone’s contribution to it becoming a norm.

However, when looking at the public support for conscription across age groups, it is somewhat lower among individuals aged 20–29 (73% compared to 87% in the general public), who are at the eligible age for service and 61% of respondents in this age group either express understanding of or approval for conscription evasion compared to the 38% in general population (Eesti Uuringukeskus, 2024). This suggests that conscription may not be as appealing for those directly affected. Studies on Estonian conscription have indeed shown that conscription is not well-integrated into the life courses of youth and is often perceived as a disruption (Raid et al., 2019; Truusa & Talves, 2018).

Interestingly, when looking at the statistics, less than half of the conscripts consider their service a waste of time – approximately 30–40% of conscripts during the period from 2016 to 2023, and these conscripts can be divided into three roughly equal groups: disappointed (initially motivated but dissatisfied by the end of their service), indifferent (low motivation and expectations from start to finish), and critical (motivated throughout, satisfied overall but critical) (Kasearu & Tooding, 2024). It demonstrates that how conscription is perceived is interdependent on the attitudes formed before the service and the service itself. The data on Estonian conscripts also reveals that around 60% recognise the moratorial nature of conscription, stating that it increased their self-confidence and provided skills and knowledge useful for their future lives (Kasearu & Tooding, 2024). As Erikson (1968: 157) notes, every society has its own moratorial institutions aligned with its values, and public support for conscription plays a crucial role in framing it as a space for personal development and self-discovery.

However, for Estonia, integrating two groups into state defence has remained particularly challenging: Russian-speakers and women. Estonia has a sizeable Russian-speaking minority, which, according to the 2021 Estonian Population Census, constitutes 29% of the population (Statistics Estonia, 2022). Studies show that Russian-speaking and ethnic Estonian youth differ in their value profiles (Tulviste et al., 2014; Rämmer, 2023), and the integration of Russian speakers into Estonian society remains an ongoing challenge (Pettai, 2021). Therefore, it is unsurprising that the Russian-speaking minority demonstrates lower levels of will to defend the country and is more understanding towards conscription evasion (Eesti Uuringukeskus, 2024). However, the experience of conscription and positive attitudes towards it have been found to have a positive effect on Russian-speakers’ will to defend (Berglund et al., 2022).

While Russian-speaking men are called up for service under the same terms as Estonian-speaking men, following the principle that all male Estonian citizens

are obliged to participate in conscription regardless of their mother tongue, conscript service for women remains voluntary. As mentioned above, only a small fraction of the annual conscript intake consists of women. Public opinion polls indicate that state defence is still largely perceived as an all-male obligation – according to 2024 data, 7% of the population believe that conscription should be mandatory for women as well, 41% support voluntary enlistment with service on equal terms with men, and 40% favour voluntary enlistment but with a separate programme for women (Eesti Uuringukeskus, 2024). Interestingly, compared to men, women themselves are less in favour of extending mandatory service to them and support a voluntary and separate programme solution. However, the challenge of increasing women’s participation in state defence, particularly in conscription, is not unique to Estonia. Even in Sweden and Norway, where gender-neutral conscription has been introduced – meaning that the obligation to serve is not dependent on gender – recruitment remains a struggle, and women continue to be underrepresented in conscript service (Jonsson et al., 2024).

While conscription presents presumably unique challenges for minorities like Russian-speakers and women, the current thesis does not examine these specific differences in depth but instead primarily focuses on the overall experiences of (male Estonian-speaking) conscripts to outline the emergence of pragmatic conscription and its relation to individual experiences and organisational change. However, this lays the groundwork for further research to explore the nuances of conscription experiences among different minority groups.

## 2. METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The methods of military studies vary, ranging from studying the stories of soldiers to international and longitudinal databases and quantitative analyses based on these (Soeters et al., 2014). However, quantitative methodologies have dominated military research (Jenkins et al., 2011). Since the Second World War, when the first attempts to study the attitudes of military personnel were carried out, military sociology emerged as a discipline widely used to contribute to the management and development of military organisations, emphasising generalisable knowledge and numerical assessments of soldiers and their motivations (Rech et al., 2016), creating a preference for statistical “facts” among military audiences (Walker, 2016).

Consequently, scholarly works on the military have primarily been conducted from an “etic” viewpoint, focusing on analysing the experience from an outsider’s perspective rather than considering the subjective experiences and narratives of soldiers themselves (Molendijk & Kalkman, 2023). In recent decades, scholarly attention on conscription has mainly focused on the shift toward all-volunteer forces and professional militaries (e.g., Moskos, 1977; Ajangiz, 2002; Haltiner, 1998; Leander, 2004; Poutvaara & Wagener, 2011), as well as on the effects of conscription on various life aspects such as political participation, educational attainment, mental health, and crime (e.g., Choi et al., 2022; Hubers & Webbink, 2015; Purre & Oja, 2018; Hjalmarsson & Lindquist, 2019). Understudied in the literature, however, is the question of how conscripts themselves experience their service. This study addresses this gap by exploring conscription through the experiences of the conscripts themselves.

This thesis is based on research that employs both qualitative and quantitative methods. While methodologically different, most of the studies are conducted from the viewpoint of conscripts and cover the whole period of conscription and include several measurements over time, aiming to capture the nuances of the interplay between conscripts as individuals, the military as an organisation, and the wider society. The exception is **Study IV**, which looks into the military organisation through a combination of various official reports, statements, interviews, and conscript studies to triangulate the results and provide additional perspective. Although for the thesis, Goffman’s concept of the total institution forms a central theoretical framework to illuminate this interplay, each individual study also adopted its own theoretical concepts to explore different nuances of the conscript service.

**Study I** is a qualitative study focusing on the convertibility of competencies between the civilian and military spheres. This focus serves as an arena to explore the mutual interferences and dynamics between the spheres. The study emphasises the role of the individual in the process of converting competencies, following the idea of Beck and Beck-Gernsheim’s (2002) of increased individualisation, where individuals are expected to take responsibility for their own life course and its consequences, which might be stressful. It also draws on Levy’s (2007) idea of symbolic and material rewards gained from the military that individuals can transfer, or

convert, to their civilian lives. When convertibility is mostly looked at from the perspective of gaining something from the military and transferring it to the civilian sphere, this study added another dimension by also exploring the reverse direction – from civilian to military – and how conscripts’ perceptions of what is convertible changed during their service. In addition to looking at individual agency and motivation in this regard, attention was also given to the societal level, focusing on employers, the primary group that, after conscription ends, will potentially assess whether they see any convertible value in the conscription experience.

**Study II** offers a closer look at the lived experiences of conscripts, teasing out their agency, attitudes, and resources and, through this, opening up perspectives on how they influence the military. The study adheres to the principles of a longitudinal qualitative study, where a number of conscripts are followed throughout their conscription experience, starting before they entered the service with their pre-conscription expectations and ending after the service with their reflections on conscription. This approach allows for addressing two questions at once – how individuals perceive the military as an organisation and how macro-level societal processes affect individuals’ expectations, as well as military practices.

**Study III** is a quantitative study that analyses what affects the perception of conscription as a beneficial experience. The study is guided by the concept of conscription as part of the youth life course, with conscription as a life course event being shaped by five aspects: agency (being an active participant in one’s life), lifelong development (previous experiences influencing current ones), location in time and place (when and where events occur), timing (the interdependence of other life events), and linked lives (the interdependency of other people’s lives) (Elder et al., 2003; Elder & Johnson, 2003). **Study III** can be viewed as a quantitative testing of the qualitative and exploratory findings from **Study I** and **Study II**. It looks into the interaction between individual dispositions and broader contextual factors shaping the experience of conscription.

**Study IV** focuses on analysing the practices through which conscription is retained and legitimised by organisational changes and adaptations implemented by the military. Building on the framework developed by Ben-Ari, Rosman, and Shamir (2023), the study highlights how these adaptations address two key demands: ensuring a sufficient number of soldiers with diverse skills to meet security needs and responding to public expectations regarding the social composition and treatment of conscripts. The study relies on different data sources, including official reports, statements, interviews, and secondary data from previous studies on conscripts. It offers an additional perspective to the conscription system by analysing the values the military officially communicates and signals to the wider society.

The characteristics of the studies are summarised in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Overview of **Studies I, II, III** and **IV**

	<b>STUDY I</b>	<b>STUDY II</b>	<b>STUDY III</b>	<b>STUDY IV</b>
<b>FOCUS</b>	Convertibility of competencies between civilian and military spheres	Lived experiences of conscripts	Conscription as part of the youth life course	Organisational practices of the military
<b>GROUP STUDIED</b>	Conscripts Employers	Conscripts	Conscripts	Military organisation
<b>DATA COLLECTION METHOD</b>	Estonian Conscript Survey using open-ended questions	Individual interviews, focus groups, written interviews through an online questionnaire	Estonian Conscript Survey using closed-ended questions	Keyword search from public sources, qualitative interviews, secondary data analysis of the Estonian Conscript Survey
<b>DATA COLLECTION PERIODS</b>	At the beginning and the end of conscript service, in the period of July 2018–May 2019	Data collection in spring 2019	Throughout the service in the period of July 2021–June 2022	At the beginning and at the end of conscript service in the period of July 2021–May 2022
<b>SAMPLE</b>	At the beginning, 1,257 open-ended answers; at the end, 701 open-ended answers	Eight companies participating in the in-depth qualitative study, 33 companies responding to the written interviews	14 participants	2,364 conscripts who participated in both surveying waves at the beginning and the end of their service
<b>ANALYSIS</b>	Qualitative analysis using content analysis method	Qualitative analysis using content analysis method	Qualitative analysis using thematic analysis method	Government policy statements, organisational reports, five interviews with active-duty Estonian Defence Forces members, Estonian Conscript Survey data from various years Integrative analysis combining insights from reports, policy documents, interview data, and survey results

## 2.1. Sample and Data

**Study I** draws on data collected as part of the Estonian Conscript Survey (ECS), an annual survey conducted among Estonian conscripts at two points during their service: at the beginning (Wave I) and at the end (Wave II). The ECS addresses various topics, including attitudes, health, motivation, and propensity to serve, among others (Allik & Talves, 2016). The conscripts' data used in this study were collected from those who began their service in 2018 and completed it in 2019.

The sample of ECS primarily included young males aged 18–20 (60%) at the start of their service, with smaller proportions aged 21–24 (38%) and 25–27 (2%). By the end of service, these proportions shifted to 45%, 52%, and 4%, respectively, reflecting participants' ageing during their conscript service. The survey included two open-ended questions specifically addressing the convertibility of competencies between the civil and military spheres: one at the beginning of service, asking about skills acquired in the civilian sphere that could be useful in the military, and one at the end, asking about skills gained in conscription that could be applied in civilian life. Response rates for the survey overall were 79% at the start and 52% at the end (Strateegilise Jätksuutlikkuse Kompetentsikeskus, 2019). Of the 2,482 participants in the first wave of the ECS, 1,257 responded to the question about convertibility; in the second wave, 701 out of 1,636 participants responded to the convertibility question.

To complement the ECS data, the study includes data from a qualitative study conducted in 2019 on employers' perceptions of conscription service. Fifteen companies across various industries and locations were initially approached, of which eight agreed to participate in the in-depth qualitative study. These eight companies were divided into two groups: 1) individual company studies, focusing exclusively on employers' perspectives, and 2) case studies, examining the viewpoints of both employers and employees. The individual company studies involved six companies where HR managers or similar personnel were interviewed using semi-structured interviews. The case studies included two companies where both employees and HR representatives were interviewed through a combination of focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews.

Additionally, based on the results of the interviews, an online questionnaire was prepared, and 150 randomly selected companies were invited to participate, resulting in responses from 33 companies. These companies represented a wide range of sectors, including, for instance, manufacturing, construction, agriculture, IT, and public administration, and varied in size from small firms with 50 employees to larger corporations with over 1,000 employees.

**Study II** used a longitudinal qualitative methodology, collecting data over one year from conscripts who began their service in 2021 and ended in 2022. The study aimed to have 15 participants who would be followed throughout their service. This was considered a feasible target for a longitudinal qualitative design, where intensive data collection across multiple time points generates a large volume of data per participant (Morse, 2000). To account for anticipated dropouts and to ensure that the final number of long-term participants would meet the

target, a larger number of 20 participants was recruited for the study. Ultimately, 14 participants remained in the study after six dropped out, slightly below the original aim.

Participants were recruited through an open invitation disseminated via social media and the Defence Resources Agency. Those interested in participating in the study completed an online questionnaire that gathered demographic and attitudinal information to ensure a diverse sample regarding region, age and sentiment towards service. At the beginning, nine participants stated in the online questionnaire that they would start their service gladly, ten said they were ready to fulfil their duty, and only one indicated they would avoid it if possible. A limitation of the study is that this one participant dropped out, as he was exempted from service due to health reasons, which also formed a part of his reluctance toward service. Although the initial interviews conducted before the start of service revealed that several participants who expressed readiness to fulfil their duty also held negative views toward the service, these perspectives were in the minority, and therefore, the range of viewpoints in the study may be limited. In addition, the sample may reflect a self-selection bias, with those more willing to share their experiences being more likely to respond to the study invitation. However, this limitation may be partly mitigated by the fact that 34 individuals initially expressed interest, from whom I was able to select 20 participants, allowing for some variation in perspectives.

The sample included only men, as conscription is mandatory only for men in Estonia. Women, who account for just 1% of conscripts, join the service voluntarily and are typically highly motivated to complete their service. As a result, their experiences in the military differ somewhat from those of men, who enter service due to a state-mandated obligation. Therefore, women were not included in the study.

Data were collected through multiple methods to capture the dynamic experiences of conscripts: semi-structured interviews conducted three times during their service, video blog recorded in the middle of their service, electronic diary entries throughout the service period, and three on-site observations during key training phases. Observations were exploratory, capturing the daily environment and routines of the conscripts to provide context to the data collected from other methods. These diverse methods formed together a rich qualitative set of data, resulting in a total of 723 pages of transcribed material.

**Study III** relies similarly to **Study I** on the data collected as part of the ECS; however, it was from a different year. It uses data from conscripts who started their service in either July or October 2021, served for either 8 or 11 months, and finished their service in May 2022. The response rate was 96% (N=3,028) in the first wave and 85% (N=2,494) in the second wave. This study analysed data from 2,364 conscripts participating in both waves, ensuring individual-level longitudinal linkage.

Data used in **Study III** were quantitative and employed a range of measures to explore factors influencing the perceived benefit of conscription. The primary outcome variable, the *perceived benefit of conscript service*, was assessed during

the second survey wave using four statements designed to capture various aspects of the conscription experience. Participants rated their agreement with these statements on a 5-point Likert scale. The statements addressed acquiring useful skills and knowledge, gaining self-confidence, forming lasting friendships, and whether the service was perceived as a waste of time. These items demonstrated good internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.71.

To analyse the effect of various life-course aspects on the perceived benefit of conscription, the five aspects of life-course theory were categorised into two groups and operationalised as follows.

*Contextual factors:*

1. **Organisational belonging (the aspect of lifelong development):** Whether conscripts were or had been members of a defence-related voluntary organisation before service.
2. **Family and friends' attitudes (the aspect of linked lives):** Conscripts rated the perceived support of their family and friends toward their conscription on a 4-point Likert scale, with a combined item reflecting whether both friends and family were negative, whether friends and family differed in their sentiment, or whether both friends and family were positive.
3. **Complicating life circumstances (the aspect of timing):** Participants indicated whether they had any factors that made joining the service complicated (e.g., ongoing studies, employment, or family responsibilities).
4. **COVID-19 impact (the aspect of location in time and place):** Conscripts rated the extent to which the pandemic affected their service on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from "very much" to "very little."

*Individual dispositions:*

1. **Preparedness for service (the aspect of agency):** Conscripts assessed how informed they were about the life and service conditions of the military on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = poorly informed to 4 = well-informed).
2. **Motivation to contribute (the aspect of agency):** This was an index based on nine items measuring the level of motivation for various aspects of service, rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = does not motivate at all to 5 = motivates strongly). The items captured various aspects of motivation, including a sense of duty to the state, not wanting to let down fellow conscripts, opportunities for personal development and pursuing a further career in the field of national defence, recognition from commanders, recognition of their value during service, clarity of tasks, challenging activities, and the chance to improve physical fitness. The motivation index demonstrated good internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.89.

In the study, an additional aspect of individual dispositions was included, closely related to the concept of agency: psychological hardiness. Three characteristics characterise hardy people – first, they believe they have control over their lives; second, they are able to be deeply interested and invested

in different activities; third, they view change as an opportunity for self-development (Kobasa, 1979, p. 3). This addition complemented the life-course framework by linking it to personal psychological traits, enabling an exploration of how psychological resources are directly related to the perceived benefit of conscription and indirectly shape it through various life-course aspects.

3. **Psychological hardiness:** Psychological hardiness was assessed using the Hardiness Resilience Gauge (HRG) (Bartone et al., 2023). This instrument comprises 28 items designed to measure overall hardiness as well as three of its facets: commitment, control, and challenge. Each item was rated on a 4-point Likert scale, from “Not at all true” to “Completely true.” The permission to use the HRG instrument was obtained from Multi-Health Systems Inc. after the instrument was translated into Estonian according to the company’s procedures. HRG was translated into Estonian using a back-translation method. Two Estonian researchers and psychologists translated the original version into Estonian, and one Estonian researcher and psychologist translated the scale back into English without knowing the original version. These two versions were then compared, and final refinements were made to the Estonian version. The HRG measured at the end of service demonstrated good reliability, with a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.89 for total hardiness and 0.83, 0.82, and 0.84 for the commitment, control, and challenge subscales, respectively.

**Study IV** looks into how conscription systems are maintained and adapted to meet evolving security needs and societal expectations by integrating diverse data sources. This study combines government policy statements, organisational reports, five qualitative interviews with Estonian Defence Forces (EDF) active-duty members, and findings from prior research. The analysis of government policy statements and organisational reports was conducted in 2021 using a keyword search related to Estonian military conscription and defence policies. Five qualitative interviews were conducted in early 2021 with EDF active-duty members from various units and positions to gather empirical insights. Additionally, this study incorporates data from the ECS collected primarily during the period of 2019–2020, while also drawing on data from other years to highlight different trends.

## 2.2. Methods of Analysis

The analysis of data in **Study I** focused on two qualitative studies: ECS and a study of employers’ perceptions of conscription. Responses from ECS open-ended questions and data from the employers’ study were analysed using qualitative content analysis. Given the sizable number of responses from conscripts and employers, the analysis of both datasets followed the technique of inductive category formation (Mayring, 2014), with codes and categories being revised and adapted throughout the analysis, aiming to condense responses into core aspects

that characterise the convertibility of competencies between civil and military spheres. The analysis was conducted following the principle of cross-case analysis, in which the unit of analysis is a case, which may be defined at the level of an individual, group, organisation, etc. (Mathison, 2005). In this study, the aim was to identify recurring patterns across different data collections, and thus, the case was defined as a dataset. In the case of ECS, the first dataset consisted of data collected at the beginning of conscripts' service, while the second was collected at the end of service. In the employers' study, the first dataset was derived from an in-depth qualitative study, and the second from an online questionnaire. In the initial stage, data from different datasets were coded separately, after which cases were used for cross-case analysis to identify similarities and differences across them.

The research forming the basis of **Study II** encompassed several research questions, resulting in a substantial volume of collected data (over 700 pages of transcripts). In such cases, datasets are first reduced by setting aside data that is not relevant to the analysis at hand (Namey et al., 2008). In **Study II**, the focus was on conscripted armed forces as total institutions, following Erving Goffman's conceptualisation, and not all collected data was directly related to this focus. Therefore, as part of data preparation, structural coding (Namey et al., 2008) was applied to the collected data, enabling the labelling and indexing of different topics and thereby allowing quick access to data relevant for analysis. To ensure that no pertinent data was overlooked, the structural codes were double-checked using keyword searches. In the next phase, the data analysis of **Study II** employed thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Ezzy, 2002) on the sections of the data relevant to the research objectives of this study. The analysis followed a structured yet iterative approach to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences, involving continuous experimentation with codes, categories, and themes (Ezzy, 2002). First, open coding was used to generate initial codes, which captured key aspects of the data. These codes were then grouped into broader categories through repeated readings and refinements.

**Study III** employed structural equation modelling (SEM) to analyse the relationships between life-course factors, psychological hardiness, and the perceived benefit of conscription. SEM was chosen for its capacity to simultaneously analyse both direct and indirect effects among multiple indicators (Hayduk et al., 2007). The SEM framework incorporated pathways to test the hypothesised direct effects of individual dispositions and contextual factors on the perceived benefit of conscription, as well as the mediating role of hardiness. Model fit was assessed using standard fit indices, including the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), with thresholds indicating acceptable model fit. The data analysis was conducted using IBM SPSS 29 and Amos 29.

The analysis in **Study IV** used a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches. The data from government policy statements and organisational reports, and the empirical data from qualitative interviews with EDF active members, were subjected to thematic analysis as it allows for the identification of recurring

themes and patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Ezzy, 2002). Additionally, quantitative data from ECS were incorporated into the study, which was mainly analysed by using contingency table analysis.

### **2.3. The Challenges of Studying the Military**

Studying the military context and related topics, such as conscription, which is the focus of this thesis, is a challenge. Military research demands that researchers remain reflexive about their own assumptions and positions, maintain continuous awareness of the complex issues inherent in studying military contexts, and make a deliberate effort to preserve a critical perspective (Ben-Ari & Levy, 2014; Rech et al., 2016). Therefore, I consider it important to outline the most commonly discussed challenges regarding military research and in the following section, my own experiences and reflections on those.

In some sense, military organisations are just like other large-scale organisations (Ben-Ari & Levy, 2014), and researching any organisation can be difficult (Symon & Cassell, 2012; Pettigrew et al., 2001). What sets military organisations apart is that, by their very essence, they are designed to protect knowledge that could be harmful to the state's defence if made public. They also have the legitimate right to use state-sanctioned violence, rely on taxpayers' money, are impactful yet unpredictable forces of social dynamics, and, due to these factors, are subjects of public interest (Soeters et al., 2014; Ben-Ari & Levy, 2014). This creates tension wherein military organisations must constantly balance being open and transparent to maintain their legitimacy while avoiding compromising state security (Soeters, 2018). Consequently, military organisations tend to exhibit an inclination toward closure, both physically and symbolically (Jelušič et al., 2016; Weber, 2016).

Hence, the common issues when studying the military setting relate to access to the field and, interrelatedly, to relations with the gatekeeper(s) (Rech et al., 2016). The gatekeepers may be officials from the organisation handling public relations, local commanders of units, and others who grant access to the field in terms of both information and individuals, thereby potentially affecting the selection of participants or materials for the study (Ben-Ari & Levy, 2014). While organisational gatekeepers are not unique to military organisations but are present in other organisations as well (Saunders, 2012), research on military topics can pose a threat to either the organisation itself or individuals within it, as findings may uncover mistakes by military personnel, potentially affecting individual military careers, or challenge the organisation's image, which can lead the armed forces to limit researchers' access to the field (Ben-Ari & Levy, 2014).

Therefore, it is common for armed forces to establish their own research institutes or foster close collaborations between academia and the military (Jenkins et al., 2011). This arrangement offers significant benefits for researchers, including better access to military environments and a greater willingness among commanders to cooperate, as such researchers are viewed as integral members of

the team, but it can also create a sense of indebtedness for gaining access to the field, potentially leading researchers to self-censor their findings (Ben-Ari & Levy, 2014). Consequently, scholars may choose to rely on externally available data for their military research. While this approach provides greater autonomy, it risks overlooking critical internal dynamics, which are often crucial for a comprehensive understanding and interpretation of study findings (Ben-Ari & Levy, 2014). Researching the military thus inherently involves navigating the role of being either an “insider” or an “outsider” (Higate & Cameron, 2006).

## 2.4. Self-reflections

My own positioning when conducting the studies of this thesis was somewhere between the two categories of “insider” and “outsider” (Higate & Cameron, 2006). I began my PhD studies after working for a year at the Estonian Military Academy (EMA). My work involved carrying out the Estonian Conscription Survey (ECS), and it captured my interest that while some studies suggested that youth perceive conscription as a period during which their lives are put on hold (e.g., Truusa & Talves, 2018), others showed that not all conscripts perceive it this way and that perceptions of conscription depend on a variety of factors (e.g., Raid et al., 2019). This interest motivated me to pursue PhD studies and research the perceptions of conscription and how they are formed.

Pursuing my PhD at the University of Tartu (UT) while working at EMA put me in a dual status position, positioning me partially as an insider and partially as an outsider. On the one hand, I had not undergone conscript service myself, and my role at EMA was coordinative, without direct contact with conscripts or authority over them. Additionally, my affiliation with UT reinforced my outsider status. However, working within a military organisation simultaneously afforded me some insider perspective. Thus, my relationship with the studied group is better understood not as a dichotomy of “insider” versus “outsider”, but a fitting way to describe this would be studying “the familiar,” where the researcher is familiar with the group but not a full member of it (Kirke, 2013). This dual positioning came with both advantages and challenges.

Since **Study I** and **Study III** were based on secondary data analyses regarding conscripts’ data, they did not require access points or interactions with military gatekeepers. However, **Study I** is comprised of two separate studies. In addition to the ECS data, it utilises data from the employers’ study. While I played no role in the data collection for the Estonian Conscript Survey regarding **Study I**, the employers’ study was part of a larger research project conducted by UT’s military sociology research group. When this study was carried out, I had not yet begun my PhD, nor was I working at EMA, which positioned me as an outsider. However, I collaborated with the research group, developing the interview questions and conducting both oral and written interviews. To address my outsider positioning and, therefore, limited knowledge of the field, I worked closely with other research group members to grasp the nuances of the topic. While the

employers' study did not require access to the military field, it posed the challenge of accessing different companies to conduct the interviews, a field in which I was also an outsider.

**Study III** was a quantitative study and did not require my own physical access to the field, as the data collection was part of the annual ECS. While some of the data collected came from the standard question set asked of conscripts each year, I contributed to the questionnaire design by acquiring rights and organising the translation of the HRG scale to add it to the survey and also added the question about family and friends' attitudes. Although researchers' reflexivity is predominantly associated with qualitative research to highlight the researcher's role and potential influence on their work, scholars have increasingly emphasised the importance of reflexivity in quantitative research, which is often regarded as more objective due to its focus on quantifiable patterns and commonalities of experience (Walker et al., 2013; Kingdon, 2005; Jamieson et al., 2023). However, quantitative social research addresses the same sensitive topics as qualitative research and is also similarly impacted by the researcher's own view at every stage, from research design to data analysis and interpretation (Jamieson et al., 2023). This consideration applies to **Study III** as well. While being quantitative, it still deals with the military field with its own specific practices and the way questions are formulated and how the data is analysed depends on the researcher.

For both **Study I** and **Study III**, while I acknowledge my role in the data collection, I feel that the primary challenge lay in analysing and interpreting the results while remaining conscious of my dual affiliation and how my partial insider status might influence the process. To address this, I made a deliberate effort to maintain a critical perspective, triangulating interpretations with my co-authors (and supervisors) and participants in the UT doctoral seminars.

In **Study IV**, my main responsibilities included organising interviews with active members of EDF and contributing to the keyword-based search of policy statements and organisational reports. Interestingly, in this study, I was positioned more as an insider, as my co-authors did not work in the military, giving me better resources for identifying potential interviewees. The sample was a combination of convenience and snowball sampling: we started with two individuals I knew, who then recommended others for interviews. We aimed to include individuals with diverse backgrounds and roles in the military to capture various viewpoints. In this study, the authors' diverse backgrounds enriched the study by bringing multiple perspectives to the topic. While both of my co-authors (and supervisors) are experts in studying the military field, neither of them worked directly in the military. Additionally, an outsider perspective on the Estonian context was provided by Prof. Ben-Ari, who highlighted aspects in the data that might otherwise have been taken for granted by Estonian researchers. Furthermore, the triangulation of different data types offered a more comprehensive understanding of the topic.

The most challenging part was conducting **Study II**, a study I initiated myself and led the data collection. The data collection involved observations and interviews conducted in the barracks. This required gaining access to a field I did not

have daily access to. The process of gaining access was relatively smooth, likely because I was working at EMA and was perceived as part of the team – a benefit of academic-military collaborations highlighted earlier in this section (Ben-Ari & Levy, 2014). However, there were a couple of challenging situations in this regard, particularly during observations that I conducted. For instance, the gatekeeper took me to the training field to observe the training process and introduced me as someone conducting research for EMA, which I had wanted to avoid to retain a more neutral stance. I thereafter reintroduced myself to conscripts and briefly explained my dual positioning, emphasising that the observations conducted are related to my PhD studies at UT to minimise the effect of conscripts feeling reviewed by someone inside the organisation.

Accessing the field could also, as noted before, lead to a sense of “owing” the gatekeeper and potentially self-censoring findings (Ben-Ari & Levy, 2014). To mitigate these effects, I minimised my visits to the barracks and employed diverse data collection methods that reduced reliance on gatekeepers and allowed for direct interaction with study participants. Using varied research strategies and modes of access has been identified as an effective approach to maintaining a critical distance in military research (Ben-Ari & Levy, 2014).

The gatekeeper may also potentially influence the selection of study participants (Ben-Ari & Levy, 2014). In this study, participants were invited through an open call shared via social media and an email sent to all individuals beginning their service during a certain time and place chosen for the study. While the email was sent by the Estonian Defence Resources Agency, which may have influenced who chose to respond to it since it came from an official institution of the EDF, I ensured that participation remained voluntary. I contacted the individuals I had selected for the final group of study participants to emphasise this before going further.

Qualitative research also poses emotional challenges to the researcher, such as dealing with developing attachments or hearing untold stories (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007). These challenges are mostly related to researching sensitive topics. While the research topic of **Study II** was not generally a sensitive one in its nature, conscripts did trust some of the hardships in their interviews and in their diaries to me, which I am not sure were shared with anyone else. From week to week and month to month, I read their stories and was expecting how some of the situations would eventually play out. The small number of participants made the research even more personal. As a result, I felt a sense of responsibility toward my participants in reflecting their thoughts and experiences truthfully. However, as most of the data collection was through electronic diary entries, the relationships did not become overly personal, and the time gap between collecting the data and analysing and writing it up also helped to create emotional distance.

In order to retain reflexivity on my own assumptions, emotions and internal negotiations, I kept a research diary. This was necessary for reflecting on my own thoughts about the data I gained throughout the year-long period that the study was ongoing, to mark down interesting insights constantly, and to be aware of any conflicting situations. While overall, I felt that being partially an insider

helped me better understand the study participants' reflections on their service, I felt it was important to think of myself primarily as a junior researcher conducting research at UT. I also deemed it important to stress from the first moment I met with the study participants that my position in this study was mainly related to my PhD studies at UT, while acknowledging that I also worked at EMA, which was why I was interested in the topic.

Lastly, it is worth noting that **Study II** and **Study III** overlapped with the start of the Ukrainian war in February 2022. While based on **Study III**, it is difficult to determine whether this had any effect on the perceived benefit of conscription, which was the central focus of the study, **Study II** provides more understanding. Conscripts made diary entries throughout their service, allowing for an insight into how the war was related to their perceptions and experiences. This was also specifically a part that I asked about in the final interviews to contextualise the results of my study. Many participants mentioned that, for the first time, they truly understood why conscription is necessary and what its purpose is. However, they also noted that the war was not widely discussed among conscripts, as they felt it might lead to conflicts. While these aspects could be further studied in depth, it appears that service motives related to patriotism gained more significance following the outbreak of the war, whereas the diary entries and interviews signalled consistency in the pragmatic motives for conscription.

## 2.5. Ethical Considerations

In all four studies, the ethical principles of social research were upheld, with particular emphasis on informed consent, voluntary participation, and the anonymity of participants.

**Study I**, **Study III**, and partially **Study IV** rely on ECS data, and therefore the ethical principles in conducting those are shared. ECS is conducted electronically on tablets and administered in person at all military camps where conscripts are trained. In such research, voluntary participation is a key challenge, as the hierarchical structure may lead conscripts to feel obligated to take part in surveys. This challenge is also present in ECS, as survey participation is scheduled into conscripts' timetables, and they are gathered in a classroom to complete it. To ensure clear communication that participation is entirely voluntary, that declining will not result in negative consequences, and that they may withdraw at any time, the survey is administered by UT surveyors who orally explain the purpose of the study to all participants before distributing the survey. This allows conscripts to opt out before receiving the survey. However, since publicly declining in front of peers may be uncomfortable, conscripts are also given the option to decline participation on the first page of the survey, where the study's description is provided again. The introductory text, along with the informed consent and the survey itself is available in both Estonian and Russian. Participants may also withdraw at any point while completing the survey. No military personnel are allowed in the room during the survey to minimise any sense of obligation. To ensure transparency,

participants receive small business cards with the survey name and a web link for further information. ECS procedures – including data collection, analysis, storage, and data protection protocols – are regulated by official guidelines issued by EMA. ECS holds approval from the University of Tartu Ethics Committee.

Considering other data collection modes in this thesis, **Study I** also includes data from the employers' study. From an ethical aspect, participants were informed about the study's aim and data processing principles, including the voluntary nature of their participation, in written form prior to their involvement. In the case of face-to-face interviews, this information was also reiterated before the start of the interviews. All face-to-face interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim by me, and I was the sole person with access to these recordings, transcriptions, and participant information. For the written interviews as well I was solely responsible for sending out the study invitations, providing information about the study, as well as collecting and analysing the data and therefore had sole access to it. Anonymity was ensured for all participants, and company names were not disclosed in the reporting of results. Instead, their field of activity was described in a sufficiently vague manner to prevent identification.

**Study II** consisted of different data collection modes, but in all cases, the guiding principles were to ensure voluntary participation, protect participant anonymity, and safeguard their data. At the beginning of the study, all participants were asked to sign written informed consent forms, with one copy provided to themselves. Six participants exercised their right to withdraw from the study at various stages. Communicating directly with the study participants allowed me to maintain their anonymity as I did not have to communicate with them through EDF or their commanders. It was, however, challenging during the second round of interviews, as they were conducted in the barracks. To mitigate this, interviews were scheduled on a day when participants had no planned activities, with prior agreement from the military camp. Interview times were arranged directly with participants to avoid the involvement of commanders in the process. While it is possible that some commanders were aware of who participated in the interviews or that participants knew among themselves who is participating in the study, in reporting the results, care was taken to ensure that no data was identifiable, preventing any potential negative consequences for participants, either during their conscription service or later in their reserve service.

As part of **Study IV**, data collection also included interviews with active members of the EDF. In conducting the interviews, all participants were informed of their voluntary nature and their right to discontinue participation at any time. They were also assured of the anonymity of their responses, and the collected data was accessed only by the authors of this study. As the aim of the interviews was to understand the context and environment and was therefore more exploratory, they were not recorded but instead documented through written notes.

### 3. FINDINGS

To understand the implications of the interaction between society, the military, and conscripts therein, the thesis relies on four original studies. **Study I** examines the convertibility of competencies between civil and military spheres. **Study II** focuses on the lived experiences of conscripts during their service, exploring how their perceptions and meaning-making change throughout their time in service. **Study III** centres on the perceived benefits of conscription and the factors influencing these perceptions. **Study IV** looks into the organisational practices of the military in relation to conscription and the changes within it in response to changing security needs and public expectations. The following section presents the main findings of each study.

#### 3.1. The Convertibility of Competencies Between Civil and Military Spheres (Study I)

The aim of **Study I** was to explore how competencies and resources gained in civilian life can be translated into the military sphere and vice versa. It addressed how this converting process depends on individual factors such as agency and motivation, how the military allows such conversion, and how societal perceptions and values are related to what is considered convertible. The study allowed to look into two dynamics: first, how perceptions of conscription change during the service, and second, the interaction between the civil and military spheres.

The study demonstrated that at the beginning of conscript service, personal qualities such as adaptability, stress tolerance, time management, and discipline were most commonly identified as transferable from the civilian sphere to the military. Conscripts' answers reflected that they expected the armed forces and service to be hierarchical and physically and socially challenging, where success relied on openness to adapt. From the employers' viewpoint, very few had experience with youth who went to service after working with them. As a result, they had limited experience to share regarding the possible conversion of competencies from the civil to the military sphere. Nonetheless, some employers actively supported young employees in further developing their skills during conscript service, such as IT companies leveraging the option for youth to serve in the EDF's Cyber Command, where they address cybersecurity challenges as part of their service, a practice known as cyber conscription. These opportunities, however, depended on proactive agency from both individuals and companies.

By the end of their service, conscripts still identified personal qualities and practical skills as the most convertible competencies and in the military-to-civil direction, these competencies were even more commonly perceived as convertible than in the civil-to-military direction. Among personal qualities, conscripts highlighted personal growth, improved discipline, stress tolerance, and leadership abilities. Employers also placed greater importance on "soft" skills, viewing

conscription as a marker of discipline, maturity, and reliability. This underscores the influence of societal expectations in shaping what is considered convertible.

Not all conscripts viewed convertibility positively. Some struggled to identify convertible skills, while others expressed frustration, perceiving conscription as disconnected from civilian career trajectories. Employers also noted that the hierarchical nature of military service is misaligned with modern workplaces' collaborative and skill-based environments. This finding is somewhat controversial, as some conscripts themselves felt that their leadership training had direct applications in civilian roles.

Overall, the study highlighted the emergence of a “pragmatic conscription”, which combines traditional institutional motivators like duty with occupational ones such as skill acquisition. It emphasised that individual motivation and agency are central to converting competencies from one sphere to another. While some conscripts readily identify convertible skills, others find it difficult to attribute long-term significance to their service. Employers, for their part, value conscripts' own ability to articulate their experiences and gained competencies, but do not universally see conscript service as advantageous when applying for a job. From an institutional standpoint, the study shows that the armed forces have adapted and are aligning their practices with societal changes by creating arrangements to accommodate new expectations surrounding individual choice and the convertibility of competencies.

### **3.2. Change in Perceptions and Meaning-Making Throughout Service (Study II)**

**Study II** goes further into depth with the experiences of conscription through the longitudinal qualitative study. The study focuses on how societal transformations on a macro level impact conscripts' lives and how the conscription system is being adapted to meet both the needs of the armed forces and the expectations of today's youth. While **Study I** focused on the content of change, **Study II** explores the process of change. It reveals the constant negotiations throughout the service—how the meaning and convertibility of conscription are continuously rethought in relation to the service experience and conscripts' personal lives. Additionally, this study provides an insider perspective on organisational change, capturing the microcosm of conscription.

The findings of this study bring out a mix of acceptance and resistance to organisational practices from the conscripts' perspective. Similar to **Study I**, some participants viewed service as an opportunity for personal growth, while others struggled with the limitations placed on their agency. Intentional efforts were made to actively participate and shape their service, which sometimes resulted in frustration when institutional needs overrode their preferences. However, in some cases, conscripts accepted that certain aspects were beyond their control and adapted to them by redefining the meaning of their service through alternative pathways, such as embracing unexpected roles.

In this ambivalent mix of acceptance and resistance, the study identifies two types of negotiations in conscription. Short-term, situational negotiations involve conscripts' immediate, context-specific actions and adjustments to the military environment, such as experimenting with their new social roles. The long-term negotiations centre on aligning conscription experiences with personal goals, such as obtaining specific training that benefits the future. These findings align with **Study I**, which also highlighted the emergence of a type of conscription where achieving personal goals and increasing the capital of convertible competencies is both publicly voiced by conscripts and addressed by the military.

The study further indicates tensions at the organisational level between adapting to societal expectations and fulfilling military needs. While lower-level interactions with commanders increasingly emphasise teamwork and civilian-like dynamics, the higher-level command remains hierarchical, focusing on compliance. These findings shed light on results from **Study I**, which indicated that some conscripts and employers struggle to identify convertible competencies between the civilian and military fields, as they perceive the two as too different, as the military does not follow the same collaborative teamwork model as modern workplaces. While lower levels of command in conscription appear similar to civilian workforce dynamics, higher levels seem to follow a classical hierarchical military model, reinforcing society's rather conservative perception of the military.

While the military's efforts to adapt to societal norms have reinforced a more flexible and individualised approach to conscripts, these changes have introduced new tensions. A perception of softened conscription contrasted with expectations of discipline, fostering disappointment among some conscripts. While the changes in organisational practices respond to societal expectations, they risk normalising the military and eroding its exclusivity as an institution, possibly diminishing its attractiveness.

### **3.3. Perceived Benefit of Conscription (Study III)**

Both **Study I** and **Study II** bring out an ambivalence in conscripts' attitudes and practices – some view the experience as useful and convertible to civilian life, while others do not. **Study III**, a quantitative study, tests how various factors identified in the previous studies are related to the perceptions of conscription. It takes into account individual-level factors, such as conscripts' past experiences and inherent characteristics like motivation and psychological hardiness, and also considers contextual factors, such as the attitudes of family and friends, as well as life circumstances that can make conscription more stressful – for example, having financial loans or a family member in need of care, which may be challenging to address while in service.

**Study III**'s findings show that the attitudes of family and friends were the most influential external factors, with positive reinforcement significantly enhancing the perceived value of conscription. Attitudes of family and friends also affected youths' motivation to contribute to service, thereby indirectly affecting

the perceived benefit of conscription. This indicated that individual dispositions are closely tied to one's social circle.

Next to it, preparedness for service, motivation to contribute, and psychological hardiness emerged as the strongest predictors of a positive perception of conscription. The study also showed that these three concepts are all closely tied to each other. Hardiness amplified the relation between preparedness and motivation with the perceived benefit of service, indicating that the combination of agency and hardiness equips youth with a mindset to view conscription as an opportunity for growth and self-development. This also resonates with the results from **Study I** by confirming that military-civil directional convertibility is related to individual agency and motivation.

The study highlights that whether conscription is perceived as a meaningful experience or a futile obligation is shaped by the interplay between individual resources and contextual factors. Actively steering one's life in a desired direction, finding meaning and interest in daily activities, approaching new experiences as opportunities for growth, and feeling supported by a strong social network all contribute to framing conscription in a more positive light. Therefore, youth who actively prepare for service, receive strong social support, and approach challenges with a hardy mindset are more likely to perceive conscription as a valuable and beneficial experience.

### **3.4. Organisational Practices and Adaptation to Societal Expectations (Study IV)**

While **Study I** and **Study II** offered an insider perspective on organisational change, **Study IV** examines it more from an external perspective, through the public eye. It highlights that, similar to other conscription systems, the Estonian conscription system is centred around four key organising principles. The first principle is selective recruitment, determining who is recruited and who is not. The Estonian system recruits all medically and legally eligible youth, including members of the Russian-speaking minority, but excludes women, who may enter the service voluntarily. Second, exemptions are granted both formally and informally. Formal exemptions include, for instance, health-related issues or not fulfilling educational requirements. Some youth also avoid conscription through informal means, such as evading recruitment. Third, there are voluntary routes to conscription. Although conscription is legally mandatory, individuals can volunteer to influence their service and serve in preferred units or positions, as well as women opting to participate in military service. Fourth, conscripts are motivated through material and non-material incentives. Material incentives include items like pins and emblems, while non-material incentives involve creating positive memories and experiences to foster a military identity.

These principles characterise the conscription system but are also subject to change in response to changing security and societal demands. The study further

highlights three key social developments in Estonian society that shape public expectations of the EDF and conscript service.

First, the military's role extends beyond defence, serving as a powerful symbol of Estonia's national identity and acting as a unifying force. Conscription plays a central role in this, with the well-being of conscripts being a national concern. The EDF publicly addresses this through different news segments and holding open family days to signal that conscripts are treated well. Second, EDF is affected by the spread of neoliberalism, which emphasises efficiency and the effective use of resources, including human resources and time. This has become a normalised public expectation and is reflected in the conscription system, which can be characterised as an exchange relationship between conscripts and the EDF. Similar to negotiations between employees and employers in civilian workplaces, conscripts are motivated and committed when the military provides opportunities for self-actualisation; if it does not, they may opt out in various ways. Third, the conscription system must be perceived as fair and inclusive for public support. The EDF actively works to signal the equal burden sharing among youth. For example, the conscription system includes Estonia's Russian-speaking minority, demonstrating that all male citizens of Estonia are required to undergo conscription regardless of their ethnic background. Additionally, while women are not subject to mandatory conscription in Estonia, they can participate voluntarily, and the EDF has increasingly promoted opportunities for women through targeted campaigns, public events, and initiatives, reflecting broader societal shifts toward gender equality. While progress has been made, women remain underrepresented in both the conscription system and active service.

Therefore, **Study IV** highlights the importance of adapting organisational practices of the military regarding conscription not only to guarantee their functional effectiveness and economic efficiency but also to ensure the continued material and symbolic support. This, however, ties back to the findings of **Study II** regarding the internal challenges the military organisation may face as a result of adapting to societal transformations.

## 4. DISCUSSION

This chapter discusses the findings of the original studies in light of the research aim: to understand the implications of the interplay between conscripts as agents, the military as a structure, and societal values on both the military and the conscripts therein, using the case study of Estonia. Accordingly, the results are discussed from two perspectives: the individual and the organisational level. The first section focuses on the individual level, examining how conscripts navigate institutional constraints and seek meaning and convertibility in their service. The second explores how the military organisation adapts to changing societal norms and expectations. The final section draws together the findings to reflect on conscription's changing and processual nature and considers its possible future developments. The discussion is guided by Erving Goffman's concept of the total institution, which is applied here as an analytical tool to offer insights into the conscription-based military as a total institution.

### 4.1. Negotiating Individual Agency within Institutional Constraints

Like other total institutions, the military seeks to exert control over all aspects of its members' lives while limiting their contact with the outside world (Goffman, 1961). Overall, organisations inherently expect participants to align their actions and identities with institutional norms and goals, which in total institutions lead to what Goffman (1961, pp. 186–190) terms *secondary adjustments*, where individuals subtly maintain their sense of individuality and autonomy while outwardly adhering to the organisation's expectations. These adjustments reflect the ongoing situational negotiations between individual agency and institutional constraints, on which this section focuses, analysing how conscripts respond to institutional constraints and engage in shaping their service experience in pursuit of personal meaning.

Goffman's (1961) concept of total institutions is, however, primarily based on prisons and asylums, which somewhat differ from the military. The military's defining feature is its legitimised monopoly over the means of violence, a legitimacy dependent upon operating lawfully under civilian authority and adhering to democratic norms and principles (Burk, 2002; Croissant et al., 2010; Kuehn et al., 2017). As a result, militaries in democratic societies are continuously engaged in efforts to legitimise themselves and align with societal expectations to fulfil their part of the implicit contract with the state. The military's unique task also sets it apart from other total institutions, as its members must ultimately be prepared to fight alongside each other, requiring trust to be fostered between the traditionally divided groups of members and supervisory staff within the total institution framework.

Moreover, conscript-based armed forces, while generally facing fewer recruitment challenges due to the natural pool provided by conscripts (Szvircsev Tresch, 2008), still need to address two issues. First, efforts must be made to attract youth to conscription, as potential conscripts may find ways to evade service or choose alternative service options when the service is, for instance, perceived as unequal or too greedy towards individuals (Kosonen et al., 2019). Second, ensuring a positive conscription experience and positive military legacy is vital for encouraging future participation in state defence as reservists (Laanepere et al., 2018; Laanepere & Kasearu, 2021). These factors suggest that conscript-based armed forces might inherently allow for greater agency and negotiation among conscripts than would typically be expected in the ideal type of total institutions.

The findings of **Study II** align with this notion, showing that while secondary adjustments in Goffman's (1961) sense are evident – for example, in how conscripts covertly find ways to use their phones during restricted times – another layer of negotiations emerges as conscripts seek convertibility from their experiences. This introduces a temporal dimension to the negotiations within and about total institutions, extending Goffman's (1961) concept of secondary adjustments in a military setting.

Namely, while Goffman's (1961) descriptions of secondary adjustments focus primarily on situational negotiations – immediate reactions to the institution – conscription also involves long-term negotiations. The findings of **Study II** demonstrate that these centre on conscripts strategically leveraging their time in service for their own long-term goals. Conscripts actively take steps to steer their careers in ways that provide experiences that would be useful in their future lives. At the same time, the military organisation's structural limitations often constrain these efforts, leading conscripts to experiment with various strategies until they find a balance that aligns their personal expectations and aspirations with the military's needs. The meaning of service is constantly redefined during conscription in accordance with structural opportunities and constraints. These negotiations extend beyond the immediate time of conscript service. One possible explanation for this lies in the process of social acceleration (Rosa, 2013), which pressures youth to make the most of every experience and acquire qualifications that will benefit their future lives (Cuzzocrea, 2019). Studies on Estonian conscripts have indeed shown that one of the fears associated with conscription is falling behind their peers who are not in service (Truusa & Talves, 2018).

Therefore, there is a rise of pragmatic conscription, characterised by conscripts openly seeking convertible competencies (**Study I**) and meaning in their service (**Study II**). To preserve legitimacy, the military accommodates these expectations (**Study IV**), offering, to some extent, a moratorial space for youth to explore roles and identities (Erikson, 1968) and a space to reinvent themselves (Scott, 2011). As a result, some conscripts indeed report that their service has been a period of personal growth (**Study I, Study II**). However, the studies in this thesis indicate that converting knowledge and skills from the military sphere to the civilian sphere largely depends on the individual. While the military can provide a moratorial space (Erikson, 1968), whether it is used as such is up to the

individual. For instance, **Study I** suggests that the influence of conscription experience in job applications depends heavily on the individual, as employers generally do not request this information or perceive a value in the experience itself. However, they respond positively to candidates who actively present convertible competencies.

This brings forward another finding about the subjectivity of the conscription experience and the extent to which conscription is perceived as a total institution. Goffman (1961: 5) acknowledges that total institutions vary, and while different institutions may not share all the attributes of a total institution, many do so to an intense degree. However, this thesis demonstrates that individual experiences of the elements of a total institution also vary. What differs is the sentiment towards these elements, such as whether there should be a strict division between conscripts and officers or not, and the intensity with which these elements are perceived, for instance, whether the time allotted for communicating with loved ones is deemed sufficient (**Study II**).

Both **Study I** and **Study II** also highlight that not all conscripts are able to find meaning or convertibility in their conscription experience. On the one hand, the reason may lie in how conscription is seen as an unquestionable obligation by both youth and employers (**Study I, Study II**), whose views reflect the wider societal perceptions. Indeed, considering Estonia's small size, historical experiences, and geopolitical location, the defence of Estonian independence and individual contribution to it has become a strongly internalised norm (Kasearu et al., 2024). This is reflected in annual state defence polls, which have consistently shown high levels of will to defend (70–80%) and strong support for conscription (80–90%) over the past two decades (Eesti Uuringukeskus, 2024).

However, viewing conscription as an inevitable and self-evident obligation may lead to a monolithic view of conscript service, focusing primarily on its core function of ensuring state defence by providing military skills to youth. As a result, **Study I** findings show that the military and civilian spheres are sometimes perceived as too distinct to allow significant convertibility between them. This societal perspective also shapes what conscripts, as members of the society, consider convertible from their conscription experience and what not. Thus, this shows how the macro-level understanding of conscription (**Study IV**) shapes perceptions at both meso- (employers) (**Study I**) and micro-levels (conscripts) (**Study I, Study II**).

On the other hand, **Study III** adds another dimension by showing that whether conscript service is perceived as beneficial depends on a combination of interpersonal and intrapersonal resources. Individual dispositions and motivation, along with social support from one's social circle, play a crucial role in shaping how the conscription experience is perceived. This suggests that individual agency and the surrounding social context collectively shape whether conscripts find value and meaning in their service. Laanepere et al. (2018) study on Estonian conscripts and reservists has also highlighted the need for militaries to actively develop and raise awareness of how competencies gained in the military can be transferred to the civilian sphere, thereby fostering an understanding of the

military's legacy in society and assigning value to it. These findings align with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, illustrating the dynamic interplay between multiple systemic levels in shaping individual experiences. They also resonate with practice theory, which emphasises how the meaning of social practices is shaped by social interactions (Vihalemm et al., 2015). This is particularly evident in **Study III**, where the conscripts' perceptions of the benefits of their service were most strongly associated with the attitudes of family and friends, and in **Study II**, where conscripts are seen to reframe their experiences during visits home but also in response to unexpected service paths, which required them to rethink the meaningfulness of their service continually. These dynamics further demonstrate how the self is in constant flux, continuously recreated through reflections on the service experience (Giddens, 1991). These results also highlight how nuanced the experience of conscription is and how it can differ significantly among individuals.

## 4.2. Military Organisation Adapting to Societal Transformations

The current section reflects the challenges of democratic militaries, where maintaining legitimacy necessitates balancing institutional aims and responding to societal transformations. While various transformations, such as social acceleration, globalisation, and digitalisation, affect militaries, normative drivers, such as shifts in societal norms and values, have been identified as the most challenging for the military as a total institution to cope with (Holmberg & Alvinus, 2019). Over the past decades, Estonian society has increasingly moved toward a neo-liberal culture (Hansen & Sorsa, 1994; Panagiotou, 2001), while simultaneously embracing post-materialistic values (Ainsaar & Strenze, 2019). Estonia is also a highly digitalised society (Björklund, 2016) with the younger generations holding high the self-enhancement values (Lilleoja & Raudsepp, 2016). These societal transformations are reflected within EDF as well.

For instance, **Study I** highlighted that while conscripts openly advocate for gaining convertible competencies from their military service, it also demonstrated how the military accommodates these aspirations. One example is the creation of opportunities for youth employed in IT companies to continue advancing their skills and knowledge through cyber conscription – a practice closely linked to Estonia's high level of digitalisation and viewed as a means to attract more young people to the cyber workforce, whether in the military, industry, or public sector (Sömer et al., 2019). This approach benefits all parties involved: IT companies gain after the service employees who have further developed their competencies, individuals are able to convert their competencies in both directions – civil-military and military-civil, and the military benefits from a workforce with prior experiences (**Study I**).

**Study II** and **Study IV** further show how the military responds to societal norms of individualisation and the demand for individuals' active contribution in

constructing their own lives (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). **Study II** highlights how the military addresses this by granting conscripts a greater degree of individual agency and choice by considering their preferences when shaping their military career paths as much as the institutional need allows. **Study IV** frames this dynamic as an exchange relationship between conscripts and the EDF. Much like employer-employee negotiations in civilian workplaces, conscripts remain motivated and committed when the military offers opportunities for self-actualisation; without such opportunities, they may disengage or seek ways to opt out. Consequently, the military adjusts its practices to meet these expectations and motivates conscripts through material and non-material incentives, which also serve to foster military identity (**Study IV**). Previous studies have also highlighted the development of a positive military legacy and positive conscription experiences as influential factors in the military readiness of reservists (Laanepere et al., 2018; Laanepere & Kasearu, 2021), further emphasising the need for the military to respond to broader societal and related individual expectations.

This change in conscript service reflects a wider trend in the armed forces of blending institutional and occupational models (Moskos, 1977; Waldman et al., 2022). On the one hand, conscription is still expected to be driven by rewards that, using Levy's (2013) conceptualisation, remain largely symbolic rather than material (**Study I**). On the other hand, elements like individual career management and negotiable working conditions align with the occupational model (**Study II**).

Related to the shift toward the occupational model, **Study II** highlights the process of civilianisation within the military in two ways. First, the work culture at lower hierarchical levels increasingly resembles that of civilian workplaces, as it incorporates conscripts' opinions, and while the division between the two distinct groups within a total institution, conscripts and regulars, still exists, it is less pronounced at the lower levels of the hierarchy. Social mobility, supposedly heavily restricted between the two groups (Goffman, 1961), appears to be rather flexible at these lower levels, with instances of befriending between those two groups outside the barracks. Second, conscripts are permitted to leave the barracks in the evenings and even overnight, as well as on most weekends after completing their basic training, making their service more similar to a job. Practices that are in the theoretical level of total institution exclusively associated with staff (regulars), are now becoming more common among conscripts.

However, both of these changes come with their challenges. Regarding the shift in social dynamics between regulars and conscripts, some conscripts find that these developments make interactions with superiors and enduring hierarchy more manageable; for others, they create a sense of inequality and undermine discipline (**Study II**). The judgmental attitude toward conscripts and commanders bonding outside the military organisation signals that the norms of the military as a total institution are internalised by conscripts. This also implies that the social practices of the military and its routines have been internalised (Giddens, 1991). This internalisation reinforces the belief that the military should adhere to a rigid

structure and hierarchy, with conscripts and commanders remaining distinctly separated.

Regarding contact with the civilian sphere, the results of **Study II** indicate that, although conscripts are allowed to leave the barracks frequently and the development of digital society allows them to stay more connected, they still feel somewhat cut off from the outside world and struggle to keep up with the world outside. In addition, given the young age of conscripts, their financial independence is generally low, and the pay they receive from the military is also relatively modest, ranging between 115–230 euros, depending on rank and time spent in service (Kaitseressursside Amet, n.d.). Therefore, the option to leave the barracks at the end of each day may be open only for those conscripts who live nearby and have the financial means to commute between the military camp and their homes.

These findings coincide with Goffman's (1961) descriptions of barriers to the outside world as inherent characteristics of such institutions and highlight two types of interrelated barriers in a total institution: physical and social. The results suggest that making physical barriers more permeable does not necessarily reduce psychological and social barriers. Paradoxically, reducing physical barriers may even create inner tensions among conscripts and heighten the feeling of seclusion. Befriending between some conscripts and regulars outside the barracks creates tensions within the service, and constant contact with the outside world accentuates the contrast between conscripts' military lives and the progress of their peers in civilian life, further emphasising their inability to keep pace with them. Additionally, the (in)ability to commute between the military camp and home or participate in various activities outside the camp during free time, which often require financial resources, exposes economic and social disparities between conscripts. Therefore, much as conscripts' service is an amalgamation of occupational and institutional models, the total nature of the organisation is also ambivalent and partial.

Conscripts also describe feeling like chess pieces for the military to move around on the battleground rather than unique individuals (**Study II**), reflecting Goffman's (1961) description of the stripping process and mortification of the self. At the same time, conscripts report that the service has become "softer" and resembles a "military-themed sports camp," indicating a normalisation of the military and a decline in its exclusivity (Norheim-Martinsen, 2016; Holmberg & Alvinus, 2019). This controversy is also linked to the classical expectation of conscription serving as a rite of passage for young men into adulthood, traditionally emphasising toughness and masculinity (Lowe, 2019; Klein, 2002). The ambivalent feelings among conscripts about the changing nature of conscription suggest that, similar to Chang's (2023) findings, traditional masculine norms associated with conscription are increasingly being questioned in the neoliberal era. An additional aspect is the greater emphasis on increasing women's participation in the armed forces, driven by the growing prominence of gender equality discourses (Carreiras, 2006; Duncanson & Woodward, 2016; Ahlbäck et al., 2024). This is supported by **Study IV**'s findings, which show how the EDF actively promotes women's participation in the military through its campaigns

and initiatives. While women remain underrepresented in conscription, the shift in public rhetoric is an important signal of how the military adapts to societal transformations. This is also reflected in how the Russian-speaking minority is included in the service to demonstrate fairness and inclusiveness (**Study IV**).

Overall, these changes in the military organisation refer to institutional isomorphism, wherein the military, operating within the same societal context as other civilian organisations, becomes increasingly similar to them due to external pressures, societal norms, and seek for legitimisation (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). While aligning more closely with civilian institutions and humanising the military as a total institution benefits conscripts on an individual level by providing positive experiences, the military on the organisational level by potentially fostering long-term commitment, and provides legitimacy to the military on a societal level, it also presents a challenge at the organisational level. Civilianisation can create a perception that the military is losing its exclusive nature, which may, in turn, impact its attractiveness as an institution (Holmberg & Alvinus, 2019). In the case of conscript service, it may result in a reduced sense of pride and identity formation, often associated with conscription.

### **4.3. The Processual Nature of Conscription and Its Future**

On the theoretical level, the studies presented demonstrate that conscription is a constantly changing and evolving system. Instead of viewing conscription as a rigid dichotomy – either fully “total” or not – or even as a trichotomy with an “intermediate” level of openness as proposed by Davies (1989), it is more accurately conceptualised as existing within a multidimensional space. Each axis in this space represents a different characteristic of a total institution, such as the division between conscripts and regulars, the barriers to the outside world, or the intensity of the stripping process (Goffman, 1961). The position along each axis collectively defines the degree of “totality” of the conscription system. However, these positions are not fixed; they are in a state of continuous transformation that reflects the dynamic nature of conscription.

A key aspect of the processual nature of conscription is the interplay between structure and agency, a dynamic not exclusive to the military but connected to wider sociological questions about how systems and individual actions affect each other. This thesis brings out that although conscription sets strict rules and limits, individuals within the system find ways to adapt and influence these rules through their actions. This back-and-forth relation between personal actions and institutional norms leads to gradual changes in the elements of totality in conscription. Such dynamics align with Giddens’ (1984) structuration theory, wherein routines and practices shape and are shaped by individuals, positioning the military organisation and its members in a continuous, reciprocal process of change. Upon entering conscription, participants encounter a new set of routines and practices that, through repetition, gradually become internalised and shape their behaviour. At the same time, these routines are subject to how individuals

engage with them, introducing subtle challenges and variations. Ultimately, this ongoing process of adaptation and change ensures the continuity of the military organisation.

However, the changes in the security environment of recent years might cause a shift back towards less adaptive military organisations, as the need to train for large-scale conventional warfare on one's own territory has regained significance, potentially leaving less room for catering to individual aspirations. These changes may also affect the expectations of conscripts. While the studies in this thesis focused primarily on the pragmatic mindset of conscripts and organisational changes catering to them, data collected in **Study II** – conducted before and around the start of the war in Ukraine – offer insight into how conscripts relate to the military's core function and how the onset of the war shifted their understanding of the aim of conscription.

Interestingly, the interview and diary materials reveal a general lack of engagement with the idea of conscript service as preparation for armed conflict. For example, in interviews conducted before conscripts started their service, which was also before the war, conscripts often mentioned that their families were not particularly concerned about them serving in the military, indicating that “it is not like I am going to die here.” They also mentioned that in their opinion, conscription plays a bigger role in people's own lives rather than in state defence, and that the effect of conscription is more about personal development and discipline, as the time in service does not suffice to make a soldier and therefore does not contribute to the state defence. As one of the conscripts put it at the end of his service, describing his thoughts when the war should escalate to Estonia: “It is worth fighting for a united and democratic Europe... but I am not a soldier”.

Reactions to the war in Ukraine varied. Some conscripts reported that it had little effect on their training or mindset, while others said it led them to reflect more deeply on their role and increased their will to defend. However, their reflections suggested that, while the idea of participating in an actual war became more real and sparked some thoughts and discussions, a sense of direct contribution to state defence was still largely absent. Therefore, it might be that pragmatic motives will retain their importance. It is also possible that the war in Ukraine had only just started at the time, and there was still optimism about its swift resolution. Now, as the war has continued for years and pressure on European countries to take responsibility for their own defence has grown, the perceived threat has become more acute, which might change the perspectives of conscription-aged youth.

Considering the above, the findings of this thesis have broader implications that extend beyond the Estonian case. They demonstrate that the degree of “totality” in conscription systems is highly context-dependent, shaped by the interplay of individual aspirations, organisational dynamics within the military, and the prevailing societal norms and values. While conscription systems differ across countries (Jonsson et al., 2024) – leading to variations in their totality – the underlying process of constant adaptation remains a shared characteristic. The purpose of the military, as an institution oriented toward the controlled use of

force, remains somewhat abstract for many conscripts. However, this may gradually shift in response to continued geopolitical tensions and the reality of war in Europe, potentially leading to changes in both how conscripts frame their service and how military organisations structure it. As conscription systems become more closely tied to real-world defence needs, new tensions may emerge between institutional demands and individual expectations. Future research could, therefore, build on these insights by examining how these dynamics unfold in diverse geopolitical and cultural contexts.

## CONCLUSION

This thesis set out to understand the implications of the interplay between conscripts as agents, the military as a structure, and societal values in shaping the experience and perception of conscript service in Estonia. The thesis outlined three research questions in the introduction section to study this. The analyses of the four original studies presented in this thesis now provide the foundation to revisit and address these research questions, along with the theoretical and practical implications of the findings.

First, the thesis aimed to explore how conscript service is rethought and reframed by conscripts during their service (RQ1). The findings show that initial expectations, largely shaped by societal perceptions of conscription as a strictly hierarchical, disciplined, and physically demanding environment, evolve and change throughout the service period (**Study I, Study II**). When expectations and reality do not align, conscripts adjust their expectations and coping strategies, continuously redefining the personal meaning of their service while navigating the structural constraints of the military as a total institution (**Study II**). **Study II** particularly highlights the balancing act between institutional and occupational motives (Moskos, 1977), where conscripts actively engage in negotiations to find a personally meaningful way to interpret their service within the restraints of the military institution. Thus, in response to the first research question, **the process of meaning-making in conscription is ongoing, shaped by both individual values and agency as well as the opportunities and limitations imposed by the military institution.**

Second, the thesis looked into the ways in which conscripts' interpretations of their service are shaped by their personal orientations and immediate social context (RQ2). The period spent in service reinforces the sense of separation from civilian life; though flexible leave policies and opportunities to interact with loved ones temporarily mitigate these barriers, they also introduce emotional tensions as conscripts transition between military and civilian spheres (**Study II**). Frequent opportunities to leave the barracks serve the purpose of increasing conscripts' motivation, but paradoxically, **constant contact with the outside world may deepen their sense of falling behind their peers and highlight the socio-economic inequality among conscripts, thereby reducing their internal cohesion (Study II)**. The attitudes of family and friends emerge as the most significant factors influencing the perceived benefit of service, with positive reinforcement from one's social circle enhancing the perceived value (**Study III**). Internal factors, such as psychological hardiness, motivation, and preparedness, also play a critical role in shaping conscripts' attitudes (**Study III**). The findings emphasise the role of individual agency and motivation in determining the convertibility of military experiences to civilian life (**Study I**). While the military provides opportunities, such as leadership training or specialised skills, the ultimate value of these experiences depends on conscripts' ability and motivation to articulate them (**Study I, Study II**). This underscores the interconnectedness of intrapersonal and

interpersonal resources that different people have. At the same time, external challenges, such as financial obligations or caregiving responsibilities that complicate being in service, create stress and negatively affect perceptions of conscription (**Study III**). **This highlights the dual nature of conscription: while it provides some space for personal growth, it can also represent a burdensome obligation for others, depending on their individual circumstances and social support systems.**

Third, the thesis examined how wider societal processes are reflected in conscripts' interpretations of their service and the military's organisational practices (RQ3). Various societal transformations and meta-processes (e.g. social acceleration, digitalisation, globalisation, value changes) have contributed to the emergence of **pragmatic conscription (Study I, Study II), which suggests that alongside traditional institutional motivators like duty, a new set of practical motives has become increasingly prevalent, focusing on acquiring competencies during service that are useful for future career paths.** The military, to the extent that organisational practices and operational needs allow, accommodates these individual preferences and career aspirations, as seen in practices like cyber conscription, which allows individuals to leverage and develop their IT skills while serving (**Study I**), or how conscripts can negotiate their roles during service to align with their personal goals, such as pursuing specialised training for future careers (**Study II**). Therefore, the **military as an organisation has become more negotiatory in its character, adapting its practices to align with societal expectations and publicly signalling its responsiveness to societal changes to ensure continued material and non-material support (Study IV).** These changes mirror broader trends of institutional isomorphism, where military organisations increasingly resemble civilian workplaces due to external societal pressures (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). The shift towards civilianisation is also evident in the increasing flexibility at the lower levels of hierarchy, where conscripts report collaborative and civilian-like dynamics with their commanders (**Study II**). However, this presents significant tensions. While the increased flexibility benefits conscripts by enabling them to transform conscription into a meaningful experience (**Study I**) and supports the military organisation by aligning with societal norms to maintain its legitimacy (**Study IV**), it also risks undermining the exclusivity and distinctiveness of the military as an institution.

The four studies highlight how conscription operates as both a restrictive institutional framework and a platform for individual development. The thesis shows that conscription in a Western post-industrial democracy is not simply a top-down institutional process but a negotiated experience shaped by the dynamic interplay of individual agency, organisational practices, and societal expectations.

While the doctoral thesis highlights the rise of pragmatic motives among conscripts and the organisation's adaptation to these expectations, an increasingly tense security environment may lead to shifts in these processes in the future. The need to prepare for a potential armed conflict affects how military training and conscription is structured, and may reduce the military's flexibility in responding to societal changes. From an individual perspective, data collected in **Study II**

suggest that although the outbreak of the war in Ukraine made the possibility of armed conflict in contemporary Europe more real and sparked discussions among conscripts, conscription remained weakly linked to the military's core function. It was seen as more contributing to one's personal life than to national defence, with conscripts noting that the length of service is not enough to truly become a soldier. Therefore, a pragmatic view of conscription may continue to prevail among youth despite the complex security situation, creating tensions between individual expectations and the needs of the military. However, as the data were gathered in the early stages of the war in Ukraine – when there was still some optimism about a quick resolution – a long-term sense of threat may, over time, shift young people's attitudes more towards national defence motives, potentially aligning expectations at the individual and organisational levels.

The theoretical implications of this thesis are threefold. First, the studies presented demonstrate that **conscription is a constantly changing and evolving system**. It is, therefore, limiting to frame conscription in dichotomous terms, such as being total or not; instead, it should be discussed as a system in constant change. Second, **the change in the nature of conscript service follows a cyclical, processual nature**. While the military allows limited room for negotiation, when negotiations do occur, they have the potential to reshape norms. This demonstrates how **individual agency feeds back into institutional change**, which then allows room for new negotiations. Third, **this change is not exclusive to the military as an organisation but is related to the classic sociological questions of structure and agency** and their mutual influence, aligning closely with the practice theory strand of sociological thinking. In this thesis, the focus was placed on conscript service, and the key forces shaping it were identified. The analysis carried out has implications beyond the Estonian case, as it can be beneficial for other conscription systems that are affected by macro societal transformations as well.

To conclude the thesis, based on its findings, several practical implications and suggestions for the organisation of conscript service in the Estonian context can be brought out.

First, considering that the role of family and friends emerged as the most influential factor in shaping the perceived benefit of conscription, **more attention should be directed toward the social circle of conscripts**. While friends' attitudes may stem from their own experiences of conscription, the opinions of the family are likely influenced by wider societal perceptions and possibly myths. Addressing societal-level perceptions and providing families with more direct interaction and information about their serving family members could be beneficial in fostering positive attitudes and support.

Second, addressing the expectation that conscription provides convertible competencies has become increasingly important. Therefore, **conscripts should be offered opportunities both to further develop their previous competencies during conscript service and to transfer the competencies acquired in conscription to the civilian sphere, while also supporting them in recognising the convertibility of their service experience**.

Third, while allowing and enabling convertibility is particularly significant during peacetime, when conscripts return after service to their civilian lives, it also plays a crucial role in preparing forces for wartime. As previous studies on Estonian reservists have demonstrated, positive experiences during conscription are positively related to the military readiness of reservists (Laanepere & Kasearu, 2021). **Enhancing opportunities for convertibility can contribute to conscription being perceived as a more positive and valuable experience, which, in turn, has the potential to strengthen reservists' military readiness.**

Fourth, young people, though their preferences and perceptions may vary, generally expect conscript service to provide them with a moratorium space. This includes the expectation that the service will equip them with discipline, improve physical fitness, and offer an adventurous experience. While addressing societal expectations and tailoring the service to individual needs is necessary for the continued legitimacy of the military, there is a risk that conscripts may become disappointed if the changes in service result in a lack of opportunities for meaningful mental and physical self-development. Therefore, **it is crucial for the defence forces to strike a balance between creating a service that is humane and responsive to societal demands while preserving its exclusivity and room for self-development.**

Fifth, the thesis showed that individuals experience conscription in different ways, reflecting the heterogeneous attitudes and motivations among them. While this heterogeneity may be challenging for both individuals and the organisation, on the individual level, it offers youth the opportunity to interact with a broader cross-section of society, thereby expanding their usual social circles. From the organisation's perspective, including young people from different social groups with diverse backgrounds helps ensure societal support and legitimacy for the military, while from a societal perspective, it contributes to social cohesion. When considering new models of conscript service, it is important to recognise that **while a more selective service might be more convenient for both the individuals serving and the military organisation training them, it could negatively impact societal cohesion and undermine public support for the military as an institution.**

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## SUMMARY IN ESTONIAN

### Pragmatilise ajateenistuse kujunemisest Eesti ajateenijate kogemuste põhjal

Suurema osa 20. sajandist moodustasid ajateenijad erinevates lääneriikides sõjaväe peamise tuumiku, kuid külma sõja järgselt olukord muutus. Akuutse sõjaohu puudumine mõjutas relvajõudude ülesehitust ja tegevuseesmärke ning sestap on viimase 30 aasta jooksul sõjaväe fookus liikunud oma riigi territooriumi kaitselt riigisiseste kriiside lahendamise toetamisele, rahvusvahelistele operatsioonidele ja rahuvalvemissioonidele (Holmberg & Alvinus, 2019). Toimunud muutustega seoses loobusid paljud riigid kohustuslikust ajateenistusest, eelistades vabatahtlikkusel ja professionaalsetel sõduritel põhinevat sõjaväge.

Pärast Venemaa sissetungi Ukrainasse on Euroopa riikides taas esile kerkinud küsimus ajateenistuse vajalikkusest ja selle vormist. Mitmed riigid on juba taastanud ajateenistuse või kaaluvad selle taastamist (Jonsson et al., 2024; Jäckle, 2023). Kohustusliku ajateenistuse taaskehtestamise debati juhtmõtteks on aga kujunenud ajateenistuse sobitumine vahepeal muutunud ühiskondlike väärtustega. Kui varasemalt seostus relvajõududes teenimine kodanikukohustuse täitmise ja rahvusliku ühtekuuluvustundega (Moskos, 1977), siis individuaalsete väärtuste ja autonoomia tähtsuse tõusuga (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Inglehart & Welzel, 2005; Santos et al., 2017) on need väärtused seatud kahtluse alla. See on tõstnud üles arutelu, kuidas mõjutavad sellised ühiskondlikud muutused sõjavägesid kui organisatsioone ja nendega seotud inimesi.

Teaduskirjanduses on üsna palju tähelepanu pälvinud 20. sajandi teisel poolel toimunud üleminek ajateenistusel põhinevalt sõjaväelt professionaalsele sõjaväele ning selle protsessi mõju sõjaväe kui organisatsiooni omadustele. Vähem tähelepanu on pööratud sellele, kuidas ühiskondlikud muutused on kujundanud relvajõudusid lääneriikides, kus kohustuslik ajateenistus on eri põhjustel endiselt säilinud. Teaduskirjanduses on toodud esile, et ajas on ka ajateenistuse mudelid kohandunud ja muutunud indiviidikesksemaks (Jonsson, et al., 2024).

Selliste riikide hulka kuulub ka Eesti, mis on säilitanud ajateenistuse tulenevalt oma geopoliitiliselt keerulisest asukohast ja väiksest rahvaarvust. Olenemata ajas kasvanud postmaterialistlike väärtuste olulisusest (Ainsaar & Strenze, 2019), mida tavapäraselt seostatakse kaitsetahte vähenemisega (Inglehart et al., 2015), peab 70–80% Eesti elanikkonnast endiselt oluliseks riiki relvastatud kallaletungi korral kaitsta ning 80–90% elanikest näeb ajateenistust vajalikuna (Eesti Uuringukeskus, 2024). See näitab, et Eesti iseseisvuse kaitsmine ja iga inimese roll selles on muutunud tugevalt juurdunud normiks (Kasearu et al., 2024). Teisalt, võrreldes vanemate põlvkondadega väärtustavad Eesti noored aga enam saavutusi, võimu ja enese heaolu ehk kalduvad pigem enesetäiustamise väärtuste poole (Mikeca, 2023). Seetõttu pakub Eesti näide hea võimaluse uurida ajateenijate teenistuskogemuse kujunemist kolme osapoole – indiviidi, kaitseväge kui organisatsiooni ja ühiskonna – omavaheliste suhete kontekstis.

Doktoritöö fookuses on, kuidas ajateenijad tõlgendavad ja tajuvad oma ajateenistuse kogemust, kuidas institutsionaalsed tegurid seda protsessi kujundavad ning kuidas ühiskondlikud muutused mõjutavad ajateenistuse tähendust laiemalt. Täpsemalt püstitab doktoritöö kolm uurimisküsimust:

1. Kuidas ajateenijad mõtestavad ja tõlgendavad ajateenistuse tähendust teenistuse jooksul? (**Uurimused I ja II**)
2. Kuidas kujundavad ajateenijate hoiakud ja vahetu sotsiaalne kontekst nende tõlgendusi oma teenistusest? (**Uurimused I, II ja III**)
3. Kuidas peegelduvad laiemad ühiskondlikud protsessid ajateenijate tõlgendustes oma teenistusest ja kaitseväelise organisatsiooni tegevuspraktikates? (**Uurimused I, II ja IV**)

Neile uurimisküsimustele otsitakse siinses doktoritöös vastust nelja uurimuse tulemuste kaudu. Esimesele uurimisküsimusele vastatakse toetudes **Uurimuste I ja II** tulemustele. **Uurimuses I** käsitletakse oskuste ja teadmiste ülekantavust tsiviil- ja militaarsfääri vahel. **Uurimuses II** keskendutakse ajateenijate kogemusele teenistuses ja sellele, kuidas nende hoiakud ja ajateenistuse mõtestamine teenistuse jooksul muutuvad. Mõlemad uurimused aitavad vastata ka teisele uurimisküsimusele, rõhutades ajateenijate agentsuse ja motivatsiooni olulisust teenistuskogemuse mõtestamisel ning avades, kuidas sõbrad, pere ja laiem ühiskondlik kontekst suhestuvad nende kogemuste tõlgendamisega. Teisele uurimisküsimusele vastamist toetab lisaks **uurimus III**. Kui **uurimused I ja II** põhinevad kvalitatiivsetel andmetel, siis **uurimus III** käsitleb samu teemasid kvantitatiivse lähenemisviisi kaudu, uurides ajateenistuse kasulikuna tajumise mõjutegureid. Kolmandale uurimisküsimusele lähenetakse kahest vaatenurgast. **Uurimused I ja II** keskenduvad ajateenijate perspektiivile, uurides, kuidas ühiskondlikud muutused kajastuvad nende tõlgendustes oma teenistusest ning milliseid järeldusi saab nende põhjal teha kaitseväelise organisatsiooni praktikate kohta. **Uurimus IV** seevastu analüüsib organisatsiooni enda poolt avalikult väljendatud põhimõtteid ja praktikaid seoses ajateenistusega.

Doktoritöö lähtub Erving Goffmani totaalse institutsiooni teooriast (1961), mis pakub kasulikku raamistikku mõistmaks, kuidas ajateenistus mõjutab noort, tema kogemusi, identiteeti ja sotsiaalseid suhteid. Goffmanist (1957, lk 45) lähtuvalt on totaalne institutsioon keskkond, kus inimeste kogu elu toimub range ajakava ja formaalsete reeglite järgi ühes füüsilises ruumis, igapäevaelu kulgeb suurtes gruppides, kõiki koheldakse ühtmoodi ja täidetakse samu ülesandeid, kuid igal tegevusel on ka laiem eesmärk, mis lähtub institutsiooni ametlikest eesmärkidest. Totaalseid institutsioone on mitmesuguseid ja kuigi mõned elemendid neis võivad omavahel erineda, jagavad nad siiski suuremas osas eelpoolkirjeldatud omadusi (Goffman, 1961, lk 5). Goffman on klassikaliste totaalsete institutsioonide näidetena nimetanud vanglaid ja psühhiaatriakliinikuid, kuid samuti ajateenistusel põhinevat sõjaväge (Goffman, 1957, lk 44). Ajateenistusse asudes satuvad noored keskkonda, kus nende varasemad harjumused, väärtushinnangud ja agentsus pannakse proovile. Neil tuleb kohaneda uute rollide, (võimu)suhete ning sõjaväelise distsipliiniga.

Teisalt on varasemates uuringutes välja toodud, et ajateenistus võib pakkuda noortele võimalusi enesearenguks ja toimida n-ö vaheaastana, mis võimaldab jõuda selgusele oma tulevikuplaanides, saada uusi tuttavaid ja saavutada suuremat iseseisvust (Davies, 1989; King, 2011). Arvestades, et lääneriikide ajateenistuse mudelites pööratakse üha suuremat tähelepanu noorte agentsuse toetamisele ja nende motivatsioonile teenistuses osaleda (Jonsson et al., 2024), võib ajateenistust vaadelda kui psühhosotsiaalset moratooriumit – erinevate rollide katsetamise ja oma identiteedi kujundamise aega (Erikson, 1968).

Eesti kontekstis on varasemad uuringud näidanud ajateenistuse suhtes mõneti vastukäivaid tulemusi. Kui ühelt poolt on toetus ajateenistusele laiema avalikkuse seas kõrge (87%), siis noorte seas, keda ajateenistuskohustus puudutab ehk vanusegrupis 20–29, on toetus mõnevõrra madalam (73%) ning ühtlasi ollakse ka ajateenistusest kõrvalehoidmise osas mõistvamad (61% vanusegrupis 20–29, 38% kogu elanikkonnast) (Eesti Uuringukeskus, 2024). Samuti on leitud, et ajateenistust tajutakse sageli katkestusena eluteel (Raid et al., 2019, Truusa & Talves, 2018). Samas on ajateenijatest vähem kui pooled pidanud ajateenistust enda jaoks ajaraiskamiseks ning 60% neist on osutanud ajateenistuse moratoorsele iseloomule ehk kinnitanud, et teenistus suurendas nende enesekindlust ning andis teadmisi ja oskusi edaspidiseks eluks (Kasearu & Tooding, 2024).

Doktoritöö käigus läbi viidud uuringute tulemused näitasid, et esialgsed ootused teenistusele, mis seonduvad peamiselt ühiskondlikult kujundatud ettekujutusega ajateenistusest kui rangelt hierarhilisest, distsiplineeritud ja füüsiliselt nõudlikust keskkonnast, muutuvad teenistuse jooksul (**Uurimused I ja II**). Kui ootused ja tegelikkus ei ole vastavuses, kohandatakse oma ootusi ja toimetulekustrategiaid, mõtestades pidevalt ümber teenistuse tähenduslikkust isiklikus plaanis, mahutades need samas kaitsevæe kui totaalse institutsiooni piiratud raamidesse (**Uurimus II**). Seega vastusena esimesele uurimisküsimusele saab väita, et **ajateenistuse tähenduse mõtestamine on pidev protsess, kus juhindutakse nii oma isiklikust väärtuspildist ja agentsusest kui ka institutsiooni võimalustest ja piirangutest.**

Teine uurimisküsimus keskendus sellele, kuidas kujundavad ajateenijate hoiakud ja vahetu sotsiaalne kontekst nende tõlgendusi oma teenistusest. Ajateenistuses tekib noortel tunne, et nad on tsiviilmaailmast eraldatud ning kuigi suurenenud võimalused vabal ajal lähedastega suhelda leevendavad eraldatuse tunnet, tekitab pidev militaar- ja tsiviilsfääri vahel pendeldamine emotsionaalseid pingeid (**Uurimus II**). Sagedased võimalused väeosast lahkuda teenivad eesmärgi tõsta ajateenijate motivatsiooni, kuid paradoksaalsel kombel võib **pidev kontakt välismaailmaga süvendada ajateenijates oma kaaslastest mahajäämuse tunnet ning tuua esile ajateenijate sotsiaalmajandusliku ebavõrdsuse, vähendades nende omavahelist sidusust (Uurimus II)**. **Uurimus III** tulemused annavad kinnitust, et kõige olulisemaks teguriks ajateenistuse kasulikuna tajumise puhul on pereliikmete ja sõprade toetava suhtumise tajumine. Rolli mängivad ka noore vaimne vastupidavus, motivatsioon ja ettevalmistus ajateenistuseks (**Uurimus III**). Kui **uurimuste I ja II** tulemused näitasid, et ajateenistuse käigus omandatud teadmiste ja oskuste ülekantavus tsiviilellu sõltub suuresti ajateenijate enda

agentsusest ja oskustest neid mõtestada, siis võivad välised tegurid, näiteks rahalised kohustused või kohustused pere ees, muuta ajateenistuse hoopiski stressirohkeks ja mõjutada selle tajumist negatiivse kogemusena (**Uurimus III**). **Seega võib ajateenistus olenevalt noore isiksuseomadustest, motivatsioonist, agentsusest ja sotsiaalsest tugivõrgustikust pakkuda ühelt poolt nii arenguruumi kui ka eneseteostust, teiselt poolt aga võib noor mõista seda ka katkestusena eluteel. See toob esile ajateenistuse tähenduse mitmetahulisuse noorte jaoks.**

Kolmanda uurimisküsimusena oli vaatluse all, kuidas laiemad ühiskondlikud protsessid peegelduvad ajateenijate tõlgendustes oma teenistusest ja kaitsevälise organisatsiooni tegevuspraktikates. Selgus, et erinevate ühiskondlike muutuste (nt sotsiaalse aja tihenemine ja kiirenemine, digitaliseerumine, globaliseerumine, väärtuste muutumine) tulemina on **traditsiooniliselt ajateenistusega seondute motivaatorite kõrval, nagu kohusetunne riigi ees, üha enam esile kerkimas uus, praktiliste motiivide kogum, mille keskmes on teenistuse käigus edasiseks eluks ülekantavate kasulike oskuste omandamine, mida võiks kirjeldada kui pragmaatilise ajateenistuse kujunemist (Uurimused I ja II)**. Nii palju, kui seda sõjaväe kui organisatsiooni enda vajadused ja praktikad võimaldavad, arvestatakse ajateenijate individuaalsete eelistuste ja karjääripüüdlustega. Seda ilmestab näiteks küberajateenistuse loomine, mis pakub võimalust arendada teenistuse jooksul oma IT-oskusi (**Uurimus I**). Samuti saavad ajateenijad oma erialaste huvide eelistusi väljendada ja seeläbi on neil võimalik suunata oma teenistuskäiku nii, et see vastaks nende isiklikele arengueesmärkidele (**Uurimus II**). Seega on **Eesti kaitseväge näitel näha praktikate ja retoorika kohandumist vastavalt ühiskondlikele väärtustele ja ootustele, säilitamaks elanikkonna materiaalne ja mittemateriaalne toetus, mis viitab organisatsiooni paindlikumaks muutumisele (Uurimus IV)**. Lisaks võib märgata militaarihierarhia madalamatel tasemetel suurenenud paindlikkust, kus ajateenijad tajuvad oma ülematega koostööpõhiseid ja tsiviilsfääri organisatsioonidega sarnanevaid suhteid (**Uurimus II**). Need muudatused peegeldavad laiemat tsiviilsfääri praktikate ülevõtmist militaarsfääris (Holmberg & Alvinus, 2019; Norheim-Martinsen, 2016). Seda protsessi võib seletada institutsionaalse isomorfismina, mille kohaselt samas keskkonnas toimivad institutsioonid muutuvad ajas üha sarnasemaks, lähtuvalt välisest survest, normidest ja taotlusest legitiimsuse järele (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Kuigi algselt viitab see kontseptsioon tsiviilorganisatsioonide üksteisele sarnasemaks muutumisele, saab seda laiendada ka relvajõududele, selgitades tsiviilorganisatsioonidele omaste joonte ülevõtmist. Kaitseväge tsiviilsfääri organisatsioonidega sarnasemaks muutumine on ajateenijate vaates positiivne ja toetab ajateenistuse isiklikus perspektiivis ülekantava ja kasulikuna tajumist (**Uurimus I**), samuti militaarorganisatsioonide legitiimsust, vastates ühiskondlikele normidele (**Uurimus IV**). Siiski võivad kaasneda sellega organisatsioonisisesed pinged, kui tuntakse, et organisatsioon kaotab oma tajutud eksklusiivsust, haldusülesannete hulk kasvab ning muutustega kohanemine viib neid kaugemale sõjavägede peamiselt ülesandelt – riigikaitset (Holmberg & Alvinus, 2019).

Uuringute tulemuste põhjal võib kokkuvõtvalt öelda, et ajateenistus on süsteemina pidevas muutumises. Kuigi ajateenija kui indiviidi agentsus on kaitseväs kui totaalses institutsioonis piiratud, ei ole ajateenijad siiski lihtsalt reeglite passiivsed järgijad. Nad kohandavad end ja oma arusaamasid pidevalt vastavalt ühiskondlikele ja isiklikele väärtustele ning institutsiooni poolt pakutavatele võimalustele ja piirangutele, katsetavad ja nihutavad piire ning mõjutavad sellega ka organisatsiooni sisemisi muutusi.

Siinne doktoritöö toob esile pragmaatiliste motiivide tõusu ajateenijate seas ja organisatsiooni kohandumise nende ootustega. Samas võib järjest pingelisemaks muutuv julgeolekuolukord tekitada tulevikus nendes protsessides nihke. Vajadus valmistuda võimalikuks relvakonfliktiks mõjutab ajateenijate väljaõppe sisu ja ülesehitust ning võib vähendada organisatsiooni paindlikkust reagerida ühiskondlikele muutustele. Indiviidi vaates viitavad **uurimuse II** raames kogutud andmed, et kuigi Ukraina sõja puhkemine muutis relvakonflikti võimalikkuse kaasaegses Euroopas reaalsemaks ning tekitas ajateenijate seas arutelusid, jäi ajateenistuse seostamine kaitseväge põhifunktsiooniga väheseks. Ajateenistusel nähti suuremat rolli noore enda elus kui riigikaitstes, kuna ajateenijate endi sõnul ei võimalda teenistuse kestus sõduriks kujuneda. Seetõttu võib pragmaatiline vaade ajateenistusele olenemata keerulisest julgeolekuolukorrast noorte seas püsima jääda, tekitades pingeid individuaalsete ootuste ja organisatsiooni vajaduste ja võimaluste vahel. Kuna aga andmed koguti Ukraina sõja algusfaasis, mil valitses teatav optimism selle kiire lõpu suhtes, võib püsivalt kõrge ohutaju siiski ajapikku kallutada noorte hoiakuid enam riigikaitsete motiivide suunas, ühtlustades seeläbi indiviidi ja organisatsiooni tasandi ootused.

Doktoritöö uuringute tulemuste põhjal saab esitada mitmeid praktilisi soovitusi ajateenistuse korraldamiseks Eestis.

Esiteks, kuna pere ja sõprade sotsiaalne toetus on tugevas seoses ajateenistuse tajutud kasulikkusega, tasuks **enam tähelepanu pöörata ajateenijate sotsiaalsele ringile** ja sellele, kuidas peredele ja lähedastele ajateenistust tutvustada ning neile rohkem infot ja võimalusi anda teenistuses olevate lähedaste toetamiseks.

Teiseks, ülekantavad oskused on omandamas üha suuremat rolli. Seetõttu tuleks **pakkuda ajateenijatele võimalusi nii nende varasemate oskuste ja kogemuste edasiarendamiseks ajateenistuses kui ka ajateenistusest omandavate pädevuste ülekandmiseks tsiviil sfääri, toetades sealjuures noori teenistuskogemuse ülekantavuse mõtestamisel.**

Kolmandaks, oskuste ülekantavuse võimaldamine on eriti oluline rahuajal, kui ajateenijad naasevad pärast teenistust tsiviilellu, kuid see mängib kesket rolli ka kaitse- ja võitluste kujundamisel sõjaajaks. **Ülekantavate oskuste võimaluste laiendamine võib toetada ajateenistuse positiivsema ja väärtuslikuma kogemusena tajumist ning varasemad uuringud Eesti reservväelaste suunal on näidanud, et positiivne ajateenistuse kogemus on seotud reservväelaste teenistusvalmidusega** (Laanepere & Kasearu, 2023).

Neljandaks, kuigi erinevate noorte eelistused ja arusaamad võivad erineda, oodatakse ajateenistusest üldiselt enesearengu võimalusi – distsipliini arenda-

mist, füüsilise vormi parandamist, sekluslike kogemuste saamist. Kuigi ühiskondlike normidega kohandumine on kaitseväele legitiimsuse säilitamiseks vajalik, on oht, et teenistuse liialt paindlikuks muutmine vähendab võimalusi enese proovilepanekuks, mis omakorda tekitab noortes pettumust ja vähendab motivatsiooni teenistusse panustada. Seetõttu on **oluline leida tasakaal, kus ühelt poolt võetakse ajateenistuse kujundamisel arvesse ühiskondlikke ootusi ja noorte individuaalset võimekust, kuid teisalt säilitatakse teenistuses väljakutseid ja enesearengut pakkuvad praktikad.**

Viiendaks, ajateenistuse kogemus on individuaalne ja seetõttu erinev, peegeldades laiemalt ajateenijate hoiakulist ja motivatsioonilist mitmekesisust. Kuigi see heterogeensus võib olla väljakutseks nii indiviidile kui ka organisatsioonile, annab see indiviiditasandil võimaluse noortele kohtuda inimestega erinevatest ühiskonnakihtidest ja laiendada nende tavapärast sotsiaalset ringi. Organisatsiooni vaates aitab erinevate ühiskonnagruppide ning eri ootuste ja hoiakutega noorte kaasamine tagada ühiskondlikku toetust ja legitiimsust ning ühiskondlikus vaates luua sotsiaalset sidusust. Uusi ajateenistuse mudeleid kaaludes on oluline mõista, et **kuigi selektiivsem ajateenistus võib olla mugavam nii indiviididele kui ka organisatsioonile, võib see negatiivselt mõjutada ühiskondlikku sidusust ja vähendada toetust Kaitseväele kui organisatsioonile.**

## **PUBLICATIONS**

## CURRICULUM VITAE

**Name:** Eleri Lillemäe  
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### Education

2020–2025 University of Tartu, PhD studies in sociology  
2016–2017 Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (The Netherlands), exchange student in sociology  
2015–2017 University of Tartu, Master Studies in sociology (*cum laude*)  
2012–2015 University of Tartu, Bachelor Studies in sociology, social work and social politics (*cum laude*)

### Professional career

2023–present Estonian Military Academy, Head of Defence Analysis Group-Researcher  
2019–2023 Estonian Military Academy, Survey Coordinator-Analyst

### Research interests

military conscription, well-being of conscripts, societal processes related to the armed forces, public perceptions on the use of autonomous technologies in the military context

### Participation in relevant research and development projects

2025–present Reinforcing Societal Resilience through Securitisation (PRG2555)  
2022–2025 Member of NATO Science and Technology Organisation research group HFM-318 “Personnel Retention in the Armed Forces”  
2020–2022 Ethical, social and legal aspects of unmanned ground systems (R-012)  
2019–2022 Member of NATO Science and Technology Organisation research group SAS-144 “Code of best practice for conducting survey research in a military context”  
2019–present Human resource survey in the Estonian Defence Forces (R-006 and R-016)

### Membership in professional organisations

Since 2025 NATO Science and Technology Organisation (STO) Human Factors and Medicine (HFM) panel member  
Since 2022 member of the Inter-University Seminar on Armed Forces and Society (IUSAFS)

- Since 2021 member of the European Research Group on Military and Society (ERGOMAS)
- Since 2020 member of the Estonian Association of Sociologists

### **Honours & awards**

- 2022 Early Career Scientist Event Award (NATO Science and Technology Organisation)

### **Selected publications**

- Jonsson, E., Salo, M., Lillemäe, E., Steder, F. B., Ferst, T., Kasearu, K., Novagrockiene, J., Österberg, J., Sederholm, T., Svensén, S., Szvircev Tresch, T., & Truusa, T.-T. (2024). Multifaceted conscription: A comparative study of six European countries. *Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies*, 7(1), pp. 19–33. <https://doi.org/10.31374/sjms.166>.
- Kasearu, K., Lillemäe, E., & Ben-Ari, E. (2024). How does a military create a tradition in a new democracy? Ritual density, commodification, and politics in the Estonian Defence Forces. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 57(2), 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1525/cpcs.2023.2003078>
- Lillemäe, E., Kasearu, K. (2024). Collecting and analyzing qualitative data. In: *Proposed NATO standards and guidelines for conducting military surveys*.
- Kasearu, K., Truusa, T. T., & Lillemäe, E. (2024). From zero to hero: A conceptual framework of creating and recreating heroism based on the Estonian experience. In U. Ben-Shalom, R. Moelker, N. Stern & E. Ben-Ari (Eds.), *Military heroism in a post-heroic era* (pp. 105–120). Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland.
- Kasearu, K., Lillemäe, E., & Ben-Ari, E. (2022). The military covenant, contractual relations, and social cohesion in democracies: Estonia as an exploratory case study. *Armed Forces & Society*, 49(3), 729–751. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X221100769>
- Lillemäe, E., Laanepere, T., & Kasearu, K. (2022). Multiple contracts concept as opportunity to ease challenges for Estonian employers' obligations concerning employees' reserve service in military. In E. Ben-Ari & V. Connelly (Eds.), *Contemporary military reserves* (pp. 127–145). Routledge.

## ELULOOKIRJELDUS

**Nimi:** Eleri Lillemäe  
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### Haridus

2020–2025 Tartu Ülikool, doktoriõpe sotsioloogia erialal  
2016–2017 Amsterdami Vabaülikool (Holland), vahetusüliõpilane sotsioloogia erialal  
2015–2017 Tartu Ülikool, magistriõpe sotsioloogia erialal (*cum laude*)  
2012–2015 Tartu Ülikool, bakalaureuseõpe sotsioloogia, sotsiaaltöö ja sotsiaalpoliitika erialal (*cum laude*)

### Teenistuskäik

2023–tänaseni Kaitseväe Akadeemia, kaitseanalüüsi grupi juhataja-teadur  
2019–2023 Kaitseväe Akadeemia, uuringute koordinaator-analüütik

### Peamised uurimisvaldkonnad

Ajateenistus, ajateenijate heaolu, kaitsevägedega seonduvad ühiskondlikud protsessid, vastuvõtlikkus autonoomsete tehnoloogiate kasutamisele militaarkontekstis

### Osalemine olulisemates teadus- ja arendusprojektides

2025–tänaseni Julgeolekustumine ja ühiskonna toimepidevus (PRG2555)  
2022–2025 NATO Teadus- ja Tehnoloogiaorganisatsiooni uurimisrühma HFM-318 “Personali säilitamine kaitseväes” liige  
2020–2022 Mehitamata maismaasüsteemide eetilised, sotsiaalsed ja õiguslikud aspektid (R-012)  
2019–2022 NATO Teadus- ja Tehnoloogiaorganisatsiooni uurimisrühma SAS-144 “Parimat praktikad küsitlusuuringute läbiviimiseks militaarkontekstis” liige  
2019–tänaseni Riigikaitse inimvara kompleksuuring Kaitseväes (R-006 ja R-016)

### Erialased organisatsioonid

Alates 2025 NATO Science and Technology Organization (STO) Human Factors and Medicine (HFM) paneeli liige  
Alates 2022 Inter-University Seminar on Armed Forces and Society (IUSAFS) liige  
Alates 2021 European Research Group on Military and Society (ERGOMAS) liige  
Alates 2020 Eesti Sotsioloogide Liidu liige

## **Tunnustused**

2022 Early Career Scientist Event Award (NATO Science and Technology Organization)

## **Olulisemad publikatsioonid**

- Jonsson, E., Salo, M., Lillemäe, E., Steder, F. B., Ferst, T., Kasearu, K., Novagrockiene, J., Österberg, J., Sederholm, T., Svensén, S., Szvircev Tresch, T., & Truusa, T.-T. (2024). Multifaceted conscription: A comparative study of six European countries. *Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies*, 7(1), pp. 19–33. <https://doi.org/10.31374/sjms.166>.
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